# The Progressive Unionist Party of Northern Ireland: A Left-Wing Voice in an Ethnically Divided Society

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*The Progressive Unionist party (PUP) was formed in the late 1970s and is one of the smallest political parties in Northern Ireland, both in terms of its membership size and its share of the vote, which translates into only a tiny number of elected representatives. Yet, supporters and critics alike have marked it out as one of the most distinctive voices in Northern Irish politics—in the main because of its democratic socialist ideology and its class-based character. This article examines the PUP's political programme, its membership and support base, its role in the peace process and its relationship with illegal loyalist terrorist organisations. It does so by drawing on current debates in the political science literature about ethnic parties in divided societies. Moreover, it focuses on the often neglected relationship between ethnicity and class in the PUP in order to explain how the party understands and contributes towards the peace process and democratic stability in Northern Ireland.*

**Keywords**: Progressive Unionist party; Northern Ireland; ethnic parties; class

It is essential that the PUP perseveres on the political scene. As a party, and as a set of ideas and as a collection of individuals, the PUP represent something bigger than one seat in the Stormont Assembly ... You represent a tradition in Northern Ireland's politics that is not as often celebrated as more divisive traditions. Yours is the voice of a distinction that is not divisive. We all know which confessional 'side' most of your activists come from. You are unashamedly for the continuation of the union with Great Britain. But what makes you different from the other two big unionist parties is your commitment to a vision of an articulate and progressive working class playing its full role in the political life of Northern Ireland (Peter Bunting, Assistant General Secretary, ICTU, 13 October 2007).

## Introduction

This article examines the career of the Progressive Unionist party of Northern Ireland (hereafter PUP) since its formation in 1979. It asks, despite all of the available commentary pointing to the contrary, how the PUP has managed to remain so politically resilient in light of its low electoral support. What is its real contribution to the political and peace processes in Northern Ireland, and what can this tell us about the nature of the party when we situate it within the broader context of the study of left-leaning parties in ethnically divided societies? In

addressing these core objectives, the article is organised into three main parts. Part one analyses the party's ideology, membership and political career, drawing on the available literature on ethnic parties to argue that the PUP is first and foremost an ethnic-based party—rooted firmly in the Protestant unionist community—which articulates a unique left-leaning political programme. Part two examines the PUP from the perspective of a survey of the party's membership, carried out by the author at its 2007 annual conference,[1] and thereby offering an empirically informed critique of the existing literature. Arguably, most available critiques of the party have been advanced by sociologists—with political scientists generally conspicuous by their absence—leading to a narrow disciplinary focus on the party's identity and less concern with its actual *political significance* in Northern Ireland's so-called 'ethnic dual party system' (Mitchell 1995). Finally, the article explains for the first time just how the PUP is linked to two illegal loyalist terrorist groupings, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and Red Hand Commando (RHC), detailing what implications such a relationship has had for the party's political development. The main argument put forward here is twofold: that the PUP has been chronically under-researched and under-theorised and this has led to a skewed understanding of its significance *vis-à-vis* the political and peace processes in Northern Ireland.

## The PUP's Unique 'Voice'

The development of the PUP since the loyalist paramilitary ceasefires in October 1994 is somewhat synonymous with the former leader of the party, David Ervine,[2] who died unexpectedly in January 2007 (see BBC 2007a). Arguably Ervine was representative of a distinctive working-class unionist voice within Northern Irish politics that has proven considerably resilient over the past three decades, despite the existence of deep-rooted ethno-national and religious divisions. It could even be said that he personified his party's brand of democratic socialism, while communicating it effectively to a wider audience. Like its former leader, the PUP views its role in the 'peace process' in pragmatic terms—as that of a political vanguard, providing leadership to the Protestant working class who have been abandoned by 'traditional unionism' (PUP 1979, 1985, 1996 and 2007a; McAuley 2004, 528–529). Nonetheless, the PUP does not enjoy popular legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate, nor does it command a significant share of the vote from within the Protestant working-class community. While there are several plausible reasons for the party's poor electoral performance, it seems likely that 'it is the structure of Ulster politics that makes it easy for working-class Protestants not to support paramilitaries' (Bruce 1992, 242), or any loyalist paramilitary-linked parties for that matter, which remains the principal obstacle to its political advancement. Moreover, a further complicating factor for small left-of-centre parties in Northern Ireland is the nature of the party system itself, which is often characterised as 'ethno-national-religious' because 'national identity and religious affiliation (often intertwined) are the most important variables in terms of party choice' (Tonge 2006, 167). Ten years after the signing of the Belfast Agreement the party system remains unchanged and shows little likelihood of realigning along left–right lines (Tonge 2006, 203).[3]

Notwithstanding its lack of popular endorsement supporters and critics alike have marked the PUP out as one of the most distinctive voices in unionist and Northern

Irish politics (Feeney 2006; Bunting 2007). As Monica McWilliams, the former leader of the Women's Coalition (a now defunct political party that sought to represent female interests), recalled:

> When that voice came to the [negotiating] table in terms of having read widely, having studied the situation, and having engaged with other people, they came to the table with a different analysis, and they were very courageous individuals because they were contesting their own tribe, and that's a real sign of a leader (cited in Gormley-Heenan 2001, 34).

Despite the party's unique democratic socialist ideology and class-based character, the academic literature has failed adequately to explore the inter-relationship of the concepts of class and ethnicity in the case of the PUP, and arguably *inter alia* the party system in Northern Ireland more broadly.

## The PUP: Political Identity and Ideology

Since its formation in 1979 the PUP has been the only unionist party to lobby consistently for what it terms the 'sharing of responsibility' between unionists and nationalists (PUP, 2007c). Despite the overwhelming Protestant unionist complexion of its membership it never advocated the return to majority rule, popularly favoured by the two mainstream unionist parties at various times since the collapse of the one-party-dominated Stormont parliament in March 1972. Indeed, some scholars have labelled the PUP's politics a form of 'civic unionism' *vis-à-vis* the 'ethnic unionism' of its rivals in the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). While these categories are somewhat oversimplistic (Walker 2004, 225), it can be argued that the former brand is more obviously British orientated with a clear perusal for power-sharing between Protestant unionists and Irish nationalists in a Northern Ireland context, while the latter displays a tendency for parochialism and a 'deflated superiority complex' (Finlay 2001, 4). According to Jon Tonge the PUP's civic unionist philosophy 'goes further than the limited form of civic unionism developed by the pro-GFA[4] wing of the UUP in seeking loyalist co-operation with the strident representatives of northern nationalism and the promotion of radical politics from below' (Tonge 2005, 197). And in Graham Walker's (2004, 253) view:

> The extent to which the PUP and the UDP became significant players in what had come to be called 'the peace process' helped shift the centre of gravity within Unionism away from the religious and ethnic pole towards a secular and civic one, and in so doing rather undermined the validity of the scholarly models of Unionism which had hitherto dominated the field.

Thus, even though the party commands its overwhelming membership, support and votes from within the Protestant working-class community, it has made overtures to the minority Catholic community (PUP 1985).

Unlike ethnic-exclusivist parties, then, whose aim is to gain control of the state and exempt from power all others, the PUP favours a form of conciliatory politics at a local level which 'produces a new style of politics that replaces the senseless tribalism that dominates our past' (PUP, 2007c). The PUP seeks to empower the

Protestant working class by lobbying government and in so doing it strongly emphasises its class-based character (Purvis 2007; PUP 2007c). The coexistence of ethnic and class variables in a political party is entirely plausible. As Donald Horowitz (2000, 7) observes, '[n]owhere, of course, is politics simply reducible to the common denominator of ethnic ties. Even in the most severely divided society, there are also other issues'.[5] In the PUP's case one of the most important independent variables is class identity, which is perhaps one of the most under-researched aspects of party politics in Northern Ireland and other divided societies (see Edwards 2009b, for a similar argument).

