**The Politics of Good Intentions**

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Much of the coverage of the European election in Northern Ireland has focused on what has been portrayed as a potentially transformative victory by Naomi Long of the Alliance Party. Taking the third seat from the Ulster Unionist Party was not, in fact, that surprising given the lacklustre and at times incoherent performance of the UUP’s candidate, Danny Kennedy, and the centrality of Brexit in the campaign. Like the British Labour Party, the UUP was punished for its shift from a Remain position at the time of the referendum to a fainthearted support for Brexit in line with what the majority in the UK voted for in 2016. Alliance’s militant pro-Europeanism and opposition to Brexit won over significant numbers of the 35 per cent of unionists who had voted Remain in the 2016 referendum. It also attracted Sinn Féin supporters confident of the prospects of their party’s candidate and seeing a vote for the Alliance as an anti-Brexit vote that had the added attraction of preventing their main competitor in the Catholic community, the SDLP, from winning the third seat. In the recent local government elections, Alliance had been one of a number of parties, including the Greens and People Before Profit, that had benefited from popular frustration about the continued deadlock in the attempt to reconstitute the Northern Ireland Assembly, attributed to the inflexibility of the DUP and Sinn Féin. However, these conjunctural factors were linked to a longer term repositioning of the party’s position on the Union.

Back in 1992 Mairead, a Catholic community worker from North Belfast and SDLP supporter, gave the journalist Fionnuala O’Connor a view of the Alliance Party that would have been common among Catholics at the time: “The Alliance Party is not an option at all. You get nice polite people coming to the door and saying we all want peace. But I have to at least vote for someone who sees this is a political problem and the sorting out of it has to be in terms of meeting some of the nationalist demands.” Others, perhaps taking seriously the party’s statement of principles – that it supported the “constitutional position as an integral part of the United Kingdom … The union is in the best social and economic interest of all the citizens of the state” dismissed it as “unionism without the sash”. Among Protestants, Alliance drew its support predominantly from the middle class in east and south Belfast and the greater Belfast area. Not untypical was Lesley from North Down, a hospital consultant interviewed by the journalist Susan McKay soon after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Like many Protestant grammar school pupils she had gone to university in England – “I wanted to get away from parochialism.” She had joined Alliance – “The Unionists were still too entrenched.” ‑ but lamented that the party hadn’t made any electoral progress, putting that down to their being seen as too middle class, but also to the party’s failure to put sufficient emphasis on their support for the Union.

In fact, in the period since the Agreement, the party has shifted to an agnostic position on the Union, content to work on the assumption that the consent principle of the accord, accepted by Irish nationalists and republicans, makes it possible to ignore what is traditionally referred to as the “constitutional question”. It argues that those who raise it are part of the “old politics”, while advocating a vision of “progressive politics”, of “a shared society, free from intimidation, discrimination and fear, where everyone is safe, can play their part and is treated fairly and with respect. We believe in a society for everyone.”

This sharing is easier to imagine on the Upper Newtownards Road, home to the unionist comfortable classes and now an Alliance stronghold, than further down the road towards the Short Strand, scene of many sectarian confrontations in recent years. Years of deindustrialisation and violence have seen an area, once the bedrock of support for the Northern Ireland Labour Party among shipyard and engineering workers, turn into the home of a section of the Protestant working class characterised by low wages and insecure employment, where many are convinced that the peace process has brought them nothing materially and marginalised them socially and politically. These were the communities who exploded into angry protest in 2012 when the Belfast council voted that the Union flag, which had flown over the City Hall for 365 days a year, would be removed except for seventeen designated days a year. Alliance supported this as a compromise alternative to a Sinn Féin and SDLP proposal to remove the flag altogether. Portrayed as part of a pan-nationalist alliance by the DUP and UUP and with their offices attacked by loyalists, the party solidified their support in the Protestant middle class, where there was an outburst of class anger at the disruption to business and social life in Belfast due to the flag protests by what was seen as the Protestant underclass.

At the centre of Alliance policy is an emphasis on shared and integrated education and a shared community where mixed housing is the norm. At present, although polls show 69 per cent of people in Northern Ireland support integrated education, only around seven per cent of children attend integrated schools. The great bulk of the middle class pick grammar schools for the same reason as their equivalents in the rest of the UK – precisely because they are selective and integrated schools are not. As the share of social housing in the housing stock is around 15 per cent, the possibilities of public policy leading to anything like a shared community outside a number of cross-community housing schemes is slim. However, yet again, surveys indicate that 80 per cent of people in Northern Ireland would prefer to live in a shared neighbourhood. In reality wishes count for little against the determinant of social class. Mixed neighbourhoods are a market-driven phenomenon where middle class residential areas like Ballynafeigh and Rosetta in southeast Belfast and Ballyhackamore in east Belfast, which up to the Troubles had been predominantly Protestant, have been increasingly attractive for an expanding Catholic middle class. The same has happened with the Malone Road, traditionally the home of the Protestant bourgeoisie and upper professional classes, whose religious composition has been transformed in the last quarter of a century.

