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## "British Rights for British Citizens": The Campaign for Equal Citizenship for Northern Ireland --Manuscript Draft--

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## **“British Rights for British Citizens”: The Campaign for Equal Citizenship for Northern Ireland**

### *Introduction*

Elections in the predominantly affluent and overwhelmingly unionist constituency of North Down have traditionally been distinctly subdued affairs. The campaign that accompanied the General Election held on 11 June 1987 would, however, prove to be anything but. When it was announced that he had been returned to serve another term, the sitting independent Unionist MP James Kilfedder took the opportunity to vent grievances that had been simmering in previous weeks. In his acceptance speech, Kilfedder issued a vitriolic attack on the composition and character of the campaign team that had canvassed for his principal rival, the “Real Unionist” candidate Robert McCartney. Amid scenes variously described as “tense”, “rowdy” and “somewhat farcical”, the veteran MP expressed particular outrage that McCartney counted among his supporters a number of “Communists.”<sup>1</sup>

In the days that followed, the controversy about the alleged “Communist intervention” in the North Down contest would be played out in the letters pages of Northern Ireland’s most explicitly Unionist daily newspaper. On Friday 19 June 1987, the *News Letter* published correspondence from a reader who described herself as “a True Blue Tory from the Home Counties.” Given her political credentials, it might reasonably have been presumed that Mrs Barbara Finney was writing to express

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<sup>1</sup> *County Down Spectator*, “Kilfedder lashes out in victory speech,” 18 June 1987.

support for James Kilfedder's caustic remarks after the count in North Down. It would quickly become apparent, however, that her intentions were entirely otherwise. The involvement of those branded "Communists" was, Mrs Finney argued, completely welcome within the "broadly based group" that had sought to secure the seat for Robert McCartney. The "True Blue" reader even went so far as to suggest that the principal publication authored by the alleged subversives was in fact "the best read of the week."

This letter prompted by the acrimonious North Down election draws our attention to the existence in the mid 1980s of a rather unlikely group of political bed fellows in Northern Ireland. In the aftermath of the Anglo Irish Agreement, a popular movement emerged that managed to bring together Stalinists and Thatcherites, among others, in support of the case for "equal citizenship." The purpose of this essay is to describe and explain how this most implausible of alliances became, for brief time at least, a pervasive voice in Northern Irish political life.

*Stalin and the (Northern) Irish Working Class*<sup>2</sup>

As the political climate in Northern Ireland deteriorated in the late 1960s, the analysis offered by the *Irish Communist Organisation* (ICO) shared many of the assumptions of mainstream Irish Republicanism. The violence that heralded the onset of the

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<sup>2</sup> This is an amendment of the title of one of the British and Irish Communist Organisation's most strident pamphlets, Stalin and the Irish Working Class (Belfast, 1979).

Troubles would, however, soon lead this small Stalinist splinter of the far Left to a rather different perspective. Key figures within the ICO – most notably Brendan Clifford - were living in west Belfast when loyalists began attacking nationalist districts in August 1969 and the experience led them to reflect on many of their central political convictions. In particular, the sustained ethnic cleansing that accompanied the beginning of the conflict shattered the assumption that unionists were mere creatures of British imperialism whose beliefs and identities would simply dissolve in the face of persuasion or pressure.<sup>3</sup> This realisation invited “some serious thinking”<sup>4</sup> that led the ICO to abandon their erstwhile Republican perspective and to adopt a position that would come to be known as the “two nations” approach.

The Stalinist grouping offered a materialist analysis suggesting that the uneven development of capitalism had created the conditions for the emergence of two distinct national communities in Ireland. While these national distinctions were principally economic in origin they found ready cultural expression in the guise of religious difference. In view of the existence of “two distinct historical communities,” the partition of Ireland should not be seen as an “imperialist contrivance” but rather as a democratic acknowledgement of social and political realities on the ground. This radical departure from the precepts of Irish Republicanism was made by the ICO within weeks of the onset of the Troubles with a brief sketch of it appearing in the September 1969 edition of their theoretical journal *The Irish Communist*. Over the next two years, the “two nations” thesis would be developed more fully in a sequence

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<sup>3</sup> *The Northern Star* 9, no. 9, September 1995, 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Workers' Weekly* 1, no. 5, 5 May 1972, 1.

of weighty pamphlets that would prove influential and controversial alike.<sup>5</sup> The irrevocable shift in the perspective of the ICO would in turn lead them to change their name. In the December 1971 edition of *The Irish Communist*, readers were informed that the grouping would from now on be called the *British and Irish Communist Organisation* (BICO).<sup>6</sup> This telling reincarnation established a precedent that would be repeated many times over. In the quarter century that followed, the BICO would assume a seemingly endless sequence of aliases. While the title of the Stalinist splinter would change as necessity or opportunity required, the location of their premises in central Belfast would, over the period in question, remain unchanged. As a consequence, commentators disorientated by the multiple *noms de guerre* adopted by the BICO often found it convenient to refer to the group simply as “Athol Street.”

The name change that occurred in the latter stages of 1971 served notice of the political direction that the Athol Street grouping would take over the next two decades. In adopting a title that combined nationalities often deemed mutually exclusive, the BICO acknowledged the Stalinist instruction that workers must transcend national distinctions and unite in common struggle against the state in which they happen to reside. While the BICO considered the fact of partition to have been entirely legitimate they also considered the form of partition to have been entirely reactionary. The creation of Northern Ireland offered the British state an

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<sup>5</sup> Irish Communist Organisation, The Birth of Ulster Unionism (Belfast, 1970); On the Democratic Validity of the Northern Ireland State; (Belfast, 1971); The Two Irish Nations (Belfast, 1971).

<sup>6</sup> *The Irish Communist* 72, December 1971, 2.

opportunity to extend to people living there the same entitlements as other citizens of the United Kingdom. Westminster had, however, squandered this opportunity in order to govern the fledgling political entity as “a place apart.” The operation of a devolved parliament merely served to antagonise relations between already mutually hostile national communities. The inevitable outcome of this inappropriate mode of government imposed on Northern Ireland was, the BICO insisted, the resumption of political violence that signalled the beginning of the Troubles.

The detrimental effects that flowed from the particular form of the partition settlement were held to have had impacted most gravely upon the Northern Irish working class. An article of faith among writers within the BICO fold was that if given the opportunity Catholic and Protestant workers would over time have been able to transcend their differences within the wider and more secular environs of the British labour movement. This process of reconciliation had been frustrated by the fact that working class people in Northern Ireland were only allowed to exist on the margins of the British trade union movement and were not allowed membership of the British Labour Party at all. For the BICO, the absolute political imperative was to bring these forms of exclusion to an end in order to forge an alliance between British and Irish – or at least *Northern* Irish – workers that would advance their interests within the state of which they were all, formally at least, citizens. In arriving at this particular understanding, the Athol Street grouping were strongly influenced by the two main loyalist strikes in Northern Ireland in the mid 1970s.

In March 1973, the British government sketched out the parameters of a new political settlement for Northern Ireland.<sup>7</sup> The centerpiece of the proposals was the restoration of a devolved assembly in Belfast in which nationalists and unionists would for the first time share power with one another. The *White Paper* also included provision for the establishment of structures enabling closer co-operation across the Irish border. This particular aspiration bore fruit at a meeting hosted by the British government in the Berkshire town of Sunningdale in December 1973 which saw the Irish government join forces with those Northern Irish politicians who favoured power sharing in order to agree the formation of a “Council of Ireland.” The initial response of the BICO to the new political dispensation was overwhelmingly positive. In their journal *Workers’ Weekly*, the prospect of consociational devolved government was heralded as a progressive turn that held out the possibility of allowing Northern Irish people to begin to transcend their sectarian distinctions.<sup>8</sup> While it was emphasised that the proposed cross border institutions would be largely cosmetic, the establishment of the Council of Ireland was also welcomed on the grounds that it provided the fig leaf that would allow nationalists to believe that they had kept faith with a commitment to a united Ireland precisely as they had abandoned it.<sup>9</sup> The initial enthusiasm of the BICO for the new political architecture in Northern Ireland was evinced in the opening days of 1974 when they denounced those unionists who had “refused to accept the democratic solution thrashed out at Sunningdale and instead

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Cunningham, British Government Policy in Northern Ireland, 1969 - 2000 (Manchester, 2000), 14-17.

