

# ‘TAME TORY HACKS’?<sup>1</sup> THE ULSTER PARTY AT WESTMINSTER, 1922–1972\*

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**ABSTRACT.** *While the historiography on Ulster Unionism after partition has grown considerably in recent years, there has been no extended investigation of Unionism at Westminster (‘the Ulster Party’), its structures and effectiveness. This article uses new archival material to shed light upon the Party’s membership, governance, coherence, and wider engagement. The later sections of the article review the nature of the ties binding the Party to Stormont and to Conservatism, unravelling some of their complexity, and placing a particular emphasis upon the relationship between Westminster Unionism and the fall of the devolved government in 1972. Here, new evidence is adduced from several underexploited or fresh sources to shed light upon the workings of the Party in the years immediately before this debacle. It is argued that the Westminster Unionists’ (at best) highly ambiguous reaction to direct rule was a fitting culmination to fifty years of often jealous and defensive interaction with Stormont.*

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## I

Among the many political issues raised by devolution since 1997 has been the tension binding members of the House of Commons, their regional parliament or assembly, and their local party structure. But, as with so much else arising from the debate on devolution, here, too, the theory and practice of Home Rule in Ireland has a great deal to offer by way of insight and precedent. Just as the numbers and rights of Scots, Welsh, and Northern Irish members have been periodically revisited in the context of Blairite devolution, so Gladstone laboured over the problem of Irish representation at Westminster in the context of a Home Rule assembly or parliament in Dublin. His various solutions to this, the ‘West Lothian Question’, as it had become known by the 1970s, are familiar; the notion of reduced numbers of Irish MPs, and the discarded idea of

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<sup>1</sup> David Jeffcock, Conservative Research Department Memorandum, 24 Aug. 1965 (referring to a comment by George Brown), Cambridge, Churchill College, Robin Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/3.

‘in and out’ – excluding Irish members from certain types of parliamentary division – have all been thoroughly rehearsed in the weighty literature on Home Rule.

But it was not only the technical and constitutional features of devolution that were anticipated by the Home Rule debates; other, more qualitative, issues were also raised during the welter of speculation about the future of Ireland’s government. It was expected by some that, with the advent of Home Rule, the combination of an Irish parliament and representation at Westminster would prove damaging both to Irish and English interests: A. V. Dicey, in arguing against ‘dual representation’, thought that the calibre of Irish representation in London might well suffer, that moderate business-like leaders would be discouraged, and that ‘the supremacy in Ireland of professional politicians’ would be sustained. In Unionist lampoons of the 1890s, the prospective Dublin parliament was envisioned as the centre-stage of Irish politics, albeit one occupied by the corrupt and belligerent.<sup>2</sup> When a Home Rule parliament was launched in Belfast in 1921 for the six counties of Northern Ireland, some of these expectations and prognoses appeared to be fulfilled. The political scientist, Philip Norton, has observed that the Ulster Unionist members at Westminster ‘were rarely of a calibre to attract attention from the Whips and Ministers’; the Belfast academic and commentator, John Harbinson, has damned them as ‘political eunuchs’.<sup>3</sup>

Such views prevail in the now weighty literature on Northern Ireland and British–Irish relations in the prelude to the ‘Troubles’, and they are confirmed by a wide range of evidence.<sup>4</sup> But the perception of Westminster as the remedial class of Ulster Unionism is only a part of a more complex and problematic political history. The Ulster Unionists at Westminster between 1922 and 1972 did indeed include choleric, incoherent, and intolerant ‘Colonel Blimp’ figures (David Low’s designation has often been applied). But, while the historiography on Ulster Unionism has grown considerably in recent years, and while individual Ulster Unionist MPs or episodes have occasionally been dissected, there has been no extended investigation of the ‘Ulster Party’, its structures and effectiveness, accepting a brief and dismissive chapter published in 1973.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> [F. Frankfort Moore], *The diary of an Irish cabinet minister* (Belfast, 1893), and *The Viceroy Muldoon* (Belfast, 1893). For a variant of the argument see A. V. Dicey, *A leap in the dark: a criticism of the principles of Home Rule as illustrated by the bill of 1893* (London, 1911), pp. 38–9.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Norton, ‘Conservative politics and the abolition of Stormont’, in Peter Catterall and Sean MacDougall, eds., *The Northern Ireland question in British politics* (London, 1996), p. 130; John Harbinson, *The Ulster Unionist Party, 1882–1973: its development and organisation* (Belfast, 1973), p. 106.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. the excellent studies by Graham Walker, *A history of the Ulster Unionist Party: protest, pragmatism and pessimism* (Manchester, 2004), pp. 179, 196, and by Marc Mulholland, *Northern Ireland at the crossroads: Ulster Unionism in the O’Neill years, 1960–1969* (London, 2000), p. 163, which stresses the Westminster Unionists’ ‘inarticulateness’ in 1968–9.

<sup>5</sup> Harbinson, *Ulster Unionist Party*, pp. 97–106. None of the most important recent studies of post-partition Unionism – Walker, *History*; Henry Patterson and Eric Kaufmann, *Unionism and Orangeism in Northern Ireland since 1945* (Manchester, 2007); or Mulholland, *Northern Ireland at the crossroads* – is primarily concerned with Westminster Unionism. Jeremy Smith, “‘Ever reliable friends?’: the

The structure of this article may also be briefly explained. The first section uses new archival material to shed light upon the Party's membership, structure, coherence, and workings; little has hitherto been written on these, the mechanics of parliamentary Unionism at Westminster. The second and third sections review the nature of the relationships binding the Party to Stormont and to Conservatism, with a particular emphasis upon the relationship between Westminster Unionism and the fall of the devolved government. Here new evidence is adduced from several underexploited or (like the Robin Chichester-Clark papers) fresh sources to shed light upon the workings of the Party in the years before 1972.

## II

Westminster had long been a focus for Irish politics before 1920; and just as the Irish parliamentary party had effectively led the Nationalist movement from the time of Butt and Parnell through to 1916–18, so an Ulster Party in the Commons had simultaneously fulfilled the same broad function within Irish Unionism. With the creation of an Ulster Unionist Council in Belfast in 1905, and with the popular extra-parliamentary mobilization of Unionism in 1912–14, so the overall importance of the Commons for Unionists weakened. This was certainly a gradual and uneven retreat, characterized by occasional rallies such as in 1918–22, when Sinn Féin boycotted the British parliament, and the Unionists temporarily exercised a near monopoly of Irish influence. But the overall trajectory had long been apparent; and in May 1921, when the Ulster parliament and executive met for the first time, Belfast was confirmed as the principal political focus of Unionism and of the partition state.

Westminster, however, retained control of most forms of taxation, together with all foreign and Commonwealth and military matters. Thus Northern Ireland had to be represented, not simply by the legislature in Belfast, but also in London; at first (following the template of Gladstonian Home Rule) a reduced number of MPs, thirteen, were returned from the North to the British House of Commons, though this was later amended to twelve, with the Representation of the People Act (1948) (and – later still, in 1978 – increased to seventeen, as James Callaghan's Labour government did deals and struggled for survival).

Those Unionists who reached Westminster in the years between 1922 and 1972 continued to be collectively dubbed the 'Ulster Party' as their predecessors had

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Conservative Party and Ulster in the twentieth century', *English Historical Review*, 121, 490 (Feb. 2006), pp. 70–103, contains some mention of the Westminster MPs, but is concerned with the evolution of the wider relationship between Conservatism and Unionism, particularly from the perspective of the former. For the use of 'Blimp' or 'blimpish' in these contexts see, for example, Walker, *History*, p. 156, and Andrew Galey, ed., *Crying in the wilderness: Jack Sayers, a liberal editor in Ulster, 1963–1969* (Belfast, 1995), p. 94. Compare Alvin Jackson, *The Ulster Party: Irish Unionists in the House of Commons, 1884–1911* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 53–113, where the problems of assessing the distinctiveness and achievement of the Edwardian Ulster Party are reviewed.

been since the mid-1880s; in reality, however, the Ulster Party functioned in a manner broadly analogous to some other regional groupings within British Conservatism in the era, such as the Scottish Unionist Members' Committee. Given the paucity of detail elsewhere, a brief outline of its membership, workings, and impact may first be offered.

