

Group Religious Identity and a Question of 'Britishness': Belfast and Liverpool as Contrasting Case Studies of Political Intervention, 1886-1922

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This article explores recent historiographical trends within the broad field of 'identity politics', particularly the 'unresolved' nature of Britishness and the growing recognition of local identities in the evolution of broader regional and national identities. This will involve an overview of the literature on Ulster Unionism and Liverpool's 'distinctive' culture, character and identity. Through this historiographical overview I will also highlight some potentially fruitful areas for future research on the relationship between Belfast, Liverpool, Britishness and sectarian violence.

By focusing upon the distinctive local cultures of two cities wracked by sectarian communal strife, I examine the extent to which British identity formation was an uneven, contested process. With their large Protestant and Catholic communities both cities were preoccupied with questions of religion, ethnicity and nationality. This article contributes to a growing appreciation of the locality and region as sites of accommodation, negotiation and resistance to British nationalising processes and how the interaction between the local, regional and national could comprise a constitutive component of identity formation.

The socio-political histories of Belfast and Liverpool show how evolving conceptions of identity could inflame religious and ethnic enmities – or lead to their containment and control. Against the backdrop of changes in British national identity and developments in British and Irish Unionism, this article explores Ulster Unionism's and Liverpool Tory democracy's complex relationship to both intra-Protestant tensions and rivalries and Protestant sectarian violence over the course of the tumultuous Irish Home Rule period.

Belfast and Liverpool both experienced rapid urbanisation fuelled by intense immigration with a substantial proportion of this influx being Irish-Catholic. These 'incomers' had a profound demographic impact and shaped the socio-economic, cultural and political development of each city. Liverpool's population increased from 77,600 in 1801¹ to 805,100 by 1911,² with the Irish-born peaking at 22.3 per cent in 1851 (83, 813).³ Belfast's population rose from 19, 000 in 1800 to 378, 000 by 1911.⁴ While Catholics had formed less than 10 per cent of the population in 1800,⁵ owing to the impact of the Irish potato famine (1845-49) and the attraction of primarily unskilled industrial work, the Catholics peaked at 33.9 per cent by 1861 (41, 000).⁶

In each city, the Catholic population was relatively disadvantaged in relation to the Protestant majority both socially and economically. Both witnessed sectarian discrimination in the labour market, dominated by commerce and conveyance in Liverpool and by linen and textiles and shipbuilding and engineering in Belfast. Both saw the evolution of distinct Protestant and Catholic territorial 'enclaves' identified as a key factor in 'endemic' sectarian rioting.⁷ There also emerged extensive associational networks organised along religious and ethnic lines. Sectarianism entered the political arena during the 1830s with the Tory-Anglican establishment in Liverpool and their Episcopalian-Conservative counterparts in Belfast forging alliances with the sectarian Orange Order. Despite the Conservative establishments in both cities being 'ashamed and disgusted' by aspects of Orange populism they continued to exploit Protestantism as a vital component of building their power base.⁸ Their principal opponents prior to the Home Rule struggle were the Liberals, and in Belfast the Liberal Presbyterians, and subsequently the proponents of Irish Nationalism. Both cities were centres of resistance to Irish Home Rule and the agitation against ritualism within the Church of England and the disestablished Church of Ireland (1869).

Consequently, I explore whether a growing nationalisation of British political culture and identity resulted in the adaptation of distinctive cultures like Liverpool and Belfast to national norms and values. Alternatively, did it produce a sense of alienation provoking resistance and even ethnic and religious conflict? I examine whether 'nationalising' processes exacerbated or contributed to the resolution of entrenched sectarian strife in the two cities.

D. G. Boyce has observed that if there was 'at the beginning of the nineteenth century a British nation, there was no desire to ask what essential characteristics constituted its identity'.⁹ If this was the case, how was a sense of

British national identity constructed and defined and what role did this identity play in an increasingly diverse, complex and fractious society? During 1886-1922 the construction, character and definition of 'Britishness' was as complex, multilayered and contested as it is today. The historian Eugenio F. Biagini argues that Britain was not a nation, but a 'rather archaic multinational state' held together by three principal institutions: parliament, the monarchy and the Protestant religion.¹⁰ Boyce argues that 'the remarkable result of these institutions (parliament and the monarchy) was that potential fragmenting divisions in the British Isles were downgraded and contained'. He identifies 'deep divisions' breaking along religious, cultural and linguistic lines.¹¹

In contrast, Catherine Hall has identified 'Britishness' as an imperial identity, describing the British Empire as a 'racial organism' differentiating between the coloniser and the colonised,¹² whilst David Cannadine has referred to it as a 'social organism' based upon 'deep-rooted principles, practises and perceptions of social hierarchy'.¹³ Hall argues that British citizenship was defined along gender, racial, ethnic and class lines.¹⁴ Linda Colley, like Biagini, highlights a Protestant tradition dating back to the Glorious Revolution of 1688 as a 'fundamental' ingredient underpinning Britishness during its 'formative' period (1707-1837).¹⁵ This Protestant 'world-view' informed attitudes towards Catholic Europe, principally France, and towards Ireland and particularly from 1800 (Act of Union) towards the substantial Irish minority in the United Kingdom. However, Tony Claydon and Ian McBride have argued that Protestantism was 'only ever one element in British nationalities' and that this 'constituent' element interacted with beliefs about the constitution, race, language, and relations between local and European culture.¹⁶

Consequently, 'Britishness' could be determined by political allegiances, regional or religious affiliations, occupational or class position and ethnic and racial ties and prejudices. Nationalism became an integral part of British political culture, accompanying the growth of mass participatory democracy, with heated debates over the character of national identity. As Kyle Hughes observes, although 'never fully pervasive' in the four constituent nations of the United Kingdom, a sense of 'Britishness sat alongside a range of national and indeed religious identities...throughout the British and Irish Isles'.¹⁷

Biagini argues that the most 'formidable challenges' facing British liberal democracy during this period came from pan-nationalism and national separatism, with the Conservative and Liberal parties having to come to terms with both militant imperialism and Celtic nationalism.¹⁸ The struggle over Irish

