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# **Protestant Challenges to the ‘Protestant State’: Ulster Unionism and Independent Unionism in Northern Ireland, 1921-1939**

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## *Abstract*

This article considers intra-unionist divisions in interwar Northern Ireland, with an emphasis on the antagonistic relationship between the governing Ulster Unionist Party and a number of independent unionists. The article is divided into four sections. The first section briefly outlines the nature of independent unionism in pre-partition Ireland. The second section considers the politics of the inter-war Ulster Unionist Party, with an emphasis on its programme to create and maintain unionist unity. This provides the context for the third section, which examines the political contribution of a small band of independent unionists who stood outside this unity. The final section conducts an analysis of the electoral politics in inter-war Northern Ireland. This reveals that the most heated political cleavage in inter-war Northern Ireland was not the traditional unionist-nationalist battle line; it was instead the intra-unionist divide.

The Government of Ireland Act of 1920 partitioned Ireland and established two devolved parliaments on the island: this was the British state's solution to the conundrum of how to reconcile the competing demands of Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism.<sup>1</sup> During the drafting of the Act, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) lobbied for the creation of a six-county northern area. The Lloyd George coalition's preferred option was for a nine-county region, based on the historic province of Ulster; but when the unionists threatened to wreck the Bill, the government backed down.<sup>2</sup> Six-county 'Ulster' was much more homogeneous than the nine-county province, containing a comfortable Protestant majority. With religious identities almost exclusively determining political affiliations in Ireland under the Union, the UUP could look forward to wielding power indefinitely: the results of Northern Ireland's first election in 1921 seemed to confirm this when the UUP won forty of the fifty-two seats in the new devolved parliament. As nationalists won the remaining twelve seats, there appeared little room in Northern Irish politics for sectional interests.

The UUP aimed to create a unionist monolith to secure its ruling position in Northern Ireland, and its domestic agenda was largely shaped by the concern of unity. But a small number of unionist political actors operated from outside the boundaries of the official party during the inter-war period. In 1923, an independent unionist was elected to the northern parliament; two more followed in 1925 and another again in 1929. These independents, as well as the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP), which was founded in 1924, provided the most vocal opposition to the Unionist Party. This article will explore the politics of independent unionism, demonstrating that the most heated electoral battleground in Northern Ireland between the two World Wars was not between unionism and nationalism but *within* the unionist family.

### *Pre-Partition Independent Unionism*

As a cross-class alliance, the imperative of containing internal divisions shaped the dynamics of Ulster unionism as much as that of facing the external threats of Irish nationalism and Catholicism. The most prominent example of this impulse before the

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius O'Leary and Patrick Maume, *Controversial Issues in Anglo-Irish Relations 1910-1921* (Dublin, 2004), 146-8.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Murphy, 'Walter Long and the making of the Government of Ireland Act, 1919-20', *Irish Historical Studies*, 25, (1986), 87.

partition of Ireland was the creation of the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) in 1905, partly a response to challenges by two very different independent unionists, T. W. Russell and Thomas Sloan, to official unionism's hegemony. The UUC provided Ulster unionism with the local organisation required to dampen unionist dissent and mobilise grassroots support: the incredible level of unity and involvement of the unionist masses during the Ulster crisis years shortly afterward were testament to the Council's successes. The UUC galvanised official unionism, while the menace of Home Rule sustained it. Unintentionally, then, Russell and Sloan were driving forces in the process of 'moulding twentieth-century unionism from nineteenth-century toryism'.<sup>3</sup>

This was not, however, evident at the time. The campaigns of Russell and Sloan caused immense panic within UUP circles, which fretted at the potential breakdown of unionist unity. Russell was an articulate liberal unionist in a classic late-Victorian/early Edwardian sense while Sloan represented an urban hard-line unionism, sectarian in outlook and populist in attitude. What united both these templates of unionist dissent was a strong element of class politics: Russell was an outspoken campaigner for Ulster's tenant farmers while Sloan was the figurehead of the Protestant proletariat of Belfast who felt that established unionism ignored working class interests.

Russell was sent to Westminster to represent South Tyrone in 1886, and he quickly became a key, if temperamental, unionist propagandist. 'It is not easy to manage him', Joseph Chamberlain would argue in 1894, 'but our friends might [wish] to recollect that he has done more work for the Union than any other Irishman'.<sup>4</sup> While celebrated within British unionist circles, at the turn of the century Russell began besieging the landed elite of Irish unionism. In his 1901 book, *Ireland and Empire*, Russell accused the landlords leading unionism of working only to further their own economic interests.<sup>5</sup> The same year, Russell launched his campaign for compulsory land purchase in Ireland, which was greeted with disdain by his political

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<sup>3</sup> Alvin Jackson, 'Irish unionism and the Russellite threat, 1894-1906', *Irish Historical Studies*, 25 (1987), 376.

<sup>4</sup> Chamberlain to Hugh de Fellenberg Montgomery, 9 October 1894, Montgomery Papers, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), T/1089/261.

<sup>5</sup> T. W. Russell, *Ireland and the Empire: A Review 1800-1900* (London, 1901), 275.

masters such as Colonel Edward Saunderson.<sup>6</sup> This assault on behalf of tenant farmers forced Russell outside the ranks of the Unionist Party and shifted the political focus from London to rural Ulster for a brief time. Crucially, Russell's campaign appealed to Catholic farmers to join the cause, arguing that a genuine cross-religious alliance should be forged to better the position of the small tenantry throughout Ireland.<sup>7</sup> 'Russellism' won two by-elections in Ulster through 1902-3; but despite Russell's appeal for nationalist support, his programme was articulated in the language of unionism. While campaigning for a Russellite candidate in 1902, Russell first declared that his man was a staunch unionist: once this was clear, then he moved onto the land question.<sup>8</sup> Seeking the backing of nationalist farmers could only be emphasised so much, as the Belfast pro-Union dailies would regularly snipe at Russell's unionist *bona fides*, arguing that in opposing the UUP he was the puppet of Irish nationalism.

Thomas Sloan's political programme clearly had an influence on Northern Ireland's first generation of independent unionists. Sloan was a shipyard worker who became politically active because he 'contended that official unionist and Orange leaders disregarded working class interests and were too ready to yield to Catholic and nationalist pressure'.<sup>9</sup> He was elected to parliament for South Belfast at a by-election in 1902. 'In labour matters', Sloan announced in an interview that year, 'his whole sympathies were with his fellow-workmen and the trade union movement',<sup>10</sup> but as he was a leading figure of the Belfast Protestant Association, an extreme anti-Catholic organisation, Sloan's notion of labourism was heavily sectarianised. As well as his parliamentary opposition, Sloan also attacked official unionist hegemony through the Independent Orange Order (IOO), an organisation he established in 1903. The Order dabbled with progressive politics, most notably with its 'Magheramorne

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<sup>6</sup> Alvin Jackson, *Colonel Edward Saunderson: Life and Loyalty in Victorian Ireland* (Oxford, 1995), 245-7.

<sup>7</sup> Russell, *Ireland and Empire*, 277-8.

<sup>8</sup> *Irish Times*, 23 January 1902.

<sup>9</sup> J. W. Boyle, 'The Belfast Protestant Association and the Independent Orange Order, 1901-10', *Irish Historical Studies*, 13 (1962-3), 117.

<sup>10</sup> *Northern Whig*, 31 July 1902.

Manifesto', but any social radicalism within the movement was firmly 'subordinated to the sectarian element'.<sup>11</sup>

The campaigns of Russell and Sloan were amplified by the weakness of the Ulster unionist organisational machinery, but this did not last long. In a matter of a few years, their separate campaigns were effectively contained and then destroyed by the Unionist Party. A combination of Sloan's prominence in Belfast and the Russellite campaign fed into the founding of the UUC in 1905. As the formation of a distinct parliamentary Ulster Party in the 1880s was not coupled with the creation of lasting local structures, the activities of Russell and Sloan were allowed to flourish within several unionist heartlands: the ease of Sloan's by-election victory in south Belfast over the official unionist candidate in 1902 is testament to the organisational deficiencies of the Unionist Party *in* Ulster.<sup>12</sup> The UUC provided the co-ordinating muscle that Ulster unionism clearly lacked, and has been seen by one historian as the 'prototype' for the northern parliament which was later to come into being.<sup>13</sup> The eye of unionism was now as much in Belfast as London.