Like the Scottish Unionists, the Ulster Unionists elected sessional chairmen and secretaries, sustaining a tradition which had begun with Edward Saunderson (member for North Armagh) and William Ellison-Macartney (South Antrim) in 1885: the first of the chairs in the post-partition era were Charles Curtis Craig (member for County Antrim) in 1922–3 and David Reid (County Down), who served from 1923 until 1939. The first secretaries of the Party in the new era were Reid (1922–3) and then Sir Michael Macnaghten (County Antrim) who served from 1923 until 1928. In addition, the Party was bound by a formal constitution, a copy of which, dating from about 1950, survives in the Montgomery Hyde papers. Its dominant principle was of course maintenance of the Union, although interestingly (at least in the Attlee era) this was expressly conditional upon the nature of political change in Britain, and upon the Protestantism of the crown. True to the original conception, as formulated in 1885–6, the Ulster grouping was to be 'an independent party', and its members were free to take whatever whip they chose; it was recognized, however, that in practice members might generally take the Conservative whip. Significantly, members were *not* delegates of the Unionist government in Belfast, but clearly the 'closest possible liaison' was desirable, and the views of Belfast ministers would carry 'considerable authority'.<sup>6</sup>

Between 1922 and 1972 the members of this Party comprised the fifty-seven Unionists who were returned from constituencies of Northern Ireland to the House of Commons at Westminster. Only two of this total were women: as a whole the group was indeed middle class and middle aged. The average age of the Party on first election (1922–66) was 46.5 years.<sup>7</sup> It may be assumed that the great majority of the fifty-seven MPs were members of the Orange Order, although the evidence in numerous individual cases is unclear. The Party was comparatively well educated, with a large and rising proportion of university graduates, embracing 45 per cent of those elected in 1922 and 72 per cent of those returned in 1966 (again, figures roughly analogous to the contemporary Conservative parliamentary party).<sup>8</sup> John Harbinson has calculated that the overwhelming majority of the Ulster Party were recruited from the professional and business classes, with 90 per cent of those elected in 1922 falling into this category (once again a figure consistent with that of the contemporary Conservative parliamentary party).<sup>9</sup> Company directors and barristers were a predominant

<sup>6</sup> Undated memorandum, Belfast, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), Montgomery Hyde papers, D.3084/I/B/3.

<sup>7</sup> Harbinson, *Ulster Unionist Party*, p. 100. Compare Michael Rush, *The role of the Member of Parliament since 1868: from gentlemen to players* (Oxford, 2001), p. 133.

<sup>8</sup> Rush, *Role of the Member of Parliament*, p. 99.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

force in the Party throughout the fifty years covered by this study, though in the 1920s two of the main Unionist newspapers were represented in the shape of Thomas Moles, member for South Belfast and managing editor of the *Belfast Telegraph*, and Sir Robert Lynn, member for West Belfast and managing editor of the *Northern Whig*. This representation of the press was a significant asset, but it had disappeared by the 1930s, and was not to be restored. Throughout the period 1922–72 the landed elite was represented, in a sustained if highly vestigial manner. But, as a counterpoint to this aristocratic motif, it was also clear that the Party of the 1950s and 1960s was enjoying a relative democratization, in so far as smaller-scale businessmen and professionals were beginning to feature within its ranks.

There was no clear pattern to the manner of selection, and local party machinery could be inefficient or dysfunctional. Local notables and family and professional linkages exercised a disproportionate influence at all levels of the highly enclosed and interconnected politics of Northern Ireland. As elsewhere in Ireland, dynastic succession was important. For example, Robert (Robin) Chichester-Clark's grandfather had sat for South Derry at Westminster, while his grandmother had sat for the same constituency in the Northern Ireland parliament, as had his father: Chichester-Clark was elected for Londonderry in 1955, and held the seat until 1974. Sir Hugh O'Neill was at the centre of a yet more complex dynastic and parliamentary web: his uncle, brother, and son all represented Antrim at Westminster between 1885 and 1959, while his nephew, Terence, considered standing for the Westminster Antrim seat, but instead pursued a career at Stormont culminating in the premiership.<sup>10</sup>

Wealth was in general a characteristic of the Party because – even in the 1950s – local associations (who exercised very considerable autonomy in the matter) tended to prefer candidates who could carry all or most of the costs of their election. When Chichester-Clark was seeking nomination for the Londonderry constituency in 1954, he was told that in the immediate past candidates had been expected to pay all the expenses, but that he would be required ‘only’ to find two-thirds of the total: a contested election was reckoned to cost £700, an uncontested election £200.<sup>11</sup> One partial consequence of this unwillingness to pay for talent was that, by the early 1960s – precisely the time when the pressures on Ulster Unionism were beginning to grow – the perceived quality of Unionist parliamentary candidates for Westminster was beginning to flag. In July 1963 Jack Sayers, editor of the *Belfast Telegraph*, wrote to Chichester-Clark, complaining of the mediocre quality of parliamentary candidates and observing that ‘I don’t like to see the chancy way in which seats are being filled nowadays ... our opinion is

<sup>10</sup> Robin Chichester-Clark (RCC) to McCay, 29 May 1954, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/12. For Robin Chichester-Clark see, for example, Clive Scoular, *James Chichester-Clark, prime minister of Northern Ireland* (Killyleagh, 2000), pp. 26–32. For Hugh O'Neill and his nephew see Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule: an Irish history, 1800–2000* (London, 2003), p. 239. For the limits of local party organization see Patterson and Kaufmann, *Unionism and Orangeism*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>11</sup> McCay to RCC, 9 July 1954, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/12. For the impecuniousness of local Unionism see Smith, ‘“Ever reliable friends”’, p. 87.

that Providence can't be counted on to take a hand'. Chichester-Clark agreed; but in fact there is no evidence that the Unionist leadership successfully wrested the initiative on this score from the clutch of Providence.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, departure from the constituency was precipitated by a variety of causes, but rarely (as in Britain) by electoral defeat. De-selection, as in Britain, was certainly a threat to those who defied the conventions of local politics. As in Britain, this was a complex area, where it was not always clear whether candidates had jumped from their party's nomination, or had been quietly pushed. Nor, given the layers of apologetic and spin, is it always possible to identify the precise causes of an eviction, when it had unmistakably occurred. Perhaps the most controversial case in this period was that of Harford Montgomery Hyde, member for North Belfast (1950–9), who was de-selected because (he said) of his liberal views on a range of issues, particularly reform of the law on homosexuality. There can be little doubt that Hyde's stand on gay rights together with his opposition to the death penalty reflected a more generous and progressive political outlook than that which characterized the majority of his constituents. On the other hand, he had been a remote, inefficient, and self-indulgent MP; and in the winter of 1958–9, when unemployment in Belfast was spiralling, and when the crisis over his de-selection was brewing, Hyde found himself on a lengthy fact-finding mission in the Caribbean. In early 1959 he was writing self-righteous letters to his constituency secretary under the letter head of the Myrtle Bank Hotel, Kingston, Jamaica: equally he was receiving letters addressed to 'Dear Piggy' from society ladies.<sup>13</sup> Urgent calls from his friends to return to Ireland were ignored; and his removal as Unionist parliamentary candidate inevitably ensued.

If de-selection was one obvious expression of popular displeasure, then ministerial office and honours may be seen as tangible evidence of success or acceptance or usefulness within the arena of high politics. No member of the Party achieved cabinet rank during this period, unless the definition is stretched to include Ulster Unionists in the Upper House (such as the seventh marquess of Londonderry).<sup>14</sup> There is also evidence that several Unionists unsuccessfully petitioned for office.<sup>15</sup> However, while the tally of junior ministers is usually treated as derisory, it is rarely given in full: James Craig was financial secretary to the admiralty and acting first lord (1920–1) before returning to Belfast as the founding prime minister of Northern Ireland. His brother, Charles Curtis Craig, was

<sup>12</sup> Jack Sayers to RCC, 2 July 1964; RCC to Sayers (copy), 5 July 1963, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/6. See Smith, '“Ever reliable friends”', p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> Hyde to Noble, 23 Feb. 1959, Montgomery Hyde papers, D.3084/1/A/2/41. See also Jayne Campbell to 'Dear Piggy', 21 Jan. 1959, D.3084/1/A/3/9. Harbinson, *Ulster Unionist Party*, p. 83.