There is certainly anecdotal evidence of the PUP receiving Catholic votes in marginal areas, such as Short Strand in East Belfast and in Newtownabbey on the outskirts of North Belfast, but in reality it is a little more complicated to ascertain exact voting patterns. Empirically, and as the latest Assembly election results from 2007 illustrate, the party did win approximately 408 transferred votes in the contest from the two principal nationalist parties Sinn Fein and the SDLP, 116 more transfers than the party received from the unionist bloc and 90 short of the number of transfers from the bi-confessional bloc made up of Alliance party, Greens and Others (Northern Ireland Assembly Research Report 2007, 37). Nevertheless, the limited nature of voting across the traditional ethno-national divide means that we must analyse such statistics with caution before viewing the PUP as an inter-ethnic party; above all it draws its members, supporters and voters from an ethnically exclusive pool, that is, the Protestant unionist community. Put simply, the PUP is an ethnic party with a left-leaning civic unionist political outlook. Furthermore, its relationship with the UVF and RHC makes it difficult for many Catholic nationalists to consider voting for the party based on common socioeconomic concerns.

Notwithstanding the lack of a cross-community complexion the PUP remains a party with a left-leaning programme. The PUP's own Constitution is modelled on that of the earlier labourist Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP), although the former has always been more explicit in its support for the unionist position than the latter (Edwards 2007; Edwards 2009b). While it makes room for both individual and affiliated membership it seems that the stress is again on individual membership as no trades unions, community-based organisations or other interest groups are formally represented at the party's conference. The PUP (1996) lists among its main objectives: 'To organise and maintain in Parliaments, National and Regional, a Political Labour and Unionist Party' while at the same time it maintains a steadfast vigilance 'To watch over, promote and protect the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom'. These key objectives reinforce its unique socialist and unionist character. Indeed article 4.5. in the PUP's Constitution retains the Old Weberian Clause 4 from the British Labour Party Constitution, which aims:

> To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.

It is obvious from the party's aims and objectives that it remains rooted firmly in the working-class community it seeks to represent and places the promotion of the

'Political, Social and Economic emancipation of the people of Northern Ireland, and more particularly of those who depend upon their exertions by hand or brain for the means of life' at the very apex of its policy decisions. Unlike the NILP, which was more explicitly democratic socialist and non-confessional (Edwards 2007, 2008 and 2009b), the PUP articulates its entire political programme from a mainly working-class unionist perspective (Edwards 2007).

The PUP was the by-product of a unique set of political circumstances in the 1970s and can trace its genesis to two political parties: the Volunteer Political Party (VPP) and the NILP. Its discourse on power-sharing developed from the thinking of Gusty Spence, the first commander of the UVF, who articulated the need for loyalists and republicans to 'sit down together for the good of our country' as early as July 1977 (cited in Purvis 2009). Yet it was built principally on the existing political foundations and the policy experience of two former members of the NILP, David Overend and Jim McDonald. Both were members of the Shankill branch of the NILP. Overend in particular 'played a major role in the formation of the PUP ... coming from a Northern Ireland Labour Party background. [H]is policy documents (and he did do most of them) would have been based on his Labour tendencies' (Interview, Jim McDonald, 4 May 2005).[6] The NILP successfully tapped into the labourist culture prevalent within the Protestant working-class constituency. Unlike the PUP, however, it built up an avowedly inter-ethnic support base which reflected the divided society in which it operated. What marked the NILP out was its non-confessional political programme and willingness to work within the confines of the Northern Ireland parliamentary system to lobby local government on the socioeconomic concerns of its constituents (Edwards 2007, 2008 and 2009b). Both the VPP and the NILP failed to gain much headway in the 1970s and collapsed due to a complex set of circumstances, including a deteriorating security situation, a segmented party system and voter apathy.

The failure to cultivate political legitimacy among the Protestant working-class electorate has been a frustrating enterprise for left-leaning political parties like the PUP. Over the past 25 years the PUP has gone from describing itself as a 'socialist unionist party' (PUP 1985 and 1986) to now seeing itself as 'a labour orientated party, committed to achieving a new Northern Ireland, free from the mismanaged and stale politics of the past' (PUP 2007a; see also PUP 2003; 2004). This identity emerged from the dissatisfaction on the part of some of its activists of 'decades of under and misrepresentation of the Unionist working class by traditional Unionist parties. These parties claim to represent the Unionist/Loyalist working class, but their policies work in direct opposition to this claim'. The party is committed to working towards 'an anti-sectarian and pluralist Northern Ireland' (PUP 2007a).

There is certainly evidence to suggest that people join and support the PUP for a variety of reasons. According to a membership survey undertaken by the author in 2007, most PUP members joined the party for a range of reasons. Some of the most commonly voiced were: 'support for David Ervine', 'for change', 'to get involved in something positive within the loyalist community', 'to help Ulster to a socialist and democratic future', 'to work with progressive elements in working class areas', 'to help my community and get away from red, white and blue and green, white and gold [politics]' and because of 'the party's approach to conflict transformation'. That

most members have a good understanding of the party's political programme is attributable principally to the articulation of party policies by its spokespeople, as well as the induction programme devised and delivered by the party's political education officer, Dugald McCullough.

Further assumptions about the nature of the party's programme were confirmed by the survey questions dealing with members' understanding of the party's significance. In answer to the question: 'What do you think the PUP stands for?', 42 per cent of all respondents said 'socialism', 26 per cent said 'working class', 16 per cent said 'loyalist' and the remaining 16 per cent said 'unionist'. This correlates with the other question asked: 'In your opinion, who does the PUP represent?', to which 71 per cent of all respondents replied either 'working class' or a mix of 'working-class loyalists' and/or 'working-class unionists'. A minority were divided between either 'the people', 'everyone' or the 'UVF/RHC'. The latter answer is curious given that, historically speaking, loyalist paramilitaries have refused to permit political activism to overshadow military prowess. In this post-Agreement era the paramilitary rank and file continue to look upon politics sceptically. In a constituency where UVF and PUP activists work closely together on community development issues, some middle-ranking militarists feel more endeared to larger unionist parties to represent them in terms of constitutional politics (Bloomer 2008). Thus, while the main function of a party like the PUP is to contest elections and to seek a mandate from its supporters, that does not preclude it from flagging up the distinctiveness of its left-leaning ideology *vis-à-vis* the conservatism of its opponents in the mainstream unionist parties (Bruce 2001, 30).

This practice of 'thinking outside the box' (*Irish News*, 11 October 2004), as David Ervine once put it, has always been a difficult concept for the PUP to communicate to its wider electoral support base. Some of the party's representatives have encountered an underlying 'conservatism' in some sections of the loyalist community which has impacted on the PUP's ability to sell its radical left-wing politics (Interview, Dawn Purvis, 4 August 2005;[7] see also McAuley 2002, 110). Nevertheless, while electoral space clearly existed 'for a populist secular unionist party which can articulate the interests of the poor working-class cultural Protestants' (McGarry and O'Leary 1995, 406) in the wake of the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994, it remains to be seen whether the PUP can offer this counter-hegemonic electoral challenge at a time when the DUP has clearly exerted its dominance in unionist politics.