<sup>8</sup> *Workers’ Weekly* 1, no. 50, 23 March 1973, 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 1, no. 86, 8 December 1973.

opted for a sterile campaign of obstructionism.”<sup>10</sup> That the Athol Street activists would subsequently revise their political sympathies would owe a great deal to legal proceedings south of the border.

In January 1974, a prominent *Fianna Fáil* politician, Kevin Boland, took a case to the High Court in Dublin claiming that the commitment made by the Irish delegation to Sunningdale that the status of Northern Ireland could only change in accordance with the wishes of people living there was in breach of articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution. In its defence, the Irish government countered, successfully, that the creation of the Council of Ireland did not in fact eliminate the constitutional claim to the six counties.<sup>11</sup> While the BICO considered that the outcome of the Boland case was premised on a misunderstanding of the nature of Sunningdale Agreement, they were also aware that quibbles about the validity of the ruling would not diminish the alienation it would inevitably engender within the unionist community. As the balance of opinion among unionists tilted ever further against the nascent political arrangements, the Athol Street activists began to express sympathy for certain perspectives that they had previously dismissed out of hand. In particular, articles appearing in *Workers' Weekly* became increasingly hostile towards the proposed institutions of cross border co-operation. By April 1974, the BICO had begun to denounce the Council of Ireland as an “elaborate farce” the prospect of which had served merely to alienate unionists in ways that imperilled the only element of the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 1, no. 91, 11 January 1974, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Dixon, Northern Ireland: The Politics of War and Peace, Second Edition (Houndmills: Palgrave), 140-41.



new political settlement that really mattered, namely the power sharing assembly.<sup>12</sup>

This shift in perspective would ensure that when the political crisis brewing in Northern Ireland eventually came to a head, the BICO would find themselves in common cause with political interests that they had only a few months previously denounced as forces of “pure reaction.”<sup>13</sup>

On 14 May 1974, the Stormont assembly debated a motion rejecting the Sunningdale agreement and calling for the fledgling “constitutional arrangements” in Northern Ireland to be re-negotiated.<sup>14</sup> When the motion fell, the ramshackle *Ulster Workers’ Council* (UWC) acted upon a previous undertaking that it would call an industrial stoppage to begin the following day. Within two weeks, Northern Ireland had been brought to a standstill and the first experiment with consociational government in the region had come to an end.<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that when the UWC strike was called the BICO did not at first come out in support of it. This initial reticence was in part a matter of political principle. While the BICO were increasingly sympathetic to the argument that the Council of Ireland should be abandoned, they did not share the hostility of some of the strikers to the ideal of power sharing. The decision to maintain a distance from the strike when it was first called also reflected a

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 1, no. 106, 27 April 1974, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 1, no. 91, 11 January 1974, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Don Anderson, 14 May Days: The Inside Story of the Loyalist Strike of 1974 (Dublin, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon and Henry Patterson, Northern Ireland 1921-2001, Political Forces and Social Classes (London, 2002), 189-91.

characteristic pragmatism. As seasoned activists, the BICO were often reluctant to lend their support to political causes that might not prove successful. This sense of caution ensured that when the UWC strike began the Athol Street grouping simply kept their own counsel and waited to see how events would unfold. It was only when the initially shambolic industrial stoppage began to take hold – on its “the third or fourth”<sup>16</sup> day – that the BICO decided to throw their weight behind it. In spite of their initial misgivings, the Athol Street activists would become enthusiastic supporters of the UWC and produced a series of “strike bulletins” under the name of the *Workers’ Association*<sup>17</sup> that provided arguably the most detailed and lucid accounts of the case for the industrial action. The BICO acclaimed what they termed “the General Strike”<sup>18</sup> as a genuinely historic moment that heralded a growing political consciousness among working class Protestants. The Athol Street sect was keen to channel the energies summoned by the UWC in progressive directions<sup>19</sup> and it was this ambition that prompted them to focus their attention more closely on the relations between workers in Northern Ireland and those living in other regions of the United Kingdom.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Northern Star* 9 no. 9, September 1995, 8.

<sup>17</sup> The full title of this particular incarnation was the *Workers’ Association for the Democratic Settlement of the National Conflict in Ireland*.

<sup>18</sup> *Workers’ Association, The Ulster General Strike* (Belfast, 1977), Second extended edition.

<sup>19</sup> *Workers’ Weekly* 2, no. 9, 3 August 1974, 1.

In the immediate aftermath of the UWC strike, the issue that came to preoccupy the BICO most was the seeming anomaly that while the overwhelming majority of Northern Irish workers were members of British trade unions, the body that represented them at a regional level was affiliated not to the British trade union movement but rather to its Irish equivalent.<sup>20</sup> This state of affairs ensured that the foremost trade union organisation in Northern Ireland was entitled to represent its members in negotiations with the Irish government which did not affect them but not in discussions with the British government which were essential to them. The BICO held to the view that the anomalous status of Northern Irish trade unions had consigned workers to the margins of a British labour movement in which they would have been exposed to more progressive, secular political currents. This reading prompted the group to issue recurrent calls in the mid 1970s for trade unionists in the region to dissociate themselves completely from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions based in Dublin and form themselves into a regional affiliate of the Trade Union Congress based in London instead.<sup>21</sup> The initial focus of the BICO on trade unionism would in time give way to a growing concern that Northern Irish workers be allowed to become involved in the other principal organisation of the British labour movement.

In the wake of the collapse of the power-sharing executive, the Labour government sought to regain momentum by calling elections scheduled for 1 May 1975 to select

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 2, no. 6, 13 July 1974, 2; 2, no. 149, 2 July 1977, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 2, no. 3, 15 June 1974; 2, no. 16, 21 September 1974, 1; 2 no. 25, 23 November 1974, 4.

members for a deliberative assembly charged with breaking the political logjam.<sup>22</sup> As the “constitutional convention” drifted towards stalemate and the prospects of a devolved settlement receded, the BICO gradually moved towards a strategy that would become indelibly associated with them for the next two decades. Although they had been previously dismissive<sup>23</sup> of Enoch Powell’s contention that Northern Ireland should be governed as an integral region of the British state, a sustained engagement with his ideas in the autumn of 1975 saw the Athol Street grouping begin to adopt an explicitly “integrationist” position.<sup>24</sup> At first, this shift in perspective was prompted by the conviction that the transformation of “direct rule” into a stable form of government would signal to Republicans that their war to sunder the Union was simply unwinnable.<sup>25</sup> Over time, however, the integrationism of the BICO would come to be shaped primarily by the belief that a closer association with the United Kingdom would serve to transform the political culture of Northern Ireland. This article of faith would principally assume the form of an insistence that workers in the region would only be able to find common cause in the secular environs of the British Labour Party. The first mention of the prospect of Labour candidates standing for office in Northern Ireland appeared in the 15 May 1976 edition of *Workers’ Weekly* but it was only in the autumn of that year that the idea took hold and became the

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<sup>22</sup> Cunningham, *British Government Policy in Northern Ireland*, 17-18.

<sup>23</sup> *Workers’ Weekly* 1, no. 106, 27 April 1974, 2-3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 2, no. 61, 2 August 1975; 2, no. 64, 13 September 1975; 2, no. 65, 20 September 1975.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 2, no. 70, 25 October 1975, 4.

preoccupation that would for years to come define the BICO perspective.<sup>26</sup> While the activists operating out of Athol Street would gradually come to the understanding that the British Labour Party would only establish constituency organisations in the six counties when they were compelled to do so, it would require a second loyalist strike to spark them into acting on it.<sup>27</sup>

On 3 May 1977, the United Unionist Action Council (UUAC) began an industrial stoppage designed to pressurise the British government to introduce more draconian security measures against Republicans and to restore devolved government to the region. In advance, the BICO had been opposed to the strike which they claimed had been called without “adequate reason” and with no “coherent objective” in mind. Moreover, while the Athol Street activists agreed that Republicans were being treated with “kid gloves” by the security forces, their increasingly integrationist outlook rendered them hostile to the prospect of a restored assembly of any kind at Stormont.<sup>28</sup> In spite of these reservations, however, once the strike began the BICO threw their support behind it. This seeming change of heart might perhaps be more accurately read as a pragmatic attempt to direct the energies summoned by the stoppage in ways considered progressive. Throughout the ultimately unsuccessful strike, BICO members distributed copies of an “Ulster Workers’ Charter” which issued the integrationist demand that Northern Ireland should be governed as “an

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 2, no. 110, 18 September 1976; 2, no. 111, 25 September 1976; 2, no. 113, 9 October 1976.

