**Cultural Responses to and the Legacies of Sunningdale**

**Introduction**

The theatre represents what the director Mick Gordon calls a ‘safe thinking space’, where the mind intuits ‘no danger from the alternative actions, thoughts and feelings being presented’. While this is often cited as a weakness – because what the audience sees does not impact directly upon their lives – ‘It is precisely because theatre does not directly affect our normal lives that our minds allow us the thinking space to experience and consider the alternative stories and behaviours in front of us’ (2010: 13–14). This may be why drama has often been the preferred form for those culturally approaching the Ulster Workers’ Council Strike of May 1974, at least from within the community who drove it. The Strike intrudes on the late Christina Reid’s *Belle of Belfast City* (1989), and it was no coincidence that when former Progressive Unionist Party leader Dawn Purvis made a recent theatrical foray through the *Flesh and Blood Women* trio of one-act plays – performed at the Belfast Opera House in May 2014 – her story was set during the Strike. The time continues to represent a powerful crucible through which to explore identity and intra-communal division, though it was a terrain first mined by Sydenham-born Stewart Parker, whose play *Pentecost* (1987) is arguably the most sophisticated framing of the era of Sunningdale.

Concerned very intimately with ‘the state of Protestant political identity as it emerged from the 1974 Ulster Workers’ Council Strike (O’Toole 1995), Parker’s work was not afraid to confront the baser elements in his own background. Echoing old Northern Ireland Labour grandees – who believed that a ‘modicum of generosity’ from Unionists during the 1960s may have averted the ferocity of the violence from 1969 onwards (Brett, 1978: 153) – one of its characters rails:

**PETER:** Can you not see, this whole tribe, so-called Protestants…all that endless

mindless marching, they’ve been marching away with the lambegs blattering and the

banners flying straight up a dead-end one-way blind alley, self-destroying, the head’s

eating the tail now, it’s a lingering tribal suicide going on out there, there was no need

for any of it, they held all the cards, they only needed to be marginally generous

(Parker, 1989: 184).

On stage there was, and remains, a probing and self-questioning going on which it is impossible to see taking place through Unionist politicians, whose careers would be curtailed by expressing such sentiments in a zero-sum atmosphere.

In his life and work Parker was obsessed with Northern Protestant identity and devoted to highlighting its multifariousness. As Field Day Theatre Company toured *Pentecost* around Ireland in the late 1980s, the play sought a return ‘to the individual, to the “Christ in ourselves”, as the source of regeneration and change’ (Andrews, 1987: n.pag). Religion was not shunned but, as the ending makes clear, an intrinsic part of the solution. Parker’s own proximity to death heightened this conviction,[[1]](#endnote-1) though *Pentecost*’s ‘final cure lies not in political action or even social agitation but in a fundamental engagement which alone can give change a moral as well as a sociological dimension’ (Andrews, 1987: n.pag). The structure and title of the play was handed to its author by the timescale; the actual dates of the UWC Strike gave way to the feast of Pentecost. Its central character of Marian steps ‘right across the community divide to investigate someone who’s whole history is totally different to her own’ (Lynne Parker, interview with the author, 24 March 2012), reaching out to an apparition – a recently deceased lady called Lily Matthews – who is a psychic manifestation of what she believes to be the ‘other’: the Loyalist community.

Initially Lily is an antagonistic revenant, emerging from the brickwork to deliver, with unapologetic intransigence, the line which seems to define her community’s stance: ‘I don’t want you in my house’ (Parker, 1989: 155). Through Marian’s engagement, however, flows a plea ‘to live now’ and move away from the perpetual blaming of the other for all grievance and injustice, reaching ‘a reconciliation of sorts: with the collective past’ (Johnstone, 1989: 62) as well as an unavoidable present. In the year of the Enniskillen bombing and the residual hostility to the Anglo-Irish Agreement (which to Parker coterminous with 1974), the essence of *Pentecost* was its imagining of some kind of reconciliation for Northern Ireland when none appeared in sight. This appeared even more pronounced with the mass mobilization element of the opposition to Sunningdale, i.e. the democratic majority will it flexed. As Stephen Rea, who founded Field Day and acted in the original production remembers: ‘It’s only in that small microcosm and room where there are these people that find it impossible to live, end up determining to be reconciled. At the time when *Pentecost* was set you couldn’t imagine a future. All you could imagine was people huddling in their houses, hiding from the very frightening violence that was outside’ (Interview with the author, 14 August 2014). He affirmed that Field Day’s theatrical productions were ‘voicing things, heightening the language in which things could be debated, because everything was being fought over rather than discussed.’ Plays like Brian Friel’s *Translations* (1980) and Parker’s *Pentecost* were ‘looking for a way out when the ceasefire wasn’t even a remote possibility’ (quoted in *Irish Times*, 11 October 2006: 16). The simple cultural presentation of a possible reconciliation, Rea maintains, ‘filters into people’s consciousness’ and, eventually, their politics (Interview with the author, 14 August 2014).

