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Not quite as British as Finchley: the failed attempt to bring British Conservatism to Northern Ireland

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In a previous issue of *Irish Studies Review* I examined the unanticipated emergence in the late 1980s of a series of Conservative associations in Northern Ireland. In this follow-up article, I will seek to account for the subsequent swift and ignominious decline in the early 1990s of the Northern Irish Conservatives. While the fortunes of the Ulster Tories were undermined by a number of contingencies – the vagaries of parliamentary arithmetic and their own lack of political judgement foremost among them – their fate was sealed primarily by certain rather more structural concerns. In particular, the rapid decline of the Conservative associations in Northern Ireland owes its origins to the historically “loveless marriage” between Ulster unionists and the British state. The unionist community simply refused to vote in meaningful numbers for a political party at the centre of a Westminster establishment deemed hostile to the cause of the Union. In addition, the Conservative hierarchy would inevitably prove unwilling to nurture their own party associations in Northern Ireland as this “integrationist” project ran precisely counter to their own longstanding political ambitions for the region. This conflict of interests and intentions would in short order ensure the demise in all but name of the Northern Irish Conservatives. There can be few more dramatic illustrations of the mutual distrust that conjoins Ulster unionists and the British state than the string of lost deposits incurred by Conservative candidates running for office in Northern Ireland.

Keywords: Ulster unionism; Northern Ireland; Anglo-Irish Agreement; British Conservatism; electoral integrationism

Introduction

On the afternoon of Friday 15 November 1985, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her Irish counterpart Garrett FitzGerald met at Hillsborough, Co. Down to sign a political accord that for the first time afforded the Dublin government a consultative role in the affairs of Northern Ireland. The initial furious response of unionists¹ to the advent of the Anglo-Irish Agreement would give rise to a campaign of opposition which, while intense and prolonged, would ultimately serve little real purpose.² Their inability to resist the implementation of the Hillsborough Accord starkly underlined the lack of political influence or imagination of a Unionist leadership that had long since elevated inertia to the status of philosophical ideal. As the political and intellectual weakness of mainstream Unionism quickly became ever more apparent, the space opened up for alternative strategies and ideas.³ In this context of ideological flux, a political enterprise that had previously existed only on the margins of Northern Irish political life would for a time move to the centre stage.⁴

The advocates of “equal citizenship” or “electoral integration” counselled that the crisis summoned by the Anglo-Irish Agreement was best conceived as merely the latest symptom of a rather more fundamental political malaise.⁵ The principal source of the

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“Northern Ireland problem” was, electoral integrationists insisted, the historic exclusion of the region from the wider party political life of the UK. As the British political parties had hitherto refused to accept members from or stand candidates in the six counties they were in a position to blithely ignore the interests and ambitions of people living there. The advent of “equal citizenship” would, however, swiftly serve to redress this democratic deficit. Once the people of Northern Ireland were able to join the principal parties of the British state they would be in a position to forge networks and exert an influence that would begin to shape the conduct of political power. In particular, the electoral integration of the region would enable voters in the six counties to initiate those often relatively small shifts of political favour that can transform government into opposition. Fearful of electoral retribution, those parties that hoped to exercise executive power in the UK would be loathe to consider political initiatives that might prove offensive to citizens living in Northern Ireland. The realisation of “equal citizenship” would, in others words, ensure that political developments such as the Anglo-Irish Agreement would in the future simply become inconceivable.

The energy and seeming idealism of the electoral integrationist case ensured that it exercised a resonance among many unionists disenchanted with the political and intellectual indolence that often seemed to define the mainstream unionist response to the crisis summoned by recent events at Hillsborough Castle.⁶ While the ideal of “equal citizenship” had originally been nurtured by a small splinter of the far left it would, ironically, bear fruit principally in the guise of a campaign to bring British Conservatism to Northern Ireland.⁷ As the 1980s drew to a close, a sequence of fledgling Conservative associations began to appear in the more affluent constituencies within Belfast and its hinterland. While the hierarchy of the party was deeply resistant to the prospect of recognising these “model” associations,⁸ it would soon become apparent that the campaign to extend Conservative politics to Northern Ireland was rather more popular among rank-and-file Tories.⁹ On 10 October 1989, a motion was placed before the Conservative annual conference advocating that Northern Irish people should be allowed to join the party.¹⁰ Amid euphoric scenes, the controversial move was endorsed by the overwhelming majority of delegates gathered at Blackpool – to the astonishment of many commentators and the dismay of quite a few.¹¹

In overcoming the reticence of the Conservative Party hierarchy, the Ulster Tories had secured a remarkable political victory. Indeed, the pressure group that agitated specifically for membership of the Conservative Party had been established a mere eighteen months before the eventful Blackpool conference. The swift success of their campaign would, however, serve to inflate the expectations and, perhaps, cloud the judgement of the Northern Irish Conservatives. As the 1980s came to an end, many Ulster Tories firmly believed themselves to be on the verge of a genuine political breakthrough. The handful of local elections in which they had already stood had seen Conservative candidates perform strongly. While these predominantly affluent and overwhelmingly unionist constituencies were unlikely to provide genuinely representative tests of their electoral potential, the Ulster Tories were quick to point to a series of surveys of political opinion appearing to indicate that there existed sufficient space for Conservative politics to flourish in Northern Ireland. One particular, respected opinion poll – the *British Social Attitudes Survey* – even seemed to suggest that the Conservatives might well become the single largest political party in Northern Ireland.¹²

The support for Conservative politics that a series of surveys suggested to be latent within the Northern Irish electorate would, however, never fully materialise.¹³ The high water mark of the Ulster Tories came in the Westminster elections of 1992 when they

secured 44,608 votes, some 10% of the poll in the eleven constituencies in which they had stood. While this performance might otherwise have been deemed respectable, the failure to secure the principal target constituency of North Down profoundly undermined the fledgling Northern Ireland Conservatives as they struggled to establish themselves as a credible political force. The subsequent swift and ignominious decline of the Ulster Tories was confirmed in the local government elections held in May 1993. Conservative candidates were routed even in council districts where previously they had drawn substantial support. In total, the Ulster Tories secured less than 1% of first-preference votes. A mere four years after those heady scenes at the annual conference in Blackpool, the movement to bring Conservative politics to Northern Ireland seemed to have already run its course.

