The meanings people apply to their situation and to their own behaviour, and to the behaviour of others, are central to anthropology. Anthropology examines the interpretations people make of things and events, and the processes by which they arrive at these interpretations. Such examination is particularly important in the study of divided societies, where events are likely to be interpreted differently by different communities. In Northern Ireland, political concessions to the wishes of unionists is often interpreted by Irish nationalists or republicans as continued oppression, colonialism or neo-colonialism and maintaining a discriminatory system. Loyalists generally see any compromise with Irish nationalist wishes as part of a much wider strategy to unite Ireland by the back door.

Starting with Rosemary Harris (1972), much anthropological fieldwork in Northern Ireland has been concerned with the nature of the sectarian divide between Catholics and Protestants and the manner in which it influences relations between and within the sectarian communities. There has been an increasing focus on social processes, especially symbolism and ritual. But studies have also begun to look at divisions within the sectarian communities.

In 1921 the Government of Ireland Act partitioned Ireland into an independent, predominantly Catholic Irish Free State (later to become the Republic of Ireland) in the south, and a predominantly Protestant Northern Ireland that remained under British rule. Northern Ireland is popularly portrayed as a clash of two cultures, two religions, and two national identities – British and Irish. However, the situation is more complex and requires appreciation of other national identities among the Northern Ireland population. In fact, the peace talks that led to the formation of the power-sharing executive at Stormont in 2000 were premised on the recognition that there are more than two national identities among Protestants in Northern Ireland. Analysts of nationalism have usually been concerned with an association between the state and an ideology that professes a common culture, ethnicity and history. Studies of the history and politics of Ireland have tended to present only one ‘proper’ nationalism – the Celtic/Gaelic tradition of the indigenous Irish, which was created in the 19th century (Garvin 1981). In relation to this, the position of the Protestants of northeast Ireland has always been typologically problematic. Their identity is expressed in terms of their relationship to Britain, and consequently they have been interpreted, in our view wrongly, as either a peripheral element of a wider British nationalism or an anomalous population that, in the age of nationalism, lacked a genuine national identity since it made no claim for an ethnically based state of its own (Miller 1978).

However, certainly within the 20th century Protestantism has been made up of divergent identities, with different conceptions of the nation and of the state to which they profess allegiance. It is therefore inaccurate to talk of a politically homogeneous Protestant population with a common identity. Protestant identity certainly exists, but it is given different importance by different individuals, and even for those for whom it is a master status it has varying importance in different situations. Todd made her classification in order to be able to discuss political attitudes and examine the problems of political change. However, Todd’s classification is also valuable for an examination and understanding of nationalism as it operates within the Protestant community, and leads us to suggest that at least two nationalisms exist within the Ulster Protestant tradition. Further, these demonstrate some of the divisions which may be hidden in the social scientist’s broad category of ‘nationalism’. They also illustrate some of the problems nationalism poses for the modern state in terms of ideology, equality of access and rights to resources, and the stability of the state in the face of divergent identities.
Ulster loyalist nationalism. One of these Ulster unionist nationalisms falls within the received definition, in that it is ethnically based. Its primary ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983) is the Northern Ireland Protestant population, and not the wider British state, although its adherents see themselves as sharing certain basic cultural and political principles, such as freedom of religion and conscience, individualism, equality and democracy, with the communities of this state. Here we are talking about people’s ideal conceptions of their communities, which often diverge from social reality. The cultural and political principles which are valued are believed to derive from Protestantism and to help distinguish the Northern Protestant community from the nationalist Irish. This nationalism claims that the Protestant community is not Irish. But nor is it British other than in terms of ethnic equality with the Welsh, Scots and English, which it sees as the three other nations in the British family of nations.