<sup>27</sup> *The Northern Star* 9, no. 9, September 1995, 10.

<sup>28</sup> *Workers’ Weekly* 2, no. 140, 30 April 1977, 1-3.

equal and integral part of the United Kingdom” before striking a populist note in denouncing “IRA terror.” It was claimed that this demand for “equal citizenship” – a phrase that would come to rather greater prominence a decade later – had secured “widespread grassroots support” among strikers.<sup>29</sup>

The enthusiasm which they believed had greeted their political agenda evidently boosted the confidence of BICO members and sparked a period of renewed political activity. Within two months of the collapse of the UUAC strike, the group had reinvented itself again as the *Labour Representation Committee* (LRC). The “Manifesto” of the LRC opened with a predictable preamble detailing why Northern Ireland was ill suited to devolution before moving on to state an objective that was rather less familiar. The purpose of this new pressure group was “to bring about the activity of the British Labour Party in Ulster in the same way that it is active in every other part of the UK.”<sup>30</sup> Within a year, the LRC would be dissolved and recast under the perhaps more authoritative title of the *Campaign for Labour Representation* (CLR). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the CLR would provide the principal channel for the considerable energies of the BICO.<sup>31</sup> While the socialist credentials of the Athol Street activists ensured that their foremost concern was to persuade the British Labour Party to extend its organisation to Northern Ireland, the specific logic of their integrationist perspective would in time lead them to widen their focus. If Northern Irish people were to enjoy “equal citizenship” with their counterparts in

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 2, no. 141, 7 May 1977; 2, no. 142, 14 May 1977, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 2, no. 150, 9 July 1977, pp. 3-4.

<sup>31</sup> *British and Irish Communist Organisation, Labour in Ulster* (Belfast: 1979).

England, Scotland and Wales, they would need the same opportunity to vote for those who might aspire to govern the United Kingdom. The integrationist case demanded, therefore, not only that the Labour Party accept members from Northern Ireland but also that the other principal party of government follow suit. The point at which this logic reached its natural conclusion was marked in a publication that appeared in 1984 courtesy of another BICO creation. In their pamphlet “Towards Equal Citizenship,” the *Integration Group* issued the first call for the Conservatives to extend their party organisation to include Northern Ireland.<sup>32</sup>

Over the first decade and half of the Troubles, then, the BICO came to represent one of the most distinctive and insistent voices within the volatile political life of Northern Ireland. The seemingly endless sequence of densely argued and poorly reproduced pamphlets that emerged out of Athol Street would exercise a considerable resonance and would prepare the ground for the emergence for a new generation of revisionist academics. Even commentators deeply hostile to the BICO perspective would find themselves compelled to acknowledge the substantial contribution of the group to the controversies that attend modern Irish history.<sup>33</sup> While the intellectual impact of the Athol Street was readily apparent, their political significance at this stage was rather less tangible. The agitation of the CLR had admittedly ensured that motions favouring the admission of members from Northern Ireland featured in the

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<sup>32</sup> *The Integration Group, Towards Equal Citizenship* (Belfast: 1984), 9-10.

<sup>33</sup> John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland* (London: 1995). 138; John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 1990), 183.

agenda of the 1983 annual conference of the British Labour Party.<sup>34</sup> The ease with which the party hierarchy was able to prevent composite 15 actually being discussed, however, suggested that the prospect of Labour candidates running in Northern Irish constituencies remained as distant as ever. Disillusioned at the possibility of political progress, the most influential thinker and prolific author within the Athol Street fold, Brendan Clifford, decided to leave Northern Ireland and had by 1985 settled for another spell in London.<sup>35</sup> Events towards the end of that year would, however, signal a dramatic and unanticipated turn in the political fortunes of the BICO. An international agreement signed by the British and Irish governments at Hillsborough Castle on the afternoon of Friday 15 November 1985 would transform the political context in Northern Ireland in a way that would allow the Athol Street group to move from the margins to the centre stage of political life.

### *The Case for “Equal Citizenship”*

It would be difficult to overstate the impact of the Anglo Irish Agreement on the unionist community in Northern Ireland.<sup>36</sup> The Hillsborough Accord offered a consultative role in the affairs of the region to an Irish government that unionists have traditionally regarded as a hostile irredentist foe. The feelings of betrayal and outrage prevalent within the unionist community would assume many forms but would be

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<sup>34</sup> *Workers’ Weekly* 2 no. 455, 7 October 1983.

<sup>35</sup> *The Northern Star* 9, no. 3, March 1995, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Graham Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party: Protest, Pragmatism and Pessimism* (Manchester, 2004), 233.



manifested most visibly on Saturday 23 November 1985 when a crowd of perhaps a quarter of a million people descended upon the City Hall in Belfast to vent their anger. While Unionist opposition to the Anglo Irish Agreement would be impassioned and prolonged, it would ultimately be to no avail. The structures established under the Hillsborough Accord, crucially, offered no institutions that were susceptible to political pressure or intimidation. As a consequence, for all the outrage expressed and energy expended by the unionist community, the mechanisms of the loathed deal remained obdurately intact. The campaign against the Anglo Irish Agreement exposed the Unionist mainstream not merely as politically ineffectual but as intellectually feeble also. While the crisis initiated by the Hillsborough Accord seemed to demand new ideas and directions, the principal voices within Unionism were evidently unable to produce any.<sup>37</sup> In the name of unity, the Unionist leadership held to a “steady course” that appeared to elevate inertia to the status of philosophical principle.<sup>38</sup> The political and intellectual crisis of Ulster Unionism was immediately recognised as a singular opportunity by the BICO.

In the charged atmosphere summoned by the Anglo Irish Agreement, many within the unionist community were open to new influences in a way that would have been unthinkable before. The zealots operating out of Athol Street wasted no time in seeking to bring the arguments they have developed over the past decade and a half to

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<sup>37</sup> Feargal Cochrane, Unionist Politics and the Politics of Unionism Since the Anglo-Irish Agreement (Cork, 1997); Norman Porter, Rethinking Unionism: An Alternative Vision for Northern Ireland (Belfast, 1996), 6-11.

<sup>38</sup> Padraig O’Malley, Northern Ireland: Questions of Nuance (Belfast: 1990), 37.

a wider and more attentive audience. At the mass rally in Belfast convened eight days after the signing of the Hillsborough Accord, activists distributed the first edition of a new occasional journal, *The Equal Citizen*. In addition, when the House of Commons sat three days after that enormous gathering to discuss the Agreement, MPs were already in possession of a substantial, newly written publication offering the BICO perspective on recent developments.<sup>39</sup> This essay, entitled “Parliamentary Sovereignty,” was the first in a sequence of influential pamphlets in which the key Athol Street intellectual Brendan Clifford set out to explain the nature of the crisis and how it might be resolved.<sup>40</sup>

The interpretation that Clifford advanced sought to depict the Anglo Irish Agreement as merely a symptom of a much deeper malaise.<sup>41</sup> The principal source of all the political difficulties that faced Northern Ireland was, he argued, the exclusion of the region from the party political culture of the United Kingdom. Since partition, the six counties have been suspended in a form of political quarantine with the result that people living there have been subjected to a profoundly unaccountable form of

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<sup>39</sup> *The Equal Citizen* 8, September-October 1986, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Clifford, Parliamentary Sovereignty and Northern Ireland: A Review of the Party System in the British Constitution, with Relation to the Anglo-Irish Agreement (Belfast, 1985); Parliamentary Despotism: John Hume’s Aspiration (Belfast, 1986); Government Without Opposition (Belfast: 1986); The Road to Nowhere: A Review of Unionist Politics from O’Neill to Molyneaux and Powell (Belfast, 1987).