**Legacy**

If Lily haunts Parker’s final play, the ghosts of Sunningdale haunt every political arrangement, every set of talks, initiatives, and deliberations undertaken in Northern Ireland ever since. A whole community – or at least the majority of a community – proved in response to a series of perceived political defeats that it could wreck developments as a final veto in the politics of destruction. This became in itself a dominant cultural feature of Ulster Protestant politics. The late John Cole astutely captured how this was reinforced ‘by a thwarted sense among many Protestants that they are losing the battle in spite of their superiority in numbers’, and for this reason ‘the possibility of another strike hangs over every Protestant politician’ (*The Guardian*, 17 February 1975: 11). Personally comfortable with increasing cross-border cooperation, Chief Executive Brian Faulkner was thought to have underestimated the anxiety the Council of Ireland would foment in the Unionist community and the Party he led. Arguing many years later that Faulkner should have ‘played harder to get’, his own Principal Private Secretary maintained that the Unionist ‘veto’ was ‘never a threat to the overall process in the way it perhaps should have been’. Faulkner’s desire ‘to get Stormont up and running again’ – part of his dynamic persona – was considered, in this reading, a ‘weakness’ (Ramsay, 2009: 123).[[2]](#endnote-2) Henceforth the position of negotiation in extracting the stoutest settlement for the extremes of Unionism is something every one of its leaders and representatives has had to be mindful of, which is why politicians continue to feel the need to run political agreements past unelected figureheads.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Alternatively the Ulster Workers’ Council Strike of May 1974 occurred at the end of a longer process taking in the fall of Stormont, the disbandment of the B-Specials, the disarming of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and the Sunningdale negotiations themselves. During the latter only two members of the process identified that the ensuing settlement constituted Faulkner ‘being nailed to a cross’ (quoted in Akenson, 1994: 407).[[4]](#endnote-4) Referring to the democratic element which was essential in underpinning Sunningdale, the Northern Ireland Labour Party’s David Bleakley – who supported power-sharing – concurred that the Agreement’s ‘Irish Dimension’ ensured the British government ‘pressed for more than the Protestant community could be persuaded to accept’. This in turn placed ‘an intolerable burden’ on the Executive and brought it, ironically, ‘into conflict with the basic stipulation of his Constitution Act that government in Northern Ireland should be “widely acceptable throughout the community”’ (Bleakley, 1975: 8). Both the SDLP and the Irish government would learn lessons for subsequent negotiations, and there is no question that in February 1974 the Westminster election turned into a virtual referendum on Sunningdale, handing the UWC an air of legitimacy (*Irish News*, 29 December 2005: 25). The Strike’s success was a one-off in the sense that future political provisions would always see the electorate of both communities ‘adequately consulted and informed *in advance*’ (Conor Cruise O’Brien, writing in *The Times*, 20 November 1975: 20).

The UWC Strike was the most pronounced manifestation of the ‘Protestant veto’ during the early Troubles, temporarily comprising disparate groups which were always liable to fall asunder. The weakness of analysis thus far has consequently been to simplify and homogenize what was in actuality a complex phenomenon, either with facile labels such as ‘fascist’ or through a nonsensical interpretation of the action as a ‘lockout’ (see Bell, 1976: 82; Mitchell, 2014: 38). Ironically mirroring the assessment of then-Secretary of State Merlyn Rees, who insisted the stoppage was ‘not normal industrial action’ (‘Press Notice’, PRONI OE/1/16),[[5]](#endnote-5) the failure to realize that the opposition to Sunningdale was built on genuine Ulster Protestant resentment, motored by trade unionists from the same background, and secured with the will of a majority, reflects many of the contemporary problems which have arisen through the ongoing politicization of history. The assessment of an Irish Labour historian that ‘The Ulster Workers’ Council had nothing to do with trade unions. It simply deepened divisions’ (Devine, 2009: 601), simply defies fact. With the language of the Left claimed – in many ways unconvincingly – by mainstream Republicanism, the Strike’s more radical trade unionist character is often neglected and downplayed, frequently by Northern Protestants themselves. Aside from the Strike garnering – with exceptions – the widespread support of working class Protestants, ‘there were a lot of people involved in it who were trade unionists, and who would remain trade unionists after’ (Joe Law, interview with the author, 26 June 2013).[[6]](#endnote-6) Speaking on television days before the Strike began, the UWC’s Billy Kelly affirmed that his group was not affiliated to any party and ‘only an organisation for the working-class people’ (quoted in ‘BBC Scene Around Six’, PRONI OE/1/16).