Ulster British nationalism. The second Ulster unionist nationalism emphasizes common political and moral principles rather than ethnicity per se as the basis of the imagined community, the wider ‘British’ entity of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, whose constituent ethnic communities are seen as secondary in terms of national allegiance. It claims loyalty to what it sees as ‘British’ values and institutions, such as progressiveness, liberal democracy, internationalism, and British law and constitutional government (Todd 1987). These are believed to derive from ‘Britishness’, rather than from Protestantism as such. This civic nationalism is akin to some of the kinds of loyalties which the elites of multi-ethnic states and plural societies often seek to create in order to overcome ethnic division within the state (Eriksen 1993). Hence these unionists were prepared, albeit reluctantly, to participate in the recent Northern Ireland talks to create the power-sharing assembly.

Given their characteristics, we argue that it is more correct to regard these identities and ideologies within the Ulster unionist community as different forms of nationalism, rather than as some 20th-century anomaly or a perverted allegiance to a previous, more religiously-based age (Miller 1978).

The Ulster British nationalist claims loyalty to a set of cultural principles which in his eyes were developed by Britain and can only be guaranteed within a British context. The Ulster loyalist claims his commitment is to his people, whom he identifies as ‘the people’ (Finlayson 1997). In the latter, loyalty to Britain is defined in terms of a relationship to the Crown rather than to a British state, and is conditional upon the maintenance of the well-being of ‘the people’. Historically, loyalty is derived from Protestant fundamentalism (Wallis, Bruce and Taylor 1986). Its main opponent, ‘the other’ in relation to which it defines itself (Todd 1987), is the Roman Catholic Church, whereas for the Ulster British, ‘the other’ is that which is seen as anti-British rather than anti-Protestant. Whereas the aim of the Ulster British is to retain the union with Britain, the principal concern of Ulster loyalists is a negative one, to stay out of a united Ireland.

Even for secular loyalists, what is regarded as Protestant loyalty to Britain rests on the necessity to preserve their community and way of life. Any state or nationalism dominated by Catholicism must be resisted because it is opposed to these principles. If a British government, to which the loyalist nominally owes allegiance, pursues policies that would undermine these principles, then the loyalist not only has the right to oppose it, but is duty bound to do so. So we have the apparent paradox of people who claim to be particularly loyal to Britain adopting various kinds of extra-constitutional opposition to policies pursued by British governments, all in the name of loyalty.

Classic examples of this are the demonstrations and strikes against earlier attempts at political compromise, such as the Sunningdale Agreement (1974) and the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985). The groups who take their loyalty to the most violent extremes are loyalist paramilitary organizations, of which the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and their subgroups, are the most significant.

The nation

The imagined community to which the Ulster loyalist owes primary allegiance is defined as ‘Ulster’. By ‘Ulster’, Northern Protestants today mean the six counties of Northern Ireland, not the ancient nine counties of Ulster. Here we come across the problem of boundaries which bedevils all attempts to create nations (Eriksen 1993). There are Protestants in County Donegal in the Republic of Ireland, for example, who have their own Orange lodges. They are considered to be both Orangemen and Ulstermen. In contrast, the classification of most Protestants in other parts of the Republic of Ireland, who identify with the Irish state, is much more anomalous. They are seen as a warning of what would happen in the event of a Roman Catholic takeover, the neutralized remnant of what was until recently a much larger population whose members have either been assimilated or have emigrated. Protestants also refer to Northern Ireland as ‘the Province’ (i.e. ‘the Province of Ulster’, a term derived from the original nine-county province). This designation is also used by British ministers and in government documents. In contrast, Irish nationalists would never use ‘Ulster’ or ‘the Province’ to refer to Northern Ireland, but would apply them to the original nine counties. At best they would use the neutral term ‘Northern Ireland’, and usually the politically loaded ‘six counties’ (to republicans, ‘the occupied six counties’).