This essay is the second of two articles in which I have sought to account for the particular, dramatic arc mapped out by the Northern Irish Conservatives. In a previous issue of *Irish Studies Review*, I set out to explain that, while often greeted with incredulity, the emergence of Conservative associations in the six counties in the late 1980s represented a rational and perhaps even inevitable attempt on the part of the unionist middle classes to resolve the contradictions that had defined their experience of direct rule from Westminster.¹⁴ In this follow-up article, I will seek to examine why it was that the attempt to fold Northern Ireland into the wider party political life of the state ultimately transpired to be such a dismal failure. As with its predecessor, the present essay draws upon two valuable forms of primary data. Firstly, the author conducted interviews with thirty Northern Irish members of the Conservative Party between 1992 and 1993. Excerpts from these interviews are used at various stages to illustrate or underline the issues at hand. Secondly, the essay draws on analysis of data generated by the 1989 and 1990 editions of the *British Social Attitudes Survey*. The information on 274 Conservative “identifiers” living in Northern Ireland furnished by these two instalments of the survey offered crucial insights that shape the discussion that follows.

A loveless marriage

The verve and apparent idealism of electoral integrationism would exert an attraction for many unionists rendered more receptive to new ideas and strategies by the trauma that was the Anglo-Irish Agreement.¹⁵ While the sense of ambition that pervaded the movement for “equal citizenship” was central to its appeal it also represented one of its fundamental shortcomings. If we are to understand the swift demise of the electoral integrationist project in the 1990s, we need to locate it in the context of one of the many troubled relationships that have traditionally defined the “Northern Ireland problem”. The ideal of equal citizenship was, at its heart, an attempt to redress and recast the manner in which the unionist community and the British state relate to one another. It would quickly become only too apparent, however, that neither party to this notoriously “loveless marriage” was willing to cooperate with this ambitious enterprise.¹⁶

The disposition of the unionist community in Northern Ireland has traditionally been defined by a deep distrust of the intentions of the British state.¹⁷ In the minds of unionists, the parties of government are at best indifferent to their interests and at worst would actually prefer a constitutional future for Northern Ireland beyond the realms of the Union.¹⁸ This abiding suspicion of metropolitan ambitions has, in the era since Stormont was prorogued at least, prompted Unionist politicians to assume a certain critical distance from the political establishment in Westminster. The electoral integrationist camp contested that this reticence had, however, served ultimately to undermine the unionist

cause. In the era of direct rule, the advocates of equal citizenship insisted, real political influence could only be exercised within the parties of government at Westminster. Once admitted to the Conservative and Labour Parties, members from Northern Ireland would be able to shape policy and to stay the hand of those who might wish to dilute or even dissolve the Union. The advent of electoral integration would mean that a political initiative such as the Anglo-Irish Agreement that drew the ire of the majority of people in the six counties would become simply unthinkable:

Author: Obviously the major catalyst for the emergence of the Northern Ireland Conservatives was the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Did the Agreement have much of an impact on you, on your political outlook?

Interviewee: Yes, I felt that the democratic views of the people of Northern Ireland had been ignored totally and that that had been possible because the Unionist Party had put itself out on a limb with no means of contact with the party of government. It became isolated and I feel strongly if they hadn't allowed themselves to do that the Anglo-Irish Agreement would never have been signed and certainly if the Conservative Party here had been active at the time it also wouldn't have been signed.

The electoral integrationist project sought to map out a boldly different direction for a unionist community that had been disorientated by the unheralded Hillsborough Accord.¹⁹ When Conservative associations emerged in the late 1980s, unionists were, in principle, being invited to immerse themselves in the wider political culture of the UK. The decision of the unionist electorate to decline this invitation was prompted largely by an abiding wariness towards the British state. On numerous occasions, I accompanied Conservatives canvassing in the tree-lined avenues of prosperous constituencies such as South Belfast and North Down. The reception on the doorstep was more often than not distinctly frosty. Wealthy individuals who would have been Conservatives had they been living in any part of the UK would show little reticence when informing canvassers that they could not bring themselves to vote for a party which they considered not to have their interests at heart and which had, after all, signed the loathed Anglo-Irish Agreement:²⁰

Author: When I watched Tories canvassing it became obvious that a lot of voters wouldn't vote for them because of their distrust of the British parties. Has that been a big problem?

Interviewee: Yes. I don't agree with it but it is a problem. People are of the opinion "stick with our boys, our boys will look after us". But our boys are not in a position to look after us, because our boys are always on the opposition benches. And that of course is where the perception of a devolved parliament at Stormont comes in: "We'll have our own wee government and our own wee government will look after us." But again that falls down because "our wee government" at Stormont only has the powers that Westminster deigns to devolve to it. In 1972 when Westminster decided to shut up shop, I mean Stormont didn't even have the power to save itself, let alone do anything else.