For many years confined to a few journalistic accounts and the odd article, the quality of literature on both Sunningdale and the UWC Strike has only been remedied by more nuanced analysis which has emerged in recent years (McGrattan, 2009; Kerr, 2011; Aveyard, 2014). For far too long events were not viewed in their continuum. Inherently connected to shifts within Ulster Protestant politics in the previous decade, Marc Mulholland has established how until the era of Terence O’Neill (1963–9):

Unionism had traditionally been led by a social elite distant from the rank and file. The

leaders had made up for this, however, by paying a populist attention to the opinions,

attitudes and prejudices of their loyalist constituency. By the 1960s, however, the

middle-class establishment had accepted a liberal consensus, which believed that

battles over the border had been left in the past (2000: 199).

O’Neill was supportive of this new consensus and won the leadership of his party as the figure best suited to steal the NILP’s ‘technocratic, economically modernizing clothes’ (Mulholland, 2000: 199). His project attracted ‘liberal’ middle class Unionists who had steered clear of his party due to its traditionalist Protestant associations, but working class liberals – who supported O’Neill’s reforms and many of the civil rights demands – remained largely steadfast in the NILP. From the start of O’Neill’s tenure, therefore, the ‘liberalism’ of his brand of Unionism was ‘very decidedly identified with the protestant middle class’ (Wright, 1973: 272). This is important in the context of Sunningdale because the consensus was still very much in the air, O’Neill identifying ‘remnants of the middle class moderation he had fostered’ in the 1973 Agreement (Mulholland, 2013: 94). While the man himself had left the stage, Sunningdale was looked on as his apex by those who sought to demolish it.

**Unionism and Loyalism**

By 1974 there had been considerable Unionist fissuring with the formation of the Democratic Unionist Party and Alliance, as well as the mild continuation of the Faulkner Unionists. In keeping with the ‘Independent Unionist’ tradition, Paisley had always lambasted ‘fur coat brigade’ Unionists – and the Executive’s Minister for Education Basil McIvor admitted that affluent ‘Liberal Unionists’ such as himself were particular ‘targets for Loyalist bitterness and anger’ (1998: 121). Despite his personal commitment, McIvor was always conscious that Sunningdale’s merits may ‘not get through to the people in the high flats at Finaghy’ (quoted in ‘Meeting of the Administration’ [5 March 1974], PRONI OE/2/10). Thus the strike was directed – as the UDA’s former Supreme Commander confirms – against the way

The Unionist politicians – Captain Terence O’Neill, Brian Faulkner and all the rest –

just took it for granted. The fascinating thing was this was the first time that people had

said ‘Hol’ on, we’ve had enough of this carry-on’. The Council of Ireland was imposed

on us. We weren’t told, we weren’t considered in the argument at all. It wasn’t about

them (the SDLP) being in government; it was about the attitude of the Unionist

politicians. They never were used to making decisions from Partition here. They

allowed the civil service to run the place, and it got that bad that we were the lesser-

known people within the British government. Our politicians hadn’t the sense to realize

that they weren’t important. They were ambushed. (Andy Tyrie, interview with the

author, 9 August 2012)

It is important to remember that effigies of Faulkner, as well as Gerry Fitt, were burned in Newtownabbey’s Rathcoole estate on the fall of the Executive (Fisk, 1975: 224).

With this in mind one of the strangest and most ironic of appropriations which has taken place since 1974 has seen Unionist politicians try to take credit for the stoppage’s success (see Laird, 2010: 89–90). *De facto* leader Glen Barr confirmed such men, aside from precipitating through their absence of ‘leadership’ his entry into politics, were opportunistically keen to be photographed with the strikers: ‘But if you’d have dared mention the fact you were thinking of marrying one of their daughters, they would run a mile.’[[7]](#endnote-7) This apparent class animosity – sometimes wrongly interpreted as ‘Ulster Nationalism’ – would seem to accord with the estimation of an Executive Minister that the Strike was motivated ‘as much by a crude class hatred of the landed gentry and local business tycoons who for years had dominated Unionist Party politics as by their fears of a united Ireland via Sunningdale’ (Devlin, 1975: 83). It is universally accepted that the only politicians to emerge with any credit from 1974 in the eyes of the Loyalist strikers were Bill Craig and a young Law lecturer at Queen’s University by the name of David Trimble.