To loyalists, Ulster is a country with its own nationhood, characteristics and identity, some of which it shares with Britain (in much the same way the Scots and the Welsh in Britain or the Basques and Bretons in Spain and France identify to some degree with the dominant national culture), but with much that is unique and distinctive. The ‘Ulsterman’ has his own special characteristics. These are a consequence of his frontier ancestry as much as of his Protestantism. They include fortitude, determination, hard work, discipline, individuality, martial history and prowess. Accounts of these ‘characters’ are often found in
However, since both Protestantism and the frontier were defined in opposition to Catholicism and Irishness, 'Ulsterman' is a designation which often implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) excludes Catholics - something of which the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland is well aware. For example, a characteristic of the stereotypical 'Ulsterman' is that he is law-abiding. From this it follows that he respects the Police Service of Northern Ireland (formerly the Royal Ulster Constabulary) and the laws of the Crown (subject to the proviso noted above). Implicitly, this would exclude Irish nationalists. (Today many loyalists no longer respect the police service, but this is because they claim that it is being used to implement policies that 'betray' loyalism.) Although a set of conventions governing interactions between Catholics and Protestants has grown up in rural areas in order to avoid contentious issues and make relationships harmonious at a somewhat superficial level, Catholics can be seen as the enemy within, fifth columnists, rebels working to destroy Ulster (Harris 1972, Moore and Sanders 1996). The failure of loyalists to recognize the Catholic minority is graphically demonstrated in issues of loyalist paramilitary journals produced in the early 1970s, at the start of the current troubles (Ulster, The Woodvale Defence Association, passim). In these publications Catholics are dehumanized and ascribed characteristics opposite to those of 'Ulstermen', being presented as fickle, stupid, lazy, workshy, deliberately living off the state, slavishly obeying the dictates of priests and unable to think for themselves, cowards who shoot people in the back. (It must be remembered, however that this was in a situation of intense conflict and what was perceived as an armed rebellion of the minority against the majority.)

National symbols, icons, and tradition

The cultural symbols and history of the Ulster British stress the history and achievements of Britain, the original emphasis on imperial culture and achievements now being shifted to Britain's role in international affairs and in NATO (Todd 1987). Ulster loyalist symbolism and history is a different discourse, focusing on sacrifice, siege and standing alone in adversity and against great odds. Classic symbols used to create Ulster loyalist historical discourse are the 1689 Siege of Derry (the Maiden City that was besieged but never penetrated, thanks to the bravery of its defenders), the Battle of the Boyne, the heroism and sacrifice of the Ulster Division at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, and, more recently, the Ulster Workers Council (UWC) strike of 1974 against the Sunningdale Agreement.

Fig. 3. Loyalist wall mural depicting 'Cuchulainn, ancient defender of Ulster from Irish attacks together with a member of 'Ulster's present day defenders', the loyalist paramilitary UDA. The myth of Cuchulainn is, however, drawn from Irish mythology.

Fig. 4. Loyalist wall poster: 'Free our loyalist prisoners. Ulster Freedom Fighters.' Ulster Freedom Fighters are mostly members of the Ulster Defence Association.

Fig. 5. Mural commemorating the heroism of members of the 36th Ulster Division in the Battle of the Somme in World War I.

Fig. 6. Loyalist wall mural: 'Our loyalist prisoners. Ulster Freedom Fighters.

CAIN (HTTP://CAIN.ULSTER.AC.UK)
the consequences of attempted betrayal. The triumph of the UWC strike, perceived as the result of the actions of the working class, was subverted by self-serving politicians in their own interest (Nelson 1984). The heroic sacrifice on the Somme was in the interests of the British governing elite. The Apprentice Boys shut the gates of Derry to prevent betrayal by governor Lundy. The loyalists at Drumcree are being betrayed by the unionist establishment and the British government. The English are perceived as arch-betrayers. In all their colonial wars they have capitulated to terrorism (as in Rhodesia, for example). They always ultimately sell out to terrorism and betray those who have fought for them, for political and economic expediency. For Ulster loyalists, in contrast to the Ulster British, the Englishman is as much ‘the other’ as the Irish nationalist. He is unprincipled and materialistic. As British government policy was interpreted as becoming anti-loyalist in the 1970s, loyalist paramilitary journals increasingly began to refer to the Westminster government as ‘the English government’ (Ulster, passim). Loyalist perception is that the affairs of Ulster are in the hands of those who cannot be trusted and will sell out to her enemies.