As suggested above, the PUP draws most of its support from the Protestant working class (McAuley 2004). At the PUP's annual conference in 1995 the veteran UVF commander turned PUP activist, Gusty Spence (1995) illuminated the differences between his party and what he termed 'traditional unionism':

> Along the way Unionism became sullied and distant, with the interests of the selfish placed above the needs of the country, with the name Unionism being equated with all that is rotten in our Society and it is our firm undertaking to win it back for the ordinary people and make it accountable, accessible, confident and caring. That is the commitment of the Progressive Unionist Party.

Three years later Ervine (1998; see also Ervine 2002) used similar language when he stated that 'it has been mostly working-class people who have borne the brunt of the violence over these past twenty-five years and they are sick and tired of political sabre-rattling and mischievousness from whatever quarter'. The clear blue water that the PUP has placed between its political programme and that of the mainstream unionist parties has made it, to borrow Peter Bunting's (2007) phrase, a 'voice of a distinction that is not divisive'. This was something articulated by the party as early as 1981:

> The Progressive Unionist Party is a minority party and has not sought to build an undemocratic structure, neither have we any intention of doing so. Our political ideologies are aimed at securing a Democratic Devolved Administration serving the needs of all the people of Northern Ireland and there is no better approach than majority consent (PUP 1981).

Arguably, the distinction became more marked in the wake of the paramilitary ceasefires when the party mushroomed in size. Consequently, without sophisticated party machinery at its disposal it soon found it faced 'difficulty in coping with the influx of new members' (Bloomer 2008, 98). The development of the PUP since the late 1970s—particularly in organisation and electoral performance—has thrown up further challenges and possibilities for the party.

## The PUP as an 'Ethnic Party'

This article draws on the literature on ethnic parties (Horowitz 1971, 2000 and 2002; Chandra 2001 and 2005; Farrington 2008) to explain the PUP's political significance *vis-à-vis* its main unionist rivals. It argues that we must move beyond Irish (and Northern Irish) particularity and view the PUP's career in conventional political science terms. Too often scholars have allowed journalistic sensationalism to prevent them from making an objective judgement on the type of political party the PUP professes to be and how the 'ethnic dual party system' impacts on its political development. This has hindered our understanding of the party and obscured the true nature of the party. As Horowitz observes:

> Whether ethnic parties emerge—and when—how many of them, their relative strength, and their interactions all have much to do with group division and cohesion. And the contours of the party system in an ethnically divided society have a profound effect on the ethnic outcomes of party politics (Horowitz 2000, 293).

What adds to the complex web of symbolism and meaning appropriated by ethnic groups in Northern Ireland is their close proximity to national identity which manifests itself in distinctly political terms. As Ernest Gellner (1983, 94) suggests:

> In fact, ethnicity enters the political sphere as 'nationalism' at times when cultural homogeneity or continuity (not classlessness) is required by the economic base of social life, and when consequently culture-linked class differences become noxious, while ethnically unmarked, gradual class differences remain tolerable.

The class dimension in moderate ethnic conflicts tends to be overlooked, and this is particularly the case in Northern Ireland. Some authors cite the dominance of the

'ethnic conflict studies' paradigm in scholarly research on political parties and institutions in the province as the principal reason for a dearth in class-based accounts (Coulter 1999), while others point to the limited impact of the variable of class on the reinforcing ethno-national identities of the province's two main traditions (McGarry and O'Leary 1995 and 2004). Nonetheless it is impossible to understand the true dynamics of the conflict, and the phenomenon of loyalist politics, without taking into account the interplay of culture, ethnicity, national identity, religion *and* class (Edwards 2007, 2008 and 2009b).

Politically speaking, categorisation becomes even more complicated when divisions are manifest within and between ethnic blocs. Sometimes this gives rise to 'ethnic outbidding':

> An ethnic party appeals to voters as the champion of the interests of one ethnic category or set of categories to the exclusion of others, and makes such an appeal central to its mobilising strategy. The key aspect of this definition is exclusion. An ethnic party may champion the interests of more than one ethnic category, but only by identifying the common ethnic enemy to be excluded (Chandra 2005, 236).

This definition is perhaps more apt for the larger DUP or UUP, than the PUP, in the main because the latter has advocated the inclusive option of sharing power between Protestants and Catholics since its inception, not merely as a tactic to be exploited for political gain at the expense of political rivals. Nevertheless, in practice the PUP has also played up its unionist political identity when 'the other' threatened to upset the ethnic balance of power in the Northern Ireland Assembly. For example, Ervine justified his decision to take the PUP into an assembly alliance with the UUP by saying that the party had decided to put 'country before party' (Ervine 2006). However, for more critical commentators it showed that he had 'conceded that the unionist vote is a purely tribal vote. He has given up and returned to sectarian politics' (Feeney 2006, 2). Moreover, for his former Assembly colleague Billy Hutchinson,[8] who vehemently disagreed with Ervine's move, 'we [the PUP] are a separate party, we have our own identity and we need to row our own boat' (Interview, Billy Hutchinson, 14 December 2007).

When David Ervine died in January 2007 his successor Dawn Purvis played to the party's 'unionist wing' in a bid to retain the former's seat; this was regarded by many critics as a sign of the seemingly skin-thin socialism underpinning the party's programme. That the party has been able to prioritise ethno-national sentiment above democratic socialist values is evidence of the coexistence of what Ervine called the two main 'wings' within the party: the 'socialist wing' and the 'unionist wing' (Ervine 2006). A less sceptical interpretation would argue that the PUP is committed to democratic socialism and that the beating of the 'ethnic loyalty drum' was a tactical recognition of the prevailing political culture in Northern Ireland. Sometimes the PUP's leadership made decisions based on the need to keep the party from losing its relevance in the local political scene. As Ervine himself observed, 'I think we live as small socialist fish in a right-wing sea' (Interview, David Ervine, 21 September 2004).

Nonetheless, this is an inadequate explanation of the complex processes at work. As Christopher Farrington (2008, 28) contends, the ideological boundary between

loyalism and unionism is 'hazy' and '[w]e know much more about the dynamics of conflict between ethnic groups than we do about the internal dynamics of ethnic groups'. However, there were times when the lines of demarcation were more marked than Farrington's analysis allows. In the entire period throughout the history of the Northern Ireland state (1920–72), clear divisions became manifest as the unionist regime sought to stymie the threat posed by a range of hostile independent unionist and labour challenges to its 'cross-class alliance' (Bew et al. 2002, 27). In trying to explain the phenomenon of unionist unity Cynthia Enloe has asked an important question:

> Why, then, did the Protestant community not split along class lines and thus dilute the ethnic cleavages threatening Northern Ireland's security? There have indeed been numerous attempts to combine Catholic poor and Protestant poor into a single class movement ... Sectarianism and racism, each raised to the level of ethnic loyalty by association with language and culture have managed to hold an ethnic community together. In the long run solidarity could not be built with flimsy material (Enloe 1973, 172).

However, the measured success of post-war political parties like the NILP, which attempted to transcend sectarianism, ultimately floundered when the constitutional issue took primacy (McGarry and O'Leary 1995, 156).

While this article agrees with the orthodox view that ethnicity is the primary ascriptive indicator of political choice in Northern Ireland, it questions the extent to which it is the *only* determinant factor, particularly in terms of social and political relationships within the Protestant community. Rather, what is being argued here is that the PUP is a unique class-based party operating in an ethnic party system, with a democratic socialist political ideology and a civic unionist stance on the constitutional question. Moreover, the PUP is the product of a class-based expression of loyalist identity and open criticism of the traditional forms of unionist leadership. As Walker has observed, the 'introduction of Direct Rule reduced overnight the Unionist Party from a party of government with patronage at its disposal, to a body of incoherent and ineffectual protest' (Walker 2004, 212). As a direct consequence the class-based tensions that the party had hitherto successfully challenged in the post-war period re-emerged in the form of radical loyalist parties—some left wing (like the PUP) and some right wing (in the form of independent loyalist and unionist politicians)—distinguished by their two-pronged hostility to the status quo and by their plebeian character (Nelson 1984). As Walker (2004, 212) writes, the Unionist party 'had been forced to mutate into a governing machine while continuing to embody a communal will; hence when deprived of the reins of government it stood as a symbol of tarnished ethnic honour'.

