

Ending the Siege? David Ervine and the Struggle for Progressive Loyalism

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Abstract: *Drawn from newspapers and interviews with political colleagues, relatives, and conflict intermediaries, this article concerns the late Loyalist political leader David Ervine – an ideal vector through which to explore the recent history and struggle for progressive Loyalism within Protestant working-class East Belfast. It outlines the vital influence of his father, as well as Ervine’s ability to find mentorship in others. It covers his imprisonment in Long Kesh, early political awakening, and later success as a representative of the Progressive Unionist Party. It argues that Ervine’s chief political opposition eventually came from establishment and hard-line Unionism, and that his primary achievement was to articulate Ulster Loyalist positions and demands against this culture. Ervine’s duality as a political representative who was close to the militarism of his former career is shown as being central to his political persona. Ervine’s premature passing is shown to be connected to the pressures arising from pursuing progressive policies and stances from a Loyalist background, frequently under fire from other Unionists.*

Unlike so many Ulster Loyalists, David Ervine (1953–2007) realized that his group needed to adapt, engage with political opponents, and present their case to the outside world. In his campaign for the South Belfast constituency in the UK Westminster election of May 1997, Ervine stated that he was ‘a relative newcomer to Ulster Politics’ but that it held ‘no fears for me since I simply apply the principles and precepts of Unionism as espoused by the authors of Unionism including Edward Carson himself’ (Ervine, 1997: n. pag).¹ It was this exact

commitment to the Union that drove Ervine to present it in its most broad-minded and progressive sense. This was a confident and pragmatic kind of Unionism increasingly lacking in contemporary Northern Ireland. It was no coincidence that Ervine was part of a Loyalist delegation which visited the United States and engaged meaningfully with Irish-American officials (Garland, 2001, 294–8; Reynolds, 2009, 326), an openness which also extends to cultural initiatives and storytelling. Modern day Ulster Protestant culture is usually (mis)understood purely in terms of the Orange Order and parading, but Ervine had a more capacious understanding. Ervine’s favourite book was Robert Tressell’s 1914 classic *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (Breen, 2006: 17), the famous novel about painters and decorators exploited under the capitalist system, and another former leader of his party remarked how ‘David recognized the importance of the arts in the community and the role that it can play’ (Dawn Purvis, interview with the author, Belfast, 20 January 2012).² This enabled Ervine to outline what he called Ulster Loyalism’s ‘heroic story’ – of people in an extraordinary situation who were driven to ‘become involved’ (*The Guardian–Film & Music*, 25 August 2006: 5). The latter is of course a subjective interpretation, but once again highlights Ervine’s willingness to buck a Loyalist tendency to avoid culture and the arts.

Ervine is also a complex figure whose memory has been romanticized, and thus distorted, in large part because of his untimely death in January 2007. The ensuing legend occasionally borders on an avuncular and absurd ‘Mandela’ image (Roy Garland, correspondence with the author, 5 March 2015), mis-framing Ervine’s real significance. As a symbol, he is continually relevant and potent precisely because he was a hard-line, militant Loyalist who transcended the intransigence associated with the ideology to articulate a progressive form of Loyalism, which in turn received public and media exposure, as well as positive reaction from those outside of Unionism and Loyalism. It is important to remember that Ervine did not renounce his own past actions, nor did he relinquish the key tenets of Unionism, with the

former leading to withering criticism (O'Doherty, 2007). At no point, essentially, did he cease being a Loyalist. This biographical article draws on interviews with Ervine's relatives and political colleagues, along with other sources, to piece together the man, at the same time reflecting some of the broader challenges in the struggle to achieve progressive Loyalism.

Upbringing

Ervine was born on 21 July 1953, though there is discrepancy as to exactly where. Sinnerton (2002: 12) and Moloney (2010: 309) suggest he was born in the house where he grew up in Chamberlain Street, east Belfast, between the Albertbridge and Newtownards Roads.