Another important context in explaining the successes and failures of independent unionism during the Edwardian period is the position of the Irish national question. The Russellite and Sloanite agendas had also gone unchecked for several years because of the relative absence of the national question from the political mainstream. Within the realm of unionism, the constitutional status of Ireland (and later Northern Ireland) was the overriding factor in promoting unity within the movement. In the period of Conservative rule that overarched Russell's and Sloan's initial successes, 'constructive unionism' was to the fore, with limited reforms rather than major constitutional tinkering marking Irish policy.<sup>14</sup> With Home Rule off the government's agenda, there was scope for unionism's cross-class alliance to fragment: Russell and Sloan were able to use this space to pursue their socio-economic grievances. But the devolution crisis of 1904-1905 – when constructive

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<sup>11</sup> Henry Patterson, 'Independent Orangeism and class conflict in Edwardian Belfast: A reinterpretation', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 80 (1980), 25.

<sup>12</sup> *Northern Whig*, 30 July, 4 August 1902.

<sup>13</sup> Alvin Jackson, *The Ulster Party: Irish Unionists in the House of Commons, 1884-1911* (Oxford, 1989), 231.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Gailey, *Ireland and the Death of Kindness: The Experience of Constructive Unionism 1890-1905* (Cork, 1987).

unionism went too far – marked the recovery of Ulster unionism, allowing the movement to return to a simplified sectarian political argument, which acted as cement for the UUC.

The challenges posed by Sloan and Russell to official unionism were effectively neutralised after the creation of the UUC. Russellism was perhaps also undermined by the terms of the 1903 Land Act, which made it easier for tenants to buy their farms.<sup>15</sup> At the 1906 election, nine candidates stood on a Russellite platform: only two won seats. Sloan survived the 1906 election, but lost his seat in the January 1910 election to an official candidate. A key component of his politics – sectarianism – was increasingly monopolised by the UUC. This factor also undermined the Russellite movement, which sought a degree of cross-community support.<sup>16</sup> The Orange Order was given significant representation on the UUC: this signalled official unionism's decisive willingness to formally 'embrace religious sectarianism and the militant ethnic politics which accompanied it'.<sup>17</sup> Membership of the IOO, small to begin with, rapidly shrunk from 1905. Its decline was mirrored by the increased significance of the Orange Order, which was to play a crucial role in the fight against Home Rule during 1912-14.<sup>18</sup> Orangeism had become political capital within unionism.

The rise and fall of independent unionism in pre-partitioned Ireland was, then, intimately tied to the UUP's organisational capabilities and the saliency of the national question. The bitter relationship between the UUP and the independent unionism of Russell and Sloan was a major dynamic within unionist politics before partition, and one that bears striking similarities to the inter-war conflicts in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>15</sup> Philip Bull, Land, *Politics and Nationalism: A Study of the Irish Land Question* (Dublin, 1996), p. 152.

<sup>16</sup> Jackson, 'Russellite threat', 397.

<sup>17</sup> Graham Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party: Protest, Pragmatism and Pessimism* (Manchester, 2004), 22-3.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Bew, *Ideology and the Irish Question: Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism 1912-1916* (Oxford, 1994), 45-6.

### *Constructing Unionist Unity in Inter-war Northern Ireland*

Northern Ireland's birth was arduous, with the new devolved administrative unit coming 'under siege' from numerous quarters.<sup>19</sup> Sectarian conflict ravaged Belfast in 1920-2; Irish nationalism within the six counties refused to recognise the new state's legitimacy; the Provisional Government of the Irish Free State sponsored republican raids across the border and launched an economic boycott; and the threat of territorial loss through a Boundary Commission loomed ominously. In spite, or because, of these factors, Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister, Sir James Craig, entered into two initiatives in 1922 with his counterpart in the Irish Free State, Michael Collins, in the hope of gaining a measure of legitimacy from nationalism for the partition settlement. In this bleak political context, though, neither man could deliver their side of the resulting pacts.<sup>20</sup> Northern Ireland's troubled development therefore continued through the inter-war period with an irredentist southern neighbour, an indifferent eastern neighbour and an internal minority who regarded the state as illegitimate. Craig reasoned in 1922 that the congruency of the new northern state could best be secured by a deal with the 'enemy' across the border; after this collapsed, he became more parochial and insular, looking more to unionism's inbuilt numerical superiority for stability.<sup>21</sup> The UUP therefore moved from a conciliatory attitude in 1922 to the more notoriously hostile rhetoric of the 1930s: 'the Protestant Parliament for a Protestant people'.

An underlying dynamic in this shift was the challenges to the UUP that emerged in the inter-war period from within the Protestant bloc, chiefly from independent unionism and the NILP. The electoral threat of these 'internal' enemies illuminates two problems that the UUP administration encountered from within its own support base. The first concerned the nature of unionism itself: it was a fissile alliance, susceptible to fragmentation when placed under socio-economic strain. Protestant workers did not blindly support the UUP's loyalism. The strength in

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<sup>19</sup> Bryan A. Follis, *A State Under Siege: The Establishment of Northern Ireland, 1920-1925* (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Paul Bew, 'The political history of Northern Ireland since partition: the prospects for north-south Co-operation', in A. F. R. Breen and C. T. Whelan (eds), *Ireland North and South: Perspectives from Social Science* (Oxford, 1999), 404-14.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Norton, 'An earnest endeavour for peace? Unionist opinion and the Craig/Collins peace pact of 30 March 1922', *Études Irlandaises*, 32 (2007), 108.



numbers of the UUP at Stormont<sup>22</sup> during the inter-war period masked an increasing level of Protestant fragmentation which was occurring at the polls, particularly after the worldwide economic depression of the 1930s. When this was added to the growth of the NILP and nationalist strength in border areas, there was more of an electoral precariousness to the UUP's position than is revealed by a cursory glance at the large majorities it racked up in Stormont.<sup>23</sup>

The second problem overlapped with the first. Devolution did not transfer many financial powers to Northern Ireland: the UUP, therefore, gained the trappings of power without any significant economic clout. But elements of the pro-Union electorate blamed the UUP for Northern Ireland's moribund inter-war economy. The nationalist commentator and author, Stephen Gwynn, prophetically discussed this issue in his 1924 book, *Ireland*, writing that it was

highly conceivable that there may develop in Ulster a nationalism like that of the Dominions, based largely on a sense of local interests: and this will be stimulated alike by the presence of a Parliament possessing power to serve local needs and by the limitation which statute has placed upon these powers.<sup>24</sup>

Serving 'local needs' is at the heart of devolution; but the limited nature of the Stormont regime left little space between the unionist grassroots and its leadership. The Northern parliament developed into a bulwark against official unionism's enemies, internal as much as external,<sup>25</sup> contributing greatly to the more unsavoury practices of the regime. Discrimination against the northern nationalist minority was encouraged more by a need to control and dampen dissident elements within the Protestant bloc and to preserve the electoral geography of Northern Ireland than by an ideologically guided sectarian campaign masterminded by the UUP.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>22</sup> The term 'Stormont' will be used throughout this article in reference to the Northern Ireland parliament, even though it did not move to the Stormont estate until 1932.

<sup>23</sup> Marc Mulholland, 'Why did unionists discriminate?', in Sabine Wichert (ed), *From the United Irishmen to Twentieth-Century Unionism* (Dublin, 2004), 204.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Gwynn, *Ireland* (London, 1924), 213.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity 1789-2006* (Oxford, 2007), 458.

<sup>26</sup> Mulholland, 'Why did unionists discriminate?', 187-206.

the fusion of party and state was disastrous for community relations in an already deeply divided society.