<sup>41</sup> *The Equal Citizen* 5, March-April 1986, 1.

government. According to Clifford, it is the effective competition between political parties that is the guarantor of genuinely democratic governance. Those parties that secure office cannot under normal circumstances afford to behave in a consistently autocratic fashion. Failure to accommodate the feelings and aspirations of citizens would inevitably ensure a shift in electoral preference that would consign the government to the largely ineffectual status of parliamentary opposition. The problem that Northern Ireland has faced, Clifford contended, is that this “reflex” between government and governed has never existed in the six counties. The exclusion of Northern Irish people from the mainstream British political parties has ensured that voters in the province have been unable to participate in electing the government of the state of which they are nominally citizens. Freed from even the prospect of electoral retribution, the sovereign parliament has been able to govern Northern Ireland in an entirely unaccountable manner.<sup>42</sup> With characteristic color and writing under the pseudonym of Jim Davidson, Clifford offered the following depiction of the poverty of citizenship endured by people living in the region:

“...in Northern Ireland there is no mediating force between the Executive and the people, because there is no electoral competition between the two. The Executive does just what it pleases with the people. It torments them with bizarre schemes when that is its fancy. In its rare moods of benevolence it does not torment them. It plays with them as a cat with a mouse.”

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

The particular reading of the crisis initiated by the Hillsborough Accord prompted Brendan Clifford to chart a distinctive political course ahead. If the problems that beset Northern Ireland were to be resolved, Clifford insisted, the region would have to be fully integrated into the party political life of the United Kingdom. The advent of “equal citizenship” would sound the death knell of unaccountable government in the region.<sup>43</sup> Rather than being governed as a “colonial condominium” or “Britain’s Bantustan”,<sup>44</sup> Northern Ireland would be embraced as an equal and integral region of the United Kingdom. Once Northern Irish people could join and vote for British parties, they would be in a position to bring about those electoral swings that can make the difference between government and opposition. The executive of the day would no longer be able to overlook the wishes of voters in the six counties as such disregard could lead to Ministers being swept out of office. Political initiatives such as the Anglo Irish Agreement that proved deeply unpopular among the Northern Irish electorate would simply become impossible.

The realization of the “equal citizenship” project would, Brendan Clifford continued, initiate a complete transformation of political life in Northern Ireland. The stunted and sectarian nature of politics in the region was the outcome, Clifford insisted, of its exclusion from the wider and more secular party political culture of the British state.<sup>45</sup> If the Conservative and Labour parties were to run for election in the six counties, there would be an opportunity for Northern Irish people to overcome their existing

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<sup>43</sup> Jim Davidson, Electoral Integration (Belfast, 1986).

<sup>44</sup> *The Equal Citizen* 9, January 1987, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Clifford, *The Road to Nowhere*, 1-3.

ethnoreligious distinctions and begin to embrace political identities other than those conventionally designated by the terms “unionist” and “nationalist.”<sup>46</sup> Individuals from different confessional backgrounds would begin to realize their shared interests and to collaborate in their pursuit. In time, the ethnoreligious disputes that have traditionally consumed the public realm in the six counties would recede and the principal fault line of Northern Irish political life would come to center on the “real” issues associated with social class.<sup>47</sup>

While the arguments featured in the writings of Brendan Clifford had existed on the margins for a decade or more, the crisis signalled by the Anglo Irish Agreement enabled them to reach a much larger and more appreciative audience.<sup>48</sup> The idealism and imagination of the case for “equal citizenship” evidently chimed with many unionists disillusioned by the intellectual poverty of mainstream Unionism. The specific composition of the constituency that was drawn to the arguments emerging out of Athol Street suggests an apparent irony that is worth marking here. The BICO was comprised in the main of manual workers, many

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<sup>46</sup> *A Belfast Magazine*, April-May 1988, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Clifford, *Parliamentary Sovereignty*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Liam O’Dowd, “‘New Unionism’, British Nationalism and the Prospects for a Negotiated Settlement in Northern Ireland”, in Rethinking Northern Ireland: Culture, Ideology and Colonialism, ed. David Miller (Harlow: 1998), 70-93; “Constituting Division, Impeding Agreement: The Neglected Role of British Nationalism in Northern Ireland”, in Dis/Agreeing Ireland: Contexts, Obstacles, Hopes, ed. James Anderson and James Goodman (London:1998), 108-25.

from nationalist backgrounds, who were intent on advancing the cause of socialism. It would soon become apparent, however, that the audience the Athol Street activists were able to reach after the Hillsborough Accord was comprised primarily of the more affluent sections of the unionist community. While the middle class composition of their support clearly represented an irony, it was not one that appeared to concern unduly the working class firebrands of the BICO. Indeed, it would seem that the Athol Street strategy was from the outset a deliberate attempt to win specifically middle class unionists to the cause of ‘equal citizenship’.<sup>49</sup> In order to make sense of this seeming contradiction, we need to reflect briefly on the manner in which the unionist middle classes had experienced what was by this stage more than a decade of “direct rule.”

### *The Culture of Contentment*

When Westminster prorogued the devolved assembly in Belfast in March 1972 and began to govern Northern Ireland directly, the move was widely opposed within the unionist community. As the benefits of “direct rule” became apparent, however, much of this initial opposition began to dissipate. In an attempt to foster conditions deemed essential for political stability in Northern Ireland, a succession of direct rule administrations vastly expanded public spending, especially in the

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<sup>49</sup> *The Northern Star* 9 no. 1, January 1995, 7-8

areas of housing and education.<sup>50</sup> While this fiscal bevelence was intended to alter the circumstances of working class communities in which the conflict was concentrated, the actual beneficiaries were among the ranks of an expanded middle class.<sup>51</sup> The principal outcome of the generous subsidies provided to Northern Ireland by the British exchequer was the vast expansion of jobs in the public sector.<sup>52</sup> While public employees in Northern Ireland earned the same salaries as their counterparts elsewhere in the United Kingdom, they were able to purchase homes priced at only 60 per cent of the UK average and to send their children to often excellent schools usually at minimal cost.<sup>53</sup> This rather fortunate coincidence ensured that Northern Irish people working in the upper echelons of the public sector in particular enjoyed a comparatively high level of disposable income which in time would find expression in ever more conspicuous consumption. In the 1980s, it became commonplace for commentators to observe

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<sup>50</sup> Derk Birrell, Direct Rule and the Governance of Northern Ireland (Manchester, 2009), 155; Sean Byrne, Economic Assistance and Conflict Transformation (London: 2011), 63-4.

<sup>51</sup> Suzanne Breen, "Middle Classes Find a Silver Lining," Red Pepper no. 5, 1995.

<sup>52</sup> Mark McGovern and Peter Shirlow, "Counter-Insurgency, Deindustrialisation and the Political Economy of Ulster Loyalism," in Who are 'the People'? Unionism, Protestantism and Loyalism in Northern Ireland, ed. Peter Shirlow and Mark McGovern. (London:1997), 127-52.

<sup>53</sup> Graham Gudgin and Stephen Roper, The Northern Ireland Economy: Review and Forecasts to 1995, (Belfast, 1990), 20.

that the region saw more sales of luxury cars than any other part of the United Kingdom.<sup>54</sup>

The unionist middle classes' experience of direct rule entailed not only growing material dependence on the United Kingdom but enhanced cultural association with it as well.<sup>55</sup> The absolute centrality of the British state in the Northern Irish economy ensured that the organization of work in the middle and higher strata of a range of professions became "integrally tied to British policies and practices."<sup>56</sup> One significant expression of this growing association was that it became increasingly routine for members of the professional and business classes in Northern Ireland to travel to Great Britain for meetings and conferences. While the "shuttle services" established by various airlines in the early 1980s were relatively expensive, they immediately proved popular among an expanding middle class clientele wishing to travel from Belfast to various regional centers

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<sup>54</sup> McGarry and O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland*, 295-6; Andreas Cebulla and Jim Smyth. "Industrial Collapse and Post-Fordist Overdetermination in Belfast," in *Development Ireland: Contemporary Issues*, ed Peter Shirlow (London, 1995), 81-93.

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Farrington and Graham Walker, "Ideological Content and Institutional Frameworks: Unionist identities in Northern Ireland and Scotland," *Irish Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2009): 135-52. Colin Coulter, *Contemporary Northern Irish Society: An Introduction* (London, 1999), pp. 17-19.

<sup>56</sup> Jennifer Todd, "Two Traditions in Unionist Political Culture," *Irish Political Studies* 2, no. 1 (1987): 1-26.



throughout the United Kingdom.<sup>57</sup> This growing familiarity with British society was nurtured further by trends in third level education.<sup>58</sup> Over the course of direct rule it became increasingly common for the children of middle class unionists to opt for universities “across the water” and to remain there once their course were completed.<sup>59</sup> Finally, the sense of belonging to a community that extended beyond the six counties and comprised the United Kingdom as a whole was encouraged by patterns within the culture industries. As the prospects of the return of Stormont receded, British newspapers began to outsell their Northern Irish equivalents<sup>60</sup> and in the process facilitated a growing awareness of public life in the other regions of the United Kingdom.

