

Dump the politicians off your backs

Joe Black

1995

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THE 12th OF JULY, always a high point of tension, was used this year by the ‘respectable’ unionist parties to try to provoke the IRA into breaking the ceasefire. Nothing made this clearer than the events surrounding the attempts of Orangemen in Portadown to march through the Garvagh Road nationalist estate. The ceasefire was already under strain from the release of Lee Clegg, and unionist politicians were quick to seize on the confrontation there as an opportunity to push republican patience to breaking point.

Many people who tuned in to the news late on the evening of July 10th to hear the wild rumours arising from of the loyalist siege of Garvagh Road must have thought they were hearing the end of the ceasefire. It was said that a mob of loyalists had broken through RUC lines and stormed the estate. Unionist leaders were claiming that up to 200 republicans, some of them armed, had come from Belfast to protect the estate. In the event neither story proved to be true. But it was a situation very much like this that directly sparked the current struggle.

Historical bigots

David Trimble and Ian Paisley were at the head of the mob trying to storm the estate. They were the voices behind the rumours. Paisley was well aware of the consequences, he encouraged similar attacks at the end of the 1960’s which prompted some nationalists to move from civil rights marches to armed struggle. Hugh McLean, a member of UVF who took part in the random killing of a Catholic in 1966, said to the RUC when he was charged “I am terribly sorry I ever heard of that man Paisley or decided to follow him”.

Paisley and Trimble are not alone, Ken Maginnis the once ‘respectable’ face of unionism has completely discredited himself by predicting a definite end to the IRA ceasefire on several occasions. The problem for the unionist politicians is that, unlike the period of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, when over a hundred thousand could be mobilised in demonstrations, now they are unable to organise any significant opposition. Even Sinn Féin’s first visit to Stormont for talks with British government representatives resulted in a protest of only a dozen or so individuals.

Wishing for war

This failure is also seen in the North Down by-election where “United Kingdom Unionist” Robert McCartney ran on the basis of opposition to both the peace process and proposals for closer ties with the South. He won (which means little as it was a guaranteed unionist seat) but the turnout was just 38.7 percent, the lowest in more than 20 years. When the Unionist leaders talk of an imminent breakdown to the ceasefire they are not expressing a fear, they are expressing a wish.

Not only are the unionists failing to mobilise mass opposition to the peace process but the loyalist paramilitaries, for once, are refusing to play along. In the week after the 12th the political wings of the loyalist paramilitaries were put to the test by the threat of a body calling itself the ‘Protestant Defence Force’ to strike against Catholics it thought responsible for arson attacks on Orange halls.

Far from playing along, both the PUP and UDP came out against it. David Irving of the PUP warned against perpetuating the cycle of sectarian violence, Gary McMicheal of the UDP pointed

out that the Combined Loyalist Military Command would take a “dim view” of anyone breaking the ceasefire.

The tail that wags the dog

Parts of the left have got somewhat over excited by the new prominence of the PUP and the UDP, seeing them either as a cunning proto-fascist plot or a left-wing break with unionism. Their emergence and willingness to talk with nationalists and the left is significant. David Irving has spoken at meetings with the Communist Party, Militant Labour, and this year addressed the Dublin Council of Trade Unions.

However there is a long tradition of working class loyalists complaining about being sold out by ruling class unionism without breaking from sectarianism in the course of doing so. Given, in particular, the horrific killings carried out by some of the prominent figures in the PUP/UDP it is correct to be cautious but their current complaints provide evidence of the growing tensions within unionism.

Loyalty’s reward

Among working class loyalists there is growing awareness that loyalty to the British crown has delivered less, in some cases, than the armed rebellion of the republicans. The biggest thing the British state gave in return for their loyalty was guns to kill Catholics with.

- A Health Profile of the Greater Shankill Area, which was published in June, showed
- Only one third of men in the district described their health as good compared with 60% in Belfast overall.
- Male unemployment in the area is 40%, compared with a Belfast average of 19%. The female rate is 35%, compared with an average of 11% in the entire city.
- Over 80% of pupils in the Shankill left school without any qualifications, compared with two thirds in Belfast overall.
- Only 1 per cent were educated to degree level, compared to 9% in the whole city.
- Just one in 12 children attended a grammar school compared with an average of one in four in Belfast.

Sinn Féin can’t do it

Sinn Féin, because of their nationalist politics, will always be unable to attract support from significant numbers of Protestant workers. The most they can do is call on them to “see sense”. Again, to quote Morrison on his release from prison: “...part of our analysis is that the unionist community is more in advance of the unionist leadership which hasn’t produced a De Klerk, someone who is imaginative and courageous enough to say, ‘we’re going to have to deal here, we’re going to have to settle and accept that everyone is going to have to compromise’”

This pretty much paraphrases 1994 Ard Fhéis speech by Gerry Adams, in which he also called for a “Protestant De Klerk”. This represents the limits of republican thinking towards the Protestant working class. They may be able to recognise that Protestant workers have been tricked but they are unable to appeal to them on the grounds of common interest, as this would be a fundamental break with the politics of nationalism. Such an appeal would also be something that the nationalist bosses in Ireland and Bill Clinton would not be keen on.

There can not be a loyalist socialism. Loyalism means loyalty to the ruling class of Britain and Northern Ireland. For this reason it is wrong to see the PUP or UDP as socialist, or even close to socialism. A socialist movement requires support from all sections of the working class and a break with orange and green politics. The ceasefires have made it a little easier to put forward this viewpoint, it is up to all of us to make the best use of this opportunity.

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