

The Unionist State and the Outdoor Relief Riots of 1932

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Précis: This paper breaks with the monolithic conception of the Unionist State in the inter-war period. It argues that the State apparatuses were characterised by an intense populist/anti-populist division. It takes a significant incident – the Outdoor Relief riots – when working-class unity seemed to be imminent to illustrate the operation of this internal conflict. This permits some general comment on the role of “objective” economic constraints in this epoch.

I INTRODUCTION

The Outdoor Relief (ODR) workers’ strike of 1932 enjoys a unique status in the history of Ireland since partition. It is the only moment when the elusive unity of Protestant and Catholic workers in Belfast politics appeared to have actually come about. For many it is a symbol which keeps alive the hope that class – rather than national or sectarian – loyalties may become again the decisive force in Irish politics. In the twentieth century such hopes have centred on the working class as the focus of a new loyalty; in the nineteenth century it was believed that the common class interest of the tenantry was a potential basis. See Paul Bew (1979), especially the conclusion.

The elementary details of the ODR crisis are fairly well known. The unemployment rate in Northern Ireland was 28 per cent in 1932. Protestant skilled engineering workers were grievously affected as were Catholic labourers. In this situation, the Belfast Board of Guardians refused assistance to many of the rapidly increasing number of applicants for niggardly Outdoor Relief rates. In fact, before becoming eligible for a small cash pay-

*We are indebted to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) and the trustees of the Spender papers for permission to quote papers in their care.

ment unemployed men had to do two and a half days' work per week on such ODR schemes as mending roads. By October 1932 large sections of both Catholic and Protestant workers refused to endure this situation. A sudden unity of purpose developed; by means of mass demonstration, and even riot, a doubling of the relief rate was won.

de Paor's (1970) comment conveys the originality of the experience:

The Protestant unemployed of the Shankill Road rioted in support of their Catholic fellows and yet again Belfast saw wrecking, burning and killing; two men died of wounds. *But it had not been a sectarian riot.*

Farrell (1976) has contributed the one outstanding account of the development of the strike from the popular side. We do not propose to repeat this analysis here. There is only one serious omission in Farrell's account and that is a discussion of the Marxist propaganda of the period. This was to be found in the *Irish Worker's Voice* and the *Daily Worker*, and both journals presented the ODR crisis in a very particular way. The ODR conflict was apparently not just a part of the economic class struggle, but an integral part of the resolution of the national question. Communist writers seem to approve of a revival of the IRA in Belfast; State repression of the strikers was regularly compared with the Black and Tan activities and it was argued that in simultaneously opening negotiations with de Valera on the annuities issue and assisting repression in Belfast, the British Government was embarking on a co-ordinated two-pronged assault on anti-imperialist forces in Ireland (*Daily Worker*, 28.9.1932, 7.9.1932 and 12.10.1932).

It was claimed at the time that in October 1932 there was a six-fold increase in *Daily Worker* sales in Belfast. In a sense this was deserved. The paper's editorial coverage of the plight of the Belfast unemployed did not begin and end — as with the British Labourist journal, the *Daily Herald* (13.10.1932) — with a condemnation of proletarian violence and the production of the usual bromides. There was substantial coverage long before the open clashes. Yet it is possible to wonder about the effects of propaganda which identified Unionist workers as taking part in an anti-imperialist struggle — without any attempt to prove that there had been a shift of opinion on the national question in Protestant ranks. Also, the strident denunciation of reformist sections of the Labour movement was counter-productive. Certainly, the Northern Ireland Government felt that one way of fending off British Government and trade union enquiries about the behaviour of the Ulster police was to pass on the *Daily Worker* cuttings depicting the anti-imperialist struggle in Belfast, the exposure of sham socialists, and so on (PRONI Cab. 7B/207).

However, the full significance of the strike can only be understood with

reference to the State and the political relationships which it threatened. Farrell's work tends to present a picture of the Unionist leadership in the inter-war period as an undifferentiated group of sectarian bigots. (It should be noted in passing that this was not quite the judgement of certain nationalist contemporaries.)¹ In fact, the recently opened State papers present a very different picture.

