Journal of British Studies

"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.” 1

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

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

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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 Class2*

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

2 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).

3

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.3 This realisation invited “some serious

thinking”4 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

3 *The Northern Star* 9, no. 9, September 1995, 9.

4 *Workers’ Weekly* 1, no. 5, 5 May 1972, 1.

4

of weighty pamphlets that would prove influential and controversial alike.5 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).6 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

5 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).

6 *The Irish Communist* 72, December 1971, 2.

5

opportunity the 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.

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In March 1973, the British government sketched out the parameters of a new political

settlement for Northern Ireland.7 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.8 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.9 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

7 Michael Cunningham, British Government Policy in Northern Ireland, 1969 -

2000 (Manchester, 2000), 14-17.

8 *Workers’ Weekly* 1, no. 50, 23 March 1973, 1.

9 Ibid. 1, no. 86, 8 December 1973.

7

opted for a sterile campaign of obstructionism.”10 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.11 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

10 Ibid. 1, no. 91, 11 January 1974, 1.

11 Paul Dixon, Northern Ireland: The Politics of War and Peace, Second Edition

(Houndmills: Palgrave), 140-41.

8

new political settlement that really mattered, namely the power sharing assembly.12

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.”13

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.14 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.15 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

12 Ibid. 1, no. 106, 27 April 1974, 2.

13 Ibid. 1, no. 91, 11 January 1974, 2.

14 Don Anderson, 14 May Days: The Inside Story of the Loyalist Strike of 1974

(Dublin, 1994).

15 Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon and Henry Patterson, Northern Ireland 1921-2001,

Political Forces and Social Classes (London, 2002), 189-91.

9

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”16 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*17 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”18 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 directions19 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.

16 *The Northern Star* 9 no. 9, September 1995, 8.

17 The full title of this particular incarnation was the *Workers’ Association for the*

*Democratic Settlement of the National Conflict in Ireland*.

18 *Workers’ Association*, The Ulster General Strike (Belfast, 1977), Second

extended edition.

19 *Workers’ Weekly* 2, no. 9, 3 August 1974, 1.

10

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.20 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.21 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

20 Ibid. 2, no. 6, 13 July 1974, 2; 2, no. 149, 2 July 1977, 3.

21 Ibid. 2, no. 3, 15 June 1974; 2, no. 16, 21 September 1974, 1; 2 no. 25, 23

November 1974, 4.

11

members for a deliberative assembly charged with breaking the political logjam.22 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 dismissive23 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.24 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.25 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

22 Cunningham, British Government Policy in Northern Ireland, 17-18.

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

24 Ibid. 2, no. 61, 2 August 1975; 2, no. 64, 13 September 1975; 2, no. 65, 20

September 1975.

25 Ibid. 2, no. 70, 25 October 1975, 4.

12

preoccupation that would for years to come define the BICO perspective.26 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.27

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.28 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

26 Ibid. 2, no. 110, 18 September 1976; 2, no. 111, 25 September 1976; 2, no. 113,

9 October 1976.

27 *The Northern Star* 9, no. 9, September 1995, 10.

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

13

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.29

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.”30 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.31 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

29 Ibid. 2, no. 141, 7 May 1977; 2, no. 142, 14 May 1977, p. 4.

30 Ibid. 2, no. 150, 9 July 1977, pp. 3-4.

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

14

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.32

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.33 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

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

33 John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, Explaining Northern Ireland (London:

1995). 138; John Whyte, Interpreting Northern Ireland (Oxford, 1990), 183.

15

agenda of the 1983 annual conference of the British Labour Party.34 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.35 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.36 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

34 *Workers’ Weekly* 2 no. 455, 7 October 1983.

35 *The Northern Star* 9, no. 3, March 1995, 6.

36 Graham Walker, A History of the Ulster Unionist Party: Protest, Pragmatism

and Pessimism (Manchester, 2004), 233.

16

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.37 In the name of unity, the Unionist leadership held to a “steady

course” that appeared to elevate inertia to the status of philosophical principle.38 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

37 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.

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

17

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.39 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.40

The interpretation that Clifford advanced sought to depict the Anglo Irish Agreement

as merely a symptom of a much deeper malaise.41 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

39 *The Equal Citizen* 8, September-October 1986, 3.

40 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).

41 *The Equal Citizen* 5, March-April 1986, 1.