In an 'ethnic dual party system', which is segmented along vertical rather than horizontal lines, this is an inevitable outcome of the transformation in the political fortunes of those at the bottom of the societal ladder. As Horowitz explains, 'Vertical systems thus may possess more social cement than do horizontal at some stages in their evolution. But when the cement cracks, the edifice usually collapses: when vertical systems are undermined, they undergo fundamental transformation' (Horowitz 1971, 234).

Such a reconfiguration took place after 1972, when the unionist regime capitulated in the wake of the suspension of its devolved administration by the British government. Unionism has been attempting to restore a form of majoritarian government since then, despite alienation by the minority (Cunningham 2001, 13; Murray and Tonge 2005). The opposition of the minority Catholic community to a return to majoritarian rule meant that a restoration of government would only be acceptable on the basis of power-sharing between Catholics and Protestants. As the leading nationalist party after 1971 the SDLP also called for power-sharing with an Irish dimension. Thus, various attempts had been made by the British government after 1972 to reinstate a form of local administration—with confederal British–Irish trappings—that would command the necessary local, national and international legitimacy needed to sustain a settlement.

## Party Structure, Organisation and Electoral Performance

In concert with other ethnic parties in Northern Ireland, the PUP 'identifies with the cause of the ethnic group it represents' (Horowitz 2000, 296), in this case the Protestant unionist community. Nevertheless it is unique in having a democratic socialist ideology, class-based character and close association with two illegal terrorist groups. Despite its diminutive size it has branches—some large like the East Belfast Constituency Association, some small like the Londonderry Constituency Association—scattered across the six counties.

Perhaps the principal reason why the PUP has failed to attract more members is due to its close association with the UVF and RHC (Edwards 2009a). Traditionally the party has given political analysis to both organisations since its formation in 1979, yet the relationship remains ill-defined. Some senior party strategists have maintained that 'the PUP is a separate organisation. There is plenty of evidence to show that the UVF don't vote for the PUP, so it would be wrong to say the PUP is the political voice of the UVF' (Interview, Billy Mitchell, 27 September 2005).[9] Publicly the UVF rarely interferes with the PUP's political decisions. However, behind the scenes the UVF still holds the power of influence over some of the party's membership, in that certain PUP members have also been paramilitants. Hypothetically UVF members could also be paid up PUP members. In reality some are and this close association allows members of the former to shuttle back and forward to the non-combatant ranks of the latter. There remains no reciprocal mechanism for those PUP members who wish to cross over to the military wing.[10]

Despite its close association with the UVF and RHC, the PUP is not 'a front for the paramilitary UVF', as some commentators have suggested (Bruce 2007, 121). Indeed, PUP strategists themselves have described the relationship in less complicated terms:

> The PUP grew out of the UVF, [yet] they are separate organisations. The leadership of the UVF asks the PUP for political analysis—that's at the macro level. At the grassroots level the UVF can't order its men to vote for the PUP. The vast majority don't vote for the PUP. Within the UVF you have people who are not aligned to any particular party—some [are] conservative, capitalist, left-wing, socialist—the best way to view the

relationship is the way some commentators [describe] it—one provides political analysis for the other. Sometimes the analysis is accepted, at other times rejected. This is the PUP's problem with the IMC [International Monitoring Commission], which insists that the PUP should be able to turn UVF violence off. Definitely following Canary Wharf—through that period to when the ceasefire was reinstated—the UVF took advice from the PUP (Interview, Billy Mitchell, 27 September 2005).

The relationship between 'party' and 'army' poses something of a dilemma to those in the former who have never been associated with paramilitarism; this is a situation that the party's new leader, Dawn Purvis, is attempting to rectify. Purvis is a technocrat, who has made moves towards modernising the party in its new post-Ervine phase of development. And there is much evidence that the association between the PUP and UVF is becoming less entangled and messy. Importantly, this goes some way to address the old argument within progressive loyalist ranks that because the UVF was chiefly responsible for forming the PUP in the first place, it will continue to dictate policy. As outlined above, apart from being inaccurate, the UVF is not represented on the PUP Executive Committee, nor does it control the party. As a left-of-centre political party, modelled on the British Labour Party, the central authority for the PUP remains the sovereignty of its annual party conference (PUP 1996). The UVF does not attend the party conference en masse, although some individual members who 'wear two hats' can be found loitering around outside the conference room, a practice common among Provisional IRA members attending annual Sinn Fein *Ard Fheis* meetings.

Apart from its relationship with illegal paramilitary groups, the PUP's main distin-guishing feature is that—to date—it is the only unionist party ever to have elected a female as its leader. The party leader is elected tri-annually by the party's conference and executes his or her duties in accordance with the rules as laid down in the Constitution and Standing Orders. In practical terms the party leader is at the centre of activity and, along with the deputy leader, is 'responsible for giving political leadership and guidance to the Party on matters pertaining to policy, strategy and political development' (PUP 1996).

In terms of leadership style the party has been characterised by three main phases. The first phase lasted from 1977 to 2002, when Hugh Smyth, the longest-serving councillor in Belfast, presided over the growth of the party 'from a single branch of around thirty members located in Belfast, to a structured party with a claimed membership of around 600, organised across eleven branches' (McAuley and Tonge 2001). The second phase, between 2002 and 2007, is synonymous with Ervine's cavalier leadership style, which provoked controversy but won many plaudits from middle-class unionists and nationalists who were disgruntled by the Reverend Ian Paisley's 'fire and brimstone' rhetoric. The third phase has only really begun, and corresponds with Ervine's death and the election of his successor Dawn Purvis to the party leadership and to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Purvis' elevation was celebrated by the party as a sign of the progressive nature of its politics. Given the machismo-centric culture of loyalist paramilitary politics, the elevation of Purvis, a woman, to high office is doubly remarkable. Each of these phases in the party's leadership brought a distinctive working-class voice to the high politics of Northern Ireland.

Organisationally the PUP draws most of its key support from branches in East and North Belfast, North Down, East Antrim, North Antrim, Mid-Ulster and Londonderry. Empirical evidence generated by the author's survey suggests that branches are tiny, with only four members, on average, regularly attending meetings of the Duncairn and Castle (North Belfast) constituency, while Pottinger in East Belfast recorded the highest turnout of 12 members. These figures, while non-generalisable, do reinforce how diminutive the PUP actually is at local branch level. In fact in East Antrim, North Down, Strangford and North Antrim only about eight to ten members regularly attend branch meetings; interestingly, despite Hugh Smyth's continued re-election to Belfast City Council for Court Ward in the Woodvale area, no local branch structure actually exists in the Shankill Road area of West Belfast (Interview, Billy Hutchinson, 14 December 2007). While the survey did not reveal the extent of the PUP's overall membership figures, it is probably safe to speculate that the party's membership has substantially decreased from 600 members in 2000 to just over 100 by 2007. If this is the case then approximately half of the party's members attended the annual party conference on 13 October 2007.