<sup>14</sup> Norton, 'Conservative politics', p. 130. For Londonderry see evaluations by Ian Kershaw, *Making friends with Hitler: Lord Londonderry and the roots of appeasement* (London, 2004), and N. C. Fleming, *The marquess of Londonderry: aristocracy, power and politics in Britain and Ireland* (London, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> W. J. Allen to Baldwin, 3 June 1929, Cambridge University Library, Baldwin papers, v.37, fos. 9–10.

parliamentary secretary at the Ministry of Pensions (1923–4), a post which James himself had occupied in 1918–20. Sir Hugh O'Neill served as chairman of the Conservative Private Members (1922) Committee between 1935 and 1939, and was under secretary for India and Burma under Neville Chamberlain in 1939–40. In 1951, Conolly Gage (the 'greatly respected' member for South Belfast between 1945 and 1952) turned down Churchill's offer of the parliamentary secretaryship at Pensions.<sup>16</sup> If, as has been suggested, these MPs were indeed 'rarely of a calibre to attract attention from the Whips and Ministers', then Robin Chichester-Clark was both a whip and a minister: a lord commissioner of the treasury (1960–1), comptroller of the royal household (1961–4), and minister of state for employment (1972–4).

The contribution of Party members naturally varied extensively, though the mean remained (by the standards of contemporary mainstream Conservatism) comparatively low. The political scientist Michael Rush has taken eight parliamentary sessions between 1887 and 1994–5, and examined average participation by government and opposition backbenchers, and by third party MPs other than the Ulster Unionists: three of his eight selected sessions fall within the period covered by this study (1928, 1947–8, 1961–2).<sup>17</sup> Calculating the contributions of the Ulster Unionists in these years, and comparing these figures with those supplied by Rush, reveals a pattern of relatively low Unionist parliamentary activity before 1972, and a marked consolidation of effort after that year. Ulster Unionists' contributions to debate and parliamentary questions were extremely slight in the sample year 1928, with a mean of little more than one question and one contribution for each MP (as compared with means of around eleven questions and six contributions for Conservative backbenchers). In the session of 1947–8 Unionist activity was rather more marked (means of nineteen questions and sixteen contributions), but remained less than the average Conservative effort (means of fifty-seven questions and thirty-eight contributions). In 1961–2 Unionists asked on average six questions per MP, and made on average twelve contributions to debate: Conservative backbenchers asked on average fourteen questions and made on average sixteen contributions to debate. Rush's figures suggest that after 1972 Ulster Unionists were generally working harder than Conservative and Labour MPs, made roughly similar numbers of contributions to debate as the Liberal, Scottish Nationalists, and Plaid Cymru, but did not make the same use of parliamentary questions as these three parties. Broadly the picture is of a relatively low level of effort, with a particular trough in 1928, a limited degree of advance after 1945, and more sustained effort after 1972.

<sup>16</sup> 'Leaves of memory', Montgomery Hyde papers, D.3084/A/7/1, fo. 290. Interview with Rt Hon. H. V. Kirk, Belfast, 6 Sept. 2004. Smith, '“Ever reliable friends”', p. 85.

<sup>17</sup> Rush, *Role of the Member of Parliament*, pp. 159–60. Ulster Unionist figures compiled from *Hansard*, 5th ser., vol. 221 (1928 session), *Hansard*, 5th ser., vol. 455 (1947–8 session) and *Hansard*, 5th ser., vol. 665 (1961–2).

While there were some structural explanations for the lastingly modest achievements of the Ulster Party, it was also clear that its overall quality waxed and waned. The impact of the new Belfast parliament upon the Party seems to have been delayed, and its quality (if not its volubility) remained high in the 1920s and 1930s: its quality was also relatively high as late as the 1950s. In that decade it still had the (admittedly mixed) benefits of highly experienced veterans like Hugh O'Neill, together with efficient stalwarts such as Douglas Savory. Sir David Campbell (member for South Belfast, 1952–63) brought extensive administrative experience to the Party as a colonial civil servant and wartime governor of Malta. The Party was broadly similar in terms of its composition and activities to contemporary Conservatism. Indeed, the essential challenge faced by the Ulster Party in the era of Churchill and Macmillan was not its marginality, but rather its apparent integration within the Conservative establishment. The challenge faced by the Party in the 1960s was that it had to deal with the consequences of this perceived intimacy.

### III

The central relationships for the members of the Ulster Party of 1922–72 were those which linked them to Stormont and to the two main parties of the British state, and the British government. In theory, the Party defended and represented the interests of the devolved government at Westminster, and constituted a source of political intelligence for the Belfast ministers. At its best the Party could be effective in fulfilling this brief: for example, in 1924–5 Ulster members regularly supplied James Craig, as prime minister of Northern Ireland, with information and legal insight concerning the Boundary Commission.<sup>18</sup> Provision for the rectification of the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State had been an essential element of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921; and in 1924 this provision was activated in the form of a Boundary Commission. The brief of the Commission was reviewed by the Judicial Committee of the privy council in May 1924, when Sir Malcolm Macnaghten (as secretary of the Party) supplied Craig with legal assessments and strategic advice.<sup>19</sup> Thereafter David Reid, as chairman of the Party, and Herbert Dixon, who was both member for East Belfast and Craig's political 'fixer', provided detailed intelligence and useful gossip to the prime minister in Belfast. Reid regularly and secretly dined with Joseph Fisher, the unofficial Ulster representative on the Commission, and passed on details of its operations to Craig. This leakage of intelligence allowed the Belfast government to hoan its strategies, and meant that both Dixon and Craig could mobilize their political allies. For example, primed by Fisher, Reid pressed

<sup>18</sup> Jackson, *Home Rule*, pp. 211–12; Kevin Matthews, *Fatal influence: the impact of Ireland on British politics, 1920–1925* (Dublin, 2004), pp. 206, 217.

<sup>19</sup> Macnaghten to Craig, 5 May 1924, 18 June 1924, 22 June 1924, 24 June 1924, Belfast, PRONI, CAB 9Z/11/1.



the issue of the town of Newry with the Conservative home secretary, William Joynson-Hicks: Newry, which had also been a possible gain for the Free State, was spared, and Reid considered it likely that Feetham had been given a 'hint' from the Home Office.<sup>20</sup>

The Boundary Commission episode supplies a case-study of effective communication between the Ulster Party and Belfast, and of the ways in which the Party was able to mobilize its resources in the Unionist interest. But it would be wrong to argue that this reflected the normal state of communication between the Ulster Party and Belfast. On the contrary, this was a connection and a relationship which could not be taken for granted, and which indeed were continually revisited and reworked throughout the fifty years of devolved government.

As is well known, periods of Labour administration imposed a particular strain on these communications, because the interests of Stormont and of its Ulster Party tended to diverge. The Unionist leadership in Belfast was generally pragmatic, understanding the need to placate British governments of whatever political hue; and it was also the case that – for essentially constitutional reasons – Stormont ministers did not want a legislative gap opening up between Britain and Northern Ireland in areas such as welfare provision. This meant that 'socialistic' legislation which the Ulster Unionist Party in London opposed (disciplined, as they often were, by the Conservative whip) was readily accepted by the Ulster Unionist Party in Belfast. The need for effective co-ordination and communication between the Ulster Party and Belfast was particularly clear.

In fact this first became evident during the Labour administration of 1929–31, when the Ulster Party was disposed to toe the Conservative line and when James Craig in Belfast was anxious for a more modulated approach. Several episodes in late 1929 created particular problems: the Belfast government, for example, wanted to accept Labour's Widows and Orphans Bill, while the Ulster Party was voting with the Conservative Party to amend the proposed legislation. Tensions over these issues underlined the need to establish 'complete harmony of action, both locally and imperially'.<sup>21</sup> As a consequence, the Belfast government decided that, whenever it was affected by British legislation, the relevant local minister would liaise with the chairman of the Ulster Party.

With the creation of the National Government in 1931, these tensions between Belfast and Westminster were partly alleviated. Personality as well as structure contributed to the maintenance of communication; and Sir Joseph McConnell, the efficient secretary of the Ulster Party in the 1930s, sustained effective links with Belfast. But McConnell died in 1942; and this and a variety of other, wartime, circumstances forefronted the issue of liaison. The welter of government business during the war meant that the pressure on lines of communication was increasing, as were the opportunities for divergence between Belfast and the Ulster Party.