The principal appeal of the electoral integrationist project was that it seemed to offer the prospect of political influence at a time when the mainstream Unionist parties had been mercilessly exposed as having none. Those individuals who for a time joined the ranks of the Conservative associations that appeared in the late 1980s invariably stated that their main motivation was a desire to alter the course of government policy, in particular in relation to Northern Ireland. It would soon become apparent, however, that most unionists simply did not believe that operating within the Conservative Party would afford them any real political influence and considered that it might in fact be used to dissipate their opposition to the Hillsborough Accord, thereby rendering them yet more vulnerable still. The prospect of participating in the wider political culture of the state evidently exercised

rather less of an appeal than its advocates assumed to a unionist community that stubbornly refused to dispense with the traditional assumption that its interests would be best served by retaining its own parties and seeking the restoration of its own separate institutions of government. The disenchantment with the British political establishment pervasive among unionists would quickly and perhaps inevitably prove fatal for the Ulster Tories. There can be few indices that have captured quite so graphically the unionist community's distrust of the British state as the sequence of lost deposits suffered by the Northern Ireland Conservatives.

If the unionist community were entirely unwilling to alter its disposition towards the British state, the other party to that distinctly unhappy union would transpire to be no less reticent.²¹ From the moment of its creation, Northern Ireland was regarded and treated by the political establishment in London as a rather less than equal and integral region of the UK. The institution of a devolved assembly consigned the six counties to a mere antechamber of the Union, well beyond the field of vision of the sovereign parliament until the eruption of violence in the late 1960s signalled that the partition settlement was unravelling. As the political climate deteriorated apace in Northern Ireland, Westminster declared the dissolution of the Stormont legislature in March 1972. While the introduction of direct rule offered the political establishment in London the opportunity to govern the six counties in the same manner as the rest of the UK, it continued, predictably, to treat the region as "a place apart".²² After the fall of Stormont, Westminster administered Northern Ireland as one might a distant colonial possession, with ministers wielding almost entirely unaccountable powers and legislation being passed without parliamentary debate via the executive fiat of "Orders in Council".²³

The realisation of equal citizenship would, therefore, have required the British state to dispense with an essentially colonial disposition that has defined its conception and treatment of Northern Ireland since partition. If electoral integration were to be properly achieved, in other words, the parties that aspire to form a government at Westminster would have to embrace Northern Irish members as equals and to govern the six counties as though they were – in Margaret Thatcher's stridently disingenuous phrase – "as British as Finchley". In reality, however, the political establishment in London seemed intent on continuing to treat Northern Ireland as fundamentally "different" to the rest of the UK even after the historic decision to affiliate Conservative associations formed in the province.²⁴ The hierarchy of the party had been strongly opposed to affiliation and often appeared to proceed as though that particular development had simply never occurred.²⁵ Indeed, in her memoir of her time as Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher did not consider the affiliation of the Ulster Tories as a matter even worth mentioning.²⁶ In an interview with the author conducted in 1993, more than three years after the historic decision at the Blackpool conference, the Northern Ireland Office Minister Richard Needham underlined that many senior officers of the Conservatives remained largely unaware of the fortunes of their fellow Tories across the Irish Sea:

Author: What is the attitude of the hierarchy of the Conservative Party and Conservative Central Office to the Northern Irish Conservatives? Are they keen in terms of what's going on with the Conservatives here?

Needham: To be honest, it doesn't appear on their television screens very much. There's the possibility of one seat which frankly if we'd someone at the last election who'd supported the government and ridden in on my coat tails and what I've done I think we'd have won that seat. But we were never going to win that seat with someone who's clearly less of a Conservative than the sitting member is. So for Conservative Central Office . . . You can say that Northern Ireland politically generally is marginal if you look at it in British terms as a whole. What is it,

two and a half per cent of the population of the United Kingdom? So it is marginalised in that sense. And the Conservative vote is even less than that . . .

The comments of Richard Needham suggest that the seeming indifference of the Conservative Party hierarchy to their members living in Northern Ireland was driven in part at least by pragmatic electoral concerns. In a confidential memorandum produced by the Conservative Research Department in late 1988 to discuss the implications of the prospective affiliation of the Ulster Tories it was stated quite baldly that “they would stand little chance of winning any seats” in Westminster elections.²⁷ This rather saturnine estimation would be repeated in several other internal reviews and would of course prove to be entirely accurate. Reading through these various memoranda there is a very strong sense that the Conservative Party was simply loathe to divert resources into candidates running in Northern Ireland who had no realistic chance of winning. One memo written in advance of the affiliation of the Ulster Tories expressed misgivings at the prospect of installing a full-time organiser in the region,²⁸ while another dated shortly afterwards underlined that there would be no financial support whatsoever extended to Conservatives standing for election in the six counties.²⁹ While the parsimony of Conservative Central Office certainly reflected a familiar bureaucratic aversion to squandering resources, it might also be taken to have revealed another, rather more ideological disposition. The reluctance of the Tory hierarchy to finance candidates in Northern Ireland who had little or no chance of winning had of course a certain logic to it, but it was deeply at odds with their approach in other regions of the UK. The Conservative Party did, after all – as it continues to do – routinely stand candidates in many regions of the state where there was no prospect of securing a seat. In doing so, it was seen to fulfil its obligations as a genuinely “national party”, as one that had at least *sought* a mandate in every constituency. Even after affiliation, however, many senior Tories seemed to have little sense of the need to seek such symbolic legitimation in a Northern Irish context. The aversion of Conservative Central Office to financing candidates in the six counties reflected, then, not merely a certain bureaucratic tight-fistedness but, altogether more importantly, the understanding that the seemingly historic decision at the Blackpool conference had changed little, that Northern Ireland was to remain “a place apart”.³⁰