However, these sources also permit an assessment of some of the themes of the critics of the recent radical nationalist work. In particular, these critics have defended the Unionist State by stressing the role of the objective, financial constraints on its capacity for generous policy-making. During the ODR crisis, it has been stressed by Buckland (1978), "the government of Northern Ireland's room for manoeuvre in the face of acute distress was severely limited".² However, the study of the broader context of decision-making — which is rightly demanded here — reveals very much more than the operation of simple economic restraints.

II THE POPULIST/ANTI-POPULIST DIVISION

The events of the 'thirties were to show clearly the contradictions that existed between the different elements of the Northern Ireland State apparatus — in particular, the conflict between its populist and anti-populist elements. The populist position of Sir J. Craig, J. Andrews, and Sir R. Dawson-Bates promoted close relations with the Protestant masses. It was based on the premierships and the Ministries of Labour and Home Affairs above all. The first priority of the populists was the reproduction of a "good" relationship between the Protestant masses and the Unionist bourgeoisie to the visible exclusion of the Catholic population, irrespective of any British Government policy that may have hindered or obstructed this strategy. The anti-populist element, whose main base was in the Ministry of Finance and whose chief protagonists were H. Pollock, the Minister of Finance, and Sir Wilfrid Spender, the permanent secretary to the Minister of Finance and head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, were resolved to do things "the British way".³ This implied opposition to Orange triumphalism, resistance to sectarian criteria in civil service appointments, and even dis-

1. See SPO (Dublin Castle) S4743 for evidence of some nationalist comment on Unionist divisions, albeit of a rather speculative nature. Kevin O'Sheil's (Collins's assistant Law Adviser) notes on Craig's speech of 10.11.1922 are particularly noteworthy.

2. See Buckland's notice of Farrell's work in *History*, Vol. 63, 1978, pp. 159-161. For an expansion of these themes see Buckland (1979).

3. For more detail see Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson (1979), forthcoming, Ch. 3. This work is discussed by Whyte (1978). These issues are rather slurred over in Oliver (1978). See the notice by Bew in the special section on economics and public affairs in *Books Ireland*, No. 26, Sept. 1978.

approval of pro-Protestant discrimination of the matter of Local Government contracts. However, the strength of the anti-populists within the Government was the lesser of the two factions. For example, the actual real control of the Ministry of Finance in relation to governmental apparatuses was considerably less than that of its British counterpart. It frequently happened that expenditure which was seen by the Ministry of Finance as "wasteful" was seen by Craig, in a significant phrase, as a necessary "distribution of bones" to his supporters (Arthur (1977), p. 104).

The object of this paper is to study the relationship between these two factions during a period when it was bedevilled by a double problem: intense class conflict arising out of mass unemployment locally and an unhelpfully stringent British Treasury policy nationally.

III 1932: THE BREAK WITH BRITISH ECONOMIC POLICY AND THE INTENSIFICATION OF THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE POPULISTS AND ANTI-POPULISTS

In the spring of 1929 the populist Ministry of Home Affairs had initiated a public works scheme to supplement the existing Outdoor Relief machinery. The background is fairly clear. While some of the more fatuous members of the Board of Poor Law Guardians spoke of solving the unemployment problem by sending men back to the land (*Belfast News Letter*, 2.1.1929), other more substantial members supported a "public works" solution (*Belfast News Letter*, 9.1.1929 and 15.2.1929).

They were anxious, in effect, to place the responsibility for the problem with the Government. There were good reasons why the populist section of the Government was prepared to accept this burden. There was a consensus amongst social workers, clergymen, and senior civil servants that the Belfast relief rates were inadequate. However, the public works schemes were, at first, on a small scale and they were certainly not sufficient to deflect criticism of the Guardians.

The doctrine of "step by step" was quite simply not holding true. Promises that the Protestant working class would be denied nothing enjoyed by their British counterparts⁴ were obviously false — the amount of relief given to claimants in Northern Ireland was well below that received by unemployed workers in Britain, both in cash and in wages. A man, wife and one child that were "out of benefit" received the following weekly rates in England and Scotland (*Belfast News Letter*, 5.10.1932):

Manchester	21s.	Bradford	26s.
Liverpool	23s.	Northampton	27s.
Glasgow	25s. 3d.		