<sup>20</sup> D. D. Reid to Craig, 16 Oct. 1925, PRONI, CAB 9Z/2/2.

<sup>21</sup> H. Pollock to Reid, 15 Nov. 1929, PRONI, CAB 9J/6/1.

Basil Brooke (who became prime minister of Northern Ireland in April 1943) was at first more proactive in addressing these difficulties than his predecessor, the niggling and remote John Andrews. In June 1943 Brooke wrote to the new secretary of the Ulster group, Douglas Savory, setting up a meeting between the Stormont cabinet and the Westminster MPs: the purpose of this was to effect improvements in communication between the two.<sup>22</sup> By January 1944 it had been agreed to form an 'inner cabinet' of the Westminster party, whose members were now to shadow individual Stormont ministers (for example, Hugh O'Neill, the chairman of the Party, was to shadow Brooke himself).<sup>23</sup> But, despite Brooke's anxiety on the subject, and despite the new structures, difficulties remained.

The fundamental challenge posed by Labour in 1945 to the Ulster Party and the devolved government was essentially that faced in 1929–31. The Stormont government desired to maintain good relations with the administration in London, and often to adopt its legislation for Northern Ireland, while the Ulster Party felt pressured by its Conservative allies to contribute to the Opposition. Samuel Haughton was the secretary of the Party at this time, and he worked hard to keep the Ulster Unionists at Westminster in communication with Belfast. It was often a forlorn campaign, however, and for many Stormont Unionists in the late 1940s and 1950s (such as H. V. Kirk) the 'Imperial MPs were a race apart'.<sup>24</sup> In March 1947, the Ulster Party was opposed to Labour's National Insurance Bill, which Brooke in Belfast deemed to be 'vital to Northern Ireland'.<sup>25</sup> By October 1947, when Brooke had his annual meeting with the Party, its members were complaining that they had opposed Labour's Health Services Bill and the Trade Statistics Bill, only to find that the Unionist government was proposing to enact these measures at Stormont. The Party was reduced to pleading that Brooke might introduce cosmetic changes into the Stormont versions of this legislation in order to maintain some semblance of credibility and independence.<sup>26</sup>

Liaison fragmented, not solely because of the pressure of radical legislation, but because of the ongoing issue of divisions within the Ulster Party itself. Haughton, though a wealthy mill owner and a retired officer, was no Blimp; he struggled to maintain lines of communication with Belfast, and argued that the Tories' case against nationalization was overstated and in need of 'reorientation'.<sup>27</sup> Haughton, like Brooke, was on good terms with a number of the Labour cabinet

<sup>22</sup> Brooke to Savory, 8 June 1943, PRONI, CAB gJ/6/2. Harbinson gives an abbreviated and inaccurate summary of these connections in *Ulster Unionist Party*, p. 103.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Gransden, 'Memorandum on liaison between the Northern Ireland government and Ulster Imperial Members. Meeting, 19 January 1944', PRONI, CAB gJ/6/2.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with the Rt Hon. H. V. Kirk, Belfast (20 Sept. 2004). For a general summary of the relationship between Stormont and the Labour government after the Second World War see Brian Barton, 'The impact of World War II on Northern Ireland and Belfast–London relations', in Catterall and McDougall, eds., *Northern Ireland question*, pp. 63–4.

<sup>25</sup> Minutes of a meeting between the prime minister and the Ulster Party, 18 Mar. 1947, PRONI, CAB gJ/6/2.

<sup>26</sup> Minutes of a meeting between the prime minister and the Ulster Party, 23 Oct. 1947, PRONI, CAB gJ/6/2.

<sup>27</sup> Haughton to Gransden, 20 May 1946, PRONI, CAB gJ/6/2.

ministers: Haughton courted the secretary of state for war, A. V. Alexander, and the home secretary, James Chuter-Ede, who both proved helpful and friendly. Such overtures were important: they built on a lingering sense of gratitude for Ulster's wartime efforts, and they helped to prepare some of the ground for Attlee's Ireland Act of 1949, wherein partition and the authority of the Stormont administration were confirmed.<sup>28</sup> By the end of the 1940s at least some of the hostility which Labour had shown towards Ulster Unionism had been effectively dispelled.

But this was not the whole story of the Ulster Party's relations with Labour. There was a core of the Party, deeply Conservative in its outlook and sympathies, which refused to be harnessed by the pragmatists. For these hardliners, liaison with Stormont inevitably meant being nudged towards an accommodation with the socialist government and its misdeeds. As Haughton observed in July 1950, 'some of the old hands in the Ulster group at Westminster were not one bit keen in 1945 to participate in the scheme of liaison I tried so hard to promote and maintain ... there were a good many Parliamentarians here in Ulster who disliked any form of collaboration with the various Ministries in Whitehall'.<sup>29</sup> Between 1945 and 1951 Brooke, together with Haughton and other moderates, was just about able to counterbalance these hardliners, and to win an accommodation with Labour. But this coup would not be repeated in 1964, when Labour returned to power.

Moreover, despite the reforms of the 1940s, there remained in the 1950s and 1960s personal and structural difficulties vitiating the relationship between Westminster Unionism and its Stormont counterpart – difficulties which culminated in the crisis of Unionism in 1972. Liaison between Stormont ministers and Westminster spokesmen continued through the 1950s, but began to be weakened through (in part) personal tensions.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Brookeborough, having sponsored reform in the 1940s, subsequently resisted pressure to set up a study group on the position of the Westminster MPs.<sup>31</sup>

The pairing arrangements began to weaken further in the early 1960s, when Stormont and Westminster Unionism were taking variant stands on issues such as the Common Market and the local engineering industry. With Bill Craig's appointment as chief whip at Stormont in 1962 came an opportunity to address the 'silly and conflicting public pronouncements' issuing forth from the two parliamentary parties: Craig sought 'to establish some sort of link between the parliamentary party at Stormont and the group at Westminster [because] I don't think contact at cabinet level is enough'.<sup>32</sup> Craig's initiative was welcomed by Chichester-Clark in London and by Terence O'Neill in Belfast, but did not effect

<sup>28</sup> Chuter Ede to Attlee, 9 May 1949, Bodleian Library Oxford, Clement Attlee papers, dep. 82, fo. 311.

<sup>29</sup> Haughton to Gransden, 18 July 1950, PRONI, CAB 9J/6/2.

<sup>30</sup> O'Neill to RCC, 16 Nov. 1959, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/5.

<sup>31</sup> Diary notes, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/22.

<sup>32</sup> Craig to RCC, 10 July 1962, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/5.

a permanent betterment in the relationship between the two parties. The lax organizational and disciplinary structures of the Unionist party, together with intense jealousies and the relatively narrow focus of many Westminster MPs, all militated against a thorough-going and lasting reform. A liaison committee met in the Whips' Office in June 1963, and advocated mutually supportive speeches, reciprocal visits, monthly reporting, and better use of the newly appointed research officer for Northern Ireland at Conservative Central Office.<sup>33</sup> But in July 1963 James Chichester-Clark reported to his brother Robin that Stormont Unionists were opposed to the notion of 'Imperial Members' attending 'our Party meetings' (the language of ownership is surely significant).<sup>34</sup> And in November 1963 Robin was writing to Belfast that 'we had better have a meeting of that liaison committee before too long if we are not to be under fire'.<sup>35</sup>

This renewed effort towards reform also failed, and in the final crisis of Unionism between 1968 and 1972 there was no effective liaison between its Stormont and Westminster components. In early 1971 Robin Chichester-Clark wrote to his brother James lamenting

that lack of liaison between themselves and the Northern Ireland Government. As you know there used to be a system whereby everybody had opposite numbers and there used to be a good deal of communication particularly in relation to legislation which came up here and which was likely to affect Northern Ireland in any way. This has now almost gone by the board.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, despite the looming threat to the survival of the devolved government, a serious division arose in the spring of 1971 between Stormont and Westminster Unionists over Heath's Industrial Relations Bill – with Robin Chichester-Clark warning that there needed to be a uniform code of industrial relations throughout the United Kingdom, and that 'if the Northern Ireland Government decides to delay a decision or worse decides not to enact similar legislation – the party at Stormont cannot expect support from the Ulster members at Westminster'.<sup>37</sup>

This tension, and comparative lack of dialogue, were the contexts against which Edward Heath twice met the Westminster Unionists (on 16 December 1971 and 29 February 1972) in order to take soundings on the constitutional future of Northern Ireland.<sup>38</sup> It is true that the numbers of Westminster Unionists were small; but – as they recognized themselves in a post-mortem, conducted in April 1972 after the prorogation of Stormont – 'with ... no close political strategy either inside the group or in consultation with the Stormont party, the Unionist influence at Westminster has been much weaker and more diffuse than it should have

<sup>33</sup> Minute, Liaison Committee, 12 June 1963, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/6.