18

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 contested, 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.42 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.”

42 Ibid.

19

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.43 Rather than being governed as a “colonial condominium” or “Britain’s

Bantustan”,44 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.45

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

43 Jim Davidson, Electoral Integration (Belfast, 1986).

44 *The Equal Citizen* 9, January 1987, 4.

45 Clifford, The Road to Nowhere, 1-3.

20

ethnoreligious distinctions and begin to embrace political identities other than those

conventionally designated by the terms “unionist” and “nationalist.”46 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.47

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.48

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

46 *A Belfast Magazine*, April-May 1988, 6.

47 Clifford, Parliamentary Sovereignty, 13.

48 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.

21

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’.49 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

49 *The Northern Star* 9 no. 1, January 1995, 7-8

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areas of housing and education.50 While this fiscal bivalence 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.51 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.52 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 unusually at minimal cost.53 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

50 Dark Birrell, Direct Rule and the Governance of Northern Ireland (Manchester,

2009), 155; Sean Byrne, Economic Assistance and Conflict Transformation

(London: 2011), 63-4.

51 Suzanne Breen, “Middle Classes Find a Silver Lining,” Red Pepper no. 5, 1995.

52 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.

53 Graham Gudgin and Stephen Roper, The Northern Ireland Economy: Review

and Forecasts to 1995, (Belfast, 1990), 20.

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that the region saw more sales of luxury cars than any other part of the United

Kingdom.54

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.55 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.”56

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

54 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.

55 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.

56 Jennifer Todd, “Two Traditions in Unionist Political Culture,” Irish Political

Studies 2, no. 1 (1987): 1-26.

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throughout the United Kingdom.57 This growing familiarity with British society

was nurtured further by trends in third level education.58 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.59 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

equivalents60 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

57 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.

58 Anne McHardy, “Young, Gifted and on a Boat Out of Ulster,” Times Higher

Education, 10 December 1999.

59 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).

60 Northern Ireland Readership Survey, 1992.

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Patterson as “minimalist”.61 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.62

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

61 Paul Bew and Henry Patterson, “Unionism: Jim Leads On”, Fortnight 256

(1987).

62 Walker, A History of the Ulster Unionist Party, 234.

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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.63 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.”64 In the

spring of 1986, the Stalinist splinter adopted another persona with the explicit

intention of tapping into this potential body of support.

63 Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern

Ireland: Power, Conflict and Emancipation, (Cambridge, 1996), 59.

64 *The Northern Star* 9 no. 1, January 1995, 7-8.

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*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.”65

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.66 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).67 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

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

66 *The Northern Star* 9 no. 3, March 1995, 6.

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

28

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 1986.68 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.69

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.”70 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”

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

69 Cochrane, Unionist Politics, 101; Christopher Farrington, “Ulster unionism and

the Irish historiography debate,” Irish Studies Review 11 no. 3 (2003): 251-61,

255.

70 *The Equal Citizen* 3, 22 December 1985, 4.

29

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,”71 the second would prove to be a rather more ambitious

affair. On 3 July 1986, an audience of “700-plus”72 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

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

72 Ibid. “Support boost for equality backers,” 5 July 1986, 6; Belfast Telegraph,

“’Political prison’ warning sounded”, 4 July 1986, p. 13.

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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 choice73 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.74 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 Aughey75 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

73 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.

74 Arthur Aughey, Under Siege: Ulster Unionism and the Anglo-Irish Agreement

(Belfast, 1989), 147.

75 Ibid. 162.

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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 1986.76 The principal controversy that weekend centred 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,77 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.”78 The hierarchy of the party responded by having

a number of influential figures, including the widely revered Enoch Powell,79

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 15380 - was far from overwhelming and suggested that there was

perhaps within the party a constituency that at the very least wished to have a

76 Walker, A History of the Ulster Unionist Party, 238-9.

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

78 Robert McCartney, Speech at the Ulster Unionist Party Conference, Forum

Hotel 8th November 1986, 1.

79 Paul Corthorn, “Enoch Powell, Ulster Unionism, and the British Nation,”

Journal of British Studies 51, no. 4 (October 2012): 967 – 997.

80 *News Letter,* “Molyneaux demands unity in party policy battle”, 10 November

1986, 12-13.

32

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.81 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.82 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

81 Cochrane, Unionist Politics, 221.

82 *News Letter*, ‘Victory pledge’, 20 May 1987, 1-2.