With unionist unity the objective, the UUP worked to diminish discontent from all elements of the Protestant bloc in Northern Ireland. There was a significant split at Cabinet level as to how this was to be achieved, with the administration divided into populist and anti-populist wings. For the Prime Minister, a populist governmental philosophy was the chief tool to build unionist unity: this consisted of sectarian argument with an economic underpinning through high public spending.<sup>27</sup> This quickly became the dominant position within the northern government; the minority anti-populist viewpoint, which stressed the need for the UUP to develop stringent fiscal policies and a conciliatory attitude to the Catholic minority, was little more than an ineffectual pressure group, particularly after 1925.<sup>28</sup>

The economic plank of the UUP's populism was important, as it revealed that the government believed that appeals to sectarianism alone would not suffice in the maintenance of unity. In 1922 the Northern Irish Cabinet ruled that welfare benefit legislation passed in Westminster would be matched in the six counties, regardless of the economic strain that this posed to the domestic Ministry of Finance.<sup>29</sup> The UUP's decision was deeply political, 'conditioned by the guarantee to its Protestant working class supporters that devolution would not mean any lowering of standards'.<sup>30</sup> A high consumption of public funds was seen as a safeguard against divisions within the Protestant bloc: the Minister of Labour, John Andrews, argued in 1926 that 'serious consequences would ensue' if the UUP did not spend generously on welfare, and this became the established norm.<sup>31</sup>

The greatest threat to unionist unity in the inter-war period came from mass unemployment, which fuelled the labour programmes of the NILP and various independent unionists. Despite the ideological and organisational weaknesses of the

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Bew, Henry Patterson and Peter Gibbon, *Northern Ireland 1921-1994: Political Forces and Social Classes* (London, 1995), 56.

<sup>28</sup> N. C. Fleming, 'The first government of Northern Ireland, education reform and the failure of anti-populist unionism, 1921-1925', *Twentieth Century British History*, 18 (2007), 146-169.

<sup>29</sup> Cabinet Conclusions Files, 13 March 1922, PRONI, CAB/4/35/6.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Norton, 'Creating jobs, manufacturing unity: Ulster unionism and mass unemployment, 1922-34', *Contemporary British History*, 15 (2001), 2.

<sup>31</sup> Cabinet Conclusion Files, 20 April 1926, PRONI, CAB/4/165/35.

labour movement in the north during 1920-2, years marked by sectarian strife and constitutional instability, the labour candidate Harry Midgely polled strongly in West Belfast in 1923.<sup>32</sup> The formation of the NILP the following year represented a clear challenge to the UUP; but despite ripe conditions for a labourist or socialist upsurge amongst the Protestant working class in the inter-war period, Northern Ireland's limited form of devolution was used by unionism to undermine radicalism. Midgely, elected to Stormont in 1933, lamented devolution, Northern Irish style: 'After you have been here for a while', he sadly conceded only one year later, 'you become obsessed with the feeling that you can perform no useful function'.<sup>33</sup> This self-defeating attitude was fostered both by the limits of devolution and how the administration was operated by the UUP. Despite massive levels of unemployment – twenty-seven per cent of the insured labour work force was unemployed between 1931 and 1939<sup>34</sup> – the political culture of Northern Ireland was decidedly unsocialistic. Even the celebrated outdoor relief riots of 1932, which united elements of the Protestant and Catholic working classes, was defused promptly by UUP through anti-socialist and sectarian rhetoric, backed by a large increase in relief rates.<sup>35</sup>

The political forces of Northern Irish labour suffered from the same difficulties which beset its British and Irish counterparts in the inter-war period. The British Labour Party suffered from 'intellectual bankruptcy' when confronted by the depression; factional fighting and organisational chaos effectively neutered the Irish Labour Party.<sup>36</sup> Sectarianism posed an additional problem to Northern Irish labour, with politico-religious divisions severely hindering Protestant and Catholic working class solidarity. These factors greatly aided the UUP's plans for unionist unity; yet it is clear that the Unionist Party could not fully absorb Protestant labourism. In 1918

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<sup>32</sup> Graham Walker, 'The Northern Ireland Labour Party in the 1920s', *Saothar*, 10 (1984), 20.

<sup>33</sup> Graham Walker, 'The Northern Ireland Labour Party, 1924-45', in Fintan Lane and Donal Ó Drisceoil (eds), *Politics and the Irish Working Class, 1830-1945* (Basingstoke, 2005), 235-6.

<sup>34</sup> D. S. Johnson, 'The Northern Ireland economy, 1914-39', in Liam Kennedy and Philip Ollerenshaw (eds), *An Economic History of Ulster, 1820-1940* (Manchester, 1985), 190-1.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Bew and Christopher Norton, 'The unionist state and the outdoor relief riots of 1932', *Economic and Social Review*, 10 (1979), 255-65.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth D. Brown, *The English Labour Movement 1700-1951* (Dublin, 1982), 259; Niamh Purséil, *The Irish Labour Party 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), 6-70

the UUP leadership established the Ulster Unionist Labour Association (UULA), a forum for proletarian unionism which was incorporated within the UUC.<sup>37</sup> This was ostensibly to curtail working class radicalism following the Great War: just as the UUC was to provide local organisation to combat the challenges from Russell and Sloan, the UULA's conception should be seen as the means employed by the unionist leadership to safely harness working class energy in an age of imminent universal suffrage. Its first president was John Andrews, a prominent member of the Unionist cabinet; but the UULA lacked any real teeth and failed to put a truly labourist agenda before the wider unionist party. Andrews's blunt assertion from 1938 places the UULA in its political context: 'During the sixteen years he had been Minister of Labour [claimed Andrews] he had endeavoured to keep employment out of the political arena. It was a great social problem which should not be dragged into party politics'.<sup>38</sup> The UULA's true value was the symbolism that it provided for the UUP in the crucial state-formation years of 1918-22, which gave the impression, at least, that proletarian concerns would be taken seriously by its bourgeois leadership.<sup>39</sup> Given that its membership remained small, particularly post-partition, it is clear that ideologically and organisationally, unionism could not fully integrate labourism.<sup>40</sup> This left a gap in the political spectrum of Ulster unionism: this was the space filled by the most prominent inter-war independent unionists, who represented a form of sectarian labourism.

### *The Independent Unionists*

Despite the electoral dominance of the UUP, the years between the twentieth century's two World Wars have been described by one scholar as the 'heyday' of independent unionism in Northern Ireland.<sup>41</sup> The 1920s and 1930s saw the emergence of vocal critics of the UUP from within the unionist bloc, with a handful of their number entering Stormont. Given the periodic abstention of nationalist members, the

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<sup>37</sup> Henry Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism: The Protestant Working Class and the Belfast Labour Movement 1868-1920* (Belfast, 1980), 114.

<sup>38</sup> *Northern Whig*, 2 February 1938.

<sup>39</sup> Walker, *Ulster Unionist Party*, 42-4.

<sup>40</sup> Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824-1960* (Dublin, 1992), 177-8.

<sup>41</sup> John F. Harbinson, *The Ulster Unionist Party: Its Development and Organisation* (Belfast, 1974), 213.

independent unionists, along with the NILP, frequently acted as parliamentary opposition to the government. Graham Walker has ably examined the NILP's inter-war fortunes in recent years,<sup>42</sup> but little is known about the independent unionists from the same period. They were numerically small, never numbering more than three in each of the five parliaments that sat from 1921 to 1939, but their presence at Stormont attracted much attention from the UUP. The independents mostly focused on critiquing the government's socio-economic performance and its perceived commitment to maintaining the unionism in Northern Ireland: they were a source of great discomfort to the UUP, which portrayed itself as the last word in loyalism.

A total of five independent unionists were elected to Stormont in the 1921-1939 period: James W. Gyle; Thomas Henderson; Robert McNeill; John W. Nixon; and Colonel Philip J. Woods. Between them, they won thirteen electoral contests to Stormont. The lilliputian numbers of independent unionists inside the northern parliament was not for want of trying: the label suffered twenty losses at the polls of inter-war Northern Ireland. The vast majority of constituencies contested by independent unionists were in Belfast. The successful candidates did not constitute an independent party, although attempts were made in the 1930s to construct one. As their individual politics and interests differed, only the shared label 'independent unionist' linked them.

A range of factors contributed to the making of independent unionism. Thomas Henderson and John Nixon both had links with the UUP before they embraced the independent label: the UUP's Shankill selection committee rejected Henderson as an official unionist candidate,<sup>43</sup> and Nixon was an unsuccessful UUP candidate at the 1925 Stormont election. As independents, though, Henderson and Nixon represented the UUP's most vocal and sustained opponents: both were fuelled by disillusionment with the government's political boundaries, their perception of the UUP's bourgeois and authoritarian nature and a sense of betrayal of the Protestant people of Ulster. Nixon was from Cavan, one of the three Ulster counties 'lost' to the Irish Free State through the partition settlement: he believed that the UUP had betrayed the Ulster Covenant of 1912 in acquiescing in the partition of *Ulster* as well

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<sup>42</sup> Walker, 'Northern Ireland Labour Party, 1924-45'.