In electoral terms the PUP has made little headway (see Figure 1 for electoral performance). This is indicative of other moderate parties operating in societies divided by ethnic cleavages and prone to centrifugal tendencies at the polls (see Mitchell et al. 2009). A process of ethnic outbidding has been in train since the collapse of the old unionist administration in 1972, which saw the DUP gain momentum and the old Unionist party haemorrhage support in various directions.

**Figure 1: PUP Electoral Perfomance, 1981–2007**

PUP Electoral Perfomance, 1981–2007
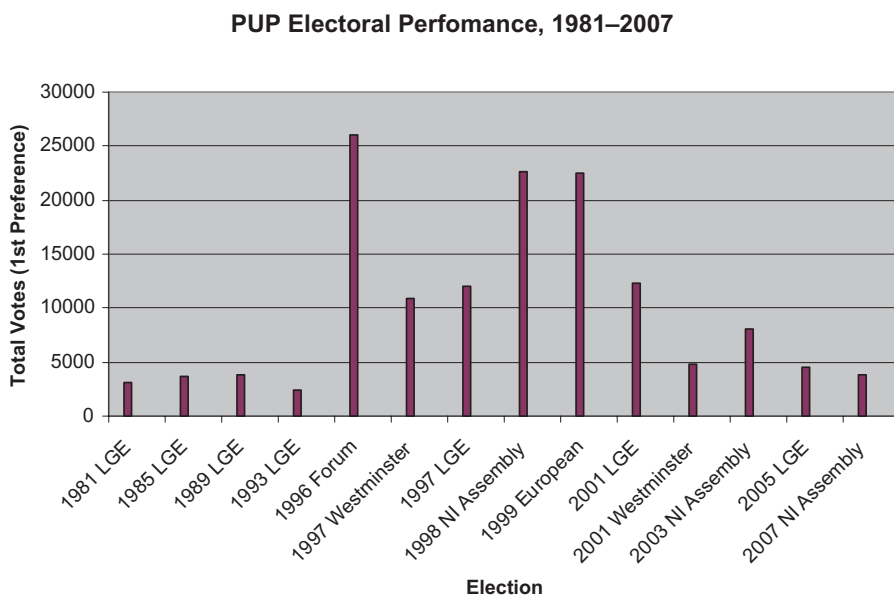
The rise of the DUP, especially since 2001, has been explained elsewhere (Farrington 2006), although it is important to point out that the PUP competes directly with the DUP and UUP for support in working-class areas. Notwithstanding this dominance, the DUP and UUP vote remains vulnerable to intra-ethnic fragmentation. By and large they have been able to mitigate this eventuality by maintaining a hard-line stance on issues such as security, partition and the defeat of the IRA. These lines of competition make moderation increasingly difficult but not impossible (Mitchell et al. 2009). As Horowitz (2000, 342) maintains, 'If party competition is taken to mean competition for support from the electorate, rather than all forms of interparty rivalry, then party competition in an ethnic party system occurs within ethnic groups but not across ethnic group lines'.

Historically, the dominant unionist parties have seen off challengers by tackling them on issues where they are weakest: the UUP prosecuted a very effective campaign against the NILP by playing up the latter's 'fence-sitting' attitude towards partition (see Edwards 2009b), while the DUP saw off the UUP by labelling it as soft on republicanism and exploiting the implementation difficulties of the Belfast Agreement to its advantage (DUP 2003). Both the DUP and the UUP have checked the PUP's electoral advance by highlighting the party's 'grubby' association with the UVF, curious in light of mainstream unionism's flirtation with loyalist paramilitarism in the 1970s (Bruce 2007, 121–123).

While ethnic outbidding is often regarded as both negative and threatening to the prudential politics of power-sharing (Esman 2004, 207), recent research has found that not all extremist parties are necessarily destructive of democracy. According to some commentators, the trade-off for many ethnic parties is in the pragmatic decision to modernise their political programmes and structures, and thereby transform themselves in the context of a peace process, from 'exclusive single-identity entities based on sectarian or ethnic membership to more pluralistic entities ready to engage in a wide range of issues' (Gormley-Heenan and MacGinty 2009, 44). Since the Belfast Agreement (1998) the DUP has successfully outmanoeuvred its main unionist rivals, including the UUP and PUP, by becoming a successful 'ethnic tribune' party (for more on this phenomenon see Mitchell et al. 2009).

There is a dearth in scholarly studies of the PUP's electoral performance. At present the party has two local government representatives elected to Belfast City Council and one representative in the Northern Ireland Assembly. The PUP contested its first local election in 1981, though individual members, such as Hugh Smyth, have served on Belfast City Council since 1973. Smyth was also elected to the short-lived Constitutional Convention in 1975–76, though he never gained a seat on a regional basis until 1996, when he was returned as a delegate to the Multi-Party Forum talks. Throughout the 1990s the PUP had an average of four elected representatives scattered across the 26 local authorities, with the highest notable return of seven councillors in 1997 in Belfast, Castlereagh and Newtownabbey councils. In 1998 David Ervine and Billy Hutchinson were returned to the Northern Ireland Assembly constituencies of Pottinger in East Belfast and Oldpark in North Belfast, respectively. Hutchinson lost his seat in 2003, leaving Ervine as the sole PUP MLA at Stormont. Nevertheless, the 2007 Assembly election saw the party's new leader Dawn Purvis increase the PUP's vote in East Belfast, thereby regaining the seat

previously held by Ervine until his death. Although 'The odds [were] heavily stacked against Ms Purvis holding the only PUP assembly seat' (*Irish News*, 19 February 2007, 6) the election result was 'a particularly good achievement as Purvis defied predictions and actually increased the PUP share of the vote' (McEvoy 2007, 374; see BBC 2007b for full results).

PUP candidates have been drawn disproportionately from the Protestant working class, although this has not always been the case, and those from more affluent backgrounds have been attracted to the party because of their liberal beliefs. For instance, the three candidates in the 2007 Assembly election, Dawn Purvis (East Belfast), Andy Park (South Belfast) and Elaine Martin (North Down), are all representative of this working-class background. Purvis had been a research assistant working for scholars based at the Universities of Huddersfield and Liverpool, while Park was previously a taxi driver and Martin worked as a community development worker in Newtownards. The party's president, Hugh Smyth, is from the working-class Shankill Road area in West Belfast. He is presently the longest-serving councillor in Belfast, having been elected in 1973, the year when local government franchise was reformed to make it more democratically representative.[11] However, the person who replaced Ervine on Belfast City Council, Dr John Kyle, is a local General Practitioner from East Belfast. Notwithstanding the involvement of professionals such as Kyle the PUP remains a working-class party. Loyalism can best be understood therefore as the political expression of unionism filtered through the mesh of everyday Protestant working-class life. Yet, it is perhaps its close proximity to violence and the desire by many political loyalists to transform their creed beyond mere jingoism that give it its unique character.

## The PUP and Conflict Transformation

The PUP's connection to the UVF and RHC has distinguished the party from its political opponents. Described by one senior member of the party as 'the kiss of death for the PUP' (Interview, Billy Hutchinson, 14 December 2007), the UVF has benefited from the political analysis offered by the PUP, particularly since the early 1990s. As ruthless terrorist organisations the UVF and RHC were jointly responsible for approximately 427 deaths (278 Catholics, 106 Protestants and 43 people not from Northern Ireland) between 1966 and 2001 (Sutton 2007; see also Edwards 2009a). Nevertheless, to see the party's significance exclusively in light of the terror campaign unleashed by these illegal groups is disingenuous and provides us with only a skewed view of the PUP's political significance. The next section considers the PUP's own analysis of the conflict and why it believes that it can only be 'transformed', rather than 'resolved' (PUP 2007b).