However, his brother Brian claims that David, the youngest of five, was actually the first to be born in the hospital. Previously his other siblings had been delivered by Nurse Simpson, who also delivered 'virtually three generations of the population of east Belfast' (Brian Ervine, interview with the author, 28 January 2011). The home was a classic working-class two-up, two-down: 'No garden, oilcloth on the floor, an outside bog, and your Da's coat over the bed at night' (*Sunday Tribune*, 21 May 2006: 17). Along with its working-class character, what is essential in understanding David Ervine's political life is the formative influence of – or more specifically, the clash between – his parents Elizabeth and Walter. Though recalling a content household, Ervine thought his father, an iron-turner by profession, ultimately regarded himself as 'an under-achiever' who 'missed the opportunity of an extended education and had to go out to work...with family requirements as a young lad'. Walter's expeditions around the world as a naval officer and engineer gave him, Ervine thought, 'a very parochial attitude towards Northern Ireland; intolerant almost of our intolerance. I would have described him as a very liberal man, and my mother would have been the opposite,

[one] to the left of Joe Stalin and the other to the right of Genghis Khan' (Moloney, 2010: 310).

This split manifested itself in a memorable incident when the late Reverend Ian Paisley visited the street where the Ervine family lived during one election campaign. As his mother was scrubbing the front of the house, Ervine recalled him approaching and saying:

'You keep these houses like little palaces', and then my da, who was ill at the time, struggled up off the chair and...in language that was shocking to me, told Paisley to go away, I think the words he used were 'Fuck off', and it was harsh and agitated. I mean, we had electric points that hung off the wall...the wallpaper sagged, the ceilings fell and cockroaches were an infestation, and Paisley was patronising my ma and then my ma was of course standing there saying, 'Ah yes, Mr Paisley, ah no, Mr Paisley.' My da of course wasn't for any of that. (Moloney, 2010: 312–3)

This moment was more than symbolic for his father and later Ervine himself. It captures a key division playing out within the Protestant working-class and east Belfast: the tension between the poles of Paisleyism and Labour politics. The community historically possesses both ideologies but has chosen through the present predominance of the Democratic Unionist Party to retain only one in their collective political memory: the Paisleyism of the mother. Yet whether through the Christian socialism of David Bleakley, who represented the east Belfast seat of Victoria for almost a decade at Stormont, to the secular socialism of many Loyalist paramilitaries (William 'Plum' Smith, interview with the author, 14 March 2012), the Protestant working-class has in different ways demonstrated a Left-wing, Labour pulse.

Accordingly, Ervine's father usually played Devil's Advocate in family debates, deliberately taking 'the other side to make you think and to test your argument'. Along with

their elder brother (who later emigrated to Australia), Walter was a member of the Northern Ireland Labour Party, canvassing in Pottinger, a safe Labour seat for a number of years held by NILP leader Tommy Boyd. 'My father hated the Stormont regime', Ervine's brother confirmed: 'He hated "Big House" Unionism, hyphenated names and then the people who latched on' (Brian Ervine, interview with the author, 28 January 2011). The other thing David remembered was a house filled with books, assembled by his autodidact father, who was really the person providing him with 'some kind of alternative view of what we'd been told'. This education did not come from the school, history books, or the street: it came only from 'hearing it in the house' (Moloney, 2001: 316). Walter also broke from the majority in his community by supporting the civil rights movement in the late-1960s.

In terms of the breakdown of East Belfast's veritable Labour tradition (see Edwards, 2009, 194–226), the outbreak of the Troubles decimated the non-sectarian potential of the NILP, with the majority of voters separating off permanently into respective ethno-national camps. Politics in Northern Ireland had always been characterized by sectarianism and zero-sum jockeying between Ulster Unionism and a limited Irish nationalism, but the NILP had made considerable inroads into this in Belfast from the mid-1950s. The four MPs the party had elected to Stormont in 1958 were all 'Protestants of notable piety, though of various kinds' (Brett 1978: 85–6), and in the following 1962 election the NILP gained over 25 per cent of the entire popular vote. All four of these Stormont representatives (Bleakley, Vivian Simpson, Tom Boyd and Billy Boyd) were 'lay preachers' who functioned alongside secular and Left-wing socialists like Paddy Devlin and Eamonn McCann, who originally hailed from Catholic working-class backgrounds. This was not a completely comfortable arrangement always, but for the most part it held and prospered until 1969. Sounding the death knell of Labour politics in the Protestant community was the British Labour Party's decision to make the moderate Irish nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) their official

‘sister party’ with fraternal links (Cradden, 1993: 228). By doing so the vast majority of Protestants were further alienated from a nominally Labour tradition, though even then ‘There’s always been a liberal socialism within the Protestant population, it just didn’t have anywhere to go’ (Brian Ervine, interview with the author, 28 January 2011).