Home Rule was a case in point. This pivotal event was not only a 'key formative period' in modern Irish politics, but was also 'inextricably bound up with the future of the British constitution and more importantly the British nation. Home Rule provoked the slumbering genie of British nationalism'.¹⁹ Boyce argues that the 1886 Home Rule crisis revealed that it had become 'axiomatic, as far as English opinion was concerned, that the Celtic peoples were better off as integral members of the kingdom and that English power and prestige would be fatally undermined if Ireland were to set the example of secession'. He also states that the crisis 'flushed' out the 'alarming' recognition that the UK was a 'multi-national regime in the first place'.²⁰

This titanic political struggle united both Irish and British statesmen and involved two conflicting conceptions of Britishness, which the rival political parties sought to impose upon the United Kingdom. There was an inclusive, federalised Liberal 'pluralist' view and a Conservative-Unionist 'organic' model which was Protestant and imperialistic.²¹ Graham Walker has argued that the cultivation of an Ulster identity 'might even be regarded as another variant of an ethnic form of Britishness, which had at its core the concept of a Protestant crown and constitution and an essentially Protestant "civilising" Empire.'²²

Historians have identified the pivotal role that the Protestant religion played in the development of both an English, and an overarching British identity, and its role, alongside national allegiance, in the 'hegemonisation' of the British working class.²³ Mary Hickman believes the anti-Catholicism inherent within British Protestantism 'continued to be significant in the nineteenth century as a means of unifying sections of the population with otherwise different interests by mobilising them for the nation and against popery, often a specifically Irish popery'.²⁴ Popular Protestantism was a component of both nineteenth century Liberal-nationalism and crucially Tory-nationalism, being used 'ruthlessly at times to inflame opinion against Irish Catholic immigrants to Britain'.²⁵ As Daniel Jackson points out 'religious creed was still a powerful force in British society, even in the twentieth century, and this should provide us with an inclination of what was to assist Ulster's appeal'.²⁶ However, Claydon and McBride have demonstrated that there is no simple correlation between Protestantism and national identity arguing that scholars should acknowledge both the 'interdependency' between faith and identity whilst giving due weight to the 'mismatches' between them.²⁷ Patrick Pasture has highlighted the role played by 'regional as well as social variation' in

the 'very complex and diverse relations between churches, denominations and modern states'.²⁸

Historians like Celia Applegate and Alon Confino have begun to highlight the role of regions and localities in the economic, cultural and political development of modern nations and their role in the evolution of complex national identities.²⁹ Consequently, regions and localities are no longer seen as 'passive' sites for 'official messages' but as actively contributing to the ongoing national project.³⁰ David Fitzpatrick has emphasised the importance of 'local study' in terms of exploring the 'many sorts of political mind' that existed in Ireland³¹ whilst Philip Ollerenshaw has emphasised how Ulster Unionist strategy 'gave the Home Rule debate a local relevance in provincial Britain it would otherwise have lacked.'³² Additionally, Neil Collins has pointed out in relationship to Liverpool, that where 'national' issues did impinge they tended to be 'locally important' and were generally religious and ethnic in nature.³³ This interaction between increasingly national norms, values and political imperatives with alternative, highly distinctive, local cultures and customs was to have a profound impact upon both Belfast and Liverpool.

Kyle Hughes has highlighted an important development in the 'new British history' with the identification of a 'distinct regional nexus' where 'northern urban societies were linked by a collective industrial heritage and a shared culture of migration'. Hughes has termed this 'regional framework' as the 'northern Irish Sea industrial zone' encompassing Merseyside, Tyneside and the Cumbrian coast to West Scotland and East Ulster. This framework involves a re-conceptualisation of the archipelago (and the wider Atlantic World) as a 'series of zones of fluid cultural contact'. In relation to Belfast, Hughes argues that the city 'shared a commonality of experience in the later nineteenth century with places like Glasgow, Liverpool or Newcastle-upon-Tyne, much more than it did with the south of England, or indeed, as has been frequently argued, with the south or west of Ireland.' Consequently, despite the 'manifold difficulties' involved, Hughes states that Belfast was 'very much part of a 'British World'.³⁴

Consequently, I argue that during 1886-1922 British identity formation was a complex, multi-layered phenomenon. There was interaction between, adaptation to, and reaction against evolving and competing 'official nationalisms' and strong local and regional identifications with the nation.

In Belfast's case the 1886 Home Rule struggle with its implications for the British nation and particularly Ulster's Protestants, led to the 'local state' which had been constructed by the Episcopalian-Conservative establishment

being shattered and its attitude to popular Protestant sectarianism transformed. Crucial to this transformation was Ulster Unionism's relationship to the rest of Britain and its pivotal role in the political debate upon national identity central to Home Rule.³⁵ D. G. Boyce argues that in all its modes, nationalism in Ireland 'has been profoundly influenced by the power and proximity of Britain'. After 1800 (Act of Union) 'Ireland was an integral part of the British polity, inextricably linked with British politics and, as always, exposed to British cultural influence'.³⁶ A number of historians have identified the pivotal importance of the general elections of 1885-1886, when Irish nationality 'became the major political issue of the age'.³⁷ I argue that Ulster Unionism was engaged in a national political contest critical to its very survival and was ultimately accountable to a wider British public opinion which was increasingly intolerant of sectarian bigotry and violence. Consequently, despite the 'insularity' of much of its support, the Ulster Unionists set about constructing a diverse 'broad church'³⁸ movement comprising a panoply of interlocking structures and organisations which largely succeeded in containing festering intra-Protestant enmities and of 'policing' the worst aspects of popular Orange and Protestant sectarianism.