The abiding sense among the British political establishment that Northern Ireland is fundamentally “different” would inevitably and perhaps fatally undermine those who sought to bring Conservative politics to the region. At its heart, the equal citizenship project was an attempt to persuade the British state that complete integration would in time allow the six counties to evolve and operate like any other region of the UK. The fate of the Ulster Tories would suggest that the principal political players in Westminster and Whitehall remained unconvinced. When the decision was made to allow the affiliation of Northern Irish associations, the Conservative Party was already committed to a political strategy that would not seek to nurture the potential sameness of the region but rather to acknowledge its actual difference. The political future mapped out for Northern Ireland was one that entailed a nascent talks process that was intended to lead to the restoration of a regional assembly in Belfast run along consociational lines. While senior Tories were in the main robust advocates of devolution for the six counties, they were also of course steadfastly opposed at the time to such a settlement in any other region of the UK.³¹

In view of the well-established political priorities of the Conservative government, the sudden emergence of the Ulster Tories was inevitably regarded as a deeply unwelcome development at senior levels of the party. A sequence of memoranda from the time suggests that there was considerable concern within Smith Square that the affiliation of

Northern Irish associations might frustrate and perhaps derail the political process that was evolving at characteristically glacial pace in the region. One position paper drafted shortly before the Blackpool conference suggested that the almost certainly poor performance of Conservative candidates running in future elections would underscore that the Secretary of State had no electoral mandate in Northern Ireland and would thus undermine further his authority among and over the local political parties.³² A further concern within the party hierarchy was that the emergence of the Ulster Tories would erode the crucial claim to impartiality of the Westminster government.³³ How, after all, was the Secretary of State to maintain the air of an “honest broker” in the prospective talks if members of his own political party were seated among their electoral competitors on the other side of the negotiating table?

The response of the Conservative Party to dilemmas of this kind was, predictably, to seek to prevent the further development of what were in principle their own associations in Northern Ireland. There were admittedly occasional kind words and gestures of support from senior Tories. Two Northern Ireland Office Ministers – Richard Needham and Peter Bottomley – did, after all, canvas for the Conservative candidate Colette Jones when she ran during the Upper Bann by-election in May 1990.³⁴ In the main, however, Conservative Central Office extended little practical or moral support to their members living in Northern Ireland. Indeed, on several occasions the Secretary of State Peter Brooke was asked by journalists whether he would recommend to the Northern Irish electorate that they vote Conservative and he simply refused to do so.³⁵ The pointed indifference of senior figures within the party to the interests of their members living in the six counties was of course profoundly detrimental. Conservative candidates standing in Northern Ireland in effect found themselves in the unsustainable and possibly unique position of asking voters to support a party that did not in fact genuinely want their votes. It was always entirely inevitable that the electorate would decline the opportunity to do so:

Interviewee: If a political party and its main spokesman are not coming out and repeatedly making the case to the electorate as to why the electorate should vote for that party rather than voting for other political parties then the electorate will detect that there’s something not quite right, there’s something bogus about that party. And what we have seen in Northern Ireland after the Conservative Party took the decision to organise here is that successive Secretaries of State instead of getting up and propounding what the benefits of Conservative politics would be and having a Conservative MP and Conservative councillors would be, instead of doing that they have continued in the totally same colonial mode of staying aloof from the electorate in Northern Ireland saying that they have no particular interest in Northern Ireland. Absolutely ridiculous. I mean it was completely letting people down who were prepared to support the Conservative Party here by coming out with statements such as “the Conservative government has no interest in Northern Ireland”, this sort of thing. And instead saying that their role here was to try and get agreement between other political parties. The only reasonable analogy it seems to me is to imagine Ian Laing or his predecessor Malcolm Rifkind getting up in front of an audience at Glasgow’s Kelvin Hall or the Assembly Rooms in Edinburgh and saying: “Well as Conservative Secretary of State I have to say that I regard my major task as getting agreement between the Labour Party, the Scots Nats and the Lib Dems on a way to govern Scotland because my party has no selfish interest in the affair at all ...”

The prospects of the electoral integrationist project were hindered not only by the broad strategic imperatives of the British state but also by the rather narrower instrumental concerns of the party that at the time held its reins. The Conservative government of the day frequently strove to cast itself as a neutral referee that sought solely to nurture agreement among the various quarrelsome political voices within Northern Ireland. In reality, however, there existed longstanding, if admittedly problematic, connections between the Tories and what was then still the principal political force in the six counties.

From the moment of its foundation, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) was affiliated to the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations and the party's MPs took the Tory whip at Westminster. As Smith notes, the half-century of devolved government that followed partition created greater distance between Unionists and Conservatives. With the outbreak of the Troubles, however, the "cordial neglect" of the Stormont years would give way to rather more fractious relations between the two parties.³⁶ The decision of a Conservative administration to prorogue the legislature in Belfast prompted Ulster Unionist MPs to relinquish the Tory whip. The remaining ties between the two parties were finally severed in 1986 as an expression of Unionists' sense of betrayal at the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement.³⁷

The ideal of electoral integration came to prominence, therefore, at a time when relations between the historic allies of the Conservative and Ulster Unionist Parties had been profoundly damaged. While the gulf between the two parties was considerable and indeed often appeared irreparable, there were forces within both camps that aspired towards a rapprochement. The advent of Conservative associations in Northern Ireland was identified by figures in Smith Square as a potential stumbling block in the path of improved relations with the Ulster Unionists. A policy paper drawn up in advance of affiliation, for instance, underlined that if "at some admittedly hypothetical point in the future" there was a possibility of cooperating once again with Unionist MPs the existence of the Ulster Tories "would make this extremely difficult – if not impossible".³⁸ Another internal memorandum dated 20 February 1990, some four months after the decision taken at Blackpool, noted that the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party James Molyneaux had "indicated that it would be inconceivable for Unionists to work closely with us – let alone take the Conservative whip – if Unionists were challenged by Conservatives at the next General Election".³⁹ The tone of these missives suggests that there were within the British Conservative Party some rather divided political loyalties. If there were to be a tug of war for the affections of Conservative Central Office between the Northern Irish Conservatives and the UUP it was clear from the start that the latter would hold a distinct strategic advantage. Not only were the Ulster Unionists close to the Conservatives in ideological terms, they also, more importantly, already had a substantial and seemingly secure foothold in the Westminster parliament. The nine seats won in the 1992 General Election lent the UUP disproportionate political influence in the context of an increasingly divided Conservative administration that had only a small and dwindling majority. The lure of potentially vital votes ensured that it was ever more likely that the embattled Major government would seek to come to an understanding with the Ulster Unionists. In an interview with the author on 19 February 1993, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) Minister Richard Needham hinted at the prospect of such a rapprochement:

Author: What is the attitude of the hierarchy of the Conservative Party and Conservative Central Office to the Northern Irish Conservatives? Are they keen in terms of what's going on with the Conservatives here?