<sup>43</sup> Patrick Buckland, *The Factory of Grievances: Devolved Government in Northern Ireland 1922-39* (Dublin, 1979), 31.

as Ireland.<sup>44</sup> But Nixon's career before politics also contributed to his antagonistic attitude to the UUP. As a District Inspector in the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), he was one of the most notorious characters associated with the Belfast violence of 1920-22. Several eyewitness reports placed him as the head of a police 'death squad' which terrorised Catholic districts of Belfast, and implicated him in the brutal murder of the entire male line of the MacMahon family in 1922.<sup>45</sup> A recent historian has queried these accusations; but, as Alan Parkinson has pointed out, the available police and government files on Nixon do not categorically either prove – or, indeed, disprove – his involvement in sectarian attacks.<sup>46</sup> Guilty or not, Nixon was something of a folk hero in loyalist areas of Belfast, but he presented the UUP government with a range of problems. Richard Dawson Bates, the Minister of Home Affairs, succeeded in forcing Nixon out of the RUC in 1924 after the District Inspector made a series of political speeches at Orange Order meetings.<sup>47</sup> Bates had been waiting for some time to remove the troublesome Nixon: in October 1922, he cryptically linked Nixon with illegality, telling Craig that 'the Protestant hooligan is allowed to interpret in his own fashion the laws of the country'.<sup>48</sup> He was savvy enough, though, to predict the backlash from 'extreme' Protestants if Nixon was dismissed from the RUC.<sup>49</sup> The staunchest support for Nixon came from elements of the security forces, the Orange Order, the UULA and individual hard-line unionist MPs following his removal:<sup>50</sup> this range of support offers an insight into his future electoral base.

While Thomas Henderson did not have a background in the security apparatus of the state, his independent unionism was, in many ways, similar to Nixon's. Like Nixon, Henderson claimed descent from one of Ulster's 'lost' counties – Monaghan – and he attacked the UUP for betraying the true cause of *Ulster* Unionism.<sup>51</sup> His independent unionism was, however, driven more by socio-economic assaults on the

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<sup>44</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 21, 26 April 1938, 709.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Farrell, *Arming the Protestants: The Formation of the Ulster Special Constabulary and the Royal Ulster Constabulary 1920-27* (London, 1983), 114, 159.

<sup>46</sup> Brian Follis queries Farrell's analysis in *State Under Siege*, 95; A. F. Parkinson, *Belfast's Unholy War: The Troubles of the 1920s* (Dublin, 2004), 239.

<sup>47</sup> Bew, 'Political history', 411.

<sup>48</sup> Bates to Craig, 23 October 1922, Ministry of Home Affairs Files, PRONI, HA/32/1/254.

<sup>49</sup> Bates to Craig, 15 August 1922, Ministry of Home Affairs Files, PRONI, CAB/9B/18/1.

<sup>50</sup> Farrell, *Arming the Protestants*, 214.

<sup>51</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 8, 25 October 1927, 2300.

government and the struggle of the unionist working class. While Nixon was also a champion of the Protestant proletariat, Henderson was more tenacious in voicing his condemnations of the UUP's perceived economic failings. He once took to the floor of Stormont and spoke for nine and a half hours on the plight of the working class.<sup>52</sup> He may have sought a career within the UUP, but Henderson's politics keenly placed him outside the borders of its cross-class hegemonic control.

Philip Woods, James Gyle and Robert McNeill combined a belief in the Union with Great Britain with a criticism of the UUP in its neglect of a particular issue to produce their independent unionist tags. Woods, a decorated former soldier who served in the Great War, represented dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the employment of ex-servicemen: this single issue dominated his rhetoric in Stormont.<sup>53</sup> McNeill was a lecturer at the Queen's University of Belfast: he primarily voiced his opinions on educational matters.<sup>54</sup> Gyle combined unionism with a desire to see the amendment of the Intoxicating Liquor Act: he campaigned tirelessly for public houses to be permitted to open on Sundays, with his background as a publican and wine merchant largely fuelling his grievance.<sup>55</sup> In 1925, the *Belfast News-Letter* criticised what it saw as independent unionism's 'self-seeking nature'.<sup>56</sup> Gyle can be seen as a vindication of this charge: politically, he was a one-issue activist, more independent than unionist. His constant repetition of the anti-prohibition cause obscured his unionism, which may have contributed to his electoral rout in 1929, after only four years in parliament.

The independent unionists inside Northern Ireland's inter-war parliament, then, came from a range of different backgrounds, and epitomised Protestant discontent with elements of the UUP's governing programme. There was no uniform pathway to independent unionism, and Nixon, Henderson, Woods, Gyle and McNeill all differed in their political emphases. But while the independent unionists were unbound by a party and were elected to Stormont to represent their constituents as individuals, a number of strands of thought can be drawn from their contributions.

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<sup>52</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 28 May 1936.

<sup>53</sup> Nick Baron, *The King of Karelia: Col P.J. Woods and the British Intervention in North Russia 1918-1919* (London, 2007), 118.

<sup>54</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 16, 20 December 1933, 1019.

<sup>55</sup> *Northern Whig*, 26 March 1925.

<sup>56</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 1 April 1925.

The independent unionism of Thomas Henderson and John Nixon reveals a staunch Protestant interpretation of politics and life, very similar to that of their predecessor, Thomas Sloan. Robert McNeill, on the other hand, was schooled in a more liberal tradition, closer to the political philosophy of T. W. Russell. Philip Woods stood between the two groupings, displaying tendencies from both, while Gyle's politics did not venture beyond anti-prohibition. What broadly united all the independents was the third strand: socio-economic criticisms of the UUP. Unionism was not a monolith; neither was independent unionism.

### *Loyalism*

Henderson, Nixon and, to a lesser extent, Woods were keen to stress their extreme Protestantism as a central plank of their politics. Given the loyalist constituencies of Belfast these men represented, this is not that surprising. These areas had a history of standing outside the UUP's sphere of direct influence, revealing the limitations of official unionist hegemony over working class Belfast. Henderson and Nixon represented the Shankill and the neighbouring Woodvale divisions respectively for over twenty years; as Frank Wright has noted, the Shankill area had a long and proud tradition of opposing established unionism.<sup>57</sup> Woods served only a brief time in Stormont, but he did win two seats in 1925, topping the poll in South Belfast and picking up the second seat in West Belfast. South Belfast had sent two independent unionists to Westminster in succession before partition: William Johnston held the seat from 1868 to 1902, followed by Thomas Sloan. Henderson and Nixon in particular carried on this Belfast Protestant working class tradition of refusing to bow to orthodox unionism. The appeal of loyalist alternatives to the UUP in certain parts of Belfast was as strong after partition as it had been before.

Partition, as has been noted, shaped several of Henderson's and Nixon's bitter criticisms of the UUP, with both men stating that nine county Ulster had been broken up for the selfish and strategic concerns of the unionist leadership.<sup>58</sup> But for both dissidents, the principles of unionism could only find meaningful political expression through an independent label, as the authoritarian office of the Chief Whip primarily

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<sup>57</sup> Frank Wright, 'Protestant ideology and politics in Ulster' *European Journal of Sociology*, 14 (1973), 262.

<sup>58</sup> *Irish News*, 17 November 1933; *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 21, 2 March 1938, 55.



guided the Ulster unionist parliamentary party. Henderson and Nixon were as vocal in their condemnation of the Irish Free State and their desire to maintain the integrity of Northern Ireland as any member of the UUP. Henderson was infamous for deploying colourful language, tainted with militancy: as he declared in parliament in 1927, ‘the day that anyone tries to drive Ulster into the Free State’, Henderson would be found ‘with a sword in my hand’.<sup>59</sup> Henderson spoke glowingly about the UUP’s dedication to loyalist politics – he praised Craig’s ‘courage as an Ulsterman’<sup>60</sup> – but despite such rhetoric, enjoyed good relations with the nationalists in Stormont. In 1934, he declared that he was proud to be a pallbearer at the funeral of Joseph Devlin, the northern nationalist leader.<sup>61</sup> This attitude was, however, used as a weapon against him by the UUP. Campaigning on behalf of the official unionists in 1929, Lady Craigavon depicted Henderson as a man who ‘spent a great deal of his time with the Nationalists and Socialists’.<sup>62</sup> But following his successful re-election that year, the *Irish News*, the major nationalist organ in the north, described Henderson as ‘more loyal than the official Unionists’.<sup>63</sup> This was the central paradox of independent unionism: they were the staunchest of Orangemen, but they could collaborate with official unionism’s electoral enemies to attack UUP hegemony.