There is considerable debate amongst historians as to what Ulster Unionism was and is. Graham Walker asserts that the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) came to 'represent - and pursue - the political project of a community arguably best described as either an ethno-religious or an ethno-national entity'.³⁹ Alvin Jackson has identified a separate 'Ulster nation', a 'cohesive, Protestant and particularist' community in the north east of Ireland, whilst, in contrast, James Loughlin describes Ulster Unionists as an ethnic group lacking a 'subjective consciousness of itself as a separate nation'. David W. Miller agrees that the Ulster Unionist community has no nationality, but was instead bound by a civil 'contract' to Britain in return for 'colonising and civilising Ulster'.⁴⁰ His phrase 'Queen's Rebels' encapsulates Ulster Unionists' contingent, frequently fractious relationship to successive British Governments.⁴¹ As Ian McBride points out this 'contractual relationship' could be used to 'sanction resistance to a British Government which had abandoned its traditional role as the protector of the Protestant population'.⁴²

Maurice J. Bric and John Coakley have identified two differing interpretations of the word 'constitutional' which contribute to our understanding of Ulster Unionism's complex relationship to the 'rule of force'. The original definition referred to the Williamite settlement of 1688 which

underpinned the 'Irish relationship to the British monarchy as well as the Protestant ascendancy on which it was based'. Defence of this 'constitution' was central to the 'Unionist interest and this term was part of mainstream Unionist terminology'. However, the word 'constitutional' also acquired a second meaning as embracing the 'conventional principles embedded in liberal democratic constitutions rather than rejecting them for the rule of force'.⁴³ In this light, other historians have described Ulster Unionism as a 'garrison mentality',⁴⁴ a reactionary 'counter-movement',⁴⁵ or 'negative appendage' of Irish Nationalism caricatured by its more extreme manifestations.⁴⁶

Ulster Unionism has also been re-evaluated as a form of nationalism,⁴⁷ whether as a 'sub-species of European ethno-regional nationalism' or a rational expression of 'regional interests'.⁴⁸ Graham Walker has emphasised the 'salience of distinctively Ulster characteristics' upon the UUP, the popularisation from the mid-nineteenth century of 'an Ulster "persona" or "type" befitting the turbulent history of a frontier people in the place apart that was Ulster within the island of Ireland'.⁴⁹

However, Frank Wright has also argued that during the nineteenth century, the north of Ireland became an 'ethnic frontier' between the British and Irish nations,⁵⁰ with John Bew emphasising the impact of British 'nation-building' processes upon Ulster as opposed to purely 'local historical enmities'.⁵¹ What is clear, is that 'identity politics' assumed an increasing importance within the Ulster Unionist 'armoury'.⁵² Critically, Ian McBride has argued that although the 'raw materials' already existed, a 'distinct Ulster Protestant identity did not fully develop until Home Rule became a real possibility'.⁵³ This Home Rule struggle embodied conflicting national loyalties (British/Irish) with both Ulster Unionism and the Irish Nationalist Party becoming integral features of British political culture.⁵⁴ They were intimately linked with the Liberals and Conservatives, successful multinational 'coalition' parties, which attempted to manage and absorb them.⁵⁵

Loughlin has characterised this Home Rule discourse as a contest between 'Enlightenment and Reaction'⁵⁶ with the Irish Parliamentary Party and Sir William Ewart Gladstone, the Liberal Prime Minister, identifying Unionism with 'Protestant bigotry' and hence it was 'discreditable and morally reprehensible'.⁵⁷ Such interpretations were bound up with differing conceptions of what was perceived to be 'constitutional' and of the character of the British connection more generally. Loughlin has argued that during the 1870s an established northern, industrialist, popular Protestant conception of Britishness

was eclipsed by a southern, Arcadian ruralist vision. He believes that because of this transition Ulster Unionism was increasingly seen as 'marginal' to the national community.⁵⁸ Some historians have acknowledged Unionist efforts at countering perceptions of 'Ulster bigotry', with Paul Bew asserting that they 'were fully aware of this ideological onslaught and sought to combat it'.⁵⁹ Additionally, McBride has argued that both traditions in Ireland have represented themselves in ways 'that are not only designed for internal consumption but for British public opinion.'⁶⁰

Consequently, I argue that, as part of a 'multi-national' Conservative-Unionist coalition, the Ulster Unionist leadership were acutely conscious of the negative reaction within Britain to the disunity and violence that had characterised popular Unionist mobilisation in the past. Popular Protestant 'excesses' (like the major riots of 1857, 1864, and 1872) proved to be a considerable challenge for Ulster Unionism. A critical event in the movement's development were the prolonged sectarian riots that had engulfed Belfast after the defeat of the first Home Rule Bill in 1886 costing between 30 and 86 lives. In an editorial the *Irish Ecclesiastical Gazette*, the mouthpiece of orthodox Episcopalian opinion in Ireland, declared that the

Ulster riots...are simply deplorable. We have no words strong enough with which to express our disapprobation of the Loyalists who may have had any share in these disgraceful emeutes, and disgust at their proceedings. They have given a good cause a blow under which it must reel; these Ulster riots will be made a handle of in England to misrepresent Protestant loyalty and we shall not be surprised if more than one seat is lost to the Unionists thereby.⁶¹

Prophetically, the editorial warned 'At a moment when caution and self-repression was imperatively demanded, Ulster Protestants have shown themselves fools and madmen'.⁶² Such warnings were heeded by the emerging Unionist movement and hard lessons learned. By the second Home Rule Crisis in 1893, the manifesto of the Ulster Defence Union stated that 'The knowledge that your interests are being watched over and your policy directed by an organisation, composed of men chosen by yourselves, on whose loyalty and sagacity you can depend, will serve to allay undue excitement and to check any disorderly outbreak of popular feeling.'⁶³ In 1964, Colonel George Hall, organiser of the Ulster Unionist Clubs from 1911, recounted to Sir Edward

Carson's biographer, how the Ulster Unionist leader 'advised me not to join the Orange Order as I was needed to bring in the staunch Unionists who would not join the Orange Order. Carson said in England you will be told you are a bloody Orangeman. Therefore organise it (the Unionist Clubs) as a Unionist thing not as an Orange thing. Carson said keep clear of the Orangemen'.⁶⁴