A window into Unionist thinking on the Strike leaders was offered by Sunningdale’s Minister for the Environment Roy Bradford, in the form of his novel *The Last Ditch* (1981). Sketching the fall of Sunningdale with fictional characters clearly modelled on real players, Harry Harmonn – an obvious surrogate for Andy Tyrie – is depicted as being secretly elated at rubbing shoulders with high-ranking Unionist politicians during the stoppage: ‘It was a step nearer to the Establishment. He affected to despise conventional politicians, but secretly he envied them…This could be the chance he’d been looking for. If they needed him, if they were prepared even unofficially to bring him in from the cold, he would come’ (Bradford, 1981: 50).[[8]](#endnote-8) Aside from conveying the baseless fear that senior Unionists had of usurped by Loyalists, Bradford’s view was that the UWC strike leaders deep down wanted to take their place at the high political table: a fundamental misreading given the sheer lack of Loyalist political success before and since.

At the third meeting of the British/Irish Association two years after the collapse of Sunningdale, former deputy leader of Vanguard Ernest Baird proclaimed: ‘There is no middle ground in Northern Ireland, there is no compromise to follow. Sooner or later one side must triumph over the other.’ It was Barr of all people who stepped up on the same platform to counter that, ‘What Ernie Baird has just said is diabolical and does not represent the view of the majority of the loyalist people of Northern Ireland’ (quoted in *Irish Times*, 10 July 1976: 10). The exchange is revealing in two ways. On the one hand Baird was locating, quite authentically, the space into which Unionism did (and occasionally continues to) situate itself. On the other Barr was correct to qualify that Loyalists did not necessarily tally with Unionist sentiment; that the former were separate and quite often more conciliatory in their political thinking than ‘respectable’ Unionism. The UDA, for instance, publicly advocated power-sharing at a time when both the leadership of the Official Unionist Party and the DUP rejected the idea (*Irish Times*, 27 September 1975: 8). Along with Paisley, Baird was strongly identified with a follow-up Strike three years later, and though a ‘closer-run thing’ than many care to recollect (Robert Ramsay, interview with the author, 2 February 2012),[[9]](#endnote-9) to call the 1977 episode a failure in some ways misses the point. What was to leave a lasting cultural mark on Northern Irish politics was the threat, or more precisely the *appearance* of the threat. To give but one instance of this, during the protests accompanying the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement the Reverend Ivan Foster and Peter Robinson were among a group who called for a third big Loyalist strike to destroy the latest accord (Hume, 1986: 6). No such action, of course, ever materialized.

The UWC Strike accordingly ushered in a new phase in that incredibly ambivalent, often tortuous relationship which has existed between the paramilitaries and Unionist politicians. A prominent journalist on the ground pinpointed the scenario whereby the three traditional pillars of Protestant power – loyalty to the Union, anti-Catholicism, and the ‘political Toryism which bound the Protestant working-class submissively into a single party’ (with its betters), was now ‘being quarried away by a section of the garrison’, i.e. Ulster Loyalists. For this reason, Neal Ascherson contended that ‘the strike has managed to shift the whole centre of gravity in Protestant politics’ (1974: 11). When the Reverend Martin Smyth insisted that Northern Protestants had no time for ‘thuggery and socialism’, Andy Tyrie rounded that men like Smyth ‘did politics for a hobby and now they come crawling to us from under their flat stones; they should be ashamed to show their faces’ (quoted in Ascherson, 1974: 11). Less than a year after the Strike’s denouement Loyalists assured Official Unionists at an east Belfast meeting that they would ‘wind up in Roselawn’ (a cemetery just outside the city) unless they shared political influence with the paramilitaries (*Irish Times*, 10 February 1975: 6). At times the DUP did embark on a closer relationship with the UDA, cooperating during the 1977 Strike, in the party’s habit of running UDA affiliates as candidates (a practice it continues to the present day), and even in the warm ties Peter Robinson had to the group (Moloney & Pollak, 1986: 292; *Irish News*, 2 May 2014: 12). There tended, however, to be much mutual distrust and periodic bouts of invective directed back and forth.