4. See Craig's speech to the Ulster Unionist Labour Association (*Belfast News Letter*, 7.1.1929).

In some of these cities an additional allowance was made for the payment of rent. For Belfast, in comparison, the normal Outdoor Relief grant for a man, wife and one child was 12s. If work were available on the relief schemes, the head of the family would be given a day and a half's work in the week and he would be paid in cash; if no work were available, the whole grant would be paid in kind, even though the man was still expected to pay rent in cash. The Outdoor Relief workers' leaders demanded that all relief works should be done under trade union conditions and that they should be remunerated at trade union rates. They also demanded an increase of relief to the following weekly rates (*Belfast News Letter*, 4.10.1932):

man	15s. 3d.
wife	8s.
each child	2s.

Signs of dissatisfaction also came from the bastion of loyalist working class support, the United Unionist Labour Association, who, on the eve of one ODR crisis, passed the following resolution (*Belfast News Letter*, 3.10.1932):

While we appreciate the difficult position in which the Guardians are placed owing to the present regrettable and widespread distress, we feel it absolutely necessary that the amount given in the form of outdoor relief should be considerably increased.

This was significant indeed. Craig insisted that the Ulster Unionist Labour Association was the most important body in Ulster, more important even than the Orange Order.⁵

The irony of this situation requires some stress. Belfast relief levels were very much lower than the British average *because Belfast rates were lower*. In general, the populist axis were the militant champions of the ratepayer. This was a most significant part of Unionism's appeal to the middle strata in this period and the Craig/Bates group passionately resisted British Treasury pressure — usually supported by the Northern Irish Ministry of Finance — that Northern Ireland rates should come more into line with the British.⁶ At the same time the populists had been vigorous champions of the rights to British welfare levels of the loyalist working man. It was apparently necessary for the populists to drop one or the other favoured group. In fact, although intervening marginally against the Guardians and their views, they

5. Craig to Sir Joseph Davidson, the Orange Lodge Grand Master, 12.1.1933, PRONI Cab. 8PF/22.

6. PRO (London) T160*269/111999, N.I. Social Services; G. C. Upcott's memorandum of 3.8.1925; and the *Financial Diaries* passim. See also Lawrence (1965) and Bogdanor (1979) for important background information.

did neither, but solved the problem another way. Sir Wilfrid Spender, arguably the most militant anti-populist, at first enjoyed the discomfiture of populism. Not normally a champion of the unemployed, he felt free to point out their claims and the failure of the Guardians. He cannot, however, have relished the eventual populist solution to the crisis.

IV THE EXPANSION OF THE RELIEF SCHEMES

There was an additional irony, however. To meet the unemployment problem of 1929 the Unionists had already sanctioned a few public work schemes. However, as the situation deteriorated in 1932 – 70,000 were out of work in April and 76,000 by August (PRONI Cab. 4/303/17, 22.6.1922) – and as ministers desperately considered the setting up of soup kitchens,⁷ the British Treasury suddenly intervened in such a way as to aggravate the problem.

In the autumn of 1932, the British Government ruled out public works as a method of promoting economic recovery. This was linked to a general determination to avoid budget deficits and maintain confidence (Howson (1975), pp. 92-93). Spender and Pollock wished to follow the British Treasury's line on relief work schemes; however, Craig, Andrews and Dawson-Bates were not so enthusiastic. With rapidly increasing unemployment there had been an alarming growth in the number of applicants for relief in a very few months. The figures available to the cabinet in July are worth citing (PRONI Cab. 4/304/21, Cabinet Memorandum on Distress, 8.7.1932):

<i>Date</i>	<i>Cases</i>	<i>Persons</i>	<i>Cost</i>	<i>Wages Paid</i>	<i>Total (per week)</i>
4 April, 1931	415	1,816	£384	£206	£590
3 October, 1931	614	2,888	£494	£253	£747
26 March, 1932	1,242	5,744	£958	£272	£1,230
18 March, 1932	1,985	9,144	£1,131	£415	£1,546