Consequently, in light of the bloody events of 1886, the Belfast Episcopalian-Conservative establishment set about constructing a representative and respectable 'umbrella' movement. Philip Ollerenshaw has emphasised the crucial role played by the Ulster 'business community in the organisation and finance of the anti-Home Rule campaign in both Ulster and Britain', suggesting that without them 'Ulster Unionism could not have assumed the significance it did in twentieth-century Anglo-Irish relations'.⁶⁵

The subsequent 'reinvention' of Ulster Protestants after 1886 has been highlighted by Alan O'Day.⁶⁶ Walker has identified 'Evangelical Protestantism, in the manner of Orangeism', as constituting an important 'solvent of Protestant fractures and instrumental in the construction of a collective identity'.⁶⁷ As in Liverpool, the Ulster Protestant community was divided by intense denominational, class, and political tensions, which threatened the emergence of Ulster Unionism as a coherent political movement. In 1901, the Rev. John MacDermott declared that Presbyterians 'had been fighting a battle against sectarianism; they had been fighting against a rooted sectarianism, a rooted monopoly and supremacy on the part of the now Disestablished Church'.⁶⁸ The principal tensions between Episcopalians and Presbyterians revolved around the differing social composition of the two denominations with the Episcopal Church having the 'most eclectic' membership but with a higher percentage of the gentry and landed aristocracy. In contrast, Presbyterianism was the voice of the professions, trade and commerce, with the nucleus of its support in Belfast.⁶⁹ There were also insinuations emanating from within Episcopalian ranks as to the extent of Presbyterian loyalty to the Union. These suspicions were embroiled in the conflicting political allegiances of the two denominations with Presbyterianism being associated with Liberalism, and consequently tainted by links with Gladstone, the architect of Irish Home Rule. In 1886, the *Irish Episcopalian Gazette* pointedly declared that 'our loyalty in this Union has never been questioned'.⁷⁰

Despite these profound internal divisions, historians have highlighted the pivotal role played in the development of Ulster Unionism by previously marginal groups like the Liberal non-conformists who injected the 'liberal

humanitarian' and 'internationalist' strands into Unionist ideology.⁷¹ Walker highlights the 'crucial' role played by the Ulster Presbyterians in the 'intensifying pan-Protestant rivalry with Catholicism'.⁷² Whilst Hughes describes a 'hijacking job' by Ulster's Presbyterians on Ulster Protestant identity,⁷³ Walker refers to a process of 'Presbyterianisation' of the Ulster Unionist anti-Home Rule campaign (particularly during the Edwardian period).⁷⁴ Hughes observes that by the late nineteenth century, Ulster Unionists (particularly Presbyterians) in Belfast and north-east Ulster had 'made a conscious effort to promote their "Scottishness" as an alternative to a growing sense of Irishness'. However, he asserts that this Ulster-Scottish relationship was not necessarily 'natural and trouble-free' and should not be viewed in isolation from 'wider Ulster Unionist strategy'.⁷⁵ Crucially, like Hughes, Walker observes that this strategy involved 'obscuring other aspects of Ulster identity which did not fit the needs of the time and "ironing out" the complexities of the past'.⁷⁶ In a similar vein John Bew has identified a strand of 'civic unionism', pre-dating Home Rule, which was shared by both the Liberals and a significant portion of the Conservative hierarchy in Ulster and which was predicated upon a 'positive identification and engagement' with the British mainland as opposed to primarily economic or Orange objections to 'Rome Rule'.⁷⁷ As Arthur Aughey reminds us Unionism 'did not necessarily play on the idea of ethnic difference and was often concerned to couch its opposition to Irish nationalism in the corresponding civic terms of the day'.⁷⁸

Therefore, contrary to perceptions of Ulster Protestantism as a 'closed ideological system incapable of responding to a changing world',⁷⁹ I believe that Ulster Unionism's ultimate success in the battle of Westminster politics critical to Home Rule was its adaptation to changing conceptions of Britishness. The movement sought not only to preserve the fragile Ulster Protestant coalition, including influential elements hostile to Orange bigotry and violence, but simultaneously to counter national perceptions of 'Ulster bigotry' and the belief that they were, somehow, 'less than British'.⁸⁰

The Unionists sought to convert a sceptical British public opinion (including Scottish Presbyterians and English nonconformist Liberals) to their cause through a range of activities. Ollerenshaw has identified during 1892-94 (Gladstone's fourth ministry) a number of influential Unionist delegations to Britain, which addressed both Westminster and Scottish and English provincial audiences. He believes that this aspect of the Irish question has 'received very little attention', principally the 'way in which the Unionist cause was promoted

in Britain outside parliament' during General Election and Home Rule campaigns. In relation to the 1892 Ulster Unionist Convention held in Belfast, Ollerenshaw has noted the 'stress on peace and respect for the law'. This was not only designed to 'differentiate Ulster from the rest of the country' but was also born out of an awareness that 'explicit threats of mass violence against government...would have weakened the Unionist cause in the eyes of opinion outside Ireland.'⁸¹

Therefore, I argue that under the umbrella of local and national Protestant defence, the Unionist establishment directly intervened channelling Protestant agitation away from the streets of Belfast into non-violent and 'primarily parliamentary agitation'.⁸² This is not to say that organisations such as the Orange Order, the Ulster Unionist Clubs and the Ulster Volunteer Force did not engage in activities of a 'quasi-paramilitary' nature, usually with the explicit knowledge and backing of the Unionist leadership. However, the public pronouncements of figures like the Liberal-Unionist Chairman of the Fortwilliam District Unionist Club, Thomas Sinclair, were keen to emphasise their fundamentally 'constitutional' nature. He declared in 1893 that the Club's movement 'was in the highest sense constitutional. There was nothing whatever of a secret society business about these clubs...They wished it to be distinctly understood again that this movement was not one of violence. Any man who conceived an act of violence in connection with this question (Home Rule) was an enemy of the Unionist cause.'⁸³ In reality 'paramilitary' activities (usually in preparation for the eventuality of the passage of Home Rule) coexisted with a range of more legitimate forms of agitation. In August 1893, Viscount Templetown, President of the Ulster Unionist Clubs proclaimed that 'The problem of the hour is shall we have time to convert sufficient of the electors between this and the next General Election to secure the return of a Unionist Government to power. The more assistance, then, that can be given to enlightening the electors the better.'⁸⁴