33

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.83 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*.84 This was a

83 Ibid. “McCartney blow to poll pact’, 16 May 1986, 1-2; *Belfast Telegraph*,

“OUP rebel to stand”, 16 May 1987, 1.

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

34

remarkably rare instance of decisive action by a party hierarchy whose inertia had

been compounded by the traumas visited by the Anglo Irish Agreement.85

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.86 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.”87 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.88 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

85 Farrington, Ulster Unionism, 69-71.

86 *News Letter*, “McCartney launches into campaign attack”, 19 May 1987, 9;

*Belfast Telegraph*, “No new party: QC”, 20 May 1987, 1, 3.

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

88 *The Northern Star* 9 nos. 6-7, June-July 1995, 6.

35

wielding sticks.”89 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.90

As tempers began to fray, the combustible figure of Robert McCartney was to be

heard making claims about the imminent success of his campaign.91 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.92 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

89 *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.

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

91 Ibid. “Triangular battle for a square deal”, 6 June 1987, 9.

92 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

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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.93

*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 Society94* - 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.”95 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

93 Farrington, Ulster Unionism, 64.

94 *Workers’ Weekly* 2, no. 675, 19 March 1988, 2-3.

95 Ibid. 2 no. 677, 2 April 1988, 3.

37

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 victory96 they

knew in private that what mattered most was that it had been a political defeat.97

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 crossparty

Unionist Task Force on the grounds that its anticipated recommendation of

96 The front page headline of the next (August 1987) edition of *the Equal Citizen*,

for instance, declared ‘North Down Success!’.

97 Aughey, Under Siege, 165.

38

power-sharing devolution represented a form of “capitulation.”98 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.”99 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.100

Those who found themselves on the other side of this increasingly acrimonious

dispute would inevitably offer a radically different intrepretation.101 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.102 While the origins of the fissures within

98 *News Letter*, “Secret deal claims made by McCartney”, 3 July 1987, 9; *Belfast*

*Telegraph*, “Unionist deal claim is denied”, 3 July 1987, 4.

99 *Workers’ Weekly* 2 no. 675, 19 March 1988, 2.

100 Ibid*.* 2, no. 676, 26 March 1988, 2.

101 Robin Wilson, “Sect behind CEC split”, Fortnight 261, April 1988, 4.

102 News Letter, “Campaign split over McCartney ‘blacklist’”, 4 March 1987, 10.

39

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.103 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 1988,104 only one piece

103 Clifford’s letter of resignation was noted in the minutes of the CEC executive

committee meeting held on 30 November 1987.

104 News Letter, “Campaign split over McCartney ‘blacklist’”, 4 March 1987, 10.

40

criticising McCartney had in fact appeared in their journal *Workers’ Weekly*.105

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.”106 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”107 the meeting before departing to sever all remaining ties

to the pressure group. Inevitably, Athol Street marked this parting of the ways by

105 *Workers’ Weekly* 2, no. 666, 16 January 1988, 2.

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

107 This was the term used by Boyd Black – a BICO member from 1972 to 1988 -

in an interview with the author.

41

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.108 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.”109

*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.110 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

108 *Workers’ Weekly* 2, no. 690, 2 July 1988, 6.

109 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).

110 This membership estimate appeared in the minutes of a ‘steering committee’

meeting held on 26 October 1987.

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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,111 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,112 the growing popularity of the argument among the rank and

111 *The Northern Star* 1, no. 18, 5 November 1988, 4.

112 Ibid. 1, no. 19, 12 November, 1.

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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.113 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.114 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

113 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.

114 Peter Stringer and Gillian Robinson eds., Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland:

The First Report (Belfast, 1991), 192.

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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.115

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”116

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

115 McGarry and O’Leary, Explaining Northern Ireland, 312.

116 *News Letter*, “NIO accused of ‘keeping Ulster divided’”, 3 November 1986,

13.

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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.117 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.118

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

117 These comments derive from the author having attended the meeting as an

observer.

118 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.119 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 1995,120 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.”121 Given that he was the individual who had originally

119 Tom Nairn, “Farewell Britannia: Break-Up or New Union?” New Left Review

II no. 7 (2001): 55-74.

120 This period of reflection began with July 1994 edition of *The Northern Star*

and concluded with the June-July edition of the following year.

121 *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.