The particular interests and experiences accumulated under direct rule by the unionist middle classes would quickly find political expression in a strategy typically characterized as “integrationist” but persuasively designated by Bew and

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<sup>57</sup> Between 1984 and 1988 alone the number of flights from Northern Ireland to other regions of the United Kingdom rose 40 per cent from 329, 240 to 454, 050. Source: Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

<sup>58</sup> Anne McHardy, “Young, Gifted and on a Boat Out of Ulster,” Times Higher Education, 10 December 1999.

<sup>59</sup> In 1968, only 326 Northern Irish students attended British universities. By the late 1980s, around 2 500 students were enrolling each year for their first term at a college in Britain, the overwhelming majority of them from Protestant backgrounds. Source: Department of Education (Northern Ireland).

<sup>60</sup> Northern Ireland Readership Survey, 1992.

Patterson as “minimalist”.<sup>61</sup> Closely associated with the Ulster Unionist Party leader James Molyneaux, the ‘minimalist’ perspective held that it would be best if Northern Ireland continued to be governed from Westminster, not least because devolution was likely to be possible only on terms unacceptable to the unionist community. While aware of the need to reform the more autocratic traits of direct rule, Molyneaux considered that this objective was best pursued through patient diplomacy behind the scenes. The oblique claims of the UUP leader to “have the ear” of key figures in Westminster and Whitehall were of course fatally undermined when he was caught out as much as everyone else within the unionist fold by the advent of the Anglo Irish Agreement.<sup>62</sup>

The events at Hillsborough Castle illustrated as dramatically as possible that the ‘minimalist’ strategy guiding the then largest Unionist party had merely translated the economic dependence of middle class unionists on the British state into a particularly abject form of political dependence. The humiliation of those advocating “*minimalist* integration” opened up a space for those who wished to advance the case of “equal citizenship” or, as the strategy was sometimes termed, “*electoral* integration.” The direction charted by the BICO would exercise a particular resonance among middle class unionists in part because it promised to resolve the gnawing contradictions that had defined their experience since the fall of Stormont. If the project of “equal citizenship” were fully realized, its advocates

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<sup>61</sup> Paul Bew and Henry Patterson, “Unionism: Jim Leads On”, Fortnight 256 (1987).

<sup>62</sup> Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, 234.

insisted, direct rule would become the stable and permanent form of government for Northern Ireland. In addition, the people of the region would for the first time ever be able to participate in the wider public life of the entire United Kingdom. The enterprise of “equal citizenship” accorded, therefore, both with the very substantial material interests of the unionist middle classes and with their burgeoning cultural sense of Britishness.<sup>63</sup> It did so, moreover, while promising to banish the political vulnerability that had discredited the “minimalist” project. The advent of ‘equal citizenship’ appeared to offer middle class unionists the prospect that while the authority of Westminster could be used to advance their interests, it could not be used to injure them.

If the strategy mapped out in Athol Street appeared tailor made for the unionist middle classes that was probably not entirely coincidental. When the crisis over the Anglo Irish Agreement broke, the seasoned activists in the BICO were keenly aware of the particular elements of Northern Irish society that might, in the first instance at least, be most amenable to the project of “equal citizenship.”<sup>64</sup> In the spring of 1986, the Stalinist splinter adopted another persona with the explicit intention of tapping into this potential body of support.

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<sup>63</sup> Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland: Power, Conflict and Emancipation, (Cambridge, 1996), 59.

<sup>64</sup> *The Northern Star* 9 no. 1, January 1995, 7-8.

### *The Campaign for Equal Citizenship*

The most prominent of all the many front organizations associated with the BICO was conceived in the rather unlikely setting of one of the more affluent districts of London. When a parliamentary by election was called in Fulham for 10 April 1986, the Athol Street grouping decided to run a candidate to promote the cause of “equal citizenship.” The academic economist and BICO member Boyd Black stood in the constituency demanding “Democratic Rights for Northern Ireland.”<sup>65</sup> Those canvassing for Boyd Black were in the main at pains to emphasize that the purpose of the campaign was not to secure votes – an astute move given that only 98 were received - but rather to bring attention to the exclusion of Northern Irish people from the British political parties. Perhaps the most important outcome of the intervention in Fulham was that it brought together experienced figures in the BICO and those younger people from mainstream Unionist politics that had come to London to canvas.<sup>66</sup> This unusual alliance would prompt the formation in late March 1986 of a new pressure group entitled the *Campaign for Equal Citizenship for Northern Ireland* (CEC).<sup>67</sup> Over the next two years, the CEC would assume considerable prominence in Northern Ireland and in the process bring the arguments formulated by the BICO to a much wider audience than hitherto. The high public profile enjoyed by the pressure group owed a great deal to the recruitment of the prominent figure of Robert McCartney. In the early days of the

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<sup>65</sup> *News Letter*, “Loyalist for UK by-election”, 17 March 1986, 1.

<sup>66</sup> *The Northern Star* 9 no. 3, March 1995, 6.

<sup>67</sup> *News Letter*, “Pact ‘symptom of political malaise’”, 31 March 1986, 8.

CEC, the barrister and Unionist politician acted as the principal spokesperson for the organization before being elected President at its first annual general meeting held on 1 November 1986.<sup>68</sup> A charismatic but abrasive individual presumed to have future ambitions to lead the Ulster Unionist Party, McCartney would at various stages prove to be both the principal asset of, and a major liability to, the pressure group.<sup>69</sup>

From the outset, there existed within the CEC two different, though not entirely discrete, understandings of what the pressure group should stand for and the political lineage that it should claim. The first of these cast the CEC as a “civil rights” movement that was the inheritor of the demand that nationalists had issued in Northern Ireland in the 1960s for “British rights for British citizens.”<sup>70</sup> The second regarded the campaign as an expression of “real Unionism” that by seeking the admission of Northern Irish people into the party political life of the United Kingdom assumed the mantle of Sir Edward Carson. Most observers of political discourse in Northern Ireland would have considered these two readings of what “equal citizenship” meant to be entirely incompatible and indeed the tension between them would in time become a major line of fissure within the CEC. In the early stages, however, the “civil rights” and “real Unionism”

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid. “NIO accused of ‘keeping Ulster divided’”, 3 November 1986, 13.

<sup>69</sup> Cochrane, *Unionist Politics*, 101; Christopher Farrington, “Ulster unionism and the Irish historiography debate,” *Irish Studies Review* 11 no. 3 (2003): 251-61, 255.

<sup>70</sup> *The Equal Citizen* 3, 22 December 1985, 4.

arguments both featured prominently in how the pressure group sought to present itself. The first major public address to the CEC by Robert McCartney illustrated this coexistence particularly well.

While the initial public meeting of the pressure group drew a respectable crowd of “more than 100 people,”<sup>71</sup> the second would prove to be a rather more ambitious affair. On 3 July 1986, an audience of “700-plus”<sup>72</sup> turned up at the Ulster Hall in Belfast to hear Robert McCartney deliver a speech entitled “We Have a Vision.” The text of the address sought to cast the CEC as an advocate of both “civil rights” and of “real Unionism,” and was perhaps unique in referencing in the same breath the unlikely pairing of Sir Edward Carson and Martin Luther King Junior. While the tone of the speech was inclusive and idealistic, the details of the meeting had already disclosed which of the two interpretations of “equal citizenship” had been afforded primacy. The text had, after all, been delivered by a prominent member of the Ulster Unionist Party who was regarded as having ambitions to become leader of what was then still the principal political organization in Northern Ireland. In choosing Robert McCartney as its public face, the CEC had in effect located itself within the bounds of Unionist politics. The sense that the ambitions expressed in “We Have a Vision” were essentially “Unionist” concerns was heightened further by the setting in which they were aired. The Ulster Hall in the centre of Belfast has a cherished place in Unionist

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<sup>71</sup> *News Letter*, “Move for unity is stepped up”, 15 May 1986, 3.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* “Support boost for equality backers,” 5 July 1986, 6; *Belfast Telegraph*, “‘Political prison’ warning sounded”, 4 July 1986, p. 13.

iconography due in particular to a speech delivered there by Sir Edward Carson at the height of the Home Rule Crisis in 1912. The very deliberate choice<sup>73</sup> of this “historic” venue for its first major public outing suggested that the CEC had at an early stage decided to cast itself primarily as a voice for “real Unionism.”