I argue that Ulster Unionism succeeded in constructing an elaborate, and seemingly democratic machinery, which succeeded in integrating and controlling the principal 'local proletarian idiom' and agency of sectarian violence, the Orange Order, whilst exerting effective forms of social control. Bric and Coakley have addressed the 'ambiguous relationship' between conventional politics and political violence that has characterised the 'two main political traditions on the island of Ireland'.⁸⁵ In relation to the Unionist elite, I argue that they delineated between legitimate 'verbal violence' and 'illegitimate'

mob violence⁸⁶ channelling Protestant agitation away from bloody street confrontation into avenues of more managed political and associational expression. This elite created, co-opted, and integrated grassroots Protestant organizations as a means of harnessing and 'policing' popular Protestant sectarianism and also in order to emasculate alternative sources of power and leadership within the community.

The only time Ulster Unionism's united 'respectable' façade came under serious threat was in the political vacuum after the defeat of the Second Home Rule Bill in September 1893. During the Edwardian era, Walker has identified a 'localisation', or 'Ulsterising', process accompanied by an 'ever-more pre-eminent' role for Belfast.⁸⁷ Unionist national anti-Home Rule initiatives were relaxed encouraging the Belfast Protestant working class to express their simmering religious and socio-economic grievances through increased street 'rowdiness' and autonomous political activism. These developments were epitomised by the activities of Protestant street preachers and the formation of the dissident Independent Orange Order in 1903. Orchestrated by charismatic Evangelical preachers like Arthur Trew and Thomas Henry Sloan renewed sectarian violence in Belfast posed a serious threat to the respectable facade cultivated by Unionism in the aftermath of the 1886 Home Rule riots.

Walker has argued that the response of the Unionist party officers and MPs to this Edwardian political crisis was to place the Orange Order within the 'engine room' of Unionism thereby 'empowering an organisation in crisis' and sending a 'message to defectors and would be defectors'. More controversially, he also argues that Ulster Unionists were 'signalling their willingness formally to embrace religious sectarianism and the militant ethnic politics that accompanied it'.⁸⁸ In contrast, I believe that the Belfast Unionist establishment perceived Protestant preachers and the mob as a serious political liability in their wider struggle against Irish Home Rule. During the critical 1902 by-election campaign in South Belfast, the official Conservative candidate, Charles William Dunbar-Buller characterised the contest as a struggle between 'rowdiness and respectability'. He described his opponent Thomas Henry Sloan's supporters as 'Protestant Hooligans' or the 'physical force party' responsible for 'degrading our common religion, the Orange Order, and our city'. Crucially, he challenged the electors 'will you put a premium on tactics which my well imperil the cause of the Union itself?' and lost by over 800 votes.⁸⁹

Consequently, the Unionist establishment sought the earliest opportunity to marginalize and quash this emerging grass-roots sectarian

movement and to re-assert their carefully cultivated image of unity and respectability. In 1904 the President of the Southern Unionist, Irish Reform Association had outlined his local devolution proposals. Fuelled by the spectre of Home Rule 'by instalments'⁹⁰ the Ulster Unionist Party distanced itself from Arthur Balfour's Conservative Government (1902-05), asserted a Protestant-populist standpoint and regrouped around the 200 strong Ulster Unionist Council (1905).⁹¹ Consisting of 10-15 members of the Ulster landowning and business and professional classes the Council's Standing Committee 'directed the policy' of Ulster Unionism during the next fifteen years.⁹² The revival of an 'Ulster centric' Unionist Party and the presence of an Irish Nationalist-influenced Liberal Government after 1906 further encouraged 'Unionist unity'.⁹³ It has been argued that between the formation of the Ulster Unionist Council and the Government of Ireland Act in 1920 there was a transition from Irish Unionism to a 'democratised, militarised and localised' six counties unionism with a concomitant cessation of an 'exclusively parliamentary focus'. However, as Ollerenshaw correctly asserts, Unionism before 1905 never had an 'exclusively' parliamentary focus.⁹⁴ The challenge had always been how to contain, control and harness the energies of the 'physical force' element within Unionist support. By the third Home Rule crisis (1912-1914), Ulster Unionism was a highly centralised political movement comprising a number of key organisations. The most important of these were the Ulster Unionist Clubs (1893 and 1911), the Ulster Volunteer Force (1912 and 1919), the Ulster Women's Unionist Council (1911) and the Ulster Unionist Labour Association (1918). Ronan Fanning and Catherine B. Shannon have argued that during 1912-14, the paramilitary, physical force tradition was 'reintroduced into Irish politics by Carson and the Ulster leaders with the explicit backing of the British Unionists'.⁹⁵ Fanning argues that this period also constituted a 'failure of British democracy'⁹⁶ with the attendant 'spectre of civil war'.⁹⁷ However, Timothy Bowman amongst others has asserted, that the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) largely succeeded in maintaining Unionist 'discipline and unity'.⁹⁸ As Fanning has observed 'any local and armed aggression by the loyalists would have had disastrous implications for support in England, and within English Conservatism'.⁹⁹ However, this situation of relative calm was to be dramatically transformed during 1920-22. Consequently, unlike the bloody violence of this post-war era, I believe that during much of the Home Rule period Ulster Unionism was able, through its various organisations and structures, to integrate and 'police' its fundamentally sectarian support.

