THE PARTIES TO THE CONFLICT

A fundamental problem since the earliest years of Northern Ireland's existence has been the disagreement not just about how Northern Ireland should be governed, but as to whether it should continue to exist at all.

British Government White Paper, 1973

Characteristics of Political Organization in Ulster

The parties to political debate in Ulster are not the organizations familiar to American or British politicians. While some organize to advance their aims by winning votes at elections, others use violence and are organized to do everything from providing armed defense of communities to carrying out assassinations and bombings. A few groups do both. These are dual-purpose movements, with one wing concentrating on electoral politics and another on violent politics. There are also protest groups that move back and forth in the shadowy world between what is formally legal and formally illegal.

To understand the politics of Northern Ireland, one must understand something about each group separately and recognize the coalitions that can be formed in efforts to govern or disrupt the government of the Province. Politicians who differ about everything including the constitution may nonetheless agree that their differences should be settled in a parliamentary fashion. Similarly, paramilitary groups in the two communities may share one assumption: that the ideals for which they fight can be justified by the political theory of "Mr. Colt," an Ulster euphemism for settling differences with guns.

For its size, Northern Ireland can claim more political organizations than any other society in the Western world. One reason for
this is that almost any organization can be political—a football or hurling team, a folk song club, or a children's group that describes itself as a Protestant flute band. Individuals can belong to several groups at once or move in and out of a variety of organizations with bewildering speed. For example, one prominent Protestant politician has served two three-month jail sentences for leading protest demonstrations and has been deported from Italy for leading a protest against Protestant talks with the Vatican. Subsequently, he has consistently won masses of votes in his election campaigns. A leading member of the Social Democratic and Labour party was in the IRA and the Irish Labour party and then was chairman of the Northern Ireland Labour party, prior to becoming a founding member of the SDLP. While the party labels change, many of the faces behind them are familiar.

The intimate size of Northern Ireland, especially in the villages and countryside outside Belfast, throws politicians into frequent contact with each other and with officials of other organizations. M.P.s from opposing parties share drinks at the same bar in Stormont or in the hospitality room of a television company after a program. In their constituencies politicians rub shoulders with members of paramilitary organizations and with clergymen of their own faith, as well as with ordinary constituents looking for community leaders to help them with their personal problems. And they notice what "the other side" is doing to maintain or subvert civil government and public order.

The Use of Arms. Paramilitary groups in Ulster have a much longer history among both Catholics and Protestants than do political parties. They were first formed in the eighteenth century, after the religious wars between English and continental European troops in seventeenth-century Ireland and before the introduction of a permanent nationwide police force in 1836. At their least organized, the groups of that day resembled the vigilantes or posses on the American frontier, ad hoc collections of friends and neighbors organized in self-defense to secure what they regarded as theirs by whatever rough and ready means were at hand, in the absence of settled and effective institutions of law and order. These groups, some public, others secret, persisted in the nineteenth century; they were involved in actions as carefully calculated as assassinations and rebellions and as

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