<sup>34</sup> JCC to RCC, 3 July 1963, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/6.

<sup>35</sup> RCC to JCC, 21 Nov. 1963, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/7.

<sup>36</sup> RCC to JCC, 21 Jan. 1971, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 3/22.

<sup>37</sup> RCC? to JCC?, n.d., Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 3/22.

<sup>38</sup> 'Meeting between Ulster Unionist Party and Edward Heath in the House of Commons', 16 Dec. 1971, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 3/23.

been'.<sup>39</sup> Even allowing for their numerical weakness, there was certainly the potential for influence; but the failure to develop a unified and coherent strategy at Westminster, and the seeming inability to communicate and liaise with Stormont, all prevented the potential becoming a serious and sustained reality. Too late, on 18 April 1972, the Westminster Unionists accepted a renewed call for 'unity of action', and agreed to send one of their members for a weekly meeting with Faulkner's ex-cabinet: but, as James Molyneaux observed, 'the effective leadership of the Unionist Party would necessarily move to Westminster'.<sup>40</sup>

#### IV

Unionism's relationship with all British governments was critical; but for the parliamentarians of the Ulster Party the bond with Conservatism was peculiarly complex and intimate. On the whole, characterizations of this relationship have been influenced by its failures, and particularly by the complete inability of Unionist MPs to avert the suspension of Stormont in 1972 (as if this feat had been possible for eight MPs).<sup>41</sup> Episodes such as this cannot be ignored, but it is certainly necessary to elaborate their wider context more fully than has sometimes been done in the literature.

There can be little doubt that, after the First World War, support for Ulster Unionism amongst British Conservatives was becoming less highly charged and emotive than hitherto. However, relations remained close, in terms of organization if not ideology. Ulster Unionist electioneering in the 1920s and after was subsidized by Conservative Central Office; in the 1950s and 1960s the Conservative Party kept a watchful eye on the Westminster seats, and Westminster elections, in Northern Ireland; Northern Ireland, indeed, was incorporated into the Central Office filing systems as 'area O'.<sup>42</sup> In return the Ulster Party generally took the Conservative whip; and there were occasions when, despite their small numbers, they were strong enough (or were thought to be strong enough) to make a difference to the arithmetic of parliamentary power.<sup>43</sup>

When Labour was in power, the Ulster Party voted with the Opposition. In the interwar period Craigavon's close association with Conservatism combined with the electoral dominance of that party meant that there were relatively few

<sup>39</sup> 'Secret: working paper of the Unionist parliamentary party at Westminster', Apr. 1972, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK, 3/24.

<sup>40</sup> 'Minutes of a meeting', 18 Apr. 1972, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 3/37.

<sup>41</sup> Norton, 'Conservative politics', pp. 137–8.

<sup>42</sup> Craigavon to Eyres-Monsell, 5 Dec. 1928, PRONI, CAB qJ/6/1. See e.g. 'Constituency files, Area O: Northern Ireland, Aug. 1950 – Aug. 1951', Bodleian Library, Oxford, Conservative Party Archive, CCO 1/8 (part of a sequence of files dealing with Westminster elections in Northern Ireland). Smith, "'Ever reliable friends'", p. 84 (though Smith distinguishes between the organizational closeness and ideological drift between the two parties).

<sup>43</sup> Craigavon to Baldwin, 28 May 1929, Baldwin papers, v.36, fo. 182.

strategic problems with this arrangement.<sup>44</sup> But, as has been argued, Labour's eventual ascendancy tended to create problems for Unionism, and to drive a wedge between Stormont (which generally wanted to keep Labour ministers on side) and the Ulster Party (which took the Conservative whip). While there were undoubtedly tensions, the Unionists' schizoid approach to Westminster politics was not without its possibilities; Basil Brooke simultaneously courted Labour ministers, while recommending to the Ulster Party that they should target bright young Conservative backbenchers.<sup>45</sup> Though there were some qualms about the viability of nursing particular Tories, Brooke's advice appears to have been followed throughout the later 1940s.

This effort can be seen as laying some foundations for the relatively strong relationship which characterized the Ulster Party and the Conservative government in the early and mid-1950s. This was an era when Unionism throughout the United Kingdom was being consolidated: Scottish Unionism, no less than the Ulster variant, was enjoying an Indian summer of popularity and influence. It is often argued that the Second World War served to consolidate British national identity and patriotic pride, and this affected the different constituent territories of the United Kingdom. The Ulster Party and Ulster Unionism as a whole benefited from the generally favourable image of Northern Ireland that the war had helped to furnish. The Ulster Party's chairman in the 1950s, Sir David Campbell, the governor of Malta from 1943 to 1952, was identified with the island's heroic wartime struggle. Wartime generals with strong Ulster Unionist associations (like Viscount Alanbrooke) were also a striking feature of the British elite of the 1950s: Ivan Neill, a Stormont cabinet minister of the time, observed that these men 'enjoyed a wide-range of influence ... [which] gradually faded in the late 1950s'.<sup>46</sup>

Given these contexts, the Ulster Party, which had a strong ex-officer and public school flavour, appears to have been relatively well assimilated, popular, and (in certain circumstances) effective. As has been noted, the 1950s (and, to a lesser extent, the 1960s) were decades when the electoral concerns of Westminster Unionism remained well integrated within the bureaucracy of Conservative Central Office. In July 1954, the Conservative whip, Patrick Buchan Hepburn, wrote to Basil Brooke saying that the Unionist members 'without exception ... have supported the government magnificently, both as regards hard work and attendance'.<sup>47</sup> Three new members of the Party – Samuel Knox-Cunningham (elected in 1955), Lord Robert Grosvenor (1955) and Stratton Mills (1959) – held parliamentary private secretaryships during the Macmillan government; and Knox-Cunningham ('a fifteen stone, six-foot-six rugger blue, who to

<sup>44</sup> Craigavon to Baldwin, 28 July 1930, Baldwin papers, v.31, fo. 138.

<sup>45</sup> Brooke to Ross, 20 Nov. 1945, PRONI, CAB 9J/6/2.

<sup>46</sup> Ivan Neill, *Church and state* (Dunmurry, 1995), p. 58. Smith, '“Ever reliable friends”', p. 83, makes the case for a growing divergence in the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>47</sup> Buchan Hepburn to Brooke, 9 July 1954, PRONI, CAB 9J/6/4; Smith, 'Ever reliable friends', pp. 95–101, ably chronicles the cooling of this relationship in the later 1950s.

some suggested the image of Macmillan's secret service gunman') was parliamentary private secretary to the prime minister himself. Robin Chichester-Clark held office as a government whip (as a lord commissioner of the treasury and comptroller of the royal household).<sup>48</sup>

The fundamental characteristic of the Ulster Party at this time was not that it was marginal, but rather that it was too closely linked with the gentrified Conservative governments of Churchill, Macmillan, and Alec Douglas-Home. There was a dual aspect to this. The expectations of local Unionists were raised unrealistically by the supposed connections between their representatives and the Macmillan government; by 1963, Ulster Unionist constituency associations were complaining that the overly intimate bond between the Ulster Party and Conservatism was not now fully delivering for Northern Ireland.<sup>49</sup> But, while there were disappointed grass-roots expectations, the real difficulties lay elsewhere. There can be little doubt that Harold Wilson and Labour's increasing antipathy for Ulster Unionism after 1964 was rooted both in the questionable record of the Stormont regime and in the role of Unionism at Westminster in the years of Conservative domination.

With Labour's accession to power in 1964, Unionism and the Ulster Party confronted a complex array of challenges. Issues of civil rights and discrimination, particularly in the fields of housing and employment, were beginning to generate anger amongst the Catholics of Ulster, and to provide the foundations for political mobilization; the Campaign for Social Justice (CSJ) was formed in January 1964 to publicize a wide range of already controversial acts. The CSJ, in turn, found support at Westminster amongst Labour backbenchers, many of whom gave their backing to the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster (CDU), a body created in June 1965 in the Commons to promote the cause of civil rights in Northern Ireland. While the CDU was beginning to apply pressure to Labour ministers, the Ulster Party found itself in the frontline of the defence of the Stormont regime.

