

UK: May's Coalition of Chaos

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Political events in Northern Ireland are generally given scant coverage in the popular British press or broadcast media. As a result, most people on 'the mainland' regard the two main political traditions, Loyalism and Republicanism, and the religious confrontation between Protestants and Catholics, as weird and distinctly 'un-British', whatever the Loyalists might claim. The condescending British media generally refer to the political and social divisions of the province as 'tribal'.

Now, however, with Theresa May turning to the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP, in her desperation to cling on to office, Loyalism has come back into focus, and many do not like what they see.

The Independent, for example, has correctly contrasted the press hysteria over Corbyn's past discussions with IRA-Sinn Fein leaders with its treatment of the news that the leader of the Tory party is relying on 'a party backed by terrorists'. The media have also suddenly noticed the DUP's long record of homophobia, its opposition to women's rights and even to teaching evolution in schools, its general religious sectarianism and corruption scandals, not to mention some of its leaders' continued links to paramilitaries.

Loyalism

When the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement burst onto the scene in 1968, demanding one person one vote and an end to gerrymandering and to outrageous discrimination in jobs and housing, many on the mainland were astonished to find that discrimination comparable to that faced by people of colour in the USA existed within the United Kingdom.

It came as an even bigger shock to see live coverage of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the B Specials, exclusively Loyalist police forces, mercilessly beating unarmed civil rights marchers near Derry, with a clergyman, the Reverend Ian Paisley, urging them on.

Under pressure from London, the leadership of the Unionist Party, which had governed Northern Ireland since the Twenties, grudgingly agreed to some concessions but were confronted by opposition from many in their own ranks. It was the same Ian Paisley, an outrageous bigot who would have fitted in well with the white racists of the Southern States, who became the leader of this arch reactionary movement and founded the DUP as a breakaway from the Unionist Party in 1971.

The DUP's closest links were to the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, an ultra-sectarian Christian fundamentalist 'fire and brimstone' church, also founded by Paisley. The DUP's longstanding rejection of any political reform, with its 'No Surrender' slogan, its opposition to 'Rome Rule' and in particular to a united Ireland, eventually made it the dominant party in the Six Counties.

In 1973, it opposed the Sunningdale Agreement, which sought to set up an Assembly and government in the North sharing power with Irish nationalists. Alongside Loyalist paramilitaries in the United Ulster Unionist Council, the party helped organise a reactionary strike, viciously intimidating Catholic workers,

which finally scuppered the agreement.

Further involvement with Loyalist paramilitary groups followed. In 1981, Paisley and the DUP created another paramilitary group called the Third Force. When British and Irish governments signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, both the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party, UUP, waged a huge campaign against the deal. DUP deputy leader Peter Robinson led a loyalist invasion of Clontibet, a village south of the border in Monaghan, causing much damage to property and attacks on two Gardai (policeman). He was eventually arrested.

In 1986, the DUP organised a new paramilitary formation, the Ulster Resistance Movement. Weapons were smuggled into the North from South Africa, then still under the apartheid regime, and shared between the URM, the Ulster Defence Association, UDA, and the Ulster Volunteer Force, UVF. Loyalist murder gangs, as we now know heavily infiltrated by British state agents, murdered over 700 Catholics just for being Catholic!

When the Good Friday Agreement, GFA, was signed in 1998, the DUP initially opposed it, arguing against power-sharing and for a government based solely on the majority community. However, as the peace process developed, the IRA decommissioned its arms and its political wing, Sinn Fein, accepted the 'rule of law' and policing. This, of course, effectively meant accepting the Unionist veto over a united Ireland and, recognising this, Ian Paisley finally led the DUP, by now the largest Unionist party, into power sharing with Sinn Fein in 2007.

DUP/SINN FEIN IN POWER

The DUP leadership's sudden change of heart did not go down particularly well with many of their members but it has to be understood within the context of the huge parallel climbdown by Sinn Fein/IRA. Sinn Fein was now helping to administer British rule, not fighting it. Or, as ex-IRA Gerry Hodgins sardonically said, no doubt thinking of the DUP rank and file, 'the IRA was too clever to admit they'd lost, the Unionists too stupid to realise they'd won?.'

The DUP 'climbdown' was the agreement to share power with nationalists, even those with 'blood on their hands?'. In reality, the peace process guaranteed the Union and did nothing to challenge the sectarianism of the Northern Ireland state. The Stormont Assembly actually institutionalised sectarian divisions by distributing resources on the basis of a sectarian headcount.