Anderson (1983) and Gellner (1983) stress that nationalism is a modern and manufactured phenomenon that involves the creation, selection and reification of tradition. In loyalist nationalism, this process is demonstrated by the reinterpretation of events such as the UWC strike and their incorporation into tradition as ‘the Troubles’ unfolded. As loyalty and the state were increasingly perceived as under threat, some loyalists attempted to broaden a Protestant claim to Northern Ireland by seeking to incorporate and reinterpret elements of Irish mythology into loyalist tradition. In recent years the Gaelic culture hero Cuchulainn (analogous to the Greek hero Ulysses and the Teutonic Siegfried) has been adopted by the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the largest loyalist paramilitary organization, as an ‘Ulster’ folk hero. This was justified by reference to the writings of two local physicians and historians, A.T.Q. Stewart’s The narrow ground (1986) and Ian Adamson’s The Cruthin (1986). Adamson argues that the inhabitants of Northern Ireland, both Protestant and Catholic, are descended mainly from Picts, argues that the inhabitants of Northern Ireland, both Protestant and Catholic, are descended mainly from Picts, and historians, A.T.Q. Stewart’s The narrow ground (1986). Adamson argues that the inhabitants of Northern Ireland, both Protestant and Catholic, are descended mainly from Picts, and the Cruthin, who were the original inhabitants of Ireland. Many were driven out of Ulster by the invading Gaels and settled in the lowlands of Scotland. The leadership of the UDA used this claim to argue that the right of the descendents of the 17th-century planters of Ulster to Northern Ireland goes back even before the Gaels. They make an analogy between the Jewish immigration to Palestine in the 20th century and the Plantation of Ulster in the 17th century. Both cases, they argue, involved the rightful reoccupation of lands by people forcibly dispossessed in earlier times. Cuchulainn is a Pictish hero, and not a Celtic one. Back in the dawn of history he sought to defend Ulster against the Gaels. Thus the Celtic mythical hero is transformed and added to the Siege of Derry and the Battles of the Boyne and the Somme in the catalogue of loyalist culture, to legitimize the loyalist claim and extend it back beyond the advent of the Irish themselves. Today he is enshrined in the logo of the UDA’s paramilitary journal (Ulster/New Ulster Defender: see Fig. 1), and some Protestant wall murals now depict Cuchulainn as well as armed and masked figures in paramilitary uniform representing the UDA (see Fig. 3). In this way time is telescoped, and the first and the latest ‘defenders of Ulster’s freedom’ are juxtaposed.

Similarly, loyalists invert the Irish interpretation of political history. It is the history of a small nation bullied and dominated by a more powerful one, but it is Ulster which is the small nation, threatened by the powerful Irish Republic. This explains why Ulster’s only safeguard is to maintain the link with England, the unreliable ally for whom it has unstintingly sacrificed its blood over so many generations. This contrasts with the Ulster British ideology that the union should be maintained for its own sake, because of its social and cultural value to its members (Todd 1987).

**Culture**

Just as specific events have been reinterpreted and become part of loyalist culture, and attempts have been made to extend the cultural lineage of loyalism, as ‘the Troubles’ have evolved loyalist discourse has increasingly come to focus on the maintenance of culture, identity and tradition. Loyalists believe that in a united Ireland they would be eradicated as ‘a people’. In line with current parlance on ethnic confrontation, Loyalists often say they would be ‘ethnically cleansed’ (New Ulster Defender).

When the current conflict began, with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in 1968, unionist discourse on ‘the Troubles’ was couched in political terms. It was a question of maintaining the union in order to retain basic political rights, as well as better living standards and ways of life. Civil rights demonstrators were popularly described by loyalists as ‘rebels’. Their activities were interpreted as a simple political assault on the Union. Any allusion to culture tended to take the form simply of a broad reference to religion, to the defence of Protestantism. This was articulated most successfully by the Reverend Ian Paisley in his opposition to civil rights marches. (But note, for example, a comment in 1968 by the Minister for Home Affairs in the Stormont government, that Roman Catholic countries had lower standards of living than Protestant ones.)