Nixon was more forthcoming in his loyalism than Henderson, which was reflected in his flirtation with extreme Protestant groupings such as the Ulster Protestant League in the inter-war period.<sup>64</sup> He outlined his political credo in 1939, with its emphasis on independentism:

I am an Independent Unionist, and that is a Unionist who is Independent. He neither gets anything nor wants anything. If there is any question of the Union,

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<sup>59</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 8, 25 October 1927, 2303.

<sup>60</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 15, 18 May 1933, 1794.

<sup>61</sup> Eamon Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism: Nationalist Politics, Partition and the Catholic Minority in Northern Ireland 1890-1940* (Belfast, 1994), 373.

<sup>62</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 22 May 1929.

<sup>63</sup> *Irish News*, 12 April 1929.

<sup>64</sup> Graham Walker, ‘Protestantism before party!’: The Ulster Protestant League in the 1930s’, *Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), 962.

and the Union only, being defended, I will be there. I will be following no man, because I will be the first to defend it.<sup>65</sup>

The Union was the essence of Nixon's politics and his sour relationship with the UUP was founded on a belief that Craig's administration was a weakness to unionism. In this regard, Nixon was close to the sectarian politics of his independent predecessor, Thomas Sloan. Nixon frequently referred to the UUP as a 'Lundy Government', fuelled primarily by his bitterness at the loss of nine-county Ulster and an extreme brew of unionism and Orangeism.<sup>66</sup> Nixon was relentless in undermining the government's record from a Sloanite perspective, although like Henderson he avoided sectarian verbal clashes with the nationalists in Stormont.

Woods also displayed loyalist tendencies, but not to the same extent as Henderson or Nixon. Asked by ex-servicemen to represent their interests as a candidate at the West Belfast by-election in 1923, the 'Fighting Colonel' belatedly joined the Orange Order (at the age of forty-two) shortly before the poll: the UUP attempted to smear his campaign by asserting, probably correctly, that this move was too opportunistic and long overdue for one who claimed to be a Ulster loyalist.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, Woods's political career in Stormont was dominated by the issue of the rights of ex-servicemen in terms of jobs, pensions and benefits. This also extended to members of the RUC and Ulster Special Constabulary: he stoutly supported Nixon after the controversial Distinct Inspector was dismissed from the police force, raising his case against the government in the northern parliament.<sup>68</sup> Yet Woods's loyalism was much more circumscribed than that of his fellow independent unionists. At the 1925 election, he styled himself as a champion of the Protestants of Belfast who rejected the 'fat clique' of the official Unionist Party; yet he was uncomfortable with any notions of sectarianism.<sup>69</sup> Woods was savvy about using the 'Orange card' to appeal to a Protestant electoral base outside the circle of the ex-servicemen he primarily represented, but appears not to have wholeheartedly embraced such rhetoric.

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<sup>65</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 22, 18 October 1939, 2311.

<sup>66</sup> For instance, see *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 15, 29 November 1932, 185-87 and *Irish News*, 2 December 1933.

<sup>67</sup> Baron, *King of Karelia*, 113.

<sup>68</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 4, 12 March 1924, col. 96.

<sup>69</sup> Baron, *King of Karelia*, 119, 121.

### *Liberal Unionism*

While the loyalist ideologies of Henderson and Nixon placed them to the right of even the most uncompromising UUP MP on the constitutional issue, there was another, much smaller, strain of independent unionism inside Northern Ireland's inter-war parliament. Robert McNeill, MP for Queen's University, was much more liberal and cosmopolitan than his fellow independents; his speeches in Stormont also reveal a level of intellectual astuteness that was often lacking from the benches of the UUP. He was, for instance, the only unionist during the debates on religious education in 1930 to appreciate 'the fundamental nature of the difference between the Protestant and Catholic attitudes to the Bible'<sup>70</sup> – a key area of controversy in the government's Education Act. His political persuasions were similar to those expressed by Russell in *Ireland and Empire*, although McNeill lacked the class conflict analysis of Russellism. He declared that he was a loyalist who had fought under the Union Jack, but was also an Irishman sensitive to the concerns of the north's Catholic population.<sup>71</sup> This philosophy directed McNeill's stance in his *raison d'être*, educational issues: he often acted as a lone voice in advocating structures of integrated and mixed religious schools.<sup>72</sup> Conscious that he was swimming against the tide, McNeill quickly grew weary of his failure to influence the holders of power within the state and came to loathe the 'fruitless discussion of party politics'. He resigned his seat in 1935 after only six years at Stormont, but not before departing with a muscular critique of politics in Northern Ireland in the 1930s:

If the Government and the followers of the Government could rid themselves of that narrow, bigoted, intolerant spirit, which is not of the very essence of Protestantism, then I could see some hope for the future of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the British Commonwealth; but at the present time, having regard to the extreme temper which prevails on both sides, I entertain no hope, and I realise with sadness that my time in this House is absolutely wasted.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Buckland, *Factory*, 264.

<sup>71</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 15, 6 December 1932, 315.

<sup>72</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 16, 19 April 1934, 1020.

<sup>73</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 17, 21 November 1934, 79.

### *Socio-Economic Criticisms*

All strands of inter-war independent unionism bombarded the UUP with socio-economic criticisms. The Sloanites were the main opponents of the UUP in this regard, blending working class identities with Orange politics to produce sharply negative assessments of the government. Henderson was undoubtedly the loyalists' most prominent champion of working class interests: his rhetoric and voting pattern in Stormont brought him closer to the NILP than the official party that shared his 'unionist' label. This point was manipulated by the UUP in efforts to weaken Henderson's support base. During the 1938 election campaign, the UUP announced the fact that Henderson had voted with the government only six times in 254 divisions from 1929 to 1937 as evidence that he was 'disloyal'.<sup>74</sup> He repeatedly slated the UUP for the chronic levels of unemployment in the inter-war period and for failing to provide a safety net for the destitute class: 'As far as the unemployed are concerned there is no reason to hope that they are going to received anything from this Government'.<sup>75</sup> In the aftermath of the outdoor relief riots, Henderson stormed out of Stormont with the NILP's Jack Beattie, after the pair were blocked from raising the subject of unemployment.<sup>76</sup> He was the most prominent speaker on social and economic issues in Stormont between the two World Wars, believing that the UUP sought only to protect the Protestant bourgeoisie: for this reason, he argued that 'there was great need for men of independent spirit in the Northern Parliament' to act as governmental watchdogs.<sup>77</sup> As the UUP loathed entering socio-economic debates, Henderson was its prime enemy in inter-war Northern Ireland.

Like Henderson, Nixon represented a working class Protestant division of Belfast, and a concern for the urban proletariat led the ex-police officer into countless clashes with the UUP over living conditions and unemployment. From 1929 to 1937, Nixon voted with the government only fourteen times.<sup>78</sup> Even as an official Unionist candidate in the 1925 election, Nixon hinted at this political mindset: 'he was out and out with Sir James Craig on the defence of the border, but on all other matters, his

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<sup>74</sup> 'Mr. Henderson's Voting Record', Department of the Prime Minister Files, PRONI, PM/4/20/3.

<sup>75</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 17, 20 November 1934, 32.

<sup>76</sup> Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: The Orange State* (London, 1980), 119.

<sup>77</sup> *Northern Whig*, 21 November 1933.