This gave rise to a system in which public funding was channelled to the DUP and its cronies, including loyalist paramilitaries, with a share to Catholics to keep them quiet. Party leader Arlene Foster had 'no regrets?' about being photographed with UDA commander Dee Stitt as he received £1.7 million for his Charter NI employability project from Stormont.

The DUP continues to have its private back room dealings with the loyalists but publicly distances itself from the UDA/UVF. In 2012, when Belfast City Council restricted the flying of the Union Jack from City Hall, the DUP orchestrated demonstrations against this, which saw loyalist roadblocks and riots with the police. The DUP knew full well what they were doing but of course distanced them from the violence.

At the same time, the power-sharing executive has presided over the implementation of Tory cuts and the repression of anti-GFA republicans continues unabated. Sectarianism has got worse.

The DUP has been hit by a series of scandals that would have finished off parties elsewhere. The most recent of these, the 'Cash for Ash?' scandal, related to a Renewable Heat Incentive, RHI, scheme that allowed companies, many owned by DUP members, to claim cash payments worth more than the fuel they

were burning, costing taxpayers upwards of £500 million. Arlene Foster, now leader of the DUP, was the minister responsible at the time and her refusal to stand down during an Inquiry was too much even for Sinn Fein. Their refusal to continue working with Foster finished off the 'power-sharing' Executive.

BIGOTRY OF EVERY HUE

If the DUP's trademark was bigotry against Catholics, that didn't stop them dishing it out to many others. Thousands attended a Belfast anti-racist rally in 2014 after former DUP First Minister, Peter Robinson, backed a born-again preacher who denounced Islam as evil and 'the spawn of the devil'.

Robinson's wife, Iris, also an MP, made an infamous comment in Parliament 'there can be no viler act, apart from homosexuality and sodomy, than sexually abusing innocent children'.

Former DUP minister Edwin Poots ended up in court for upholding a ban on gay men donating blood. Thanks to the DUP, 'Northern Ireland' is the only place in Britain and Ireland to outlaw same sex marriage. Arlene Foster says they are not anti-gay but 'we take these positions from a faith point of view and why we want to protect the definition of marriage'.

The North is also the only place in the UK to oppose the extension of the 1967 Abortion Act, which means women are forced to travel to Britain to fund their own abortions, risk prosecution for procuring abortion pills or to carry pregnancies to term even if their foetus has no hope of survival. This affront to women's rights has the backing of both the DUP and the Catholic Church.

WHAT NEXT?

No wonder that even the Scottish Tory leader, Ruth Davidson, herself in a same sex relationship, is worried by the Tory/DUP deal. Ex-Tory PM John Major is, too. He agrees with Sinn Fein that the Tory government cannot be an 'honest broker' in dealings with the DUP and Sinn Fein over the restoration of Stormont and devolution if it is dependent on the DUP for its own survival. The Good Friday Agreement appears to be in tatters.

The GFA was, of course, in a parlous state before the deal. Many in the DUP were never won over to it. Nationalists are beginning to believe they have not benefitted. The DUP's sectarian behaviour regarding the use of the Irish language and on the issue of prosecuting British soldiers for crimes committed during the Troubles, and the RHI scandal have all contributed to the collapse of Stormont

In Britain, Labour supporters are rightly alarmed that a Tory/DUP deal will prolong an administration with no majority for its programme. It will undoubtedly raise tensions in the north as the Orange Order marching season, the annual demonstrations of the 'Protestant Ascendancy', reaches its peak in July and August.

The Irish national question is, therefore, back again in British politics. The 2011 census showed 48 per cent defining themselves as Protestant and 45 per cent as Catholic and calculations suggest the Protestant majority will disappear within 20 years. The GFA was to an important degree bolstered by both Northern Ireland and the Republic being in the European Union, which meant the border was less and less important. Now, with Brexit, this process could be reversed.

Whilst the border remains, whilst a state based on religious sectarianism underpinned by British money and British troops exists and bigoted Unionists are given the political upper hand, the national question will not go away, no matter how many cracks the peace process tries to paper over.

British socialists continue to have the internationalist duty to defend the right of the Irish people as a whole,

north and south, to determine the future of Ireland. Britain has no right to be in Ireland backing up its reactionary sectarian state with all its bizarre and reactionary Unionist leaders.

We should build a campaign within the Labour Party and the trade unions to call for British withdrawal and to present the case for a united Ireland. We should call on Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell, who share that view and have often expressed it, to lead such a campaign. However, socialists in and outside Labour, in all parts of the UK, should not wait to relaunch such a campaign now.

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