Arguably, the fragile nature of the paramilitary ceasefires—even after the signing of the Belfast Agreement—continued to cast a long shadow over the peace and political processes, despite IRA decommissioning in 2005 and the UVF's 'no-first-strike' policy. The appointment of an Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) to report to the British and Irish governments 'on activity by paramilitary groups, on the normalization of security measures in the Province, and on claims by Assembly parties that other parties, or Ministers in a devolved Executive, are not

living up to the standards required of them' (IMC 2007) is further evidence of how elite-level coercive pressure was applied on paramilitary groups. However, the 'stick' wielded by the IMC on behalf of both governments was counterbalanced by a 'carrot' in the form of overtures to community-based organisations close to paramilitary groups that the British government would aid in the regeneration of loyalist areas. Peter Hain's appointment of David Hanson as the Northern Ireland Office's special envoy to loyalist areas between 2005 and 2007 is just one example of how the British government sought to engage with loyalism. Nonetheless, violence by the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) in South East Antrim and North Down throughout 2007, and the response by the then SDLP Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, in cutting government funding for loyalist conflict transformation initiatives, is an indication of how precarious state-sponsored funding for grass-roots programmes has been in post-conflict Northern Ireland (Ritchie 2007).

Representatives of the Ulster Political Research Group (UPRG), the political organisation close to UDA thinking, have been working to a similar end goal of conflict transformation as the PUP. Although not a formally constituted party in the traditional sense, the UPRG provides political advice to the UDA, the largest paramilitary organisation in Northern Ireland. The UPRG's membership is spread across Northern Ireland, and this is reflected in its broad-based leadership structure reflecting diverse geographical areas such as North, South, East and West Belfast, North Antrim, South Londonderry and Mid Ulster; its structure mirrors the amorphous nature of the UDA. The UDA and UPRG fragmented in 2006 when the South East Antrim component of the organisation broke away and formed its own political-military structure. The UPRG shares the same end goal of conflict transformation (*Belfast Telegraph*, 21 September 2006). However, unlike the PUP, it has chosen to implement its vision for conflict transformation by adhering to a 'top-down' model whereby funding is centrally controlled and released to projects on a minimalist basis. The PUP does not control funding for projects but opts instead for 'an equal partnership developed between and within three interlinking strands—political, paramilitary and community' (PUP 2007b), as the preferred methodology for realising transformation beyond violence.

That the Labour government has encouraged 'bottom-up' initiatives throughout its decade in power did not ultimately detract from its willingness to reprimand paramilitaries and those connected to them when deemed necessary (see Powell 2007, 321). For instance, an IMC (IMC 2005) report released on 24 May 2005 inflicted serious injury on the PUP. It drained the party's coffers of important financial resources that had previously been directed towards managing the party's local offices in Protestant working-class areas across Northern Ireland. One immediate casualty was the closure of the PUP's head office on the Shankill Road. Of course the burden of debt was more than financial as the 5 May 2005 elections soon proved. The PUP failed to put forward a single candidate in the Westminster contest and at local government level its 14 candidates were reduced to 13 when Caroline Howarth, one of its senior female activists, withdrew her nomination in favour of standing as a UUP candidate on an anti-Democratic Unionist party ticket. In total the PUP obtained 4,591 votes, falling embarrassingly short of the number needed to return all serving councillors. Billy Hutchinson (Belfast Oldpark) and Tommy Sand-

ford (Castlereagh Central) both lost their seats in an election that saw the oblitera-
tion of the PUP's mandate at the hands of the DUP. Electoral defeats only reinforced
the party's determination to redouble its efforts to assist the UVF and RHC in their
internal transformation process (Interview, Billy Mitchell, 27 September 2005; see
also Edwards and Bloomer (forthcoming)).

The PUP had argued consistently as far back as 1979 that 'there is little likelihood
of a British Military Solution' and that a 'Democratic Devolved Administration
within the framework of the United Kingdom' was necessary to build a 'better
future for all the people of Northern Ireland' (PUP 1979). Devolution, or returning
power to local politicians, has been the mainstay of the PUP's policy recommen-
dations to the British government since then and the one methodology by which its
policy of conflict transformation could be realised. In the party's discourse devolu-
tion is seen as a double-edged mechanism for shifting the balance of power in
favour of grass-roots communities while simultaneously managing the conflict.
One of the most far-sighted, albeit radical, recommendations advanced by the PUP
was the release of political prisoners as a confidence-building measure during the
negotiation process in the 1990s. Moreover, the party's support for radical demo-
cratic solutions to the conflict has been reflected in all of its policy documents since
1979. It has often illustrated how a settlement could be reached by assessing the
importance of ingredients common in other conflicts around the world. Following
the murder of 18 British soldiers at Warrenpoint in 1979, the PUP said that its
candidates would 'campaign for the building of an Israeli-type border and all that it
entails' (PUP 1979). However, in the same document it claimed that it was essential
for the British government to take courageous decisions for peace, including
'phased amnesty for persons convicted or detained for clear political offences'.

A common feature of PUP policy documents is the willingness to compromise with
ethnic-based rivals. For example, in its 1979 policy document, the PUP drew
political comparisons with events in the Middle East to justify its assertion that a
de-escalation of the military dimension of the conflict could potentially lead to its
transformation: 'One has only to recall the massive Genocidal conflicts of Beirut
and Cyprus to be convinced that our people are capable of forging a much better
future for our families and future generations' (PUP 1979). This unique brand of
compromise politics set the PUP apart from its unionist rivals in the DUP, particu-
larly in the early 1990s. One radical suggestion made by David Ervine in the weeks
leading up to the loyalist ceasefire in 1994 was that loyalists would eventually sit
down in talks with republicans. 'I might not like it', he said, 'but it ill becomes
someone such as me who has called on people to enter the political process to then
refute them' (*The Times*, 3 September 1994, 2).

The PUP began to refer to 'conflict transformation' more explicitly in its political
discourse in the late 1990s (PUP 1999), in large part because party strategist Billy
Mitchell was intimately familiar with the scholarly work of John Paul Lederach.
Conflict transformation is a distinct approach to dealing with the legacies of past
conflict in societies. It differs from conflict resolution in its focus on human rela-
tionships and the recognition that it may take just as long to emerge from conflict
as it took to get into it. The term was first utilised by Lederach, who suggests that:

> conflict transformation represents a comprehensive set of lenses for describing how conflict emerges from, evolves within, and brings about changes in the personal, relational, structural dimensions, and for developing creative responses that promote peaceful change within those dimensions through non-violent mechanisms (Lederach 1997, 83).

Lederach argues that 'we must acknowledge that war—protracted armed conflict— is a system, a system that can be transformed only by taking a comprehensive approach to the people who operate it and to the setting in which is rooted' (Lederach 1997, 18). One of the principal methodologies for envisioning conflict transformation is to rebuild fractured relationships, which continue to feed on antagonism. For Lederach, '*Relationship building* suggests that training is not solely concerned with increasing an individual's capacity and skill, but seeks also to develop and build relationships both in and across the lines of the division in the context of protracted conflict' (Lederach 1997, 109, emphasis in original).

This particular approach to conflict resolution is often derided because of its inability to grapple with the harsh realities of the international political system or the state-centric conceptualisation of war and conflict harboured by realists. Lederach argues that, as a direct consequence, political scientists have avoided peace-building in the main due to the conflict transformationist reliance on the emotional and social-psychological elements of peace-building (Lederach 1997, 34–152).