Over the years, with the erosion of Protestant political control, an emphasis has come to be placed on the preservation of culture, which is associated with ethnic identity. Now, Irish nationalism’s perceived aim is the destruction of the ‘Protestant community’ by destroying its identity through destroying its culture (described as ‘tradition’). The very existence of the Protestant community, which is encapsulated in Protestant ‘tradition’, is at stake. Any act against Protestant tradition is aimed at the Protestant community which can only safeguard itself by maintaining political separation from the Irish Republic. This emphasis on cultural survival is associated particularly with loyalism. In other words, loyalists appear to be moving from a political folk conception of Northern Ireland to a multicultural, plural society, one in which ‘Protestant’ culture is seen as under threat. Their cultural focus is what are commonly referred to as ‘Orange’ institutions and activities, such as Orange marches (Cairns 2000). Marches are claimed to be an expression of cultural identity (Bryan 1995, Jarman et al. 1998), and they are associated particu-
and tolerance in Ulster: A study of neighbours and strangers in a border community. Manchester University Press.


New Ulster Defender (The Journal of the Ulster Defence Association).

New Ulster Political Research Group 1979 Beyond the religious divide. Belfast: NU PG.

— 1987 Common sense. Belfast: NU PG.


Fig. 8. Loyalist mural focusing on the issue of nationality, East Belfast. A smaller section, partly hidden by the lamp post on the left, reads ‘We will maintain our faith and our nationality.’

larly with working-class and rural areas. The opposition to re-routing Protestant marches away from predominantly Catholic areas was initially couched in terms of the right to walk the Queen’s highway (a political and legal right). Now it is as likely to be phrased as resisting an attack upon ‘tradition’. Similarly, articles in loyalist paramilitary journals in the early 1970s offered a crude political interpretation of the conflict, but they have increasingly come to emphasize identity and culture (Moore and Sanders 1993). In this sense, the conflict has strengthened loyalist culture and contributed to the manufacture of “traditional” institutions and activities. Some of the loyalist parades now claimed as ‘traditional’ are relatively recent creations. In many cases although the route may be traditional the content has changed, for example regarding the inclusion of paramilitary flags and the type of bands marching. The contentious ‘mini-12th’ parade on the Ormeau road, although seen as traditional, probably dates from the 1960s or early 1970s. Drumcree, on the other hand, may date back as far as 1807 (Dominic Bryan, personal communication).

Class and nationalism: Politicians and paramilitaries

The creation of nationalism has usually been an elite or middle-class activity, as for example with the creation of a Norwegian national identity in the 19th century (Eriksen 1993). This is true of the creation of Irish nationalism, and of the development of a British identity. In contrast to this, Ulster loyalism is essentially a working-class phenomenon. It is adopted by the working class in particular, and its symbols are derived from working-class culture and activities and are reinterpreted largely by members of the working class. Middle-class unionist politicians have always had to cater to it, in order to seek its support (Todd 1987), but unionism has always contained a strong strand of working-class opposition to unionist politicians and the Ulster establishment, identified collectively as the ‘Fur Coat Brigade’ – a description which encapsulates the idea of them as self-interested middle-class people with their own values and with no real interest in the Protestant working class. In less conflictual times, large numbers of working-class voters have expressed this suspicion by voting for independent unionist candidates and smaller unionist parties such as the Northern Ireland Labour Party. With the increasing intensity of the Northern Ireland conflict and the perceived threat to the union came the necessity to close ranks in order to keep out ‘the other’. Nonetheless, the Ulster loyalist vote is particularly strong for populist, classless, or non-middle-class politicians such as Ian Paisley. Middle-class politicians and career politicians are also classed, in the loyalist perception, in the category of unreliable ally and potential betrayer. One significant element of the loyalist population has turned not only against establishment politicians but against professional politicians in general. This is the loyalist paramilitaries and their strongest supporters. In the early 1970s loyalist paramilitaries believed they were acting in concert with, and with the approval of, loyalist and unionist politicians in order to fight the IRA and defend the Union. They believed politicians were encouraging them to take direct, armed and illegal action. The most notorious example was Bill Craig, ex-Minister of Home Affairs in the O’Neill government and founder of the Ulster Vanguard pressure group, whose inflammatory statements about ‘liquidating’ the enemies of Ulster were quite understandably taken by loyalist paramilitaries to be a direct appeal to take up arms (Taylor 1999). When paramilitaries were imprisoned for their actions, which were condemned by the politicians, they and their supporters came to see themselves as having responded to a direct appeal and subsequently been betrayed. They had been used for political ends.