At the same time, Unionism had lost its Labour friends from the post-war era. When Labour regained power in 1964, after thirteen years of Conservative government, its front bench looked very different from that of 1945–51: Harold Wilson and his colleagues were much less sympathetic figures than 'Major Attlee' or Herbert Morrison. Moreover, the Ulster Party's strategic location in the Commons was also coming under increasingly critical scrutiny. Wilson was elected in October 1964 with a majority of six at a time when the Ulster Unionists were returning twelve supporters of the Conservative front bench. It would doubtless be wrong to discount the likelihood that Wilson had a genuine concern for the civil rights of the Nationalists of Northern Ireland, and a principled

<sup>48</sup> Alastair Horne, *Macmillan, 1957–1986: volume II of the official biography* (London, 1989), p. 161.

<sup>49</sup> Walker, *History*, p. 144. Smith, '“Ever reliable friends”', pp. 97–9. The 'crisis of expectations' in the relationship between the Ulster Party and Macmillan's government was foreshadowed by a similar 'crisis' in the relationship between the Edwardian Ulster Party and the Balfour government: see Jackson, *Ulster Party*, pp. 281–3.

antipathy for Unionism. But he was clearly willing to be seen to consider limiting the intervention of Westminster in return for the surrender by Ulster MPs of their existing voting rights. The existence of this issue has been noted by scholars; but its significance and fall-out have not yet been fully excavated and assessed.<sup>50</sup>

In April 1965, Wilson raised the question of the Ulster Party's voting powers with his attorney general.<sup>51</sup> In May 1965, he broached the issue again during a meeting with Terence O'Neill, and by October of that year Ken Bloomfield was registering alarm at the development of the 'vexed question of the powers of the Ulster members'.<sup>52</sup> In January 1966, Wilson wrote to his lord president of the council, again emphasizing that there was a need to investigate the possibility that Ulster MPs should be prevented from voting on 'purely domestic matters affecting Great Britain'.<sup>53</sup> Some of the urgency was taken out of this issue after 31 March 1966, when the Labour government was returned with an increased majority. But Wilson never really forgot the experience of governing at a time when the effective absence of the Ulster Party would have confirmed his grip on the House of Commons.

In January 1967, Wilson met Terence O'Neill, and specifically argued that:

within a period of about three years one of two things must happen. Either (1) the Westminster Parliament would insist on interfering more and more with the internal affairs of Northern Ireland with the inevitable erosion of the 'division of powers' which formed the basis of the present arrangements or (2) an agreement would be reached whereby the British parliament and government would refrain from interfering at all in Northern Ireland affairs provided that Northern Ireland members of the Westminster Parliament observed the same discretion on voting on matters appertaining to Britain.<sup>54</sup>

O'Neill did not immediately rise to the bait; but there is new evidence that he did take Wilson's ideas to the Westminster Unionists. In early 1967, Chichester-Clark was shadow minister for public buildings and works (areas where responsibility was devolved), and O'Neill pressed hard to get him moved to a portfolio which dealt only with 'reserved' matters. Chichester-Clark's role was discussed at a meeting with Willie Whitelaw (as Conservative chief whip) and O'Neill in February 1967, and subsequently at a meeting between O'Neill and the chairman of the Ulster Unionist MPs, Willie Orr: Orr summarized the Unionists' reading of the matter by pointing out 'that much of the pressure from Labour's left wing, which Wilson fears, is occasioned by our voting record on such matters as London local government ... but if we were suddenly to withdraw eleven votes on

<sup>50</sup> E.g. Thomas Hennessey, *The origins of the Troubles* (Dublin, 2005), p. 110; Peter Rose, *How the Troubles came to Northern Ireland* (London, 2000), pp. 29, 35.

<sup>51</sup> Attorney general to Wilson, 5 Apr. 1965, The National Archives, Kew (TNA), PREM 13/1663.

<sup>52</sup> Memorandum of a meeting between Terence O'Neill and Harold Wilson, 19 May 1965, TNA, PREM 13/1663. Bloomfield to RCC, 6 Oct. 1965, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 3/6.

<sup>53</sup> Wilson to lord president of the council, 31 Jan. 1966, TNA, PREM 13/1663. See also Rose, *Troubles*, pp. 35–6, 62, 77, 174, 177.

<sup>54</sup> Note for the record of 12 Jan. 1967 meeting, TNA, PREM 13/2266. See Hennessey, *Origins*, p. 116, which mentions the meeting, but not all aspects of its fall-out.



this sort of issue, how is the Conservative party going to feel?'.<sup>55</sup> For Ken Bloomfield, deputy secretary to the Northern Ireland cabinet, the way forward rested with a voluntary code of conduct for Westminster Unionists, wherein (inter alia) they agreed not to become spokespersons for subjects which 'in Northern Ireland are the concern of our Government and Parliament'.<sup>56</sup> But, despite this advocacy, a meeting of the Ulster Party on 22 February 1967 to discuss O'Neill's disclosures about Wilson's stand brought a revelation of the still livid jealousies separating Westminster Unionism and Stormont; it was now felt, even by those like Chichester-Clark, who were essentially sympathetic to the Stormont prime minister, that O'Neill's 'real fear' and fundamental concerns were, not for his Westminster MPs, but rather the threatened 'tightening of the screws on the Northern Ireland Government'.<sup>57</sup> In this situation, the Westminster Unionists might well be expendable.

Even though a deal with Stormont was not immediately attainable, Wilson remained preoccupied by the strategic importance of the Ulster members, and by the possibility that they might be able to bring down a British government. In November 1968, after the first bloody unrest in Northern Ireland, he and James Callaghan met O'Neill, Brian Faulkner (then Northern Ireland minister of commerce) and Bill Craig (minister of home affairs). This was a critical gathering, when the British ministers were threatening a variety of financial and other sanctions if the Unionists failed to deliver reform in the areas of housing allocation, the local government franchise, and the Special Powers Act. However, Wilson chose to frame the entire meeting with references to the powers of the Ulster Party at Westminster; in his preliminary remarks, he complained that 'it was not unthinkable that the Ulster members could bring down the United Kingdom government by a vote on a matter completely divorced from Northern Irish interests'. He reiterated this point in his concluding statement, again apparently hinting at the possibility of a deal; he emphasized that the present political crisis was exacerbated by the illogical situation that Ulster MPs could freely vote on matters that were not the concern of Northern Ireland, but that Westminster MPs could not intervene directly in the affairs of Northern Ireland where responsibility had been transferred by the Northern Ireland government. He remained of the opinion that the public interest at large would be better served by action by the Northern Ireland government to remedy these grievances; but if the Northern Ireland government failed to take such action a more radical solution would have to be found.<sup>58</sup>

Depictions of the relationship between the Ulster Party and Edward Heath naturally tend to be coloured by the realpolitik of March 1972, when the devolved

<sup>55</sup> Diary notes, 1967–8, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/22.

<sup>56</sup> Bloomfield to RCC, 20 Feb. 1967, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 3/4.

<sup>57</sup> Diary notes, 1967–8, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/22.