The initial course charted by the pressure group was prompted at least in part by a pragmatic reading of the existing field of political possibility.<sup>74</sup> The enterprise of building a “civil rights” movement that could transcend the established divisions of Northern Irish public life was a monstrously difficult task unlikely to yield results at least in the immediate term. In contrast, there was a rather greater prospect of winning to the cause of “real Unionism” a Protestant community disorientated by recent political events. It was fairly predictable then that the initial direction of the CEC would be to seek to make advances among the ranks of the Ulster Unionist Party. As Arthur Aughey<sup>75</sup> has noted, there “was always something quixotic” about this particular strategy. The ultimate objective of electoral integrationists was, after all, to create the conditions that would see local parties preoccupied with the traditional concerns of “constitutional issues” replaced by British parties dealing with the rather more modern fare of “real” politics. In seeking to convert the UUP to their cause, the CEC was in effect

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<sup>73</sup> Peter Brooke of the CEC stated: “We have chosen the Ulster Hall because of the historic importance of the issues we are raising”, *News Letter* 3 July 1986, 16.

<sup>74</sup> Arthur Aughey, Under Siege: Ulster Unionism and the Anglo-Irish Agreement (Belfast, 1989), 147.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* 162.

inviting the party to collude in its own dissolution. The inevitable resistance that would greet the case for electoral integration would become all too apparent when the traditional voice of Ulster Unionism held its annual conference on 8 November 1986.<sup>76</sup> The principal controversy that weekend centered upon two motions advocating that the party adopt the principles of “equal citizenship” submitted by Robert McCartney and the North Down association of which he was a member. In a heated session from which the media had been excluded,<sup>77</sup> the newly elected President of the CEC moved the twin motions with a speech in which he delivered a withering appraisal of the UUP leadership whom he claimed had “neither vision nor policy.”<sup>78</sup> The hierarchy of the party responded by having a number of influential figures, including the widely revered Enoch Powell,<sup>79</sup> table an alternative proposal that any discussion about the future should be shelved until the loathed Anglo Irish Agreement had been defeated. While the blocking amendment tabled by the UUP leadership was carried, the margin of victory – 199 to 153<sup>80</sup> - was far from overwhelming and suggested that there was perhaps within the party a constituency that at the very least wished to have a

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<sup>76</sup> Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, 238-9.

<sup>77</sup> *News Letter* “Unionist gag row”, 8 November 1986, 1-2.

<sup>78</sup> Robert McCartney, Speech at the Ulster Unionist Party Conference, Forum Hotel 8<sup>th</sup> November 1986, 1.

<sup>79</sup> Paul Corthorn, “Enoch Powell, Ulster Unionism, and the British Nation,” Journal of British Studies 51, no. 4 (October 2012): 967 – 997.

<sup>80</sup> *News Letter*, “Molyneaux demands unity in party policy battle”, 10 November 1986, 12-13.



discussion about the ideas that the CEC had recently brought to the fore of public debate.

The defeat at the UUP annual conference appeared if anything merely to have strengthened Robert McCartney's ambition and resolve. Over the next few months, the public profile of the CEC President would become ever more prominent and his comments on the party leadership would become even more caustic. The hierarchy of the UUP increasingly regarded McCartney as a source of division and by February 1987 had already agreed to take moves to deal with him.<sup>81</sup> On Monday 18 May 1987, the outspoken barrister appeared before a disciplinary committee of the party. The multiple charges levelled at McCartney fell into two main categories.<sup>82</sup> The first addressed what Arthur Aughey, as we saw earlier, termed the "quixotic" nature of McCartney's twin roles as CEC President and Ulster Unionist. The disciplinary committee made the entirely logical case that the activities of the pressure group were designed to invite other parties to compete for votes in Northern Ireland and hence were detrimental to the interests of the UUP. The second broad allegation against McCartney centred on a whole plethora of critical comments that he had directed towards the leadership of Ulster Unionism. Among the many colorful quotations cited at the meeting were his claim that party policy was being "decided at the urinals of the House of Commons" and his allegation that the UUP, in league with all the other local parties, was content with "Lilliputian sectarian politics where they can crow over

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<sup>81</sup> Cochrane, *Unionist Politics*, 221.

<sup>82</sup> *News Letter*, 'Victory pledge', 20 May 1987, 1-2.

their own little dung hills.” The venom and frequency of McCartney’s invective had offered a great deal of ammunition to his many enemies within the UUP and on the day after the disciplinary hearing the inevitable announcement came that he had had been expelled from the party.

If the case for terminating McCartney’s membership had not been deemed sufficiently overwhelming already, the UUP might have considered adding another item to the charge sheet drawn against him. In the wake of the Anglo Irish Agreement, the two main Unionist parties had agreed that in the interests of unity they would not stand against one another at elections. This electoral pact had been extended to include the only sitting independent Unionist MP, James Kilfedder. On the evening of 15 May 1987, the North Down Ulster Unionist Association voted by a margin of 39 to 29 to select Robert McCartney as its candidate to stand against Kilfedder in the forthcoming Westminster election.<sup>83</sup> As the decision to expel McCartney had already in effect been taken, this deliberate breach of the Unionist electoral pact did not alter his circumstances. The outcome of the selection meeting would, however, have considerable repercussions for every other party member in the constituency. On 26 May 1987, the UUP announced that it had decided to expel the North Down association *en masse*.<sup>84</sup> This was a

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. “McCartney blow to poll pact”, 16 May 1986, 1-2; *Belfast Telegraph*, “OUP rebel to stand”, 16 May 1987, 1.

<sup>84</sup> *News Letter*, “Rebels ditched”, 27 May 1987, 1-2.

remarkably rare instance of decisive action by a party hierarchy whose inertia had been compounded by the traumas visited by the Anglo Irish Agreement.<sup>85</sup>

Expulsion from the UUP appeared insufficient to knock McCartney out of his stride and he announced immediately that he would run as an independent “Real Unionist” candidate on an “equal citizenship” platform.<sup>86</sup> The team that gathered to support McCartney was by far the largest of the three candidates running in North Down and one journalist noted that the barrister had attracted an “eager, almost fanatical, band of workers.”<sup>87</sup> The zeal of the “Real Unionist” campaign team derived in part from the fact that at its centre was a group of Athol Street figures who were the source of most of the ideas and all of the literature designed to prise the seat from James Kilfedder.<sup>88</sup> The presence of “Communists” on the leafy avenues of a constituency often referred to as Northern Ireland’s “gold coast” would prove one of many sources of controversy. While elections in North Down had traditionally tended toward the genteel, the 1987 contest would produce a whole series of lurid allegations among the three candidates. The sitting MP claimed to have been the victim of a “Nazi smear campaign” and alleged that he had been verbally and physically threatened by “people from outside the area

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<sup>85</sup> Farrington, *Ulster Unionism*, 69-71.

<sup>86</sup> *News Letter*, “McCartney launches into campaign attack”, 19 May 1987, 9; *Belfast Telegraph*, “No new party: QC”, 20 May 1987, 1, 3.

<sup>87</sup> *News Letter*, “Triangular battle for a square deal,” 6 June 1987, 9.

<sup>88</sup> *The Northern Star* 9 nos. 6-7, June-July 1995, 6.

wielding sticks.”<sup>89</sup> John Cushnahan of the Alliance Party reported that two men in a car had attempted to run him down one evening when he was putting up election posters.<sup>90</sup>

As tempers began to fray, the combustible figure of Robert McCartney was to be heard making claims about the imminent success of his campaign.<sup>91</sup> When the polls closed, however, this confidence would quickly prove to have been misplaced. North Down had seen the third largest swing of the 1987 elections anywhere in the United Kingdom but James Kilfedder had still managed to retain his seat, albeit with a vastly reduced majority of around 4,000 votes.<sup>92</sup> While the outcome of the “Real Unionist” campaign would ultimately prove a disappointment, there was much from which the CEC might have drawn comfort. In particular, the contest in North Down had drawn to the standard of “equal citizenship” a substantial body of activists who transcended political distinctions often deemed insurmountable – staunch Unionists canvassed with erstwhile Republicans, Stalinists rubbed shoulders with Thatcherites, Gay Rights activists found common cause with the more genteel elements of the unionist middle

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<sup>89</sup> *News Letter*, “Kilfedder hits out over ‘Nazi smear campaign,’” 6 June 1987, 7; *County Down Spectator*, “Allegations abound in election race”, 4 June 1987, 1.