In congruence with Lederach's understanding of conflict, the PUP advocates 'conflict transformation rather than resolution, as unionism and nationalism are diametrically opposed political philosophies'; although the party believes that the 'manner of how these competing political ideals engage can be transformed to a non violent one' (PUP 2007b). In order to understand the approach to conflict transformation favoured by the PUP and its associated community activists in Northern Ireland it is necessary to ascertain how it sees itself relating to its key Protestant working-class support base. Often the term is used by loyalists without a firm understanding of what it means and this has led, indirectly perhaps, to a misunderstanding of how the PUP has actually utilised Lederach's philosophy. Notwithstanding the negative equity placed on conflict transformation by those commentators suspicious of loyalist motives (Feeney 2007; McKay 2007), the approach can aid us in our understanding of the PUP's politics for the following reason: the classical idea of political parties as coherent entities is dissipating in an increasingly global world and it may be necessary to construct a new typology based on new empirical realities (Gunther and Diamond 2003). The PUP provides us with a working example of a party that has served as an umbrella to an outer core of community-based activists (who are not card-carrying members of the party) but who nonetheless share the party's ideals. This has ensured that the PUP has survived electoral and political meltdown because of the community and voluntary sector complexion of its key activists (see Bloomer 2008).

The PUP's efforts to transform the conflict have certainly met with failure in many respects. The decision by the UVF to halt its armed campaign on 3 May 2007 was eventually followed up with a further statement on 29 June 2009 that the organisation had put its arms beyond use. The May 2007 statement announcing the UVF's intentions was read out by Gusty Spence, who became a prominent PUP strategist

following his release from prison in the early 1980s for UVF-related offences. Spence was flanked by the former PUP MLA Billy Hutchinson and the director of the UVF/RHC-linked Ex-Prisoner Interpretative Centre (EPIC), Tom Roberts. PUP leader Dawn Purvis sat opposite, listening attentively. When the UVF finally rendered its arms beyond use in June 2009 the PUP was again present. Purvis made a statement that drew upon the party's discourse since the late 1970s, highlighting its compromise politics and articulating the view that it was right to support the peace process (Purvis 2009). The presence of Purvis and Hutchinson on both occasions illustrates starkly how the party remains a key actor in loyalist paramilitary politics; it also throws into sharp relief the PUP's continuing cavalier attitude towards transforming the UVF and RHC beyond violence. While the Belfast Agreement reiterated the commitment of all participants to 'the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations', no formal steps were undertaken to implement a top-down disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programme for former combatants. The relevant section of the Agreement reads:

> They [participants] also confirm their intention to continue to work constructively and in good faith with the Independent Commission, and *to use any influence they may have*, to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms within two years following endorsement in referendums North and South of the agreement and in the context of the implementation of the overall settlement (Belfast Agreement 1998, emphasis added).

The PUP chose instead to take a 'bottom-up' view of decommissioning and held firm to its position that:

(1)  Each armed group within those communities has a duty to develop its own internal conflict transformation process.
(2)  Political and community activists within these communities have a duty to help empower local people to take ownership of their communities and develop a new progressive brand of loyalism.

This vignette also invites the important question of how a slavish commitment to conflict transformation might actually improve the PUP's electoral standing in the longer term. It may be some time before we can embark on a satisfactory answer.

## PUP Discourses on Social Justice and Inequality

Conflict transformation is not the only distinguishing feature of the PUP's bottom-up approach to the peace and political processes in Northern Ireland. A common thread running throughout its class-based political programme is the central narrative of social justice and inequality. In her maiden speech to the PUP's annual conference on 13 October 2007 the party's new leader Dawn Purvis stressed the need for Northern Ireland's politicians to tackle the inequalities evident in society. In her estimation the gap between rich and poor was growing and sectarianism and racism remained endemic problems in everyday life. Couching her calls in the discourse of social justice Purvis said:

> We want a health service that works from the bottom up, tackling the inequalities in the community and empowering people, enabling them to

> make informed choices about their lifestyle. And after 40 years of blatant
> discrimination against mainly working-class women, we want the Abor-
> tion Act extended to Northern Ireland (*Irish News*, 15 October 2007, 13).[12]

Importantly, the theme of equality and fair treatment has permeated the PUP's discourse for over two decades. It formed the basis of the party's first electoral manifesto in 1981 and underpinned its statement of objectives encapsulated in the seminal *Sharing Responsibility* policy document issued in 1985. A decade later Gusty Spence (1995) was stressing that 'The ordinary men and women of this small country must be facilitated when their desire is for democratic institutions and an honourable decent life based on equality'. That rallying call has appeared in almost all of the PUP's electoral communiqués since the mid-1990s.

The PUP's discourse of equality and social justice also correlates with the spirit and letter of the Belfast Agreement. In the Agreement, the relevant section on equality reads that all citizens of Northern Ireland have the 'right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity' (Belfast Agreement 1998). By making equality the cornerstone of its political programme the PUP has set itself firmly within the mainstream of the human rights culture encapsulated in the Agreement and the subsequent St Andrews Agreement (2006) which paved the way for the historic agreement between Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams in 2007. This is important given that the 'language of the agreement is the language of the guaranteed rights to equality' (Horowitz 2002, 196). It also demonstrates the PUP's commitment to St Andrews, which again places 'equality and human rights at the heart of the new dispensation in Northern Ireland' (St Andrews Agreement 2006).

As the excerpt from Peter Bunting's speech headlining this article suggests, the PUP punches above its weight because it represents something 'bigger' than just one seat in the local Assembly. Indeed, as this article has argued, the PUP is symptomatic of a long lineage of left-of-centre political parties with a strong social conscience that has placed the concerns of the Northern Ireland working class at the forefront of its political programme. In an era of globalisation the clear lines of division between the old tiers of class alliance are fragmenting and becoming ever more blurred, yet the PUP still chooses to articulate a democratic socialist message for its working-class support base. This is significant in itself, mainly because it demonstrates how the PUP refuses to campaign on purely ethnic issues or to engage in ethnic outbidding with its main rivals in the UUP and DUP (see Horowitz 2000; Gormley-Heenan and MacGinty 2009).

That is not to say that the PUP has never engaged in a limited exercise of ethnic outbidding per se: it has. One has only to examine the party's 2007 Assembly election manifesto, in which 'socialism' was not mentioned at all, yet the terms 'union' and 'unionism' were mentioned 20 times. Moreover, the party's attitude with respect to its temporary (and ill-fated) alliance with the UUP in the latter's Assembly group laid bare both a middle-class disgust for paramilitarism and a rampant hostility for the PUP's politics (*Belfast Newsletter*, 18 May 2006; *Irish News*, 17 August 2006). UUP leader Sir Reg Empey justified Ervine's inclusion in the group as part of a wider process to engage with loyalist paramilitaries and persuade them to abandon the politics of the gun (*Irish News*, 26 March 2006). Interestingly,

Ervine's 'Faustian pact' left some nationalist commentators bewildered at the prospect of the PUP abandoning its own distinctive brand of working-class unionism by design (Feeney 2006). While the UUP failed to transform the UVF beyond violence it did make a noble attempt to 'dissociate itself from the threat, and the fact, of violence' (Walker 2004, 215).