<sup>58</sup> Summary note of a meeting with the prime minister of Northern Ireland, 4 Nov. 1968, TNA, PREM 13/2847. The meeting, but not the allusions to the Westminster Unionists, is discussed in Hennessey, *Origins*, p. 155.

parliament at Stormont was prorogued.<sup>59</sup> But such emphases do not take into account the close and complex interconnection between Heath's Conservatives and Ulster Unionism, dating from Heath's time (1951–9) as a Conservative whip. Heath and Robin Chichester-Clark shared a connection, forged in the Whip's Office, which lasted until Heath's death; Chichester-Clark hosted Heath's visits to Northern Ireland, acted as his trusted observer at the Conservative leadership election in 1965, and drafted many of his speeches on Northern Ireland as Opposition Leader.<sup>60</sup> When, in October 1968 and January 1969, Heath's backbenchers were unsettled by the violence in Northern Ireland, they approached Chichester-Clark for assistance with their constituents' queries.<sup>61</sup> Throughout 1970, sympathetic Conservatives such as Bill Deedes or Nicholas Ridley used the Westminster Unionists to learn about, and organize trips to, Northern Ireland.<sup>62</sup> In March 1971, against the background of the resignation of James Chichester-Clark, Westminster Unionists were meeting with likeminded Conservatives such as Philip Goodhart and Julian Amery in order to co-ordinate pressure upon the Heath government, while other backbench Tories such as John Biffen were regularly speaking in strong support of Ulster Unionism.<sup>63</sup> As late as January 1972, Brian Faulkner was reporting that he was receiving help from Conservative backbenchers such as Antony Buck and Norman St John Stevas.<sup>64</sup> The trouble with Westminster Unionism was not that it wholly lacked, but rather that it had insufficient, support; and that its influence over Heath, though real, was ultimately trumped by more powerful factors within the British–Irish relationship.<sup>65</sup>

Edward Heath and the Tories were returned to power in the British general election of 18 June 1970. As early as 12 July 1970, Robin Chichester-Clark (whose brother, James, had been prime minister of Northern Ireland since O'Neill's resignation in April 1969) was arguing to Reginald Maudling, the Conservative home secretary, that the reform policy in Northern Ireland had produced few identifiable gains, and little generosity of response.<sup>66</sup> Heath and Maudling met Chichester-Clark, for whom the failing security situation in Northern Ireland

<sup>59</sup> Norton, 'Conservative politics', pp. 131ff.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Emery, '1922 Committee: election of a leader', 23 July 1965', Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 7/1.

<sup>61</sup> Airey Neave to RCC, 17 Jan. 1969, Patrick Jenkin to RCC, 23 Jan. 1969, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/9; RCC to Bernard Weatherall, David Waddington, John Osborn, Harry Legge-Bourke, Oct. 1968, CCLK 3/28.

<sup>62</sup> Deedes to RCC, 10 Sept. 1970, Ridley to RCC, 28 Feb. 1970, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 3/14, 20.

<sup>63</sup> Goodhart to RCC, 23 Mar. 1971, Biffen to RCC, 26 Mar. 1971, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 3/22; Biffen, copy of speech to Cambridge Young Conservatives, 27 Sept. 1971, CCLK 3/23. Cf. Smith, '“Ever reliable friends”', pp. 72–3, quoting Biffen in Apr. 1974, on the eve of the failure of the Executive.

<sup>64</sup> Faulkner to RCC, 14 Jan. 1972, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/10.

<sup>65</sup> For the growing tensions see e.g. Mills to Pym, 15 Oct. 1971, Chichester-Clark papers, e.g. CCLK 3/23.

<sup>66</sup> RCC to Maudling, 12 July 1970, TNA, PREM 15/101. See also Jeremy Smith, '“Walking a real tightrope of difficulties”': Sir Edward Heath and the search for stability in Northern Ireland', *Twentieth Century British History*, 18 (2007), pp. 219–53, and Paul Arthur, 'The Heath government and

was a particular issue, together with London's evidently insensitive handling of the Stormont government.<sup>67</sup> Progress was promised; and indeed at about this time – July 1970 – a gaggle of experts (including Sir Charles Carter, Lord Crowther, Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, and Thomas Wilson) was commissioned to generate ideas for a possible political settlement in Northern Ireland.<sup>68</sup> But Heath's learning curve was very steep; in October 1970, for example, he was still referring to Sir John Peck, the British ambassador to Ireland (which had not been associated with the Commonwealth since 1949) as 'our High Commissioner in Dublin'.<sup>69</sup>

By the beginning of December 1970, Chichester-Clark felt that there had been little headway, and wrote again to Heath.<sup>70</sup> This was now part of a wider effort on the part of the Westminster Unionists to influence the Conservative government. The quality and seriousness of this wider onslaught undoubtedly varied; Stratton Mills and Chichester-Clark offered reasoned and detailed indictments, while Willie Orr, a genial ex-officer, emoted to Maudling against Sir John Peck: 'My dear Reggie, I have only just been handed this [newspaper interview with Peck]. Could anything be more appalling?'<sup>71</sup> Despite Orr's clubland bluster, Heath took the broad Unionist assault seriously; he minuted Chichester-Clark's letter of 1 December 1970, scribbling to Burke Trend, the cabinet secretary: 'Urgent. This is a mixture of very important points and oversensitivity. Please examine all of them urgently.'<sup>72</sup>

But here the problematic relations between the Westminster Unionists and Belfast which characterized the Stormont years once again came into play. Heath's demand for action landed on the desk of Maudling. Maudling in turn contacted the Stormont prime minister, James Chichester-Clark, who by now was beginning to give way under the pressures of office, increasingly hesitant and incoherent, overly eager to win acceptance in London, easily ambushed in dialogue and negotiations, and pathetically grateful and apologetic. Maudling was able to report to Heath that 'Robin [Chichester-Clark] seems to take a more jaundiced view ... than does James Chichester-Clark, with whom I have had full and detailed discussions.'<sup>73</sup> This, doubtless, was an accurate assessment; and it helped to take much momentum out of the Ulster Party assault, which nevertheless continued to develop into the summer and autumn of 1971. The Party and Stormont, indeed the two Chichester-Clark brothers, were apparently divided over the seriousness of the issues which had been raised. This was a classic

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Northern Ireland', in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon, eds., *The Heath government, 1970–1974: a reappraisal* (London, 1996), p. 241.

<sup>67</sup> Minute of a meeting between Chichester-Clark, Heath, and Maudling, 17 July 1970, TNA, PREM 15/101.

<sup>68</sup> Heath to Trend, 30 July 1970, TNA, PREM 15/101.

<sup>69</sup> Heath to Armstrong, 25 Oct. 1970, TNA, PREM 15/474.

<sup>70</sup> Chichester-Clark to Heath, 1 Dec. 1970, TNA, PREM 15/474.

<sup>71</sup> Orr to Maudling, 23 Nov. 1970, TNA, PREM 15/474.

<sup>72</sup> Chichester-Clark to Heath, 1 Dec. 1970, TNA, PREM 15/474. Cf. Smith, 'Walking a real tightrope', pp. 248–9.

<sup>73</sup> Maudling to Heath, 31 Dec. 1970, TNA, PREM 15/474.

example of the ineffective liaison between Stormont and the Ulster Party which marked virtually the entire period of the devolution experiment.

This division between the Ulster Party and Stormont, so central a theme of this article, characterized the last weeks of the devolved parliament. Direct rule had been an element of British contingency planning since early 1969; legislation to effect this end had been part of the planning, and had been regularly raised, or extracted from the files, at particular moments of crisis in 1969–71.<sup>74</sup> The introduction of internment in August 1971 was widely seen as a last gambit for the existing constitutional arrangements; but in fact it was the killings in Derry on ‘Bloody Sunday’, 30 January 1972, which precipitated the final removal of Stormont.

The Ulster Party did little to avert the disaster which overwhelmed Stormont, but then the events which were in play were far beyond its influence or control. However, despite its deep roots in British contingency planning, direct rule was by no means a fixed goal of British policy, which on the whole favoured subcontracting the whole Ulster mess to the devolved authorities. Opinions are divided in the literature, but the evidence suggests that Heath was only finally converted to the notion of suspending Stormont very late in the day. As late as 1 March 1972 Heath and his ministers were debating a proposal (favoured by Maudling) that Stormont should be curtailed, but preserved, and draft legislation to this effect was in fact commissioned.<sup>75</sup> Famously, Heath put the proposal for a diminished Stormont to Brian Faulkner and his ministers at a critical meeting in Downing Street on 22 March 1972. It was certainly thought likely that Faulkner would reject the government’s scheme; but Heath and his minister could not be sure. In fact Faulkner, who was armed with counter-proposals, did refuse to deal; and he and his Stormont cabinet resigned on 23 March.

It is now clear from the official (and other) archives that the government had been careful to take a wide variety of soundings within the Northern Irish establishment as to the desirability and practicality of direct rule. In December 1971, Ken Bloomfield secretly visited the British representative in Northern Ireland, Howard Smith, to argue both for direct rule and a role for the Irish government in Northern affairs.<sup>76</sup> There were other, confirmatory, perspectives from within the Unionist elite. Smith subsequently interviewed Faulkner’s minister for development, the serpentine Roy Bradford (‘both politically devious and in private conversation indiscreet’), who pronounced in favour of direct rule, as did other Unionist worthies.<sup>77</sup> On 17 February 1972 Maudling met with the leaders of the Westminster Unionists, Chichester-Clark and Mills, and sounded them out on ‘government by commission’ for Northern Ireland (Chichester-Clark raised,

<sup>74</sup> E.g. Michael Latham to Heath, 6 Aug. 1970, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 3/22.