<sup>78</sup> 'Mr. Nixon's Voting Record', Department of the Prime Minister Files, PRONI, PM/4/20/3.

independence was as strong as ever'.<sup>79</sup> While his loyalism at times obscured his complaints and he was not as consistently vocal as Henderson in registering the perceived socio-economic failings of the government, Nixon could ably articulate the frustrations of his working class constituents in an era of chronic unemployment.<sup>80</sup>

Championing the Protestant proletariat was not the monopoly of the Sloanite wing of independent unionism: the other dissidents also offered socio-economic criticisms of the UUP. Robert McNeill strongly believed that it was 'essential that the interests of Labour' were represented in Stormont; he also admitted that he was an admirer of the NILP's Harry Midgley.<sup>81</sup> James Gyle framed his socio-economic critiques of the Government within the terms of his political star, the amendment of the licensing laws for public houses. He was politically savvy enough to occasionally draw on the spectre of partition to toughen his message: in 1925, for example, he argued that 'an enormous amount of money had been drained out of Northern Ireland into the Free State as a result of the Intoxicating Liquor Act'.<sup>82</sup> Woods frequently spoke about welfare issues concerning ex-servicemen. But he also had other lines of attack: he vocally deplored the exorbitant levels of civil service and parliamentary expenditure in Northern Ireland and the employment of Englishmen in public posts instead of unemployed Ulstermen.<sup>83</sup>

The inter-war independent unionists all held clear socialist and labourist sympathies: all the independents voted on the side of the NILP at one time or another. Yet it would be incorrect to claim that the dissident unionists *were* socialists. Independent unionism, particularly in its most aggressive form in the persons of Henderson and Nixon, only claimed to represent the workers from the Protestant bloc: class issues were sectarianised and the independents did not share socialism's interpretation of the capitalist structure. The success of independent unionism in working class divisions of Belfast also undermined the NILP's attempts to attract Protestants to labourist politics, as both labels were often in competition for the same votes. The re-emergence of Thomas Sloan onto the streets of Belfast in 1926, sixteen years after his crushing electoral defeat at the hands of the official party, was a case in

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<sup>79</sup> *Northern Whig*, 2 April 1925.

<sup>80</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 21, 3 May 1938, 835.

<sup>81</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 16, 20 December 1933, 182.

<sup>82</sup> *Northern Whig*, 28 March 1925.

<sup>83</sup> Baron, *King of Karelia*, 120.

point. He attacked the NILP in a series of political meetings held in late summer, denouncing its socialism as ‘disloyal’. What the Protestant working class needed, claimed Sloan, was not the NILP but the vigilance of Orangemen.<sup>84</sup> He also voiced criticisms of the UUP, but these seemed muted next to his equation of socialism in Belfast with the ‘evil’ of Bolshevism.<sup>85</sup> The Orange labourism that Sloan advocated posed a massive challenge to the NILP and it hugely dented its electoral fortunes in Protestant working class areas.<sup>86</sup> The NILP was more than aware of this: Midgley expressed amazement in 1936 at how many votes the independent unionists picked up through appeals to sectarianism while lacking any electoral organisation.<sup>87</sup> As in Glasgow, sectarianism posed a major threat to organised labourism in Belfast.<sup>88</sup> Contemporaries such as the Minister of Education, Lord Charlemont, saw the conservatism of the Orange Order as ‘a bulwark against Socialism’: in 1933, he privately believed that ‘Belfast would be largely Socialist tomorrow if it wasn’t for the unswerving opposition to Socialism on the part of the Orange Order’.<sup>89</sup> The Orangeism advocated by independent unionists such as Sloan, Henderson and Nixon was a conservative force: it had a powerful hold over sections of the Protestant working class, weakening the appeal of socialism in its natural constituency.

Despite their vocal condemnation of the UUP’s management skills, the independent unionists failed to offer any coherent economic policies beyond increasing welfare spending and finding employment for unemployed Protestants. But this critique is to view independent unionism in the wrong light. The various individuals who stood under the independent unionist banner represented localised unionist discontent with the UUP. Without any means to gain political power, the independent unionists acted merely as hostile individual pressure groups within Stormont, which the Unionist Party, particularly at election time, treated with an

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<sup>84</sup> Inspector General’s report, 7 September 1926, Ministry of Home Affairs Files, PRONI, HA/5/1434.

<sup>85</sup> Inspector General’s report, 28 September 1926, Ministry of Home Affairs Files, PRONI, HA/5/1434.

<sup>86</sup> Christopher Norton, ‘The left in Northern Ireland 1921-32’, *Labour History Review*, 60 (1995), 9-10.

<sup>87</sup> Walker, ‘Northern Ireland Labour Party, 1924-45’, 237-8.

<sup>88</sup> Graham Walker, ‘Labour in Scotland and Northern Ireland: The inter-war experience’, in Rosalind Mitchison and Peter Roebuck (eds), *Economy and Society in Scotland and Ireland 1500-1939* (Edinburgh, 1988), 269.

<sup>89</sup> Paul Bew, Kenneth Darwin and Gordon Gillespie (eds), *Passion and Prejudice: Nationalist-Unionist Conflict in Ulster in the 1930s and the Founding of the Irish Association* (Belfast, 1993), 3

obsessive contempt. But the extent to which the independents propagated the need for increased spending and employment in Northern Ireland underlines a misreading – which may or may not have been deliberate – of the powers that the Stormont regime actually possessed.<sup>90</sup> Northern Ireland was no better prepared than non-devolved regions of the United Kingdom for the global economic slump of the 1930s. The rhetoric of the independent unionists belied this fact; but they should mostly be seen as an outlet for Protestant labourist frustrations, tinged with Orange populism.

A factor that fed into the failure of the independent unionists to develop valid socio-economic philosophies was the lack of a party machine behind them. One organisation that sought to transform the independents from a band of individuals into a viable political party appeared in the 1930s, but it was a complete flop. Henderson launched the Independent Unionist Association (IUA) in 1933.<sup>91</sup> He spoke of his desire to see unionists of independent thought come together to oppose the UUP; rather optimistically he announced that ‘when we have our organisation in working order we hope to have twenty-two members’ in Stormont.<sup>92</sup> Henderson’s dream, however, would never be realised. The IUA struggled to build the structures needed for a mass political party. Dissident unionism in the inter-war period was independent of party labels and whips, and was chiefly found in several localised areas: a national party, in many ways, went against the grain of independent unionism. Further to the organisational and ideological problems inherent in an independent party, the pro-unionist media turned its wrath on the organisation: ‘There is no room in Ulster for more than one Unionist Party... The plain truth is that this “Independent Unionist” movement is, in effect, an anti-Ulster movement’.<sup>93</sup> The IUA contested one election to Stormont, in 1938, before folding. Henderson was its sole elected MP as the UUP crushed the challenges from within the Protestant bloc, vindicating the words of the unionist MP, Robert Lynn: ‘There could not be different types of Unionism’.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Buckland, *Factory*, 26.

<sup>91</sup> *Northern Whig*, 14 December 1933.

<sup>92</sup> *Northern Whig*, 16 December 1933.

<sup>93</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 27 November 1937.

<sup>94</sup> *Northern Whig*, 4 February 1938.

### *Electoral Politics in the Inter-war Period*

The most striking features of electoral competition in inter-war Northern Ireland were the intensity of the intra-Protestant battle and the lack of the traditional unionist versus nationalist pattern. The UUP aimed to turn every election into a border poll, or as the poet John Hewitt succinctly put it, ‘regular plebiscites of loyalty’,<sup>95</sup> to defeat their independent foes. This contributed to the increasingly sectarian political culture of inter-war Northern Ireland, as socio-economic issues were never publicly debated within official unionist circles. Independent unionists competed in four of the five elections to Stormont between the World Wars. The first election to the Northern Irish parliament in 1921 witnessed an impressive display of unionist unity, as the UUP returned all its candidates.<sup>96</sup> The first independent unionist to be elected came in 1923, when Philip Woods won a by-election in West Belfast. In the next four elections before the outbreak of the Second World War, independent unionists and the NILP confronted the UUP, eating into the Protestant vote. An analysis of these elections offers a valuable insight into the bitter intra-unionist battles and how the UUP countered the independent unionist challenge.

Craig was a tenacious and talented electioneer. In 1925, he fought the election under the shadow of the Boundary Commission; the election of 1933 was fought with the republicanism of Fianna Fáil, the new governing party of the Irish Free State emphasised; and in 1938, he called a snap election one day after Eamon de Valera, the Fianna Fáil Taoiseach, publicised his intention to travel to London for negotiations with the British Government, with partition topping the agenda.<sup>97</sup> The one oddity was 1929, which was fought without an overt constitutional threat to Northern Ireland. But even then, the message from Craigavon<sup>98</sup> was a familiar one: he claimed that the question at stake in 1929 was ‘whether or not Ulster will remain true to Great Britain and the Empire’.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> John Hewitt, ‘The Coasters’, *Selected Poems* (Belfast, 2007), 73.

<sup>96</sup> All electoral figures herein are drawn from Sydney Elliott (ed), *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Election Results 1921-1972* (Chichester, 1973).

<sup>97</sup> *Northern Whig*, 14 January 1938.

<sup>98</sup> Craig became Lord Craigavon in 1927.

