



LEGACY: The Good Friday Agreement is just one of the many crises facing unionism from 1972 onwards

Book suggests important shifting in unionist opinion

LIKE and respect books that make me think. I particularly like those that make me rethink and reconsider some of my older certainties, while introducing me to voices I haven't heard before. Even when those voices are saying things that make me feel particularly uncomfortable.

Susan McKay's *Northern Protestants On Shifting Ground* is one of those books.

Twenty years ago she wrote the hugely insightful—and similarly uncomfortable—*Northern Protestants: An Unsettled People*. That journey from unsettled to shifting is something I've been observing and commenting on for years too, although in my case it has been specifically about party-political unionism and the narrowing of electoral demographics between it and republicanism/nationalism and, since about 2017, 'others' as well.

For years I've been trying to put my finger on the precise reason for the growing disillusion with the Good Friday Agreement. Even though I voted for it, I was aware, from around 2003, it was never going to deliver a 'new' Northern Ireland or 'new' way of doing politics here: but I could never find the words to sum up the core of my disillusion.

The poet Jean Bleakney, quoted in the book, does have the words: "...the GFA was never fit for purpose. It institutionalised a two-tribes mentality. What was not factored in was human nature, a particularly nasty algorithm hereabouts." She voted for the agreement, but she's right of course; and devastatingly so. She also summed up another issue at the heart of the book: "I felt the ground shifting... There needed to be a steadying of unionism."

The problem with unionism is that it has difficulty with 'steady'. It seems to prefer rolling around, or protest, or self-inflicted schism, or even full-blown internecine warfare. Most of which leads, inevitably, to lost votes and seats, which won't, according to a quote in the book from the TUV's press officer Sammy Morrison, be recovered 'by lapsing into Derry syndrome (i.e. let's all rally together, shut the gates and

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whoever isn't standing with us is a Lundy').

In my lifetime there have been a number of crises for unionists: the fall of Stormont (1972); Sunningdale (1974); the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985); the 'no selfish strategic or economic interest...' doctrine (1993) and the GFA, which the majority of party-political unionism and Orange rejected in 1998. Each and every one of those crises (along with smaller hiccoughs along the way) had an impact easily recognised as unsettling to unionists. Yet there was no sense of a significant shifting in the thinking of mainstream unionism. No sense of an ultimate, final betrayal.

The interviews compiled in McKay's book suggest there is now an important shifting of opinion. A recognition, if you like, by increasing numbers of those from a Protestant, unionist, loyalist background (the PUL community) that something very significant has happened to the relationship between Northern Ireland and Great Britain;

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and to the relationship between unionism and Britain's political and media classes. Crucially too, to the relationship between unionist parties (particularly the DUP) and people who would usually have been expected to vote for them.

There will be unionists keen to dismiss the book as the work of someone who is 'no friend of unionism... talking to people who were never really unionists in the first place'. That would be a mistake. Many of the voices in the book have been involved with political or on-the-ground unionism for years, while others have been astute observers of Northern Ireland post-1998.

And, as I said, some of the voices are entirely new to me, but no less important for that, including 16-year-old Rebecca Crockett: "I was born in 2002 so I wasn't even alive in a time when there wasn't a Good Friday Agreement. I'm the generation after the Troubles, the legacy generation. What I know about the Troubles is based on what people tell me. There's always going to be two sides of it and it's important not to be biased, to listen to every account, because everyone was affected by it and there were no good sides."

I've noted before how diverse and often increasingly nuanced the various strands of the PUL are. Many of the voices in this book are reflecting on political realities post-Brexit and it's those realities that explain the shifting. Not all of them ready to abandon their unionist/UK roots just yet, of course, but all of them shifting, sometimes even squirming on the ground on which they now find themselves.

'Ulster' unionism requires continuing majority support to safeguard Northern Ireland's position within the UK. Each shift, each drift, each newly unsettled supporter or potential supporter, each new yard of difference between NI and GB — all of it makes it harder to sustain, let alone build the majority. Wednesday's ruling on the protocol represents another shifting of the ground.

So, all in all, there's a lot mainstream unionism could learn from this book.

ON THIS DAY

JULY 2 1921

Churchill on Ireland

ONE grave impediment to the growing unity of the English-speaking peoples has long been the condition of affairs in Ireland, said Mr Winston Churchill in London yesterday. 'It is a hope we have at the present time that there will be a reconciliation of the interests and sentiments of this great island and of the Irish people whose fortunes are indelibly intermingled with our affairs, but with whom we have had so many long and bitter disagreements.'

'What the course of events may be, no-one can tell. Once more unreason may dash away the cup and, once more, the sinister fortune which has dogged the relations of the two peoples may intervene. But this I will say: the British peoples in their relations with Ireland must not only consider Ireland as Irishmen, but they must consider the very much larger considerations which lie outside beyond the compass of this United Kingdom'.

Cork IRA Commander Shot

A PARTY of military on Monday night proceeded to Waterfall, six miles from Cork, for the purpose of arresting Walter Leo Murphy, reported to be Commandant of C Battalion, Mid Cork Brigade, IRA, who was wanted by the authorities in connection with the deaths of Captain Thompson, Manchester Regiment, and Sergeant Bloxham, RIC.

The military surrounded the house in which Murphy was staying. Murphy rushed out and was seen to throw away a Mauser automatic. He was shot dead while running away.

Belfast Bread Van Burned

A BREAD van, the property of a Belfast firm, was burned on Saturday evening at Kilduff, Beltrubet, County Cavan. The horse was shot and the driver relieved of about £10 in cash. It appears the driver was held up by four masked and armed men. They ordered him to drive to a field close by where they had tins of petrol ready.

PM Proposes Carson's Health

LORD Carson was entertained at a dinner last night at the House of Commons by a number of parliamentary friends on his recent appointment of Lord of Appeal and in recognition of his distinguished career as a parliamentarian.

The Prime Minister was in the chair and proposed the health of the guest of the evening.

AS BOTH crown forces and the IRA continued to settle accounts and the IRA enforced the 'Belfast Boycott', Churchill seemed hopeful of a settlement. The son of the Tory Lord Randolph of 'Ulster will fight' fame, Winston had shifted from all-Ireland Home Rule in 1912 to support for Craig and the Unionists by 1920. An early advocate of reprisals, he would play a key role in the Treaty negotiations.

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