**‘Spongers’**

In a statement on Saturday 25 May 1974 Brian Faulkner observed that the potential damage of the UWC action was ‘beyond calculation’. Estimating the loss of ‘hundreds of thousands of jobs’, he warned that ‘If the present deadlock continues much longer we will all be the losers in time to come’ (Broadcast, PRONI OE/1/16). A matter of hours later British Prime Minister Harold Wilson took to the screens to deliver what became infamously known as the ‘spongers’ broadcast. Many Loyalists were expecting Wilson to announce plans to intern them; instead he railed how:

British taxpayers, have seen their sons vilified and spat upon – and murdered. They

have seen the taxes they have poured out almost without regard to cost – over £300

million a year...going into Northern Ireland. Yet people who benefit from this now

viciously defy Westminster, purporting to act as though they were an elected

government; people who spend their lives sponging on Westminster and British

democracy…Who do these people think they are? (1974)

Wilson later explained that ‘the idea I was seeking to get across was that Ulster was always ready to come to Auntie for spending money, expressing their thanks by kicking her in the teeth’ (1979: 77). Local civil servants remain bemused at the specific phrase, perusing a version of the speech earlier in the day which made no reference to it at all (Maurice Hayes, interview with the author, 26 November 2012). However there was something especially potent in the spectacle of a Labour Prime Minister – a man who helped to establish the Welfare state through his work on the Beveridge Report – addressing this section in such derogatory terms. Its economic tone – reminiscent of successive British governments right up to the present day – was designed for an English audience but also calculated with maximum contempt. A notable piece of high theatre, it invites *all* Northern Irish citizens to consider their status within the UK and its economy.

After listening to the speech in Stewart Parker’s *Pentecost*, Ruth dubs Wilson a ‘smug wee English shite with a weaselly voice’, who fails to respect the sacrifices of Northern Protestants, ‘British taxpayers just the same as they are’. When she is challenged by Peter – who fears that ‘raw sewage is about to come flooding down those streets out there, and it won’t be the English who die of typhoid’ – she defies: ‘They can’t take on an entire community. The strike is theirs’ (Parker, 1989: 183–5). Such defiance was not to pass unpunished. Wilson triumphantly withheld a £9 million subsidy from Harland and Wolff, clearly inferring that the yard and other industries seen as too close to the Strike were to take a hit in the coming years (1979: 75–7). Papers released under the ‘thirty-year rule’ revealed that during the month of the stoppage Commerce Minister John Hume warned of financial problems at Harland and Wolff and the threat to tens of thousands of jobs. Despite Hume’s pleas the company was actually excluded from subsequent plans to nationalize British aircraft and shipbuilding industries (*Irish News*, 29 December 2005: 24). Andy Tyrie remains proud that his community ‘were the first group that ever took the British government on and won a strike’ (Interview with the author, 9 August 2012), but it was in some ways a pyrrhic victory, offering a wounded Labour government the chance to begin eroding its financial contributions to what were frankly Protestant industries. The broader energy crisis and worldwide quadrupling of oil prices further compounded the depressing impact on employment within the Northern Irish economy from then on.

**Banditry**

One of the other more ominous consequences of the Sunningdale period was the systematizing of criminal underworlds. The thin line between vigilantism – which has a long history in Belfast – and criminality was regularly blurred, in a dynamic further exacerbated by the political distress and fragmentation engendered by O’Neill’s tenure. This resonates with Eric Hobsbawm’s assessment that banditry fundamentally challenges ‘those who hold or lay claim to power, law and control of resources’, in a dynamic intrinsically related to ‘class divisions’ (2000: 7–9). The criminality tar had initially been used in the context of Northern Ireland by the SDLP as ‘a useful weapon in its constant battle to distinguish itself unequivocally from the Provos’ (Nelson, 1977: 13), but the clash between law and lawlessness was always more pronounced in the Northern Protestant population for the simple reason that it maintained a considerably more loyal relationship with the state than its nationalist counterpart. As a writer who travelled around Belfast in the 1970s put it, ‘for all the endemic lawlessness of the Catholic ghettos their inhabitants have not descended as far into gangsterism as the Loyalists’, in part ‘because Loyalists have in the past been able to count on certain elements in the RUC “not noticing” their exploits’ (Murphy, 1979: 146–7).