In light of the profound divisions exposed within the Ulster Protestant community during the early Edwardian period the Ulster Unionist establishment had sought to re-engineer unity. The subsequent intensification of Unionist activity culminated in the formation of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) in 1905. The UUC drew together the constituent components of Ulster Unionism directing a centralised strategy for Ulster Unionist resistance. It rendered division and conflict less likely by providing a forum for democratic debate and constituted the basis for an accountable, popular leadership symbolising Ulster's unity of purpose. Prior to 1905 there had been no effective over-arching structure capable of mediating and resolving internal conflicts particularly when the 'cement' of anti-Home Rule mobilisation had receded. By integrating popular sectarianism into representative structures, Ulster Unionism minimised the risk of a breakdown within the Protestant community accompanied by a resurgence of damaging sectarian violence. Through these measures, Ulster Unionism was able to project itself on the British mainland, and increasingly after 1911, throughout the empire,¹⁰⁰ as a democratic movement predicated upon ideals of unity, discipline and respectability, whilst simultaneously manipulating the 'menace of armed resistance'.¹⁰¹

In contrast to Belfast's largely successful attempts at containment, my thesis is that in Liverpool the interaction between national trends and local imperatives led to the ascendancy of belligerent sectarian street mobilisation and violence. Described as a 'place apart' or, as a 'city on the edge',¹⁰² Liverpool was a highly distinctive local context which (as a great seaport) was defined by its 'amazingly polyglot and cosmopolitan population' as well as by its 'exceptionalism'.¹⁰³ Whilst interacting with wider national political culture and identity, Liverpool was in many respects 'marginal' to prevailing conceptions of identity and political culture. Consequently, although Liverpool was undoubtedly buffeted by the consequences of Government actions there was minimal external political intervention in the city which provided a vacuum in which the forces of religious and ethnic dissension and conflict could triumph over any genuine prospects for inter-communal harmony.

John Belchem has argued that Liverpool constitutes a 'cultural intersection on the geographical margin', a critical site for investigations of northerness, Englishness, Britishness, and the pre-devolved United Kingdom.¹⁰⁴ In contrast to Belfast, I emphasise Liverpool's relative 'exceptionalism' in relation to mainstream British political culture and identity

during 1886-1922. A number of historians have identified this 'exceptionalism' as being pivotal to Liverpool's civic identity. This 'otherness' was defined locally, regionally, nationally and even trans-nationally embracing its socio-economic, cultural and ethno-sectarian characteristics alongside its 'peculiar' political culture. In what Belchem has described as an 'imagined past', the sectarian 'community' mentality of the Scotland Road Irish 'slummy' co-existed with a broader culture, a seafaring cosmopolitanism epitomised by 'sailortown'. For Belchem this 'diaspora space' has stood as 'metonym for the wider city, the critical influence in representations of Liverpool's distinctive culture, character, and history'. An exception within Britain, Liverpool was 'representative...of developments in other major seaports.'¹⁰⁵ However, despite this significant trans-national dimension, I believe it is also important to re-emphasise the role of specifically national trends and political developments in exacerbating and moderating aspects of the city's distinctive civic identity and sectarian culture. Although, Jackson is correct in asserting that 'sectarianism was a phenomenon not confined to the big cities,' the scale, duration and political significance of Liverpool's communal divisions were unparalleled outside of Belfast, and perhaps, Glasgow.¹⁰⁶

With its cosmopolitan 'demographic mosaic', Liverpool has been described as the 'least 'English' of the great Victorian provincial cities,' illustrating that nationalising trends did not advance at an even pace or have a uniform impact from one locality to the next.¹⁰⁷ These highly contested British 'nationalising forces' can be summarised as the erosion of 'local attachments,'¹⁰⁸ the spread of 'religious doubt and secularism'¹⁰⁹ and the emergence of a genuinely national political culture¹¹⁰ characterised by class rather than religious and ethnic allegiances.¹¹¹ Commenting on the Edwardian period, Jackson recognises that 'Britain was on the cusp of change' but had 'not yet reached the watershed' identifying the persistence of a 'traditional, imperial British patriotism' with Protestantism at its core.¹¹²

Although the chronology and extent of secularisation is highly contested historians have highlighted the gradual decline in organised religion accompanied by the erosion of Protestantism as a central component of British identity.¹¹³ I argue that as a direct consequence of this erosion of Protestantism Liverpool experienced conflict between two evolving local conceptions of Britishness. Liverpool Tory democracy, a modern Conservative nationalism, attempted during the early 1880s to revive Conservative political fortunes nationally through engagement with issues that would animate the working

classes. In Liverpool, this movement had a pronounced regional character, particularly a strong Protestant dimension conceived to win over the city's majority working class. In contrast the second conception of Britishness, the rival, more militant, 'Protestant Democracy' constituted a potent amalgam of fundamentalist Protestantism intertwined with local class, ethnic, and national allegiances.

During his agitation against Ritualism ('Romanising tendencies') within the Church of England, the Protestant Democracy's leading light Pastor George Wise (1855-1917) used his Protestant 'crusade' as a medium to criticise and undermine the Tory-Anglican establishment. The city's Orange-Tory-Unionist community was outwardly united by a shared anti-Catholicism, embodied by the slogan 'No Popery,' but was also riven by internal fissures over questions of class, religion, and political priorities and principles. Moreover, both secularisation and democratisation were to play crucial roles in fuelling Protestant-Catholic violence by exposing fault-lines in the relationship between the Protestant working class and local and national Conservatism.

The emergence of the powerful 'Protestant Democracy' can be traced back to the Conservative Party at Westminster's perceived compromising of its Protestant character, as part of its adaptation to increasingly secular national political culture and identity, which in turn magnified the Ritualist threat. This anti-Ritualist 'crusade' commenced around the time of the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850. This 'internal' controversy concerning 'Romanising' practises within the Established Church was extensive and deep-rooted. Although the degree and extent of this threat in Liverpool was more perceived than real, it was conflated in the popular mind with anti-Catholicism, anti-Irishism and pronounced class sensibilities. Liverpool's Protestants had traditionally looked to the Conservative party to 'conserve' and 'defend' their Protestantism.¹¹⁴ However, this relationship was to come under increasing strain, particularly during the period of Conservative Government between 1895-1905, which was seen as neither Protestant enough nor democratic enough for Liverpool Tory democracy. Lord Salisbury's Conservative administration (1895-1902) was attacked for having made too many concessions to Roman Catholicism whilst giving too little to the Protestant working class.¹¹⁵ This 'grassroots' disenchantment fed into a growing belief amongst Liverpool's Protestants that they could no longer rely upon the Conservative party to maintain their Protestantism against 'Papal aggression'.