Needham: ... The danger they face is what will happen within the Unionist Party. The interesting thing in the years to come may be whether the Unionist Party actually says that it will come back into the Conservative fold.

Author: Do you think it would be welcomed back?

Needham: I don't know. I mean one's got to say that there appears to be as much in common between the Official Unionist Party and the Conservatives in government as there is between the Conservatives in Northern Ireland and the Conservatives in government.

The prognostication offered by Richard Needham would prove rather prescient, save at least for the timeframe suggested. Within five months of the comments above, the beleaguered government of John Major had, as we shall see later, struck a deal with the Ulster Unionists that would in effect entail the Conservative Party abandoning its own members in Northern Ireland to their fate.

“People who knew how to direct affairs”

The emergence of electoral integrationism as a pervasive and for a time persuasive voice in the late 1980s represented in part a scathing rebuke of established Unionist politics. Those who were drawn to the standard of equal citizenship in the wake of the Hillsborough Accord were wont to dismiss the mainstream political parties as having offered a stunted and parochial vision of unionism that had consigned the people of Northern Ireland to the “window ledge of the Union”.⁴⁰ This critique was given especially colourful expression by the most high-profile champion of electoral integration – the charismatic but divisive barrister and Unionist politician Robert McCartney – who was wont to talk of “pygmy politicians” content within the confines of a “Lilliputian sectarian politics where they can crow over their own little dung hills”.⁴¹ The individuals who joined the ranks of the Conservative associations that emerged at the time often mentioned that their choice was informed in part by the conviction that the other parties articulating a unionist position were indelibly sectarian:

Author: Why did you join the Conservatives rather than one of the local parties?

Interviewee: To my way of thinking our local parties here had a sectarian aspect to them. We all know that the Orange Order has quite an involvement in the Unionist Party and vice versa⁴² which would make it a bit difficult for, for example, a conservative Catholic living in Northern Ireland to become a member. So part of my reason for not applying for membership of the Unionist Party is that I personally feel that religion should not be mixed up with politics the way they are here. I feel it’s a very negative thing and it’s only going to bring us trouble until we get it sorted out.

The narrow sectarianism of mainstream Unionism was at times held to be associated closely with its particular socio-economic composition. In the course of an interview with the author, one academic who was active in the South Belfast association marked his repugnance at the “class aspect” of the main Unionist parties:

Author: Why did you join the Conservatives and not, say, the Ulster Unionists?

Interviewee: Well to join a political party I think you have to feel at home within it and for whatever reason I guessed that I wouldn’t feel at home in the Unionist parties. I’m not sure why that might be. Maybe it’s the Orangeism, or maybe it’s the class aspect. You could call it snobbery.

Author: What do you mean by that – “the class aspect”?

Interviewee: Well, I suppose there’s the perception that politics in Northern Ireland is a very rough business, and that might be linked up – I know this all sounds very unpleasant – with the types who are represented in the political parties ...

The emergence of the electoral integrationist movement in the late 1980s represented in part an attempt to resolve the presumed iniquities of mainstream Unionism. Over the course of the Troubles, commentators often noted that the conflict had largely prompted the unionist middle classes to abandon Northern Irish political life. Those who sought to bring British Conservatism to the six counties were in effect seeking to reverse this particular political exodus. The appearance of Conservative associations in certain affluent

Northern Irish constituencies gave form to a desire to create another version of unionist politics, a more lucid and expansive one that had discarded the sectarian baggage of the past and was guided by newly energised figures from the professional and business classes.⁴³ In the following excerpt, a successful management consultant living on one of the most exclusive streets in South Belfast expresses his desire for the return of the middle classes to Northern Irish political life:

Author: How did you think that the Conservatives could improve the local political scene?

Interviewee: Well, I thought that the Conservatives could bring in more of the professional classes who had opted out of politics for the last fifteen years. People of influence, people who knew how to direct affairs. They would understand the dynamics of the Northern Ireland political situation and be able to act within a party of influence.

For a time, it appeared that the electoral integrationist camp might just succeed in its quite explicit ambition to transform the class composition of Northern Irish politics. As the 1980s drew to a close, the campaign to bring British Conservatism to the region had considerable momentum and seemed to exercise an appeal among those affluent social strata that had hitherto largely shunned local political life.⁴⁴ The spatial distribution of constituency organisations, the accents to be heard at public meetings and the occupational backgrounds of the principal party spokespersons all served to underscore that the nascent Conservative associations in the province drew principally on the talents of the professional and business classes. The characterisation of the Northern Ireland Conservatives offered by anecdotal information was – as we saw in the predecessor to this article⁴⁵ – confirmed and fleshed out more fully by the information offered by the 1989 and 1990 editions of the *British Social Attitudes Survey*. Between them, these polls offered insights into the backgrounds and outlook of some 274 respondents who claimed to “identify” with the Tories rather than with a local political party.