A thesis dubiously fostered by contemporary Loyalist leaders proposes that the ‘cancer’ of criminality basically entered Protestant areas with drug-dealing and the prominence of UDA figureheads in the early-1990s (Jackie McDonald, quoted in Shirlow, 2012: 115). A former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party confirms that problems began decades in advance of this, damaging not just Loyalist politicization but the societal fabric:

When they did start up in the 1960s and ‘70s, their activities in Loyalist areas weren’t

confined simply to fighting Republicans. They were involved in rackets, they were

involved in criminality and those sorts of things discredited them in front of the

ordinary people because their activities in Loyalist areas had the effect in some

instances of destroying the quality of life. They had Shebeens, they had protection

rackets, they were throwing their weight around locally and just generally upsetting

people. And the idea that they would actually fire on and attack police goes against the

grain. (Lord Reg Empey, interview with the author, 11 November 2011)

The UDA in particular became heavily absorbed in extensive criminal enterprises, and the difference between it and the UVF in this regard (as in others) has often been elided by journalistic and academic investigations. From the beginning of its existence it attracted ‘gangsters who saw a position in the UDA as an easy way to good cars, thick gold jewellery and winter holidays in Spain’ (Bruce, 1992: 17), and a prevalent belief among UVF ex-combatants is that many who joined the UDA were driven by the basic desire for individual aggrandizement. This is seen to persevere in the form of contemporary UDA spokesmen: ‘The likes of Frankie Gallagher and Jackie McDonald, I wouldn’t in a million years associate them as having a voice that’s representative of anything other than themselves. Not only because they’re not elected but because their organization historically has went down that line. You only have to look at anything they’re associated with: it’s personally and financially beneficial’ (William Mitchell, interview with the author, 26 July 2012).

In the context of the Troubles the UVF was a deadlier outfit, while its notorious east Antrim wing was also immersed in criminality from the early-1970s (Cusack & McDonald, 1997: 107–9). But there is much to be said for the view that the UDA’s criminal actions were expanded by the power it enjoyed from 1974.[[10]](#endnote-10) Their exertions had begun (as Empey stated) prior to the UWC Strike but, unchallenged by security forces, a generation of leaders within the UDA – such as McDonald and John ‘Grug’ Gregg – cut their teeth in the stoppage (Wood, 2006: 40–1). The manning of barricades, oil and fuel smuggling, extortion and black markets all flourished, generating some of the more unpropitious images associated with Loyalism thereafter. This situation may also be understood, as a recent work on global crime couches it, as a by-product of ‘unimaginative politicians who lack either the vision or the interest to address the great structural inequities...upon which crime and instability thrive’ (Glenny, 2008: 394). In *Pentecost*, as the UWC tightens its grip on the province Peter delineates the atmosphere around the centre of its headquarters in east Belfast, not far from the gates of Stormont:

**PETER:** is this what you want? – the apemen in charge, shops without food to sell,

garages without petrol...there’s a mile-long queue of doctors and nurses and social

workers, and lawyers, up at Hawthornden Road, queuing up to beg for a special pass to

get them through the barricades to their patients and clients, and from who? – from the

hard men who can barely sign their name to their special bloody passes, from shipyard

bible-thumpers, unemployed binmen, petty crooks and extortionists, pigbrain mobsters

and thugs, they’ve seized control over all of us. (Parker, 1989: 184)

In fairness to the UDA, its members tended to own up to these activities to an almost comical degree. One public relations officer, Sammy Duddy, admitted the UDA had originally ‘incorporated among many of our companies and brigades gangsters, petty thieves and so on’, and that after attempting ‘to put forward some sort of political initiative this organisation has been very disappointed at the public response. We deduce from this that the only thing that pays in this country is violence’ (quoted in *The Guardian*, 15 August 1979: 24). To the dismay of those Strike leaders with trade union backgrounds, the UDA discovered it was better at racketeering than socialism.

**Republicanism**

The literature of Sunningdale’s impact on militant Irish Republicanism, like much of the literature on the period, is underwhelming and deserves further expansion. The response of Republicans ranged across a spectrum, though most have hit back at Seamus Mallon’s famous dictum. An unlikely ally in the Irish media would retrospectively claim that the Agreement collapsed ‘because it did not have mainstream republican or unionist parties on board’, so that arguably ‘the slow learners were in fact the participants in Sunningdale who thought they could do it without bringing the in the political representatives of the mainstream paramilitary groups’ (O’Clery, 1998: 5). This comment, made in the somewhat delusive glow of Good Friday 1998, captures a commonly-held view even amongst dissenting Republicans. At a conference held to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Strike, former Provisional IRA hunger striker Tommy McKearney lashed the SDLP for sitting down with Faulkner and disputed Mallon’s aphorism: ‘If there were any slow learners it was the people who coined that phrase, because if Unionism wasn’t willing to do the deal, and if the British Government wasn’t willing to enforce it, the slow learners were those who thought that it might work.’ Nobody appreciates being labelled a slow learner, but other Republicans believe that 1973 actually represented a ‘better deal’ for Republicans. The North-South/East-West relationships and toothless British-Irish Council enacted by subsequent agreements were arguably inferior to the ‘Irish-run’ Council of Ireland (Richard O’Rawe, interview with the author, 18 January 2012).