## Conclusion

Ulster loyalist politics has been chronically under-researched and under-theorised since the outbreak of the Troubles. Indeed, most of what we know about loyalism is informed by those who view the Protestant working class as exotic and deeply irrational (McKay 2000; Hastings 2005; Howe 2005). This article has taken a different view. Observing the PUP from close quarters it has situated the party in the context of two decades of (sporadic) scholarly literature on Ulster loyalism (see, for example, Bruce 1992; McAuley 2005; Spencer 2008; Spencer and McAuley (forthcoming)). Moreover, while some authors have focused explicitly on the agential direction provided by PUP 'elites' (Garland 2001; Fearon 2002; Sinnerton 2003), others have concentrated on the party's structural connection to paramilitary groups (Cusack and McDonald 2000), the criminality associated with Ulster loyalism and the influence of both 'party' and 'army' on the peace process. This article has built on the recent empirical-based work on Ulster loyalism (see McAuley and Hislop 2000; McAuley and Tonge 2003; Wood 2006; Edwards 2007 and 2009a; Gallaher 2007; Spencer 2008) in order to advance the debate on the PUP, important not least in that there has been a far greater intellectual fascination with Irish republicanism (see English 2003; Maloney 2007; Bean 2007; Frampton 2009).

Furthermore, this article has sought to analyse the PUP in light of the developing literature on ethnic parties. Its central purpose has been to analyse the concepts of ethnicity and class within the PUP in more detail and to ask how they impact on the party's understanding of the peace process in Northern Ireland. I have argued that while ethnicity is an important variable in understanding the PUP's unique 'voice', what really distinguishes it from other unionist parties is the protean class-based character of its membership. Moreover, the article has detailed the party's career *vis-à-vis* broader political developments in the region, as well as how individual members interpret the nature of their party and its place in the surrounding political landscape. The PUP's contribution to politics has been to democratise the peace process by offering a unique grass-roots-based perspective. Finally, the article asked what the party's contribution has actually been to advancing the peace process in Northern Ireland. The answer outlined here is that the PUP has played an important stabilising role in furthering the conflict transformation process and in articulating a social justice and equality agenda, aspects of its left-leaning programme that set it apart from other ethnic parties in the region. Despite some rather jaundiced critiques of the party's anticipated demise the PUP will continue to remain a distinctive voice in Northern Irish politics.

## About the author

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## Notes

1. The author surveyed party members at the PUP's annual conference on 13 October 2007. Respondents were asked about their reasons for joining the party, their political identity, the composition of local branches, the party's policies and so on. Out of 52 party members (total PUP membership is approximately 100) attending the conference 31 returned surveys, giving a 60 per cent response rate. There are obvious limitations to utilising a sample this small to test hypotheses rigorously and one certainly cannot generalise with any strong degree of authority but it does provide us with impressionistic insight into the key variables animating the party's membership.

2. David Ervine was the well-known and articulate loyalist politician who played a key role in facilitating the paramilitary ceasefires in 1994. A former UVF member who was sentenced to 11 years' imprisonment, he was elected to Belfast City Council in 1997 and returned to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998. Ervine laid the foundations for UVF/RHC decommissioning in June 2009. He died in January 2007.

3. This article disagrees with the flawed assumption that ethnicity is simply a mask for class conflict. Indeed, opinion poll data suggest that most people in Northern Ireland make political choices based on ethnicity and national identity (Hayes and McAllister 1999, 36–41). While the PUP is certainly left leaning in its political outlook, it seeks a redistribution of rights, such as equality and social justice, principally for the Protestant working class. That does not contradict the fact that there are those in the PUP who wish to reach out to the Catholic community, but they are in a minority. According to Donald Horowitz (2000, 340), 'The electoral survival of socialist parties only when they espouse ethnic causes, and their conspicuous electoral failure when they do so, attests to the pre-emptive power of ethnic party systems'. The PUP has clearly espoused its commitment to the union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Interestingly, some scholars (Little 2002; Ashe 2006 and 2007) have made similar observations on gender and ethno-national conflict, especially in relation to political allegiance and identity in Northern Ireland.

4. The Belfast or Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was signed on 10 April 1998 following all-party talks involving the principal political parties in Northern Ireland, with the exception of the DUP which stayed out of the process and campaigned vigorously against the GFA because it admitted 'terrorists into government' and would lead to 'unaccountable' and 'unworkable government' (DUP 2003).

5. Horowitz (2000, 293) suggests that 'To be an ethnic party, a party does not have to command an exclusive hold on the allegiance of group members. It is how the *party's* support is distributed, and not how the *ethnic group's* support is distributed, that is decisive ... Whether ethnic parties emerge—and when—how many of them, their relative strength, and their interactions all have much to do with group division and cohesion. And the contours of the party system in an ethnically divided society have a profound effect on the ethnic outcomes of party politics' (emphases in original).

6. Jim McDonald was one of the founders of the Progressive Unionist Group in 1977–78, which became the PUP in 1979, and an influential member of the party's Executive Committee until his death in May 2009. He believed strongly in the socialist basis of the PUP's programme and helped to draft party policies from the late 1970s onwards. He was a former member of the NILP.

7. Dawn Purvis became leader of the PUP following the death of David Ervine in January 2007. She had previously been party chairperson and worked closely with PUP members to develop a more robust branch system across Northern Ireland. Purvis was elected party leader by the Executive in January 2007 and her nomination was unanimously ratified at the PUP's annual conference on 13 October 2007. She held Ervine's seat in the Northern Ireland Assembly election in March 2007. Reaffirming the PUP's commitment to democratic socialism in her maiden speech to the Northern Ireland Assembly Purvis (2007) stated: 'As long as there is poverty, and as long as there is inequality in education, health and gender, it will be my duty to articulate the needs of the working and workless classes in East Belfast'.

8. Billy Hutchinson was elected to Belfast City Council in 1997 and returned to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998, although he lost his Assembly seat in 2003 and Council seat in 2005. Hutchinson had served a life sentence for UVF activities and—when released—remained close to the UVF leadership. He acted as the organisation's interlocutor with the international Independent Commis-

sion on Decommissioning, established under the terms of the Belfast Agreement. He is now a community development worker in North Belfast.

9. Billy Mitchell was a senior PUP strategist and conflict mediation practitioner based in North Belfast. He had been a senior member of the UVF in the 1970s, subsequently serving 14 years in prison. He was one of the key facilitators of the loyalist ceasefire in 1994. Mitchell favoured a Christian Socialist interpretation of the PUP's programme based on his British labourist tendencies. Although he died in July 2006, he had been responsible for driving forward the conflict transformation process, which eventually led to the decommissioning of UVF/RHC weapons in June 2009.

10. According to the party's own rules if you are not 'on the books' you are not a member, yet in practice this is not as straightforward as it sounds. One former Executive Committee member who wished to remain anonymous describes the relationship as often 'a one-way street between the party and the army'. However, this is not a 'permanent arrangement—and in fact it is more than likely that personnel will be recalled at short notice' (Interview, former PUP Executive member, 14 November 2007). To complicate things further this recall can happen instantaneously as follows: at a local level, UVF Activist A (who, for instance, is also a PUP member) can attend a liaison meeting with the PUP, but UVF Activist B can, by 'changing hats', 'pull rank' and force through or overturn decisions taken by the PUP representation if it affects the UVF's interests in the area. An analysis of the UVF's military strategy can be found in Edwards (2009a).

11. The antiquated electoral franchise was reformed in 1973. It was one of the grievances that led to the outbreak of the conflict in the late 1960s.

12. In terms of gender politics, the PUP's policy on abortion has been one of Dawn Purvis' significant contributions to this sensitive issue. At a time when some Labour MPs are backing calls for the extension of the Abortion Act (1967) to Northern Ireland, there were allegations that Prime Minister Gordon Brown had made a secret deal with the pro-life lobby group in Northern Ireland, spearheaded by the DUP but also gaining unprecedented support from Sinn Fein, the SDLP and UUP. See O'Hara (2008).

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