

To understand the present troubles in Belfast, we need to go back to the dying days of the old ‘Orange State’

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The disturbances prompted by Belfast City Council's decision to restrict their flying of the Union flag can seem bewildering to outsiders. However [Eric Kaufmann](#) argues that they make sense within the broader historical context, as the dismantling of a centuries old tradition has come to symbolise Protestant fears of a loss of power in what is rapidly becoming a Catholic majority country.



Belfast City Council's decision in December 2012 to cease flying the Union flag apart from on designated days led to over [six weeks of rioting](#) by loyalist protesters. Though Unionist politicians condemned the violence, it's clear that many sympathised with the aims of the protesters. The violence can be compared to loyalist clashes with police around the right to march on the Drumcree parade route at Portadown in the late 1990s and early 2000s which I chronicled in my book [The Orange Order](#).

Viewed from afar, these appear nonsensical: how can people get so worked up over symbols and rituals? Why would mothers put their children at risk by joining the protests? It does little good to pretend that such events are simply caused by a fringe of loyalist paramilitary troublemakers and a penumbra of teens along for the ride. Respectable Unionism – working families and the middle-class cadres of the Orange Order – sympathise with the cause (though not the tactics) of the rioters. To understand why, I think we need to go back to the dying days of the old ‘Orange State’, the Protestant-run Stormont regime which was prorogued by the British Parliament in 1972. In the mid-1960s, Unionists were already experiencing significant pressure from Westminster to curtail discrimination against Catholics in housing, local government elections and employment. Unionists dragged their feet on reform, arguing they had secured a form of self-determination in the 1920 Government of Ireland Act that could not be infringed by London. Unionists did not see themselves as a privileged majority in a 6-county Northern Ireland but an embattled minority on the island of Ireland in the midst of a Catholic majority determined to drive them out, exact revenge or assimilate them as they maintained had occurred in the South. England (Scotland less so) was perceived as a fair-weather friend happy to wash its hands of Ulster for strategic advantage.

British pressure – accelerated by the need to end Catholic support for the IRA's bombing campaign – forced through necessary reforms to obtain equality. In so doing, however, Ulster Protestants, especially the working-class, experienced downward social mobility and a loss of power. Though this was the price of inter-communal equality, Catholics gained upward mobility while working-class Protestants became alienated. This was exacerbated by demography: Protestants have slid from about two-thirds of the total in 1965 to around half today. In Dungannon, in County Tyrone, a local Orangemen, speaking without rancour, recalled a time when Protestants formed a solid majority of the town's residents but were now in a one-third minority. The tale is similar in many towns in the west of the province. In Belfast, interface violence is often the result of loyalist paramilitaries who tap into resentment at the fact that demographically buoyant Catholics are encroaching on their traditional areas. The [Holy Cross dispute](#) in North Belfast in 2001-2002, in which loyalists intimidated parents and children attending a Catholic school in ‘their’ area, reflected this sense of powerlessness in the face of Catholic demographic advance.

The flag riots tap into the Unionist perception that Belfast, a historically Protestant city, is – like Northern Ireland – becoming Catholic majority, and that this has political implications. The fact that a century-old tradition of flying the Union flag from Belfast City Hall is being dismantled symbolises this loss of power. Likewise, the [Drumcree riots](#) involved the abrogation of a 200-year old Protestant tradition, touching a similarly raw nerve.

The outlook in the two communities is very different because one is rising and the other is in decline. However, within the Catholic community, there is an alienated fringe of republicans who continue to worship at the altar of the disgraced ‘physical force tradition’ of armed struggle. They have not reconciled themselves with the ‘men in suits’

(Adams and McGuinness) that led Sinn Fein/IRA away from the armalite in favour of the ballot box. While Sinn Fein maintains it can peacefully deliver a United Ireland in the future, dissident extremists believe the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 has cemented Northern Ireland into the Union, and they are impatient for action.

As we enter 2013, the themes discussed in my April 2012 [Political Quarterly special issue](#) and at events in [Birkbeck](#) and [Belfast](#) continue to resonate. The tempo of dissident Republican activity remained high throughout 2012, with numerous successful and foiled attacks. In November, David Black, a 52 year-old father of two, was shot on the M1, becoming the first prison officer to be murdered in Northern Ireland in almost 20 years. Dissident ginger groups joined forces to form a reconstituted IRA, promising further attacks in the New Year. As with much else in the province, the vagaries of peace and conflict appear to be rooted in long-term dynamics. This said, our contributors were asked to also consider whether austerity in a province whose economy is more dependent on government than anywhere else in the UK would adversely affect its hitherto successful Peace Process.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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