<sup>90</sup> *News Letter*, “Cushnahan dodges speeding car peril”, 11 June 1987, 8.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* “Triangular battle for a square deal”, 6 June 1987, 9.

<sup>92</sup> Aughey, *Under Siege*, 164. Kilfedder’s majority in 1987 was 3 953. In 1983, the only previous Westminster election in which McCartney had stood against him, the distance between the two candidates was 14 600 votes

classes. While the diversity that sheltered under its umbrella was often vaunted as the principal attribute of the CEC, it would also prove to be its undoing. In the year that followed the unity and energy of the North Down campaign, the differences always latent within the pressure group would begin to tear it apart.<sup>93</sup>

### *Schisms Within the CEC*

The principal fault line that opened up within the CEC inevitably mapped the tensions between the two principal centres of power within the organisation, namely the Athol Street grouping on the one hand and Robert McCartney and his supporters on the other. The small band of longstanding BICO activists - now operating as the *Ingram Society*<sup>94</sup> - contested that McCartney had come to exercise too much influence within the pressure group and was intent on reducing its executive committee to a state of “obedience to his sovereign wish.”<sup>95</sup> One incident that rankled in particular occurred on 20 November 1987 when the CEC President used a press conference to announce that the group planned to invite a range of figures from civil society to discuss possible directions for political progress and that a record would be kept of those who declined to attend. The proposed meeting came as a surprise to other members of the executive who had not discussed, let alone approved, the idea. What came to be known as the “blacklist” statement was an incident widely cited by those who felt that the

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<sup>93</sup> Farrington, *Ulster Unionism*, 64.

<sup>94</sup> *Workers' Weekly* 2, no. 675, 19 March 1988, 2-3.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 2 no. 677, 2 April 1988, 3.

President of the CEC exercised excessive authority over the organisation and that his ego was out of control.

The Athol Street grouping held further that McCartney had used his influence to take the CEC in an unpalatable ideological direction. The key players within the BICO had endorsed the “Real Unionist” persona that the pressure group had adopted in its early days. The experience of the 1987 Westminster elections, however, had produced a clear change of heart. While the Athol Street sect would in public declare the North Down campaign to have been a moral victory<sup>96</sup> they knew in private that what mattered most was that it had been a political defeat.<sup>97</sup> The BICO activists felt that if the CEC were to make a genuine impact on the political culture of Northern Ireland it would have to abandon the discourse of “Real Unionism” and recast itself solely as an inclusive campaign for “civil rights.” A rally held a few weeks after the disappointment in North Down offered an opportunity for the CEC to chart a rather different course. While the Athol Street group felt that a meeting held in the Ulster Hall on 2 July 1987 to mark the first anniversary of the pressure group should be used make the case for the British parties organising in Northern Ireland as a civil right, Robert McCartney had other ideas. On the night, McCartney used the platform to denounce the cross-party Unionist Task Force on the grounds that its anticipated recommendation of

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<sup>96</sup> The front page headline of the next (August 1987) edition of *the Equal Citizen*, for instance, declared ‘North Down Success!’.

<sup>97</sup> Aughey, *Under Siege*, 165.

power-sharing devolution represented a form of “capitulation.”<sup>98</sup> In the eyes of the BICO, McCartney had squandered a golden opportunity to move beyond the abiding concerns of local politics and had instead “immersed the CEC in the squabbles of the Unionist Family.”<sup>99</sup> The conviction that the controversial barrister had taken the pressure group in a direction that was “too Unionist” was compounded by a series of subsequent events. In particular, the Athol Street contingent were outraged in March 1988 when McCartney appeared to suggest that the entire Catholic population was “morally culpable” for the deaths of two off duty British soldiers at a Republican funeral in west Belfast.<sup>100</sup>

Those who found themselves on the other side of this increasingly acrimonious dispute would inevitably offer a radically different interpretation.<sup>101</sup> Supporters of McCartney would suggest that the allegations issued from Athol Street merely represented a petulant response to the disappointment of having invested a great deal of political capital in the North Down campaign without the desired return. The CEC President himself would contest that the criticisms levelled at him were simply expressions of spite from activists who had lost control of an organisation they had been instrumental in founding.<sup>102</sup> While the origins of the fissures within

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<sup>98</sup> *News Letter*, “Secret deal claims made by McCartney”, 3 July 1987, 9; *Belfast Telegraph*, “Unionist deal claim is denied”, 3 July 1987, 4.

<sup>99</sup> *Workers’ Weekly* 2 no. 675, 19 March 1988, 2.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* 2, no. 676, 26 March 1988, 2.

<sup>101</sup> Robin Wilson, “Sect behind CEC split”, *Fortnight* 261, April 1988, 4.

<sup>102</sup> *News Letter*, “Campaign split over McCartney ‘blacklist’”, 4 March 1987, 10.

the pressure group were open to dispute, their impact was rather more clear cut. In the closing months of 1987, meetings of the executive committee of the CEC became increasingly rancorous affairs. The minutes for 21 December 1987, for instance, record Robert McCartney storming from the room when the BICO member David Morrison attempted, unsuccessfully, to pass a motion of censure against him. As relations deteriorated within the CEC, a number of pivotal figures resigned from the organisation. The “blacklist” statement in November prompted the immediate resignation of the most influential BICO intellectual, Brendan Clifford.<sup>103</sup> In the spring of the following year, the two principal office bearers of the CEC followed suit. On 12 March 1988, a press release from the CEC announced that Robert McCartney had resigned as President and Dr Laurence Kennedy had stood down as Chairman. These resignations would prove to be simply tactical manoeuvres. Both McCartney and Kennedy intended to return their positions once they had been able to sideline their critics.

It would soon become apparent that the BICO harboured more or less identical ambitions. As the divisions within the CEC became ever more acrimonious in late 1987 and early 1988, the Athol Street group remained uncharacteristically discreet about the whole affair. Indeed, in advance of the *News Letter* running an article that made public the splits within the CEC on 4 March 1988,<sup>104</sup> only one piece

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<sup>103</sup> Clifford’s letter of resignation was noted in the minutes of the CEC executive committee meeting held on 30 November 1987.

<sup>104</sup> *News Letter*, “Campaign split over McCartney ‘blacklist’”, 4 March 1987, 10.



criticising McCartney had in fact appeared in their journal *Workers' Weekly*.<sup>105</sup>

The discretion exercised by the notoriously vitriolic BICO activists reflected their concern to hold the organisation together in advance of resuming control of it at some stage in the near future. The competing ambitions of the two principal factions within the CEC would clash at a heated extraordinary general meeting convened on 18 June 1988. Among the matters before the conference was a motion from the Athol Street grouping demanding that Robert McCartney be censured on the grounds he had “moulded the CEC around his own personality” and that his resignation had damaged the organisation in a manner that needed to be acknowledged. That the motion was easily defeated revealed the balance of forces in the room and this was confirmed when the meeting turned to consider the competitors for the position of President. In a last ditch attempt to recapture the organisation they had founded, the BICO had decided to run Mark Langhammer against Robert McCartney for the leadership of the CEC. When the ballots were counted, it emerged that the former President had been returned by a margin of “almost four to one.”<sup>106</sup> The re-election of McCartney with such a ringing endorsement clearly signalled that he was the ultimate victor in the bitter disputes within the CEC. The BICO members present reacted angrily by attempting to “wreck”<sup>107</sup> the meeting before departing to sever all remaining ties to the pressure group. Inevitably, Athol Street marked this parting of the ways by

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<sup>105</sup> *Workers' Weekly* 2, no. 666, 16 January 1988, 2.

<sup>106</sup> *News Letter*, “Setback for equality group,” 20 June 1987, 1-2.