At the time the Provisional IRA was thrown into disarray by the resistance to Sunningdale. As some commanders talked of ratcheting up the bombing campaign the leadership exhibited a Pearse-*esque* admiration, Dáithí Ó Conaill describing the Strike as ‘in the Wolfe Tone tradition’ (quoted in Walsh, 1994: 139). There were areas of agreement between the Provisionals and the UWC over opposition to Internment and the Diplock court system, but essentially the Provisional IRA began thinking – as previously had the Official IRA – that working class Unionists could be ‘useful to Republicanism’ (Walsh, 1994: 139). As the Troubles wore on, however, and the Protestant working class continued to refuse their ‘deluded Irishmen’ designation, this strain of thought was completely abandoned by the time the new Northern leadership, i.e. Adams-McGuinness, took over the reins of Sinn Féin (Pollak, 1983: 3). Nevertheless the Provisionals can be seen to have gained much from the UWC Strike, including learning about the importance of electric power when thwarting a British Army plan to control Newry’s street lighting in the autumn of 1974. For the duration of the stoppage their armed volunteers were posted in shops, churches and the interfaces of Catholic estates, while ‘Emergency committees’ were set up to distribute food in the Falls and Andersonstown. By the strike’s second week the IRA was supervising convivial open-air barbecues (Fisk, 1975: 208–9) in the same areas.

At the same time the street-level competition for control of Catholic districts ensured things were rather more complex than originally thought. Jim McCorry, a chief organizer of the Falls Community Council and the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP), remembered that the Provisional IRA felt threatened by his groups’ activities during the UWC Strike,

when we took over a hut at the Glen Road School. Indeed, because we had a van and

the contacts for food, we actually took over the provisioning of much of Catholic West

Belfast. We took over the running of the petrol stations; people used to have to come to

us to get petrol: doctors, priests, whoever. Those of us in the Co op did all that. We’d

petrol lorries going down to the South to fill up...But most of those in the “army” had

no sense of this as a community thing. Especially during the UWC strike they just felt,

as they saw it, that I’d taken over. (Quoted in *Grassroots Leadership*, 2005: 15–16).

The Provisionals’ solution to this was to propose shooting McCorry, which they never got round to doing. But in a key moment during the Strike it was announced within the Sunningdale Executive that the organization would take over foodstuff distribution in Catholic areas (‘Minutes of Executive Meeting’, PRONI OE/2/31). This was official recognition of the authority of the Provisional IRA and a harbinger of future political developments.

UDA spokesmen liked to talk up the idea that the Protestant and Catholic working class ‘came together’ during May 1974, with Loyalist paramilitaries reaching ‘an understanding with some Catholic leaders’ concerned about the strike’s sectarian connotations. On taking over fuel distribution, and with essential services now guaranteed by the Strike Committee, the UWC pointedly directed the first petrol truck to West Belfast. This gesture impressed the Provisionals, though it was actually the order of shop steward Harry Murray and not a decision taken in conjunction with either the UDA or the IRA (Fisk, 1975: 207). Tommy ‘Tucker’ Lyttle echoed his UDA colleagues in claiming that for the first time since 1969 Loyalists had contact ‘with the people who had opposite views to us’ (quoted in *Irish Times*, 4 July 1974: 12). It spoke volumes that Lyttle himself embodied the UDA’s initial political shoots – co-founding the Ulster Political Research Group – before presiding over its ‘mafia-style criminal gang’ elements when the politics failed (*The Guardian*, 21 October 1995: 32). If the UDA retained the power arising from its criminality, the Provisional IRA held on to the power arising from the recognition it received in 1974.

**Conclusion**

Instructive is the caste of Unionists who served as Ministers in the Executive who were all, in different ways, utterly scattered following the collapse of Sunningdale. Basil McIvor, Herbert Kirk and John Baxter retired almost immediately from politics to careers in law and accountancy, while both Leslie Morrell and Roy Bradford lost their seats in the Constitutional Convention election the following year. The modernizing guard, the logical culmination of O’Neillism, had been categorically decimated. Duncan Pollock, a Presbyterian who soldiered on in Faulkner’s doomed Unionist Party of Northern Ireland (UPNI), believed ‘They saw the Executive working and they decided to wreck it. I was hammered in the elections to the Convention (1975). I expected it, but they really hammered me’ (quoted in *Irish Times*, 12 July 1979: 10). Generated by a ‘sense of humiliation’ and feeling that ‘Catholics had been “winning” consistently since 1968’ (Miller, 2007: 163), the consequent euphoria expressed in Protestant working class areas veiled a relief. As Glen Barr now declares: ‘The Loyalist people had taken such a terrible battering over those years from 1968 up to 1974. There was no consultation with them when their government, their institutions, were taken away. 1974 I think was the last time that the Loyalist people held their head up, the last time they had got a lift’ (speaking at ’40 Years On’ conference, held at Queen’s University Belfast, 19 May 2014).