The data garnered by the *British Social Attitudes Survey* confirmed the common-sense understanding that support for the Conservative Party was to be found among the more affluent sections of Northern Irish society. The Ulster Tories emerged as being distinctly more privileged than those who aligned themselves with one of the provincial political parties. Conservative “identifiers” were, for instance, one and a half times more likely to fall into the highest bracket of income earners (31% versus 20%) and had substantially more chance of owning their place of residence (76% versus 61%). The data furnished by the *British Social Attitudes Survey* indicated, therefore, that the Conservative associations that sprang up in parts of Northern Ireland in the late 1980s had drawn principally from the ranks of the professional and business classes. This was scarcely a revelation, of course. The class profile of the Ulster Tories merely echoed, after all, that to be found in any other Conservative association in any other region of the UK at the time or, for that matter, since. Indeed, in their campaign to gain admission to the party, the Ulster Tories were at pains to underline their similarities to rank-and-file Conservatives living “across the water”. In the early months of 1989, the fledgling North Down association produced an audio cassette designed to make the case for affiliation to the National Union. The opening narrative of the tape depicts an idyllic pastoral setting that is clearly intended to establish the impeccable bourgeois credentials of the Ulster Tories:

On a glorious sunny afternoon in the summer of 1988 a group of people sat sipping drinks in a pleasant country garden filled with the scent of roses and the sound of humming bees and singing birds. As the afternoon wore on the conversation turned to what is loosely called “politics”. One of the group was a doctor who remarked upon the problems he was facing with regard to wastage in the hospital where he was based, a problem which he felt could almost

certainly be solved by putting the service in question out to private tender. Another was a businessman interested in the possibility of expanding his company in 1992. A third was a solicitor boning up on a new Act which was about to change the current legislation. Just the sort of thing you'd expect to see anywhere in the Home Counties. But these people were different. They didn't live in England. They lived in the United Kingdom, yet they weren't truly part of that Kingdom. Each one wished to support government policy, yet none had ever had the opportunity. Each one was a Conservative, yet none could join the Conservative Party. Each one had something to contribute to the party in talent, time and funds, yet they were not wanted. Why? Because they lived in Northern Ireland ...

The typically well-heeled individuals who founded the Conservative associations that sprang up in the wake of the Anglo-Irish Agreement were evidently of the view that they would make a more persuasive and inclusive case for the Union than those who had previously been charged with the task. The Ulster Tories were, after all, men and women who had guided successful business and professional careers and these attributes were presumed to identify them as "people who knew how to direct affairs". The confidence of the Northern Irish Conservatives in their own political acumen would, however, soon be exposed as mere hubris. The professional and business figures who were involved in their local Conservative associations had very little experience of the notoriously demanding world of Northern Irish politics. Most of the Ulster Tories whom I interviewed – seventeen out of thirty – had never been politically active before and none had previously held a senior position in a political party. The danger that attended this lack of political inexperience was disclosed shortly after a reluctant Nation Union agreed to affiliate associations from Northern Ireland.

The death of the Unionist MP Harold McCusker in February 1990 offered the Ulster Tories the first opportunity to test their electoral strength since affiliation. While many Conservatives were acutely aware that Upper Bann was unlikely to provide fertile ground for their version of integrationist politics, it was decided nonetheless to put forward a candidate. The already substantial challenges that faced the Conservative campaign were compounded further by the absence of a high-quality candidate or even an adequate constituency organisation. These weaknesses were immediately recognised within Conservative Central Office. From the moment of her selection, the Conservative candidate Colette Jones was characterised as "diffident", "inexperienced and politically inept".⁴⁶ The reservations that circulated among the party hierarchy would prove to have been entirely justified when the polls in Upper Bann closed on the evening of 17 May 1990. The Ulster Tories had performed even worse than expected, limping in sixth with barely 3% of the poll and losing their deposit. This result inevitably represented a devastating blow to a fledgling political organisation trying to establish its bona fides with a famously partisan Northern Irish electorate.⁴⁷

The lack of tactical sense that was mercilessly exposed in the decision to compete the Upper Bann by-election was also echoed at the level of political strategy. Among the many difficulties that faced the Northern Irish Conservatives after affiliation was how best to deal with what was now – in name at least – their own party. If there was in fact a strategy in this regard it appeared to entail the simultaneous adoption of two mutually contradictory and comparably ruinous approaches. The first of these was that the Ulster Tories were from the outset vocal opponents of every aspect of policy devised by their party to deal with the political specificities of Northern Ireland. The most high-profile Conservative in the region, Dr Laurence Kennedy, was among the most vehement critics of the Hillsborough Accord and was public in his opposition to the nascent talks process that began in the spring of 1991.⁴⁸ The strident stance adopted by the Ulster Tories would serve little ultimately to advance their interests. In "bickering" constantly over official policy in

relation to Northern Ireland, Conservatives living in the region began to alienate even those figures within the hierarchy of the party who were not previously hostile to them.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the seeming fixation of the Ulster Tories with issues such as the Anglo-Irish Agreement often made them virtually indistinguishable from the mainstream Unionist parties which in turn alienated potential Catholic voters whose support was indispensable if they were ever to realise their professed ambition to transform the face of Northern Irish politics. While the fierce opposition of Conservatives to party policy on Northern Ireland limited their appeal among the nationalist electorate, it would ultimately fare little better with unionist voters. It would soon become apparent that unionists were simply unprepared to accept the sincerity or credentials of candidates who declared their devotion to the UK yet chose to belong to a political party that had given life to what was in unionist eyes the most treacherous threat to the Union in living memory. In sum, then, the opposition that the Ulster Tories offered to official policy towards Northern Ireland had the effect merely of alienating opinion on either side of the Irish Sea and making enemies both within and without their own party.