Alliance’s philosophy of sharing is something that would need to be imposed or at least encouraged from above – how else is the ending of separate schooling or in many working class areas of separate health and leisure centres to be achieved? Of course this is unlikely to happen, but these and all the associated communal divisions provide a fertile ground for a politics of good intentions that, while it lacks the capacity to displace the more fundamental sources of political differences in Northern Ireland, provides the basis for a third form of identity politics. This is based on a rejection of the “two communities” approach to politics embodied in the Good Friday Agreement as “this undermines the legitimate expression of political identity of many people; it denies the individual choice over identity”. As the political scientist Jonathan Tonge noted, this approach was profoundly ahistorical: “The party did not dwell on why the two communities had emerged. It offered a vision of societal integration but did not explain the origins of the fracture. Instead it tended to regard the pursuit of ambitions ‑ unionist or nationalist – as innately sectarian and thus pernicious.”

At the time that Tonge wrote this in 2005 he described the party as part of the North’s “diminishing centre ground”. In fact, ironically, the Good Friday Agreement, denounced as the institutionalisation of sectarianism, would prove ultimately to be very good for Alliance. By integrating mainstream republicanism into the state it laid the basis for the return of devolution. Although in the period of protracted peace-processing that went on until the St Andrews Agreement in 2006 the focus on enticing in the extremes marginalised the party, once the Assembly and Executive were functioning after 2007 its support began to grow. This expansion was directly related to the difficulties of the UUP in adjusting to its displacement as the dominant unionist party by the DUP. Its broad church philosophy of unifying different classes, town and countryside and conservatives and liberals, was hard to maintain without the glue of state power. Attempts to modernise it through first breaking the link with the Orange Order then an ill-fated linkup with the Conservative Party and later, under Mike Nesbitt, by adopting a more unashamedly liberal unionist stance, have not worked and its lack of coherence has cost it dearly in Belfast, where Alliance overtook it in terms of councillors in 2014 and where the UUP is now reduced to one seat to the Alliance’s ten. For younger, university educated professionals, the Troubles and the peace process are the stuff of history books not visceral memory. More cosmopolitan values and issues like gay marriage and the climate crisis count for more in self-identification than the national question. Alliance as well as the Greens tapped into this demographic.

Belfast is not Northern Ireland and the UUP continues to significantly outpoll Alliance in rural Ulster and west of the Bann. Yet the substantial strengthening of the Alliance vote in the greater Belfast area which has developed over the last decade is here to stay. That in itself reflects the consolidation of a substantial middle class with its roots in Northern Ireland’s large public sector. With salaries based on national pay scales yet with relatively low house prices and free grammar school education for their children this is a class with an objective interest in the continuation of the Union but, in the case of its Protestant members, no desire to be bothered by rowdy debates about the national question. The DUP is beyond the pale for such people and the UUP is regarded as incoherent in its commitment to a more liberal unionism. The Good Friday Agreement, despite Alliance complaints about its inherent communalism, had the effect of apparently putting constitutional confrontations to bed. However, Brexit has delivered a perhaps terminal body blow to this prospect. The desire to turn the page on the past, to get on with business as it were, is threatened and this has galvanised support for Alliance. But Brexit has also raised fundamental questions about the unity of the UK and opened up the possibility of a period of profound constitutional uncertainty which could threaten precisely the stability that the Good Friday Agreement aimed to achieve. Comparisons have been made between the Alliance victory and the large vote gained by the Northern Ireland Labour Party in the 1960s. Leaving aside the profoundly different class basis for both votes, there is a similarity in that both took for granted a settled constitutional framework. Civil rights and the Troubles destroyed that framework for the NILP, which saw its support decimated. The threat of Brexit has propelled the Alliance to the centre of the stage but it is also an issue that raises profound constitutional issues for the UK and for Anglo-Irish relations. These are precisely the issues which Alliance has dismissed as the superannuated “Orange and Green” politics. It is doubtful if this devaluation of conflicting national identities can be the basis for more than a niche type of progressive politics that leaves the mass foundations for nationalist and unionist politics in both the Protestant and Catholic working classes untouched.

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