Locally, the 1880s had witnessed an alliance between the so-called 'democratic' Conservative forces (personified by Archibald Salvidge, Chairman of the Liverpool Working Men's Conservative Association) spawned by the 1884 Reform Act and various militant Protestant personalities and organisations via the anti-Ritualist 'crusade'. This burgeoning 'crusade' saw a convergence between frequently violent 'grassroots' agitation against Ritualists (the rich, or 'aristocrats') within the Anglican Church and working class demands for political representation within the local Conservative political 'machine'. These demands were directed at the 'patrician' Liverpool Constitutional Association, or 'upper tenth,' comprising ship-owners, brokers and merchants with wider horizons than mere 'Church issues'.¹¹⁶ This 'grassroots' Protestant indignation culminated in the triumph of Salvidge (Liverpool party 'boss' by 1900 and dubbed the 'Lord High Dictator') and his distinctive brand of Protestant Tory-Democracy¹¹⁷ and also empowered an aggressive strand of working class Protestantism, which the Conservative political 'machine' proved unable to control.

Consequently, by the Edwardian period anxiety was growing within the Tory-Anglican establishment at this emerging working class Protestant Democracy's autonomy, crude anti-Catholicism and escalating communal violence. A vigorous contest was developing for the leadership of the Protestant working class in which charismatic street preachers were to play a pivotal role. This power struggle centred upon who truly represented the 'bulwark' of the Protestant Reformation (1688), which was the bedrock of local communal, ethnic, and national identity. As D. G. Boyce states, 'citizenship in the United Kingdom was informally, as well as constitutionally, defined by religion. Church and state were part of the one constitutional settlement of 1688'.¹¹⁸

During the Independent Protestant political revolt (1903-1905), in which a number of Independent Protestant councillors were elected, 'grassroots' Protestant political aspirations were eventually frustrated, resulting in the acrimonious unravelling of the democratic and militant Protestant strands within Tory Democracy. This loss of control was accompanied by escalating Protestant-Catholic violence as the Protestant Democracy resorted to the politics of the street in order to defend its 'established religious privilege'.¹¹⁹ They were determined to preserve their Protestant culture, identity and self-worth from the combined threat of insidious secularism and growing Catholic self-confidence and self-assertion. On the other hand, Salvidge explored

alternative popular issues (like Tariff Reform, defence of the Legislative Union, and anti-Socialism)¹²⁰ as more stable bases upon which to retain Protestant working class political support.

In order to outflank the Independents, Salvidge defined a 'respectable' Protestantism incorporating the 'constitutional' anti-Ritualist agitation but excluding 'bigoted anti-Catholicism' and outlined a Conservatism predicated upon the defence of civil and religious liberty for all.¹²¹ Despite this distancing of Tory democracy from its militant 'grassroots' base, the period 1905-1911 witnessed continued interaction within the Protestant community between conventional political action and popular street mobilisation epitomised by the bloody anti-Catholic riots of 1909. These large-scale disturbances represented the pinnacle of the Protestant Democracy's influence, leverage and power.

However, despite posing a serious challenge to Tory-Anglican leadership in the city, the Protestant Democracy also directly and indirectly contributed to Tory democracy's continued political hegemony in the absence of viable alternatives for Protestant political expression. This factor, along with an inability to exert effective forms of social control or to facilitate integration, helps to explain the pragmatic co-existence that developed between Liverpool's Tory democrats and 'aggressive' Protestant street mobilisation throughout much of the period.

How did the interaction between local, regional and national factors influence developments in both cities towards the end of the period? Belfast's relative calm during the Home Rule era was dramatically transformed upon the city becoming the capital of a six-county Northern Ireland, or effectively a 'colonial-nationalist state', in May 1921.¹²² This Province constituted a 'Protestant parliament and a Protestant state'¹²³ an embodiment of the prevailing 'border politics'. Now that the Home Rule struggle was over, the imperative for Ulster Unionism to project a respectable façade was reduced and the 'tight discipline' characteristic of the preceding era was relaxed.¹²⁴ Paul Bew has outlined how a 'shift in political relations within the Protestant class bloc'¹²⁵ occurred with many Unionist and Orange leaders encouraging or condoning 'violence and discrimination'.¹²⁶ The Unionist Government of Northern Ireland's adoption of a more 'ambivalent approach' towards Loyalist violence was accompanied by an upsurge in sectarian conflict costing some 498, mainly Catholic, lives between 1920-1922.¹²⁷

A critical factor in this violent upsurge in Belfast was the rapid disengagement by British political parties with the Irish question that occurred

during the First World War. By 1918, no major British party 'existed for reasons to do with Ireland', with James Loughlin stating that the war 'destroyed the deep divisions between the major British parties on the question of national identity and the national interest'.¹²⁸ For Boyce, this 'placed Ireland firmly outside the realm of British party politics',¹²⁹ whilst for Loughlin it rendered Northern Ireland 'an expendable part of the United Kingdom'.¹³⁰ Against this backdrop of Northern Ireland's increasing 'political marginalisation', plus the growing IRA insurgency during the Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921), there was little political will in either Belfast or London to contain or control the escalating violent 'pogroms' in Belfast.¹³¹ As Peter Hart observes, the Northern Ireland government and the Protestant churches 'shamefully did nothing to discourage popular sectarianism and the UUP often encouraged it'. Meanwhile, after the July 1921 Truce with the IRA, the British Government endeavoured to adopt a pragmatic 'position of neutrality'.¹³²