At the same time this momentum was destructive rather than creative, as captured – again – by Stewart Parker. Surveying the jubilation which greets the fall of the Executive, Peter in *Pentecost* despairs: ‘You’d think they’d given birth, actually created something for once, instead of battering it to death, yet again, the only kind of victory they ever credit, holding the good old fort, stamping the life out of anything that starts to creep forward’ (Parker, 1989: 199). Barr himself wished the Strike had bequeathed to the Protestant community a ‘willingness to cast off the old-style politician who waved the Union Jack every five years’ (quoted in *Irish Times*, 24 June 1974: 8), but in this and his hopes of Left/Right politics where ‘people like Paddy Devlin and myself sit on one side of the House and people like Leslie Morrell and Brian Faulkner sit on the other side’ (Interview with the author, 28 November 2012), he was to be sorely disappointed.

Perhaps the first victim of the powerful veto established by the opposition to Sunningdale was another of the Strike leaders. Less than two months after its denouement shop steward Harry Murray appeared at a conference in Oxford where he reiterated the UWC’s opposition to Internment and urged Loyalists, almost *Pentecost*-like, to engage and talk with the Provisional IRA (on the condition the latter put down their arms). Following vigorous denunciation from Unionist politicians, Murray was forced to resign from the UWC within a matter of days (*Irish Times*, 11 July 1974: 6). Ironically Murray was known to have disapproved of paramilitary involvement during May 1974, though the UDA backed him for his Oxford comments. Before the end of the year he had founded a non-sectarian peace group (*The Times*, 9 September 1974: 2), appearing on platforms with members of the Corrymeela community and peace activists in Derry. He joined the non-sectarian Alliance Party, which he would later stand for as a candidate in local government elections, and by the time of the Hunger Strikes had reconvened the UWC as an organization to promote job creation and ‘unity among all Northern Ireland workers’ (*The Guardian*, 28 February 1981: 24). If indeed the head was beginning to eat the tail, Murray’s own example demonstrated that individuals in Northern Ireland could persist in their own engagement and reconciliation, even if they had to circumnavigate their political culture to do so.

**Notes**

1. Parker died of stomach cancer (aged 47) the following year. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Under Faulkner’s brief as Minister of Commerce, motor-car manufacturing and the fibres industry were drastically expanded in the mid-1960s (*The Guardian*, 19 August 1976: 9). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Following the all-party talks chaired by US Diplomat Richard Haass at the end of 2013, it transpired that politicians from the Democratic Unionist Party had briefed victims campaigner Willie Frazer and Loyalist activist Jamie Bryson on the final proposals. Both Unionist parties eventually withdrew their support leading to the talks breaking up without agreement (*Belfast Telegraph*, 8 January 2014: 11). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The phrase of SDLP Minister of Health and Social Services Paddy Devlin. The other man who grasped Faulkner’s predicament was Irish Minister for Posts and Telegraphs Conor Cruise O’Brien. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Two thirds of the UWC Committee was drawn from the trade unions, the Loyalist paramilitaries providing the other third. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Law is a trade unionist from the largely demolished Agnes Street area of the Lower Shankill. For the perspective of one from within the community who defied the Strike see the memoir of Baroness May Blood (2007: 80). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Speaking at the conference ‘40 Years On: The Strike Which Brought Down Sunningdale’, held at Queen’s University Belfast on 19 May 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Later Harmon fumes, rather more realistically: ‘All your moderates, all your stuck-up fur-coat brigade – they’re tucked up nice and snug in their bungalows down in Cultra watchin’ the telly! While we’re on the streets!’ (Bradford, 1981: 101–2). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Harry Murray, Glen Barr and Bill Craig – all major players in 1974 – opposed the 1977 Strike (*Irish Times*, 7 May 1977: 4). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Despite the input of the UVF’s Ken Gibson, the Strike was primarily associated with the UDA (see the comments of David Ervine in Moloney, 2010: 347).

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