<sup>99</sup> ‘Viscount Craigavon’s Message to the Electors of Northern Ireland’, 1929, Department of the Prime Minister Files, PRONI, PM/6/9/3.



But UUP hegemony was not complete. The constant re-election of Henderson and Nixon through the inter-war period, as well as independent unionism's other sporadic victories, revealed the flaws in the government's programme. The loss of four Belfast seats to three independents (as well as three seats to the NILP) in 1925 in particular came as a huge shock to the UUP. After the boundary question, the second major aspect of the UUP's campaigns was a repeated condemnation of independent unionism. UUP electoral literature equated a vote for an independent unionist as a victory for nationalism: it was a gross 'betrayal of the Loyalist cause'.<sup>100</sup> The intra-unionist clash was heated in 1925: UUP candidates heartedly condemned the independents and vice versa, while many editorials in the pro-union press savagely came out against the 'dangerous' dissidents.<sup>101</sup>

The 1921 and 1925 elections to the northern parliament were conducted under a multi-seat constituency proportional representation (PR) system; from 1929 onwards, a single-member constituency 'first-past-the-post' system was used. The dynamics of this change originated in the threat posed to unionist hegemony by the independents and NILP. Official unionism had long been sceptical about PR: a UUC committee reported prior to the first election in Northern Ireland that unity in the Protestant ranks was imperative, 'otherwise under PR undesirable candidates may succeed in being elected'.<sup>102</sup> In 1925, the worst fears of the committee were realised. The three independent candidates polled extremely strongly: Henderson topped the poll in North Belfast; Woods topped South Belfast and came second in West Belfast; Gyle picked up the third seat in East Belfast. But the PR system offers an additional point of interest, namely the destination of transferred votes. This starkly illustrates the antagonism between the independent unionists and the UUP. The vast bulk of Henderson's surplus went to the NILP candidate, Sam Kyle, which pulled him over the quota and won him the second seat; Nixon, standing unsuccessfully almost as an 'independent' official Unionist, also gained a healthy number of Henderson's transfers. A Town Tenants candidate, much to the chagrin of the official unionists, pocketed the overwhelming bulk of Woods's surplus in South Belfast; in West Belfast, Woods benefited from receiving a number of transfers from the nationalist

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<sup>100</sup> UUP election leaflet, 1925, Ulster Unionist Council Papers (UUC), PRONI, D/1327/20/4/142.

<sup>101</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 1, 3 April 1925; *Northern Whig*, 25, 30 March 1925.

<sup>102</sup> Untitled and undated findings of the UUC committee appointed to review the unionist position in the six counties [1920-1], UUC Papers, PRONI, D/1327/18/47.

poll topper, Joseph Devlin. Once he passed the quota, half of the independent unionist's surplus went to the NILP candidate, helping him take the final seat. In East Belfast, the NILP's Jack Beattie and the UUP's Sir Herbert Dixon were elected on first preferences. A massive amount of Beattie's surplus votes went to Gyle; none passed from Dixon to the independent.

Despite these losses, the UUP still won fifty-five per cent of the vote across Northern Ireland, and played down the disappointments in Belfast by focusing on the 'emphatic vote of confidence in the Premier'.<sup>103</sup> PR became the scapegoat of the Belfast losses: its days were numbered after the 1925 election. Shortly afterwards, Craig initiated the abolition of PR in favour of single-seat constituencies and the 'first-past-the-post' electoral system. The Prime Minister justified the destruction of PR in terms comprehensible to all shades of unionism, suggesting that the PR system left an open door to Dublin in Northern Ireland.<sup>104</sup>

The UUP's motive in abolishing PR was simple: it was a hindrance to unionist unity and UUP hegemony over the Protestant electorate. By replacing PR with the British model of one-seat constituencies, the government aimed to institutionalise Northern Ireland's Protestant/Catholic divide inside Stormont's chamber. The net result was the weakening of independent unionism and the NILP, making it more difficult for them to win seats in the northern parliament. Craigavon made this very clear in 1927:

Mr Devlin and his party [the nationalists] are the natural opposition; why, then, should any loyalist constituency add strength to it and weaken the influence of my colleagues and myself?<sup>105</sup>

In such a two-party system, the UUP would always dominate. The government's Chief Whip declared in 1924 that '[t]here is no room in Ulster for diversities of opinions'.<sup>106</sup> the erasing of PR was this attitude in the form of policy.

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<sup>103</sup> *The Ulster Unionist Council Year Book 1926*, UUC Papers, PRONI, D/1327/20/1/2.

<sup>104</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates*, 8, 25 October 1927, 2272.

<sup>105</sup> *Northern Whig*, 13 July 1927.

<sup>106</sup> Sir Herbert Dixon to W. B. Spender, 23 August 1924, Ministry of Home Affairs Files, PRONI, CAB/9B/101/1.

The results of this change were witnessed at the next election in 1929. Nine independent unionists fought the election, six in Belfast constituencies. Only two, however, were elected through the 'first-past-the-post' system: Henderson and Nixon. Robert McNeill later joined them after a prolonged election for the Queen's University seats, which retained the PR system. The independent unionists polled over fourteen per cent of the total votes cast in 1929, but comprised less than six per cent of the northern parliament's representation. With only one NILP candidate winning a seat in 1929, Craigavon's decision to abolish PR seemed vindicated.

A by-product of adopting the 'first-past-the-post' system was that the number of uncontested seats rose dramatically, which turned elections into farcical affairs at times. In 1933, for example, twenty-seven official Unionists were returned to Stormont without a contest, which gave the government a majority of two before the polls even opened. The UUP were ecstatic with this result: Anthony Babington, a unionist MP, described the large number of uncontested seats, somewhat unwittingly, as 'a vote of confidence in the Prime Minister'.<sup>107</sup> Independent unionists contested eight seats in 1933, with five Belfast constituencies supplying intra-Protestant battles. The government and the pro-union media played an anti-republican card throughout. The ascendancy of Fianna Fáil was strongly emphasised, as were the dangers of republicanism within the borders of Northern Ireland.<sup>108</sup> Craigavon focused unionism's attention on the one and only issue in which he was interested:

This General Election is being watched by our political opponents on the Free State and across the water to see if there is any weakening on the part of loyal Ulster in its allegiance to the Crown... Loyalists cannot afford to play into the hands of Nationalists or so-called 'Independents' who are hostile to the Government and therefore against the best interests of the people. Let 'Unity' be our watchword.<sup>109</sup>

The pro-Union press concurred with the Prime Minister. Despite the extreme poverty and unemployment in Northern Ireland in the 1930s, the *Northern Whig* recorded that

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<sup>107</sup> *Northern Whig*, 21 November 1929.

<sup>108</sup> *Northern Whig*, 26 October, 3 November 1933; *Belfast News-Letter*, 4, 11 November 1933.

<sup>109</sup> 'Lord Craigavon's Appeal to the Electors of Northern Ireland', 1933, Department of the Prime Minister Files, PRONI, PM/6/9/4.

‘the defence of Ulster’s status within the United Kingdom becomes the supreme issue of the Election’.<sup>110</sup>

These factors produced a restrictive environment for the independent unionists in 1933. Henderson retained the Shankill by the skin of his teeth and McNeill won the final seat of the four-seat university contest; Nixon, however, was the independents’ great success story, polling a majority of over 2,000 against the official unionist candidate in Woodvale. The three sitting independent unionists were the only dissidents returned in 1933. Several of the other independent unionist challengers polled quite strongly: William Wilton, a member of the Belfast Board of Guardians, won over forty per cent of the vote in Oldpark, a similar share to John Woodburn in Mid-Antrim, who stood as a representative of farmers’ interests.<sup>111</sup> Rural Protestant discontent, as represented by Woodburn, constituted a smaller strain of independent unionism outside Belfast, which argued that the UUP was not doing enough to materially aid ‘loyal’ farmers. But no dissident of this nature was elected in the inter-war period: the loss of PR was felt particularly by the unsuccessful independents, while the government’s constant bombardments of anti-dissident propaganda, coupled with the perceived republican threat, were effective electioneering tools. The time, effort and expense that UUP candidates put into their anti-independent unionist campaigns in 1933 was phenomenal: the *Irish News* even remarked that ‘[s]everal members of the Craigavon Administration have unmistakably shown that they hate Independent Unionists even more than they hate Nationalists’.<sup>112</sup>

Unionist politics were publicly fragmented in the 1938 contest, with five dissident labels challenging the UUP’s hegemony.<sup>113</sup> Not that this altered the UUP’s approach: the main issue that the UUP campaigned on was Eamon de Valera’s political activities, particularly his constitution of the previous year which laid claim to the six counties, and his increasingly militant anti-partition rhetoric. A snap election was unionism’s reply. Craigavon wished to use the election to ‘put the position of Ulster beyond doubt’, and he strongly emphasised the urgent need to

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<sup>110</sup> *Northern Whig*, 20 November 1933.