The second approach pursued by the Northern Irish Conservatives was rather more conciliatory but no less counter-productive. Among the many allegations levelled at the Conservative associations that emerged in the late 1980s was that they had been created by people who were not in fact Tories but rather Unionists seeking to pursue traditional objectives via alternative channels. At the time, critics were wont to deploy the metaphor of “old wine in new bottles”.⁵⁰ This line of criticism generated considerable resentment and gave rise among the Ulster Tories to a certain anxiety to establish their ideological fidelity to the party they had only recently joined. There was a propensity among Conservatives living in Northern Ireland to slavishly endorse those fiscal measures proposed for the UK as a whole. This devotion to the social and economic policies conceived in Westminster and Whitehall was rather poorly timed. It is worth remembering that the affiliation of the Ulster Tories occurred at a very particular moment in the long arc of Conservative government in the UK. By the time that the first official Conservative candidates stood for office in Northern Ireland, their party had begun to unravel, with divisions over Europe becoming increasingly apparent and social and economic policy ever more peculiar. The Ulster Tories would, however, prove themselves prepared to endorse even the most eccentric fiscal measures advocated by Westminster. Hence, the Conservative associations in Northern Ireland were willing to express support for swingeing public expenditure cuts, a stance that would inevitably play poorly with the electorate in a region where the state sector and the local economy have long since been more or less coterminous.⁵¹ Furthermore, as the introduction of the notoriously unpopular community charge was sparking major popular unrest elsewhere within the UK, the Ulster Tories were seeking to establish their devotion to the cause by calling for the introduction of the “poll tax” to Northern Ireland. It is hard to imagine even the “pygmy politicians” of mainstream Unionism falling prey to such an elementary lapse of political judgement.⁵²

The afterlife of the Northern Irish Conservatives

While the errors sketched above meant that the Northern Ireland Conservatives were often the authors of their own misfortune, they were also at times unwitting victims of circumstance. In the summer of 1993, the Conservative government had only a slim majority in Westminster and required the votes of the nine Ulster Unionist MPs to pass the Maastricht Treaty in the House of Commons.⁵³ In return for their support, the Unionists extracted certain concessions from the ailing Major administration. One of these was the

understanding that the Conservative associations in the six counties would be allowed to “wither on the vine”.⁵⁴ A principal claim of the Ulster Tories had from the outset been that they would have more power inside the party of government than the Ulster Unionists could ever hope to exercise outside. The events at Westminster in the summer of 1993 appeared to suggest that perhaps the very opposite might – under certain propitious conditions at least – be rather closer to the truth.

The deal struck during the horse-trading that surrounded the Maastricht Treaty issued a more or less fatal blow to the Northern Ireland Conservatives who were already reeling from their disastrous performance in the local government elections.⁵⁵ The timing of their demise as a meaningful political force would seem, in hindsight, perhaps rather appropriate. A few months later, after all, the Conservative Secretary of State would address the House of Commons to confirm rumours that discussions had taken place between the government and the Republican movement. In making this disclosure, Sir Patrick Mayhew intimated that the British state possessed a very specific vision of the political future for Northern Ireland. The peace process would of course ultimately prove able to accommodate many different strands of political opinion. It was readily apparent from the outset, however, that the political future of the six counties was one that would have no room for those integrationist impulses that had, for a brief time at least, animated the attempt to bring British Conservatism to Northern Ireland.

While the prospect of the Ulster Tories becoming a meaningful political force in Northern Ireland ended in the summer of 1993, they have retained a nominal presence ever since. Those few Conservative candidates who would run subsequently for election in Northern Ireland would in all cases poll poorly. In recent years there have, however, been two separate attempts to revive the fortunes of the Ulster Tories. In 2009, it was announced that the remaining Conservative area council was to forge an electoral pact with the Ulster Unionists under the guise of the Ulster Conservatives and Unionists – New Force (UCUNF). The rather unwieldy title of the new alliance coupled with the very public quarrelling among those who sheltered under its umbrella did little to endear it to the Northern Irish electorate. The electoral prospects of UCUNF were undermined further when it was announced that the sole remaining Ulster Unionist representative at Westminster had left the party. Lady Sylvia Hermon declared that she could not conscience standing as part of the alliance as she simply was not a Conservative and decided instead to run successfully as an independent candidate in the 2010 elections.⁵⁶ The departure of the North Down MP inevitably meant that the attempt to rekindle the previously close relations between the Conservatives and once powerful Ulster Unionists would yield not a single Westminster seat.

With the debacle of the 2010 general election over, the ill-starred political alliance that was the UCUNF was quietly dismantled. Seemingly undeterred by this latest electoral disappointment, the few remaining stalwarts among the Northern Irish Conservatives set about changing their political fortunes once more. The summer of 2012 saw a glitzy re-launch of the Ulster Tories as a political brand at the newly minted Metropolitan Art Centre. The optimism that seemed to pervade the press conference convened in one of the principal emblems of the “new Belfast” would, however, quickly dissipate.⁵⁷ Those Tories who ran for office in the 2014 local government and European elections fared no better than their predecessors had over the previous quarter century. Furthermore, the Conservative candidate for the European parliament, Mark Brotherston, came last, receiving only 4144 first preferences, less than 1% of the ballots cast. In view of this latest debacle, it would seem reasonable to suggest that if the Northern Irish Conservatives do

indeed have a political future it will be one that will be littered with a succession of lost deposits.