<sup>107</sup> This was the term used by Boyd Black – a BICO member from 1972 to 1988 - in an interview with the author.

forming another couple of front organisations. The *Catholic Committee of the CEC* was formally intended to chart the descent of the pressure group into “Unionist fundamentalism” but in practice seemed to be designed purely to cause embarrassment to those with whom the BICO had until recently worked so closely.<sup>108</sup> The *Institute for Representative Government*, on the other hand, was a rather more sober affair, established to perform the intellectual labour necessary to advance the cause of “equal citizenship.”<sup>109</sup>

### *The Demise of the CEC*

While the blood letting of the summer of 1988 certainly tarnished the image and dented the morale of the CEC, it was far from inevitable that it would prove fatal. The BICO activists who were now operating as *the Ingram Society* may well have provided the intellectual impetus for the pressure group but they represented only a small fraction of a total membership that had grown to around 750 people.<sup>110</sup> It was entirely possible, therefore, that the CEC would survive the departure of the Athol Street contingent. The subsequent swift decline of the pressure group

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<sup>108</sup> *Workers' Weekly* 2, no. 690, 2 July 1988, 6.

<sup>109</sup> Institute for Representative Government, Ending the Political Vacuum: The Case for Representative Government in Northern Ireland, (Belfast, 1988); Representational Politics and the Implementation of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, (Belfast, 1988).

<sup>110</sup> This membership estimate appeared in the minutes of a ‘steering committee’ meeting held on 26 October 1987.

would, ironically, owe rather less to the machinations of the volatile and bohemian veterans of the BICO than to those of a rather more “respectable” element that had been drawn to the cause of “equal citizenship.” While the CEC contained among its ranks people from a range of backgrounds and with a range of objectives, its principal appeal was, for reasons outlined earlier, among certain elements of the unionist middle classes. These individuals would in the main have been “natural” Tories had they resided in any other region of the United Kingdom. It was their attempt to bring Conservative politics to Northern Ireland that would ultimately sound the death knell of the CEC as an influential organisation.

In the spring of 1988, figures within the CEC such as Chairman Dr Laurence Kennedy began to focus more specifically on the demand that Northern Irish people should be admitted to the Conservative Party. In the following eighteen months, the inexperienced and often naive individuals who formed the *Campaign for Conservative Representation* (CCR) would achieve a great deal more than the vastly experienced and often astute activists who sustained the *Campaign for Labour Representation* had managed over the previous decade. In a slick campaign that emphasised their impeccable bourgeois credentials,<sup>111</sup> those calling for the Conservatives to organise in Northern Ireland quickly gathered support among the grassroots of the party. While the demand that Northern Irish people be allowed to join was declined in November 1988 by the executive of the Conservative Party,<sup>112</sup> the growing popularity of the argument among the rank and

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<sup>111</sup> *The Northern Star* 1, no. 18, 5 November 1988, 4.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* 1, no. 19, 12 November, 1.

file would become fully apparent the following year. At their annual conference on 10 October 1989, the Tories voted overwhelmingly to extend their organisation to Northern Ireland.<sup>113</sup> While affiliation had clearly been a remarkable political achievement, the speed and ease with which it had secured served perhaps to raise expectations and to cloud judgement. The Northern Ireland Conservatives seemed to believe they were on the verge of a major electoral breakthrough, a complacency that was nurtured in part by opinion polls suggesting that they might even become the principal political force in the region.<sup>114</sup> The support for the Tories that was apparently latent within the Northern Irish electorate would, however, never fully materialise. The high water mark of the Ulster Tories came in the Westminster elections of 1992 when they secured 44 608 votes or ten per cent of the ballots cast in the eleven constituencies in which they had stood. While this performance might otherwise have been deemed respectable, the failure of Dr Laurence Kennedy to win the principal target of North Down dealt a devastating blow to a fledgling political movement seeking to establish itself as a credible electoral force. Within a year, the Northern Ireland Conservatives had been humiliated at the local government elections and had ceased to exist in all but

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<sup>113</sup> Michael Cunningham, "Conservative Dissidents and the Irish Question: The 'Pro-Integrationist' Lobby," Irish Political Studies 10 no. 1 (1995): 26-42; Brendan O'Leary, "The Conservative Stewardship of Northern Ireland, 1979-97: Sound Bottomed Contradictions or Slow Learning?" Political Studies XLV (1997): 663-676.

<sup>114</sup> Peter Stringer and Gillian Robinson eds., Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland: The First Report (Belfast, 1991), 192.

name. An evidently embittered Dr Kennedy made public his conviction that the local Tories had been crippled by a lack of support from the hierarchy of the party and announced that he was leaving political life.<sup>115</sup>

Among the various casualties of the ill starred project to bring Conservative politics to Northern Ireland was the pressure group from which it had emerged. In the late 1980s, many of the middle class unionists who had provided the bulk of the support for the CEC allowed their subscriptions to expire and pursued their political instincts by joining one of the Conservative associations appearing in the more affluent parts of Belfast and its hinterland. As membership began to dwindle and its public profile evaporated, the CEC chose to recast its role from campaigning organisation to “think tank.” The articles that appeared in *The Equal Citizen* – a title inherited from the original journal produced by the BICO – became longer and more scholarly and public meetings of the pressure group became increasingly rare. The ignominious decline of the CEC was made painfully clear at the annual general meeting of the organisation held in November 1992. At the first such occasion held six years earlier, some “150 delegates”<sup>116</sup> had come along to hear Robert McCartney enthuse about the prospects of a new political movement whose star was clearly in the ascendant. That the 1992 annual general meeting was the only CEC gathering that year and that only 17 people attended to discuss its future underscored just how far the once influential

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<sup>115</sup> McGarry and O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland*, 312.

<sup>116</sup> *News Letter*, “NIO accused of ‘keeping Ulster divided’”, 3 November 1986, 13.

organisation had fallen. The figure at the helm of the pressure group had remained unchanged during its swift decline but it would become apparent that Robert McCartney no longer regarded the organisation as a fitting vehicle for his considerable political ambitions. The President turned up pointedly late to the meeting and made little effort to disguise his disinterest in being there before suggesting that it was time to wind up the CEC.<sup>117</sup> The motion to terminate the organisation was in fact defeated but the decision to persevere without McCartney was perhaps testimony more to sentiment than to judgement. The pressure group would remain in existence for a further three years but would serve little discernible political purpose. At a meeting on 6 November 1995, the few remaining stalwarts bowed to the inevitable and agreed to disband the CEC and to distribute its assets to three groupings considered to be politically sympathetic.<sup>118</sup>

The campaign for “equal citizenship” that had flourished in the late 1980s ran aground, therefore, in the early 1990s. By the middle of decade, the Northern Ireland Conservatives had effectively ceased to exist and the once vibrant CEC had barely been able to summon the energy required to wind itself up. The demise of the “equal citizenship” project found one more, perhaps rather more

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<sup>117</sup> These comments derive from the author having attended the meeting as an observer.

<sup>118</sup> Letter from outgoing Treasurer Barbara Finney to CEC members, 10 November 1995. The assets of ‘approximately £3, 300’ were distributed between the *Cadogan Group* of unionist intellectuals, *Labour in Northern Ireland* and the *Conservative Integration Group*.

significant, expression at that time. In the mid 1990s, the political context and prospects of Northern Ireland had of course been altered dramatically. The direction in which events were moving would require the British political establishment not to foster the potential sameness of the region – as the advocates of “equal citizenship” demanded – but to acknowledge and ultimately institutionalise its actual difference. It was readily apparent that the political future for Northern Ireland would not be electoral integration but consociational devolution.<sup>119</sup> In a series of valedictory articles published in *the Northern Star* – the successor to the long running *Workers’ Weekly* - over a 12 month period spanning 1994 and 1995,<sup>120</sup> the chief Athol Street intellectual Brendan Clifford acknowledged how political circumstances had changed in recent years. The case for “equal citizenship” could no longer be realised “within the sphere of practical politics” and those who had advanced it over the past two decades would simply have to “let it go.”<sup>121</sup> Given that he was the individual who had originally

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<sup>119</sup> Tom Nairn, “Farewell Britannia: Break-Up or New Union?” New Left Review II no. 7 (2001): 55-74.

<sup>120</sup> This period of reflection began with July 1994 edition of *The Northern Star* and concluded with the June-July edition of the following year.

<sup>121</sup> *The Northern Star* 8, no. 7, July 1994, 4-5; 8, no. 12, December 1994.

formulated the electoral integrationist argument and had worked hardest to bring it to a wider audience, Clifford was arguably best placed to declare that it was an ideal whose time had passed. With this judgement the BICO stalwart drew the curtain down on a movement that had created many remarkable alliances and had represented arguably one of the more compelling subplots in the miserable narrative that was the Northern Irish Troubles.