The Northern Irish Parties: the Background

Sarah Nelson

Constitutionally, Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. Yet the politics of the province have been different in some fundamental ways from British politics; so, traditionally, has been its two-party system. Historically, the parties did not share a basic loyalty to the state itself; on the contrary, their main division was over whether the Northern Ireland regime should exist at all. The Unionists stoutly defended the Border and the British link: the Nationalists demanded Irish unification. Secondly, the electorate was divided on religious rather than class lines – most Protestants voted for the Unionist Party, most Catholics for the Nationalist Party. Thirdly, stability did not result from competitiveness or the alternation of parties in government. Such stability – or stagnation – as existed resulted from the fact that the Protestants were in a permanent two-thirds majority. Fourthly, the parties did not see themselves as national groups competing for the ‘middle-ground’ vote among all sections of the population. Parties stood for one religious community, made no attempt to win votes from the other, and had little faith that such an attempt would succeed. There was no ‘middle-ground’ to appeal to anyway – what little existed voted for third parties, such as the Northern Ireland Labour Party.

The political culture was also very different from the British one. Despite many important differences between Protestant and Catholic ideology, both religious communities tended to share certain political
values. First, the constitutional issue took priority over socio-economic issues, except for short periods and in exceptional circumstances. People were divided over non-compromisable issues; hence politics had many of the characteristics of a zero-sum game. Refusal to compromise was synonymous with honesty and integrity, compromise with weakness, treachery and appeasement. Each side was expected to work 'for its own': while people complained about discrimination and Catholics felt it to be a serious injustice, people expected it to happen as a normal part of political life. It was difficult for many to imagine that if Catholics gained some benefit Protestants would not lose one, and vice versa.

Most political outcomes were highly predictable: Stormont was less a real debating chamber than a gladiatorial arena for the ritual restatement of old positions. When the vote was taken in the House, the Unionists always won. Few constituencies were marginal: many seats remained uncontested for decades. Most people in politics behaved as they were expected to—this may have been boring, but it lent important reassurance in a society riddled with so many tensions and divisions. Political careers did not tend to attract the intelligent or unconventional while the rewards for those who joined third parties were low. Many people (especially the professional middle class) opted out of politics, and lamented the bigotry of politicians from a safe distance; others emigrated, and some felt deeply alienated, a few sufficiently to prefer the gun to politics.

Terence O'Neill, who became Prime Minister in 1963, challenged many of the traditional rules and assumptions we have described; so did the Catholic civil rights movement. O'Neill saw the future stability of Northern Ireland in the reconciliation of Catholics to the Northern Ireland regime and to Unionist party government. He spoke for a growing number of middle-class Protestants who felt hampered and embarrassed by the old rigidities. They wanted to develop good economic relationships with Britain, Eire and foreign countries, attract investment, and modernise the economy. They looked to a future in the EEC and saw themselves as Europeans rather than as Ulstermen. O'Neill was thus turning many traditional values upside down—implying that some Catholics could be 'loyal' and trusted, that material values were more important than non-material ones, that both religious groups could be economic and political winners in the 'game'. Moderation became a virtue rather than a vice, ambition and efficiency were new gods, parochialism (or local pride) was shameful rather than praiseworthy.