Again this was not the total picture of those in distress as the "means test" had disallowed many from receiving relief benefits. The Labour Party (NI), in their Annual Report of 1930/31, had stated that over 500 applicants for relief were being turned down every week by the Court of Referees (Harbison (1966)). The number of those employed on relief work schemes was around 2,000. To accept British policy in the strict way demanded by the anti-populists involved unacceptable political risks. Dawson-Bates voiced these fears in July of 1932 (PRONI Cab. 4/304/21, 8.7.1932),

7. PRONI Cab. 4/304/26, *Distress in Northern Ireland*, memorandum submitted by R. Dawson-Bates, Minister of Home Affairs, 31.8.1932.

... all my information shows that unless adequate measures are taken in good time and on some settled plan, there is grave danger that the peace of the Province will be endangered... the only alternative to relief measures is to keep order by force, and for this purpose, in the face of widespread discontent, the existing force is not adequate.

He concluded,

It will be necessary to have relief works on a large scale in the coming months, and it will be necessary for the Government to assist by way of grants.

However, even though the British had not abandoned *all* public works, Spender insisted that Ulster policy represented a deviation. He told Bates in November (PRONI D715, Sir Wilfrid Spender's Financial Diaries, 28.11.1932),

I pointed out to him that our government still seemed to be going on with Unemployment Relief Schemes, and that I thought that this departure from the British policy would get us in serious trouble.

At this time the Government's involvement in relief works had two forms:

- (a) the grants made by the Ministry of Labour towards approved schemes for the relief of unemployment, and
- (b) grants made by the Ministry towards the distress schemes initiated by the Board of Guardians in conjunction with the Corporation.

For the former, as far as road work was concerned, the grants from the Government had, for the last two years, been funded by the Road Fund; for the latter, it was financed by up to 50 per cent from the Road Fund, the balance being made up by the Corporation and the Guardians. Pollock was well aware that heavy borrowing from the Road Fund to maintain the relief schemes was endangering his attempts to balance his Budget which he managed to do by reducing expenditure and often raiding the Road Fund (PRONI Cab. 4/304/21, 8.7.1932). Pollock approached Craig to warn him of the danger of over-expenditure on relief work schemes; the incident was recorded by Spender in his diary (PRONI D715, Financial Diaries, second week in October 1932):

... Mr Pollock addressed a letter to the PM dated the 3 October dealing with this subject (relief schemes). The Prime Minister saw Mr Pollock and gave him very full assurances that no burden would be placed on the Budget in regard to relief schemes without his full knowledge.

Despite his reassurance to Pollock, Craig had revealed his true position when speaking at a meeting of the Duncairn-Clifton Unionist Association in late September. He told his audience that (*Belfast News Letter*, 1.10.1932)

the Government was prepared to give liberal grants in aid of relief schemes, no matter what the cost.

Pollock was soon to discover this fact when he learnt that the Ministry of Home Affairs had promised large grants to Local Authorities in order to continue relief schemes, the grants being funded by the Road Fund. When Pollock enquired from the Ministry of Home Affairs as to the extent of its commitments, he was shown that heavy liabilities had been incurred on the Road Fund in respect of relief schemes and that a sum of £200,000 had already been sanctioned. Spender wrote of this incident (PRONI D715, Financial Diaries, 28.11.1932),

The true facts have now come to light, namely that the Minister of Home Affairs has, in that capacity, approved of very heavy grants being made to local authorities from the Road Fund which is under his control, and that having authorised such contributions from the Government, he now says they have to be met from the Exchequer although the Ministry of Finance has never been consulted on the matter. *In other words, the method of handling this matter has resulted in the Minister giving authority for very heavy expenditure from the Exchequer without bringing the matter to the notice of the Minister of Finance. I cannot imagine any other country where such a state of affairs could be possible.* (emphasis added)

Craig, Andrews and Dawson-Bates, drawing on what they felt to be the mood of the Protestant masses at the time and what they felt to be the proper lesson of the riots in October, pressed on with expenditure on relief work schemes, irrespective of the British Government and their own Ministry of Finance. Craig was to answer his anti-populist critics at the beginning of 1934 (Financial Diaries, 9.1.1934):

The agitation had got so serious that he believed that they might have found themselves confronted with wilful damage which would be out of all proportion to the £300,000 paid away on Relief Schemes.