In Liverpool's case both local and national developments were to eventually erode aspects of the city's 'exceptionalism'. Sustained violence during the city's 1911 Transport Strike had aroused fears of 'social revolution' drawing the attention of Herbert Asquith's Liberal Government to street mobilisation seen as a contributory factor in the unrest.¹³³ A subsequent peace conference resulted in a special Act of Parliament, the Liverpool Corporation Act of 1912, providing 'limited' police powers to regulate outdoor religious meetings and processions.¹³⁴ Significantly, Daniel Jackson has noted the relatively peaceful protests in Liverpool against the third Home Rule Bill during 1912-1914, questioning the validity of the conflation of 'crowds with riots' and stating that such meetings throughout the UK 'can be seen as a collective reaffirmation of a type of British identity that felt increasingly under threat'. However, I believe that unlike the primarily local and frequently volatile anti-Ritualist agitation, the question of Home Rule was a critical 'national' issue which ultimately transcended Liverpool's local sectarian political culture involving, as Jackson himself points out, the wider 'interests of England and the British Empire'. With an eye on British public and political opinion, this co-ordinated national dimension to the Home Rule struggle was crucial as I argue in relation to Belfast, in attempts to contain potentially damaging, large-scale, outbreaks of sectarian violence.¹³⁵

The First World War further undermined parochialism and accelerated secularisation whilst local developments like mass inter-war slum clearances resulted in the dismantling of the 'cultural and community infrastructure' of

sectarianism.¹³⁶ Additionally, the resolution of the Irish Question in 1921 witnessed the gradual decline of Irish nationalism and a growing threat posed by the Labour Party. Within this new political terrain, a Conservative like Barbara Whittingham-Jones sought to integrate Protestants into a 'broad church' so long as this did not 'involve the adoption of sectarian prejudices by Conservatives.'¹³⁷

I argue that this interaction between local factors and the direct encroachment of national political culture and identity witnessed the diminution in sectarian street mobilisation and violence as a 'distinctive feature' of Liverpool's cultural and political identity. Consequently, by the inter-war period sectarian violence was episodic and in decline, whilst sectarianism remained an important but no longer pivotal determinant of political allegiance within what remained a highly distinctive local context. Additionally, Belchem has highlighted how the Liverpool-Irish eventually 'entered the white mainstream and secured a hyphenated identity'. The Liverpool-Irish 'slummy' was transformed becoming 'emblematic of the Liverpoolian struggle against adversity, misperception and misrepresentation' and eventually 'came to be inscribed as the prototypical "scouser"'.¹³⁸

What can we learn about the 'unresolved nature of Britishness' from the complex, often contradictory, experiences of Belfast and Liverpool?¹³⁹ I argue that competing and conflicting conceptions of 'Britishness' emerged during 1886-1922. These were the product of both evolution and attempts at imposition by the main Westminster political parties.

As Boyce highlights the question of Irish Home Rule was 'the political issue of the age'.¹⁴⁰ This fundamental question of political devolution proved to be a catalyst in the reinvention of Britishness. The Home Rule struggle not only challenged established English 'power and prestige',¹⁴¹ but also came to define competing political orthodoxies (Liberal 'pluralist' and Conservative 'organic' models of the UK) whilst bringing into focus what was legitimate or illegitimate action in defence of the constitutional status quo including the possible threat of 'armed resistance'. Home Rule also clarified (perhaps for the first time) that the UK was in fact four distinct nations differentiated along religious, cultural and linguistic lines and also posed a serious threat to 'imperial integrity'.¹⁴²

Enmeshed with this titanic political debate were longer-term 'nationalising forces' like democratisation and secularisation which helped to erode, undermine and transform the three principal institutions (Parliament, the Monarchy and the Protestant religion) that 'held together' the fragile UK.

However, despite the Protestant communities of Belfast and Liverpool being united in their loyalty to the Williamite Constitution of 1688 with its concept of ‘a Protestant Crown and constitution and an essentially Protestant “civilising” Empire’¹⁴³ why did they respond in such contrasting and surprising ways to the seismic events of 1886-1922?

Belfast and Liverpool show how changes in Government opinion and policy, alongside national political interventions, could profoundly influence the response of local elites to community conflict – and how that response could determine whether confrontation was largely expressed through formal political channels or more extreme forms of protest. In Liverpool’s case the dominant political culture was fundamentally parochial in character, and although profoundly affected by national political trends and developments, it was nonetheless largely unmediated by concerted external political intervention: its political culture therefore continued to feed off and be sustained by religious and ethnic rivalries. In contrast, Ulster Unionism in Belfast was highly sensitive to changes in Government opinion and policy. The movement was engaged in a national political debate critical to its very survival and was ultimately accountable to a wider British public and political opinion increasingly intolerant of religious bigotry and violence. Revealingly, with the decline of Liverpool’s relative ‘exceptionalism’ during the inter-war era and Belfast’s increasing marginality to British political culture and identity, religious confrontation and violence gradually declined in Liverpool whilst in Belfast it exploded back into life.

Alan Confino, writing about the experience of Imperial Germany, has described the nation as a ‘local metaphor’.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps the lessons of Belfast and Liverpool during 1886-1922 are that these ‘local metaphors’ are most potent and enduring when they acquire a broader political utility and become (no matter how fleetingly) part of a national narrative upon identity and belonging. Revealingly, in terms of this local-regional-national axis, I believe the late Victorian/ Edwardian period, when the unifying narrative of anti-Home Rule mobilisation had receded, requires much further investigation. This period in Belfast was akin to the localised anti-ritualist agitation in Liverpool when intra-Protestant enmities assumed paramount importance. The sectarian movements that emerged in both cities, with their emphasis upon violent direct action, believed that the ‘sapping and mining’¹⁴⁵ of Romanism within the British Protestant nation was the ‘danger of the hour’.¹⁴⁶ This ‘grassroots’ pan-Protestant movement posed a very serious threat to the legitimacy of the

Conservative-Unionist establishments in both cities as the defenders of the Protestant community.

However, the national dimension to the Home Rule struggle proved to be a critical factor in the long-term containment and suppression of sectarian violence in Belfast and to a lesser extent in Liverpool (specifically during 1912-14). Consequently, does the necessity of being accountable to wider domestic and national public and political opinion lead movements like Ulster Unionism and Tory democracy to moderate and even suppress their core support? Most importantly, does the degree to which the two cities were engaged with and/or marginal to developments in national political culture and identity throughout the period help to explain their complex relationship to sectarian violence?

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