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Introduction: Politics, Identity and Change in Contemporary Loyalism

Graham Spencer and James W. McAuley

Enter any mainstream bookshop in Northern Ireland and the image of loyalism that confronts the browser is ostensibly one of criminality and individualism. Publishers of books on loyalism seem to take particular interest in acts of violence and murder perpetrated by those who gain reputations not so much for their thinking, but for their actions. Accounts of this behaviour, through dramatic emphasis on menace and brutality, mean such books tend to sit better on the shelves of crime fiction, rather than politics or social history.

Though in recent years serious studies of loyalism reveal an image which moves beyond this stereotype by demonstrating a considered engagement with peace process politics and social change in Northern Ireland (McAuley 2010; Spencer 2008) and although there have been important previous examinations of loyalist paramilitarism, both from academic (Bruce 1992, 1994; Crawford 2003; Nelson 1984; Wood 2006) and journalistic perspectives (Cusack and McDonald 1997; McDonald and Cusack 2004; Taylor 1999), it is the criminal portrait which dominates popular understanding of loyalism and therefore which shapes the public imagination about what loyalism means and the ‘realities’ of being a loyalist (for examples of this, see Adair 2007; Caldwell and Robinson 2006; McDowell 2008).

Moreover, the image of mafia type criminality and irrational behaviour that pervades modern accounts of loyalist activity finds no real comparison in the world of republicanism, where public relations awareness and political and communal emphasis combine to promote an image of seriousness, consideration and purpose. The loyalist image can only help magnify these differences, reinforcing the intelligence and sophistication of the republican project while underlining loyalism’s apparent lack of structure and obstructing its social and political relevance in the process.

While acknowledging the criminality of loyalism and the destructive role that loyalist paramilitarism has played in the Northern Ireland conflict, this collection of essays goes some way to challenging the criminal stereotype by considering the social, historical, political and cultural forces
that shape loyalist history and identity and it relates that combination of forces to how loyalism is adapting to the complex shift from conflict to tentative peace.

In that sense, the collection is an attempt to interact with a range of influences and concerns that impact on loyalist thinking and help determine subsequent responses to change. But, to do this, the editors believe it is important to draw not only from academic interpretation and assessment, but also from the experiences and actions of loyalists themselves, as well as those who work with them, to understand how loyalist communities function. Hopefully this combination of academic and practitioner approaches to what we might think of as ‘the loyalist condition’ will help the reader to appreciate the range of tensions and pressures which are being faced in the post-conflict Northern Ireland climate by loyalists, and contribute towards a timely understanding about how those tensions and pressures are being dealt with.

Significantly, the conflict provided a sense of resistance and purpose for loyalists that acted to define paramilitary identity and galvanize communities through a protectionist psychology, often referred to as a ‘siege mentality’. This, to a large extent, offered some stability and definition in an otherwise unstable and violent society. But the end of violence does not mean the end of those communities who were engaged in such violence. Rather it tends to correspond with a change of meaning (perhaps a crisis of meaning), a questioning of identity (perhaps a crisis of identity) and a reappraisal of history and purpose (perhaps a crisis of history and purpose) which can cause problems for those seeking to maintain cohesion in a climate which encourages movement away from traditional positions and convictions (sometimes leading to further resistance, violence and conflict by those fearful of losing status, authority and control, or by those who see the end of conflict as throwing into doubt personal loyalties, costs and reasons for suffrage).

As is well known, unlike republicanism, loyalism has not been able to establish a political project, which has gained public understanding, sympathy or credibility. Those within loyalism who have shown and continue to show considerable political ability and skill have been hamstrung by perceived associations with paramilitarism, which connects with broader negative Protestant unionist imaginations about loyalism itself. In Protestant unionist society more generally loyalism has struggled unsuccessfully to overcome such imaginations, and because of lacking evident social or political legitimacy has been unable to cultivate even marginal recognition that loyalists have important contributions to make to political and social stability (recent popular books about turf wars, gangs and criminal underworlds merely confirm this perceived illegitimacy).

Yet, as this collection seeks to show, the possibility for contributions in both spheres is not only possible but also crucial for maintaining the
transition from conflict to non-conflict society and entrenching the non-conflict attitudes to support such transformation. To view loyalists as little more than criminals is to overlook the importance of loyalism in the transition process and risks ignoring the influence of communities who have the ability to reactivate conflict. This by itself is reason enough to take loyalists seriously and not exclude them from the wider social benefits of peace and stability.

In examining the meaning and nature of loyalism today this book sets out interrogate history, identity and change within loyalism since the peace process took hold (McAuley 2004c) and gained cross-party support with the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998. However, in order to understand identity and its complexity it is also necessary to account for the historical influences and precedents of identity formation and construction.