<sup>111</sup> *Northern Whig*, 18, 27 November 1933.

<sup>112</sup> *Irish News*, 25 November 1933.

<sup>113</sup> These were: five separate Independent Unionists; ten members of the Progressive Unionist Party; one Independent Progressive Unionist; six candidates of the Independent Unionist Association; and one candidate of the Ulster Protestant League.

secure unionist unity to rebuff de Valera's objectives.<sup>114</sup> The de Valera factor, combined with the surprise of the snap election, effectively stunted the growing band of Protestant dissidents, which was Craigavon's domestic aim. The Progressive Unionist Party, a hastily formed liberal unionist party, was crushed at the polls, with all ten of its candidates defeated. The electoral environment also hampered the IUA, which was compounded by its chaotic organisational structure.<sup>115</sup> As an umbrella group which loosely united various strands of *localised* independent unionism, the IUA did not have the appeal to break through in official unionist heartlands, despite winning the public backing of the loyalist Ex-'A'-Specials' Association.<sup>116</sup> Only one of its candidates – Thomas Henderson – was successful, although it did poll quite strongly in several constituencies around the country, such as Enniskillen and West Down. The IUA's manifesto, which was hurriedly drawn up, declared that partition should not arise as an election issue and that the movement intended to fight on the government's domestic record.<sup>117</sup> But Craigavon bluntly asserted that 'every man who voted against the official Loyalist candidate was in favour of the policy of a united Ireland':<sup>118</sup> this provocative message was amplified throughout the six counties in a zealous manner through rigorous campaigning and an extensive media focus. The IUA and the Progressive Unionists failed to alter the election's main issue: unemployment and social conditions were easily brushed aside in the anti-republican rhetoric of the 1938 campaign.

The inter-war period's most electorally successful independent unionist, John W. Nixon, was, tellingly, not a member of the IUA. His campaign to retain his Woodvale seat was colourful: after proclaiming that the 'Border was as safe as it had been for decades',<sup>119</sup> Nixon played throughout on his Protestant credentials, including canvassing with a mock King William III.<sup>120</sup> Nixon shared much ground with the IUA, particularly when he argued that Northern Ireland should be classified as an economic 'Special Area' for the purposes of gaining additional grants from the British

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<sup>114</sup> *Politics in Review*, 5 (January-March 1938), 59.

<sup>115</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 21 January 1938.

<sup>116</sup> *Northern Whig*, 26 January 1938.

<sup>117</sup> *Northern Whig*, 26 January 1938.

<sup>118</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 26 January 1938.

<sup>119</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 5 February 1938.

<sup>120</sup> *Northern Whig*, 9 February 1938.

Treasury to tackle working class hardship.<sup>121</sup> He was, however, determined to remain a localised independent unionist, accountable only to the Protestants of his constituency. And this he did: Nixon increased his majority. But his success proved to be the exception rather than the norm for the various strands of dissident unionism in 1938. The UUP dominated, gaining over fifty-five per cent of the vote. This display of strength, however, masked an underlying problem facing the official party. The combined non-UUP unionist share of the vote was an impressive twenty-nine per cent; but under the ‘first-past-the-post system’ this filtered into less than four percent of the MPs at Stormont.

The 1938 election starkly revealed several of the deficiencies of the UUP after seventeen years of unbroken rule. The faces around the Cabinet table had aged, not changed: the large non-UUP unionist vote in 1938 reflected a discontented and apathetic attitude bubbling within unionism, pre-empting the difficulties faced by the lethargic early wartime administration under John Andrews, who became Prime Minister after the death of Craigavon in 1940.<sup>122</sup> The UUP was invigorated by the ascent of the more energetic Sir Basil Brooke to the premiership in 1943, which marked the political death of the first generation of unionist ministers. But the dogged independent unionism of the inter-war period persisted: Henderson held the Shankill seat until 1953, while only death could end Nixon’s reign in Woodvale in 1950.

### *Conclusion*

‘I know what “Independent” means, and I know what “Unionist” means, but what they mean in conjunction I cannot tell, and the first word contradicts the second’.<sup>123</sup> The words of Sir Basil Brooke in 1938 reflected the UUP’s profound distrust of ‘unofficial’ or ‘independent’ unionism in the inter-war period. From the partitioning of Ireland until the outbreak of the Second World War, the independent unionists in the northern parliament formed the UUP’s staunchest critics. With the nationalist members of Stormont unwilling to fully play the part of parliamentary opposition, that role fell to the several members of the NILP and the independents. But they operated in an incredibly hostile atmosphere: Craigavon’s administration released large

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<sup>121</sup> *Northern Whig*, 8 February 1938.

<sup>122</sup> Walker, *Ulster Unionist Party*, 89-96.

<sup>123</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 12 January 1938.

quantities of anti-independent unionist propaganda, which usually equated the dissidents with nationalism. The UUP keenly pointed to the fact that the independent unionists often voted with the nationalists in Stormont. A substantial number of the Protestant electorate in Belfast, though, rejected the UUP's claims that a vote for an independent unionist was a vote for a nationalist; but at the same time it should be noted that Henderson and Nixon in particular displayed electoral durability by continually promoting their loyalist credentials. This was encouraged, and fed into, the UUP's emphasis on the constitutional question and politico-religious identities, the consequence of which left labourist politics an underdeveloped creed in inter-war Northern Ireland.

The UUP's fear of Protestant fragmentation dominated its domestic agenda for decades. Government rhetoric by the 1960s had altered very little: Brooke declared in 1966 that 'never at any time can we Unionists afford to forget that in unity and unity alone rests all our strength'.<sup>124</sup> Craigavon could have made this speech at almost any point during the inter-war period: the intrinsic conservatism of unionism is clear. The dangers in the UUP's fusion of state and party, however, were inherent. In his classic commentary on the French Revolution, Edmund Burke forecast the grim consequences of political and societal stagnancy within a territory: 'A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation'.<sup>125</sup> Northern Ireland did not possess a mechanism for change, and the consequences of this would become clear in the 1960s. Its inert political culture was partly the logical result of the UUP's programme to construct Protestant unity and to destroy attempts to raise socio-economic issues. Independent unionism highlighted the limitations of this programme, but did not, and could not, pose a national threat to the UUP, particularly under the asphyxiating conditions of the 'Protestant Parliament'.

The political significance of the independent unionists lies in their relationship with the UUP. The intra-unionist battle lines were the most heated during the inter-war period, with the official party and pro-Union media almost hysterically opposing the Independents. Lord Craigavon headed a government which was guided by Protestant populism and was extremely sensitive to unrest within the unionist bloc. In the 1930s in particular, his rhetoric was more 'Protestant' than 'unionist', partly

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<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Bew et al, *Northern Ireland*, 177.

<sup>125</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London, 1986; first published 1790), 106.

cultivated by the UUP's reliance on electioneering on loyalist principles. This was fostered by the need to confront independent unionism and to provide an agenda behind which all unionists could fall. But the independent unionists can also be seen as an important safety valve for the government. Loyalist discontent with the UUP was transferred to the independents, stunting the growth of socialism within the Protestant bloc. Without any formal political power, the independent unionist threat could be contained. Containment, however, generally translated into the UUP stealing the clothes of their independent rivals, which aided the move within mainstream unionism from the conciliatory tones of 1922 to the public Protestant pieties of the 1930s. While the increasing Catholic ethos of the Irish Free State was an important context for the emergence of the 'Protestant State', the domestic agenda of the UUP should not be overlooked. Protestant unity was imperative for electoral durability; and the UUP were very conscious of the *appearance* of Protestant unity to the eyes of the British and Irish governments, particularly when Northern Ireland's constitutional security was seemingly threatened, such as in 1925 and 1938. But the refusal of elements of the Protestant electorate to yield to the official party, despite the continual electioneering on the border issue, starkly reveals the incomplete nature of UUP hegemony.