**BELFAST TELEGRAPH**

**DEBATENI**

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**14 October 2013**

**Carson a terrorist or history rewritten?**

Tuning into Sunday Sequence last week, I heard Jim Allister cross swords with BBC presenter William Crawley on whether Sir Edward Carson was a terrorist. Crawley had suggested this possibility since he “had taken up arms organising against the state”. This is of course the current nationalist, and now even the Methodist view of Carson, that he introduced the gun to Irish politics. It conveniently ignores the United Irishmen in 1798, Robert Emmet’s 1803 rising, the 1848 Young Irelanders led by John Mitchel, and the 1867 Fenian rising, not to mention the 1882 Invincibles Phoenix Park assassinations.

In Carson’s own time, the nationalist view was that he was bluffing. Failure to take him seriously led to Asquith and Redmond’s refusal to compromise on Home Rule in relation to Ulster and the inevitable partition. Many of the forebears of those who decry Carson signed the 1912 Covenant and, if young males, joined the UVF although many in east Ulster today are embarrassed about it. Not very British. But even London accepted Ulster could not be coerced, the mobilised social forces being too great.

Carson, a reluctant warrior, realised that unorganised resistance would almost certainly lead to great loss of life. He decided to lead from the front. The Protestant all-class alliance was a people’s national response and one which did not descend into terror, rather preventing it. Its opposite number the Irish Volunteers (Oglaigh na hÉireann) in 1916 were acting for a minority of nationalists. They failed to create a Gaelic and separate Ireland ending up with a 26-county Catholic state, much as unionists predicted.

The other speaker in the programme was the Rev Lesley Carroll of the Presbyterian Church, a member of the Eames Bradley Consultative Group on the Past. Her view of terrorism revealed a new and equivocal concept within the reconciliation world.

She accepted that the first decade of killings were terroristic. However under questioning said, “by the end of the 1970s things had fallen into such a state of collapse we were running a system of informers where nobody knew what we were really doing and it was just a general mess.”

Her view, when drilled down, is that the thousand+ murders from 1980 were not morally culpable because the state’s security response makes such a judgment impossible. There will be much more of this if the rewriting of history is not resisted.