The subsequent disenchantment with politicians extended not only to establishment figures but also to populist leaders such as Ian Paisley. Disaffected paramilitary ideologues went on to attempt to formulate a class analysis of Ulster’s problems (Moore and Sanders 1993), arguing that the Catholic and Protestant communities had suffered equally at the hands of the middle classes, and at the hands of British imperialism. Both had been exploited for others’ advantage and material gain (Ulster 1976-1980 passim). These writers sought to create a civic nationalism, based on common rights and history rather than on ethnicity (Eriksen 1993). In other words, they used a model of Northern Ireland as a plural society with a common colonial history and claimed to see common class experiences and interests as the means of bridging cultural differences.

However, because of their loyalist beliefs, the nationalism they hoped to create was to be based on a six-county Ulster rather than on the island of Ireland, and this was one reason why it was doomed to be unattractive to Northern nationalists. (Other reasons included the fact that loyalist paramilitaries would obviously not be found appealing by a Roman Catholic population that they had targeted for sectarian killings.) Ulster was to have independence (this has now become devolution within a devolved United Kingdom), with a written constitution, a Bill of Rights to safeguard minorities, and power-sharing in political committees. These proposals were put forward in two UDA publications, Beyond the religious divide (1979) and Common sense (1987), issued by the New Ulster Political Research Group, the UDA ‘think tank’. They formed the basis for the policies presented by the United Democratic Party (the political party associated with the UDA) at the Northern Ireland Forum. The UDA leadership attempted to add an ethnic dimension to this civic nationalism by adopting the ‘Cruthin’ thesis that both ethnic communities in Northern Ireland have a common Pictish ancestry.

Basic to these ideas is the conception of Ulster as ‘a place apart’ and the Ulsterman as a special kind of person. However, an examination of the manner in which the term ‘Ulsterman’ is used by paramilitary theorists shows that in effect, even if only by implication, the Ulsterman is a Protestant. The imagined community of the Ulster loyalist
The language of loyalism is a language of fear of betrayal. For example, speaking about the controversy over Senator Mitchell’s appointment to chair Strand One of the Forum talks, the Reverend Ian Paisley stated that unionists must stand together to defend the Union from ‘British government intrigue and betrayal and from Irish government greed and absorption’. He claimed that Mitchell represented an attempt by the two governments to impose a chairman who was ‘wholly prejudiced in favour of Sinn Fein/IRA and the pan-nationalist front and joint authority’ (Belfast Telegraph, 11 June 1996). He graphically described talks between David Trimble (leader of the Ulster Unionist Party) and British government representatives as ‘hatching’ a plan to give Senator Mitchell the chair — a use of words suggesting the concoction of a plot. On the day after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement Paisley stated that the new Northern Ireland assembly would be ‘an assembly of treachery…[David Trimble] has enabled the Southern government and the British government to come to an agreement that there will be an all-Ireland parliament in everything but name’ (Belfast Telegraph, 11 April 1998).

The Belfast Telegraph report of Reverend Paisley’s address to a rally at Kilkeel shortly before political agreement was reached on a power-sharing assembly states: ‘He lambasted David Trimble for selling Ulster out to a Republican conspiracy which will build on the Anglo-Irish Agreement [to] “guarantee a permanent place in government for Sinn Fein/IRA…Commissions on policing, justice and equality will report directly to the Dail [the Republic of Ireland parliament]”’ (Belfast Telegraph, 7 April 1998). Opening his ‘No’ campaign against the Agreement on 15 April 1998, Paisley referred to it as the ‘mother of all treachery’ (BBC News 15 April 1998).