The opening two chapters of the book do this by exploring relations between British, Ulster and Irish identity influences on the loyalist consciousness. In Chapter 1, Thomas Hennessey brings to light variations in regional, national and patriotic points of identity and moves us towards comprehending the loyalist condition as infused by clusters of regional and national identities. Looking at the connection between an allegiance to notions of patriotism, Irishness and Britishness as factors, which shape the loyalist imagination, Hennessey opens the book with a direct challenge to any preconceived idea that loyalism functions only as a reactive presence sustained by a single desire to protect the Union.

This is followed in Chapter 2 by Leigh-Ann Coffe’s assessment of southern loyalists and their historical tendency (1921–37) to support more inclusive adaptations in loyalist identity. Here, Coffe explores shifts in political ties between Britain and Britishness and highlights the relationship which came to shape comprehension of both British values and the Free State. What this chapter clearly reveals is an historical dimension within loyalism in Ireland, which sought to reconcile multiple influences rather than reinforce simplistic and narrow definitions of loyalist identity.

In Chapter 3, Roger Mac Ginty considers the significance of international actors on loyalism throughout the peace process. Looking at the negligible influence of America on loyalism Mac Ginty indicates that it is precisely because loyalism was not subject to international pressures (unlike republicanism) that it was able to show greater agency in the transition process. Importantly, Mac Ginty notes how dominant narratives of the peace process have tended to accept the role of international players rather too easily and uses the example of loyalism to challenge this assumption.

From here, in Chapter 4, Kevin Bean focuses on how loyalism has lost at the expense of the growing republican project. Bean considers how public images of sectarian loyalist action such as Drumcree and Holy Cross serve to reinforce nationalist prejudices, which have been used to support the credibility and importance of political republicanism. This chapter therefore
raises important questions about how actions by loyalists reinforce imaginations about sectarianism, which their political opponents use and capitalise on.

Bean’s analysis finds an interesting comparison with Chapter 5 where Graham Spencer interviews former Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) volunteer, turned Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) representative and community worker Billy Hutchinson. In this chapter, Hutchinson talks about engagement in political negotiations, the politicization of paramilitary loyalism and the moves towards UVF transformation, which resulted in the decommissioning of UVF weapons in July 2009. Hutchinson details an important inside account of the transformation process, which the UVF has gone through and signifies the primacy of political engagement in order to bring about change.

Further elaboration of this area is dealt with in Chapter 6 where former trade union official, now clergyman, Chris Hudson describes his involvement with the UVF since the early 1990s. Hudson acted as an intermediary between the UVF and the Irish government throughout the most sensitive period of the peace process and provided an important link between the UVF leadership and the Irish. In providing a personal account of his involvement with the UVF and its transformation, Hudson produces a picture, which develops a number of points about transformation made by Hutchinson in the previous chapter. Hudson’s narration brings us up to date with recent decommissioning and gives an invaluable explanation of how the UVF has slowly moved from paramilitarism to recognizing the value of politics and social change.

Chapter 7 by Lyndsey Harris looks at what she calls the ‘strategic environment’ of loyalist paramilitarism and how the leaderships of both the UVF and the UDA have taken variable approaches to transforming their paramilitary worlds. How strategy has been adopted and carried out requires examination of how loyalist leaderships have engaged with their respective communities and grassroots and Harris does this here.

In Chapter 8 by Aaron Edwards and Stephen Bloomer, attention is given to the internal dialogues and debates conducted inside the UVF and how the authors themselves assisted with the development of each. In highlighting the work of key UVF figures that drove the transformation process, Edwards and Bloomer also invite us to think about the role of the academic as facilitator to conflict transformation initiatives and in doing so invite us to more critically evaluate the function and use of academic enquiry in such a contentious and delicate area.

In Chapter 9, Andrew Mycock, Jonathan Tonge and James W. McAuley investigate relations between loyalism, Orangeism and Britishness. In particular, the authors are interested in how Britishness in this relationship draws on patterns of nationalism while absorbing civic and ethic values of exclusiveness. They explore how Orange identity interacts with British
nationalism and outline how commonality and difference function through and within this nationalism.

Chapter 10 by Catherine McGlynn and James W. McAuley tackles the neglected study of the roles that women have played in the loyalist paramilitary campaign. Concluding that there is little evidence of gender equality in the involvement with paramilitary activity, McGlynn and McAuley explain how women come to be part of paramilitarism and they connect this relationship with the broader patriarchal nature of Northern Irish society and the social structure of the Protestant working-class communities within which paramilitarism is embedding.