<sup>75</sup> Trend to Heath, 1 Mar. 1970, TNA, PREM 15/1003; Heath to the queen, 9 Mar. 1970, TNA, PREM 15/1004. For a narrative of the count-down to prorogation, see Thomas Hennessey, *The evolution of the Troubles, 1970–1972* (Dublin, 2007), pp. 322–40.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Ramsay, *Ringside seats: an insider’s view of the crisis in Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 2009), pp. 106–7.

<sup>77</sup> Smith to Home Office, 4 Mar. 1972 (telegram), TNA, PREM 15/1003.

hypothetically, the issue of the long-term suspension of Stormont).<sup>78</sup> Chichester-Clark and Mills subsequently met privately with Ian Paisley, who ‘clearly has no love for Stormont or Faulkner. Although P[aisley] is not going to advocate it, it seems to me that he would broadly accept direct rule.’<sup>79</sup>

Maudling having prepared the way, Heath met the entire Ulster Party in the House of Commons on 29 February, and was given their take on direct rule. James Kilfedder was particularly supportive, but the general view of the meeting was that direct rule was negotiable: any qualms arose over timing (‘this might be done in the fulness of time’) rather than from the principle itself.<sup>80</sup> Amongst the other issues raised, the Westminster Unionists were keen to argue for their own enhancement in the event of Stormont’s demise – that ‘if Stormont was abolished, this would mean an increase in the number of Northern Ireland MPs at Westminster’.<sup>81</sup> It took an interval of eight days before an appalled Faulkner got to hear of the meeting: ‘I believe’, he complained to Robin Chichester-Clark, ‘that solidarity on this issue could have an important bearing on how the situation in Northern Ireland is viewed by responsible people in Great Britain, not least the British government.’<sup>82</sup>

Faulkner was correct in his assessment: the critical impression conveyed by this intelligence-gathering was one of division and disorientation. The signals that the Westminster Unionists were emitting suggested that they would not offer impassioned and coherent opposition to direct rule, and such proved to be the case. It was certainly recognized that some individuals were unreliable guides; but the government’s wider soundings within the Unionist elite indicated that there would be no united movement of protest if Heath moved against Stormont.<sup>83</sup> On 24 February, Burke Trend, the cabinet secretary, had mused over how to deal with Faulkner in the event of direct rule, and had wondered ‘how far we might isolate him by political action, i.e. by splitting the Protestants as far as possible’.<sup>84</sup> But in fact there was no need for political action to ‘split the Protestants’. From Westminster down, they were more than capable of splitting themselves.

It is sometimes observed that, in the aftermath of these events, the Ulster Party was divided and ineffective, with only some taking a tough stand against Heath’s action, and others (like Robin Chichester-Clark and Stratton Mills) moving closer

<sup>78</sup> Minutes of a meeting between Reginald Maudlin, RCC, and W. S. Mills, 17 Feb. 1972, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 3/37. This meeting is not mentioned in Hennessey, *Evolution of the Troubles*.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Notes of a meeting at the House of Commons, 7 March 1972’, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 3/37.

<sup>80</sup> Memorandum of a meeting between the prime minister and the Ulster Unionist MPs, 29 Feb. 1972, TNA, PREM 15/1003. This meeting is not mentioned in Hennessey, *Evolution of the Troubles*.

<sup>81</sup> Minute of meeting by Stratton Mills, 29 Feb. 1972, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 3/14.

<sup>82</sup> Faulkner to RCC, 8 Mar. 1972, Chichester-Clark papers, CCLK 1/2.

<sup>83</sup> Record of a discussion between Lord Grey of Naunton and the prime minister, 21 Mar. 1972, TNA, PREM 15/1004.

<sup>84</sup> Trend to prime minister, 24 Feb. 1972, TNA, PREM 15/1003.

to Conservatism.<sup>85</sup> In fact Robin Chichester-Clark's unpublished memoir of 22 March 1972, the day that Stormont was prorogued, suggests that events had not turned out quite as Heath had expected, and that he now indeed relied upon the possibility of creating further division within Ulster Unionism. Late on that evening, Chichester-Clark was summoned to No. 10 Downing Street, where he was smuggled in through the garden: 'the Prime Minister, sitting by himself, said "Good Evening" and then maintained one of his longest and most disconcerting silences before volunteering "this has been the worst day of my life"'.<sup>86</sup> According to Chichester-Clark, Heath asked him to serve as minister of state at the new Northern Ireland Office. For the moment, the temptations of office were refused; but they were clearly designed to divide the 'reasonable' Unionists from their more recalcitrant brethren.

## V

The Ulster Party demonstrates some of the dynamics of regional parliamentary groupings in an era of devolution. The Party has been condemned as second rate, the natural by-product of a constitution where 'real' politics had apparently been sub-contracted out of Westminster. In this characterization, the Party failed because of its low calibre, and above all because of its marginal role within the British party system. In the early 1880s, Parnell had supplied a model of effective independent parliamentary action for such parties; but even he had ultimately fallen victim to the constricting embrace of British Liberalism. Parnellite practice, rather than theory, appeared to signal the fate of all small, national, or provincial parties struggling for survival at Westminster.

Some of the condemnations are accurate; but an alternative, and more varied, reading of the Ulster Party's history is also possible. Its efficiency certainly could be lamentably weak, constrained by a range of influences. But equally there is some evidence to suggest that in the aftermath of devolution the Party continued (in some respects) to perform well, undertaking useful work over matters such as the Boundary Commission. If there was a gradual tendency for political talent (such as it was) to coalesce within the devolved parliament, then there also may have been a period of grace when Westminster continued to function as an important focus for regional loyalties and respect.

The Party was certainly limited by a range of structural problems. It never created a lasting and successful mechanism for liaison with Stormont, even though this issue was revisited periodically from the late 1920s onwards – and systematically from c. 1943 onwards. This meant that the provincial parliament and its representatives in London often took quite different stands on particular issues, and this in turn meant that the wider cause which they embodied, Ulster Unionism, was sometimes relegated. The cacophony of differing Unionist

<sup>85</sup> Norton, 'Conservative politics', p. 134. Smith, ' "Ever reliable friends" ', p. 71.

<sup>86</sup> Notes on Edward Heath's *Course of my life*, CCLK 1/22.

opinions on the issue of direct rule helped to ensure the easy suspension of the devolved parliament itself. In a sense, the Westminster Unionists' (at best) highly ambiguous reaction to direct rule was a fitting culmination to fifty years of often jealous and defensive interaction with Stormont.

The history of the Party also demonstrates that there was no automatic equation between provincialism and marginality. Its members were relatively well placed in the world of early and mid-1950s Conservatism, even if difficulties subsequently multiplied.<sup>87</sup> It was also obvious that even a small number of provincial MPs could occasionally exercise a disproportionate influence over the fate of governments. These two factors – the integration of the Ulster Party within Conservatism, and the Party's strategic significance – were a major preoccupation for Harold Wilson and Labour MPs after 1964. One of the more intriguing counter-factual speculations in modern Irish history involves assessing the wider implications of a deal between Wilson and Terence O'Neill on the powers of the Ulster Party. At the very least, Wilson's concerns illustrate the kind of controversy which the powers and numbers of regional representatives might generate in the context of devolution.

In the end, no crude characterization of the Ulster Party will suffice. The Party certainly failed in some critical respects. This was not because of any particular intellectual deficit, although the quality of individual parliamentary candidates certainly gave periodic cause for concern. Instead, the Party's dogged individualism, divisions, and jealousies, its unwillingness to communicate with Stormont, and its unrelenting Conservatism all created difficulties which would later prove disastrous. The central paradox of the Party's existence was that, for much of its life, it sought simultaneously to be liberated from Belfast and to be enslaved by Conservative Central Office. This meant, ultimately, that, far from being a prop to Stormont, the Party ultimately contributed to its demise. Here, as elsewhere, the practice of devolution proved self-destructive.

<sup>87</sup> See Smith, '“Ever reliable friends”'.