Zero-sum conception and conspiracy interpretation mean that loyalism has to be hegemonic. If loyalism loses the ability to influence power significantly then the pass is lost. Its enemies (the enemies of Ulster) will ensure that it never regains influence, and Ulster will be destroyed (incorporated into a United Ireland with the loss of Protestant identity, freedoms, and culture). The mainstream Ulster loyalist political party, the Democratic remains the Ulster Protestant people. The religious basis of loyalists’ ideologies and perceptions opposes an interdenominational nationalism. The real enemy remains the Roman Catholic Church. Recent years have seen changes in the character of Irish Catholicism, and this is beginning to influence the view of many loyalists who have long believed that the Catholic community submits unquestioningly to the dominance of a monolithic Roman Catholic Church. However, a Catholic background continues to be equated with alien attitudes, opposed to the democratic principles of Protestantism. In consequence, Catholicism is equated with an Irish nationalism that is equated with republicanism, and therefore trust and parity of identity cannot be extended to the Catholic population. (For the Ulster British, on the other hand, Roman Catholics are an acceptable element of the nation, provided they are not anti-British [Todd 1987]).

Although some loyalists seek some kind of cross-community class-based solution, it is difficult to see class becoming the basis for any meaningful political identity with regard to major political issues. However, unlike the other strands of loyalism, some loyalists with a paramilitary background are prepared to entertain the idea of compromise.

Zero-sum interpretations and conspiracy explanations

The particular religious base to Ulster loyalist ideology supports a classic zero-sum conception of politics. It equates the opposition Self:Other with Good:Evil (Finlayson 1997, Todd 1987). Any compromise would mean a defeat, because your enemy’s aim is your elimination as an ethnic entity. At the very beginning of the Northern Ireland peace talks, this attitude was apparent in the non-paramilitary loyalist position on the appointment of Senator George Mitchell as chairman of the talks. To allow an ‘Irish Catholic’ to hold an influential position would sell the pass to the enemy from the outset. (In fact, Mitchell’s ancestry is Lebanese Maronite, although his mother is of Irish extraction.)

This brings us to what is perhaps the most prominent characteristic of loyalist ideology, the interpretation of political events in terms of conspiracy. We suggest that this is a consequence of the zero-sum interpretation of events derived from the particular religious base of loyalist nationalism. It is reflected in loyalists’ choice of symbols and their reinterpretation of historical events. Loyalist politics is a constant attempt to identify and prevent betrayal.

Of course, a political interpretation of events that is based on the belief that one’s enemies are out to sell the pass to the enemy is never going to promote any meaningful political identity. The loser, therefore, is the political community as a whole. The language of loyalism is a language of fear of betrayal.


Unionist Party (DUP), and significant loyalist elements in the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), have maintained the idea of Protestant political exclusivity in Northern Ireland. Conspiracy beliefs have made mainstream loyalism intransigent towards compromise and distrustful of the peace process, thus making it one of the main obstacles to a compromise resolution of the Northern Ireland conflict.

In our view, regarding Ulster loyalism as nationalism (in fact as one of two unionist nationalisms in Northern Ireland), instead of treating it as marginal to British nationalism or as an anomaly when posited against Irish nationalism, puts it in its proper political perspective. It makes possible an accurate evaluation of the intricacies and problems loyalism poses for political settlement in Northern Ireland. This view also suggests possible strategies which might be pursued towards accommodation between the various forms of nationalism in Northern Ireland. As Todd (1987) has pointed out, the basic premises of Ulster loyalism are only likely to change as a result of factors external to Northern Ireland. We believe that this is one reason why the major role in generating political change in Northern Ireland has to be taken by external arbitrators and authorities. (In this we include pressure by interested parties such as the EU, the USA, and the government of the Republic of Ireland, on the British government to maintain the momentum of political change in Northern Ireland.)

Specifically, this is the conclusion that treating Ulster loyalism as a nationalism per se leads us to in respect of the current ‘peace process’. This analysis, we believe, has resonance for other conflict locations where nationalism appears to be allied with a conspiracy ideology to create an extremely intransigent form of hegemonic nationalism; examples include Israel, Afrikaner nationalism during the apartheid period in South Africa, and possibly French Canadian nationalism in Québec.