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Notes

1. It might be useful here to offer a brief note on the terminology used in the essay. As with its predecessor, this article employs a distinction between 'unionism' and 'Unionism'. While the former designates simply a broad political commitment to the maintenance of the Union, the latter denotes a more exclusive ethnonational identity. The two orientations overlap to a large extent but are not entirely coterminous. Hence, someone from a nationalist background who happens to believe in the Union might be termed a 'unionist' but would not be considered a 'Unionist'. The distinction between 'unionism' and 'Unionism' was one routinely employed by the Conservatives I interviewed. Most were at pains to distinguish themselves from the sectarianism and parochialism of local parties whom they considered to be 'Unionist with a capital U'.
2. Aughey, *Under Siege*; Loughlin, *Ulster Unionism and British Identity since 1885*, 212; Ruane and Todd, *Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland*, 113–15.
3. Aughey, *Under Siege*, 138–46; O'Malley, *Northern Ireland*, 37; Cochrane, *Unionist Politics and the Politics of Unionism*; Porter, *Rethinking Unionism*, 6–11.
4. Farrington, *Ulster Unionism and the Peace Process*, 63.
5. Clifford, *Parliamentary Sovereignty and Northern Ireland*; Clifford, *Parliamentary Despotism*; Clifford, *Government without Opposition*.
6. Farrington, "Ulster Unionism and the Irish Historiography Debate," 255.
7. Jackson, "Unionist History (ii)."
8. Trend, "Down with the Tories?"
9. Aughey, "Conservative Party Politics in Northern Ireland," 144–6.
10. Cunningham, "Conservative Dissidents and the Irish Question," 35.
11. Pearce, "Not Everyone was Cheering."
12. Stringer and Robinson, *Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland*, 192.
13. Coulter, "Origins of the Northern Ireland Conservatives," 37–41.
14. Coulter, "Peering in from the Window Ledge of the Union." For more on the nature of "direct rule" see Birrell, *Direct Rule and the Governance of Northern Ireland*; Byrne, *Economic Assistance and Conflict Transformation*.
15. Walker, *History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, 233.
16. O'Leary, "Conservative Stewardship of Northern Ireland," 671.
17. Farrington, *Ulster Unionism and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland*, 50; Loughlin, *Ulster Unionism and British Identity since 1885*.
18. Farrington and Walker, "Ideological Content and Institutional Frameworks," 140.
19. Walker, *History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, 233.
20. Smith, "'Ever Reliable Friends?'," 72.
21. O'Dowd, "'New Unionism,'" 115.
22. Cunningham, *British Government Policy in Northern Ireland*, 105–20; O'Leary and McGarry, *Politics of Antagonism*, 117–19; Ryan, *War and Peace in Ireland*, 157; Wright, *Northern Ireland*, 185–6.
23. Livingstone and Morison, *Audit of Democracy in Northern Ireland*; O'Leary and Arthur, "Northern Ireland as a Site," 41.
24. Rose, "Is the UK a State?," 125; Ruane and Todd, *Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland*, 224–6; Wright, *Northern Ireland*, 198–9.
25. O'Dowd, "'New Unionism,'" 116; McGarry and O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland*, 312.
26. Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*.
27. Conservative Research Department, "Confidential: The Implications of the Establishment of Conservatives Associations in Northern Ireland" (London: Conservative Research Department, 1988).

28. Conservative Research Department, "Confidential: The Implications of Recognising North Down" (London: Conservative Research Department, 1989).
29. Jonathan Caine, "Upper Bann Affiliation," Conservative Party Internal Memorandum, February 16, 1990.
30. O'Leary, "Conservative Stewardship of Northern Ireland," 675.
31. Farrington and Walker, "Ideological Content and Institutional Frameworks," 146.
32. Conservative Research Department, "Confidential: The Implications of Recognising North Down" (London: Conservative Research Department, 1989).
33. Ibid.
34. *The Northern Star* 3, no. 18, May 12, 1990, 1.
35. *The Northern Star* 3, no. 1, January 13, 1990, 1; 3, no. 7, February 24, 1990, 4.
36. Smith, "'Ever Reliable Friends?'," 78.
37. Corthorn, "Enoch Powell, Ulster Unionism, and the British Nation."
38. Conservative Research Department, "Confidential: The Implications of the Establishment of Conservatives Associations in Northern Ireland" (London: Conservative Research Department, 1988).
39. Conservative Research Department "Confidential: Links between the Ulster Unionist Party and the Conservative and Unionist Party" (London: Conservative Research Department, February 20, 1990).
40. Farrington, *Ulster Unionism and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland*, 57.
41. "Victory Pledge," *News Letter*, May 20, 1987, 1–2.
42. This association would end in March 2005 when the Grand Lodge severed its ties with the party. See McEvoy, *Politics of Northern Ireland*, 45.
43. Coulter, "Direct Rule and the Unionist Middle Classes"; Coulter, "Culture of Contentment"; McKay, *Northern Protestants*, 37.
44. McGovern and Shirlow, "Counter-insurgency," 188–9; McKay, *Northern Protestants*, 37, 258.
45. Coulter, "Peering in from the Window Ledge of the Union," 415–17.
46. Conservative Research Department, "Confidential: Upper Bann" (London: Conservative Research Department, 1990).
47. Walker, *History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, 242.
48. Duffy and Evans, "Building Bridges?," 126.
49. Needham, *Battling for Peace*, 255.
50. McGarry, "Old Wine, New Bottles."
51. Coulter, "Under Which Constitutional Arrangement Would You Still Prefer to be Unemployed?," 769–70.
52. O'Leary, "Conservative Stewardship of Northern Ireland," 667.
53. Cochrane, *Unionist Politics and the Politics of Unionism*, 304; Dixon, "The Usual English Doubletalk"; McCann, *War and an Irish Town*, 56–7.
54. Anthony Bevins, "Major's Pact with Unionists Exposed," *The Independent*, July 28, 1993.
55. Walker, *History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, 245.
56. Henry McDonald, "Blow to David Cameron as Only Ulster Unionist MP Quits Party," *The Guardian*, March 25, 2010.
57. Alex Kane, "Ulster's Tories Are Too Conservative," *News Letter*, June 18, 2012.

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