The relationship with wider social forces also preoccupies Philip Orr, who in Chapter 11 reflects on the relationship between loyalism and the Protestant churches. Orr is very much concerned with the working class/loyalist drift away from churches but also acknowledges the work carried out by loyalists who have a religious conviction. Looking at the involvement of transformative projects by individuals such as Billy Mitchell (former UVF volunteer and prisoner) Orr interrogates the tendency for Protestant self-criticism and views eroding support for the church as representative of an important underlying identity shift.

Having established historical and identity-based influences on loyalism the remaining chapters of the book address more specifically loyalist reactions and attitudes towards change and transformation. Chapter 12 looks at the problems faced by ex-prisoners trying to integrate with society and draws from the experiences of the ex-prisoner group, Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre (EPIC), and its director Tom Roberts to explain what those problems are and what needs to be done to help overcome them. Roberts highlights the marginalization and exclusion faced by ex-prisoners, who are themselves crucial for developing and facilitating conflict-prevention projects. Though acknowledged by the GFA, ex-prisoners remain dislocated from many of the social advantages and opportunities provided by peace and Roberts talks about the consequences of this dislocation.

An interesting comparison to this chapter is provided by Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) Commissioner John Grieve, who in Chapter 13 explains how the IMC goes about monitoring paramilitarism as part of a remit to monitor the wider transition to democratic politics and institutional normalization in Northern Ireland. Grieve explains how the IMC operates and uses extracts from a series of Reports produced by the IMC to show how official monitoring functions as an important part of intelligence assessment in the process of change. The difference in style and presentation of this chapter is representative of the formal approach necessary while the IMC stills exists and produces its Reports. Grieve’s contribution is reflective of the IMC itself and the construction of the chapter must complement the legal obligations and expectations of the Commission while it continues to operate. The reader is asked to accept the rather formal nature of the chapter
structure in this light. This is the first time the IMC has published such an explanation of how it monitors, recommends and Reports on areas such as paramilitarism. For this reason, it provides vital information about how such an official agency operates in the transformation of Northern Ireland.

In Chapter 14, Neil Southern explores the relationship between political violence and decommissioning. Southern is interested in the extent to which republican violence has impacted on loyalism and concludes that the lack of a loyalist political project (and so political transformation and gains), along with the continued existence and actions of dissident republicans, made loyalist decommissioning especially difficult and that this was an act which should be recognized in that light.

Returning to this difficulty and the internal tensions and difficulties that persist, Chapter 15 consists of an interview between Graham Spencer and south Belfast UDA leader Jackie McDonald. In this interview McDonald explains the tensions and obstructions, which the UDA leadership have sought to address over recent years as well as arguing for a conclusive and decisive end to paramilitary structures and intent. Once a hardened paramilitary himself, McDonald now symbolizes the extent to which, at leadership level, there is a strategic aim to shift the UDA from a focus on community defence to a preoccupation with community politics.

The difficulty of shifting UDA consciousness from military to political strategy inevitably involves coping with new challenges for understanding memory, past loyalties and the cultivation of new organizational identity. The question of what role memory might play in a new Northern Ireland is elaborated in Chapter 16 by Kris Brown who seeks to frame memory as a space which allows for the re-negotiation of identity but only if related to the imperatives of the peace process. Notably, Brown explores how ceremony and murals tend to reinforce conflict identity and addresses this tendency in relation to the possibility of rethinking the function of memory not as dominated by the past but reoriented to the possibilities of the future.

In Chapter 17, Graham Spencer examines loyalist relations with the past by looking at loyalist attitudes towards apology, regret and change. Drawn from interviews with a number of loyalists, Spencer finds significant resistance to apology but a determination to avoid a return to conflict. This raises questions about the relationship between regret and lack of regret and points towards the need to think carefully about how open displays of regret can bring shame and other destructive consequences. Spencer suggests here that works towards peace, on the other hand, provide a far less contentious demonstration that attitudes have changed and perhaps have stronger and more significant impact for peace than a verbal articulation of sorrow.

Overall, this collection offers an introduction to the complexity of concerns, aspirations and influences, which effect loyalism in the post-GFA phase. The chapters challenge the simplistic, narrow, often depoliticized representations of loyalism that dominate the public mind and show loyalism
not as a static monolith, but as a dynamic system of beliefs and attitudes that move with the flux of political and social change. Given the absence of rewards and gains that Sinn Féin has been able to acquire because of a very different reception within the wider republican–nationalist community, perhaps we might acknowledge that what loyalists have done is even more remarkable, while recognizing that this has come at the expense of unquantifiable levels of pain and suffering that have been both perpetrated and received.
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