V CONCLUSION

The argument presented here has been based on the existence of a division

within the Unionist State between populist and anti-populist sections. Despite the notoriously labile nature of the term "populist",⁸ we have maintained the usage of "populist" and "anti-populist" to indicate a gamut of practices rather wider than could be denoted by reference to "sectarian" and "liberal" groupings. (There would also be the danger then of presenting the anti-populists anachronistically as an inter-war version of O'Neillism.) The populist political practice was one of paternalistic concession towards the Protestant working class embodied in a practical and vulgar interventionism — at a time when it was unfashionable in Britain — combined with a deliberately hard line towards Catholics. The anti-populist practice was established by the strictest adherence to the Treasury orthodoxy of the period and a softer face towards Catholics.

To stress the relationship between the populist sections of the Unionist State and the Protestant masses is not, of course, to imply the total plasticity of the masses in the hands of their omnipotent leadership. As Probert (1978) rightly insists in this context,

... the failure of these economic struggles to make any real impact on the divisive ideologies of the Belfast working class was also caused by the decisive intervention of Orangeism as a relatively autonomous force.

But it is to say the Unionist State was not neutral with respect to the reproduction of sectarian divisions within Ireland.

It should be noted that this division within the State is linked to the division within the proletariat. The populist grouping's role during the ODR crisis makes sense only in the context of an assumption that the maintenance of hegemony over the Protestant masses was the primary objective of political strategy. In pursuit of this end, this group were prepared to take the potentially dangerous step of flouting a powerful adversary, the British Treasury.

But the State considered as a totality was not in a position to allow an uncontrolled populism. To do so might have provoked British intervention. This was the stance of the anti-populist group. It permits us to answer the question which has plagued all students of Belfast riots of the 1930s. Why did the non-sectarian proletarian riots of 1932 give way to the sectarian riots of 1935?⁹

We have already rejected the view of the Unionist working class as the

8. For the most recent discussion, see E. Laclau (1977), pp. 143-198.

9. Farrell's (1976) answer is discussed in Bew (1977); this paper also discusses the role of the British State which is omitted here.

“pliant” dupes of the leadership. But, apart from the general conception of the Protestant working class ideology that this implies, we believe that our analysis provides a different solution to this question. For just as the connection between populism within the Unionist State and the Loyalist masses is an objective relationship of great political importance, so also is the relationship between the anti-populist elements and the loyalist masses. This is the clue to the understanding of the 12 July, 1935 riots.

The anti-populists pursued a strategy of support for British Treasury initiatives — for example, the raising of the rates as was eventually achieved in 1934. They also opposed anti-Catholic discrimination in the sphere of jobs and contracts. Very often they were unsuccessful in this respect but they did, at least, save the regime from dangerous excesses.

However important these activities have been to the survival of the State, they did help to create feelings of disillusionment among Unionist supporters both in the middle and working classes. There was, in the 1932-35 period, an increasing strain of Loyalist opinion — the founding of the extremist Ulster Protestant League is only one symptom — to the effect that the Unionist leadership was now “out of touch” with its supporters. All this helped to generate the frustrations which expressed themselves in the crisis of 1935. This crisis cannot be reduced simply to the inter-communal violence of July itself. It is not too much to insist that the summer of 1935 marked one of the most significant disruptions in relationships between Unionism and its mass support since partition. It involved a serious attempt to establish a “new Unionist party” which marked the temporary coming together of frustrated middle- and working-class layers. It involved a campaign to purge Catholics from the police, oppose anti-populist economic policies and so on. The Outdoor Relief crisis had, thanks to its mode of resolution, not altered the expectations the Protestant masses had of “their” State.

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