

Ireland & Britain: Why is the DUP so reactionary?

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In Britain, Theresa May's Conservative Party, who suffered significant defeats at the General election on June 8 at the hands of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour, are now trying to stitch together an agreement with one of the most reactionary parties on the continent to maintain her minority government.

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) has attracted a lot of opprobrium for its reactionary positions on every subject you can think of and for their ongoing links with loyalist terrorists writes Andy Stowe.

"There can be no viler act, apart from homosexuality and sodomy, than sexually abusing innocent children.

I cannot think of anything more sickening than a child being abused. It is comparable to the act of homosexuality. I think they are all comparable. I feel totally repulsed by both." Iris Robinson, a DUP MP speaking in Westminster in 2008

What might surprise many people who don't follow politics in the north of Ireland is that every July 12th its members and voters take to the streets with the Orange Order in commemoration of an alcoholic, bisexual 17th century Dutch king, William of Orange. They make a point of going into streets where they aren't welcome because what they are really doing is asserting their belief that the north of Ireland should be a Protestant state for a Protestant people.

It's rather like dogs pissing on lampposts to mark their territory, except that the Orange marches, named in honour of William, piss in people's gardens and play deliberately offensive songs outside Catholic churches or at sites where Catholics have been murdered by loyalist terrorists.

The marches are central understanding what the DUP really is. The Orange Order says of itself:

"Today defending Protestantism is not so literal as it was in 1795 (the year of its foundation - AS), but it requires us to take a stand for truth in an age of secularism and in order to defend our culture and traditions."

The DUP is an unapologetically Protestant party. It was established in 1971 as split within northern unionism and its founder Ian Paisley was a fundamentalist Christian demagogue who was always willing to deploy the threat of violence. Paisley boasted that he had not read any book published after the year of his birth, 1926, and his intellectual reference points were Luther, Knox and Calvin, figures from the Protestant Reformation.

Who votes for the DUP and why?

The party now has ten MPs in Westminster. This represents 36% of the vote in the north of Ireland and all those votes will be Protestants who identify as loyalist much more than they identify as workers.

So why did 292,316 people vote for the DUP?

The Protestant population in Ireland mainly arrived as part of the British colonisation of the island. Ulster, the nine counties in the north, was the most remote and rebellious. The counter-insurgency strategy was to settle the area with Protestant English and Scottish settlers who were given the land seized from the native Catholic population. This is still a raw issue in rural Ulster.

Skip forward to the late 18th century and religious rivalries over land tenancies meant that in rural areas there was bitter conflict between Protestants and Catholics. These became violent and in 1795 the Orange Order was set up as a militant organisation to defend Protestant supremacy.

At the same time a linen industry had developed in Ulster, centred on Belfast. In 1798 a rebellion, mostly led by Protestants influenced by the French Revolution, demanded an independent democratic Republic in which the majority Catholic population would have full equality. The Presbyterian revolutionaries resented the privileges of the Anglican Church which was the aristocracy at prayer.

However, they did not win over a majority of northern Protestants, promised French military support was ineffectual and the rebellion was crushed. The Orange Order's members joined the British forces which crushed the rebellion. Its first major political intervention was to crush a radical democratic revolutionary movement and its core purpose remains unchanged. That's what its parades celebrate.

Through the 19th and 20th centuries the Orange Order developed a hegemonic influence in much of Protestant rural Ulster and the expanding industrial working class in Belfast. In 1912 Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald described the situation and explained why workers in Belfast factories and shipyards were paid less than people doing the same job in Glasgow or Liverpool:

"In Belfast you get labour conditions the like of which you see in no other town, no other city of equal prosperity from John O'Groats to Land's End...It is maintained by an exceedingly simple device...whenever there is an attempt to root out sweating in Belfast the big Orange drum is beaten."

Belfast's industrialists and unionist politicians had learned that they could prevent any meaningful trade union or working class movement developing in Ulster by appealing to religious sectarianism and Protestant privilege. In 2017 that's still the situation.

In the early 20th century, Orangeism and its political organisation, the Unionist Party organised Europe's first proto-fascist mass movement to oppose Home Rule for Ireland. Months before the First World War it smuggled guns from Germany in April 1914. In 1921, its opposition to Irish freedom resulted into the partition of the country and the creation of the northern state out of the six Ulster counties which could secure a Protestant majority for the new entity. Again, its role in Irish and British politics was to be reactionary and anti-democratic and the state they created secured the loyalty of its Protestant citizens by election rigging and giving them marginal privileges over Catholics.

While the organisational forms have changed; the plebeian, fundamentalist Christian DUP has wiped out the older Official Unionist Party, the strategy remains the same. The Good Friday Agreement has made sectarian division of spoils the political basis of the northern state. Sinn Fein dispenses jobs, money and patronage to Catholics. The DUP retains the support of the loyalist murder gangs turned drug dealers by doing the same for Protestants.

So, the DUP's views on women, sexuality, climate change, evolution have deep roots in everything backward and reactionary in Irish society. Voters in Britain shouldn't be at all surprised that Theresa May turned to them to keep the Tories in office for a little while longer.

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P.S.

* <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5025>