Education

During the 1960s Ervine was educated at Orangefield Secondary School, a state institution off the Castlereagh Road then under the stewardship of the legendarily forward-thinking headmaster John Malone. But while the numerous trips to the school’s Newcastle, Co. Down retreat – a ‘sort of early Corrymeela Community’ (Emerson, 2002: 27) – were resonant, Ervine was not studious like his brother Brian and drifted into undetermined youth, later expressing regret at not having grasped the significance of Malone’s project at Orangefield (Mulvenna, 2016, 49). His drive and education would come later, via pivotal rage at the July 1972 Bloody Friday bombings, the event which led to his enlisting in the ranks of the Ulster Volunteer Force at the age of nineteen, when he was working in a city-centre paint store (Moloney, 2010: 304–7). He was apprehended in possession of explosives by the Royal Ulster Constabulary on 2 November 1974, and soon after a court sentenced him to eleven years in jail.

Though he would justify his incarceration later on by saying ‘You almost felt you had to get involved, especially with the arrival of a young son. I was thinking “I’ve got to defend this”,’ (Sharrock, 1994: 3), those who suffered most from Ervine’s imprisonment were his wife Jeanette and son Mark, who was then just two years old. Jeanette later remarked of her disillusionment with her husband for not having discussed his membership of the UVF with her: ‘I was angry with him because I felt that I never would have made a decision that would

have affected both our lives so profoundly. I would never have done that to him, and I felt that he shouldn't have done it to me.' Therefore, when Ervine emerged from prison, 'I made it clear to him – if it ever happened again – that I wouldn't be standing by him. I wouldn't put my children and myself through that' (speaking in *Voices From the Grave*, broadcast 26 October 2010, RTE 1; see also Sinnerton, 2002: 38–9).

The story of Ervine's encounter with Loyalist icon Gusto Spence (1933–2011), in Compound 21 of Long Kesh prison, is by now familiar: 'The first question Gusto asked me was "why are you here?" and I said "possession of explosives", to which he said, "no, I'm asking you *why* are you here?"' This initially dejected Ervine, 'But it made me think about the police, army and judge who put me there because they were defending their country – which was exactly what I thought I'd been doing' (Sharrock, 1994: 3). This led to the deeper kind of self-examination which came to define David Ervine as a political figure. Spence's Socratic opening salvo

was a question that began to unlock a door to a different idea. He was confronting my attitudes and was forcing me to question *why*... self-analysis is one of the most frightening and difficult things for a human being to do. But once I'd stepped from it and was looking back at it – that was the breath of life. I was beginning to understand the human being that I was and why generations had been prepared to sacrifice their liberty or lives for the defence of republicanism or loyalism. Given that we're in a zero-sum society, what fuels us most is not what we want, but our desire to make sure that others don't achieve what they want. (Garland, 2001: 193)

Ervine completed 'O' Levels and began a University degree, but it was the personal interaction and intellectual camaraderie in the compounds of Long Kesh which was his

central education. Out of his interaction with Spence ‘came the capacity to think on our feet, and the articulation. Gusty unlocked the door for many’, though it was incumbent on individuals themselves to complete the journey. As with his father, Spence became a mentor, probing and questioning: ‘Gusty was saying – for goodness’ sake, understand this problem, then when you understand it do something about it’ (Garland, 2001: 174). Spence’s strict regime, along with what fellow Loyalist prisoner – and later PUP colleague – Billy Hutchinson identified as his use of ‘psychology’ (Billy Hutchinson, interview with the author, Belfast, 12 November 2012), harnessed violence and liberated Loyalist prisoners into thought, discussion and creation: the opposite of the zero-sum society on the outside (Novosel, 2013: 62–87; Smith, 2014: 80. 116–17). Not only did future Loyalist political leaders emerge from Long Kesh, but ex-prisoners like George Morrow, who became an acclaimed painter on his release, were indebted to Spence’s structure, which ‘made things orderly’ (*Irish Times*, 1 April 2013: 6), facilitating his artistic work.

There are numerous examples of Ervine’s Long Kesh training informing his later political persona. The perpetual self-questioning and interrogation of long-held mythologies was something he demonstrated on a number of public platforms in his career. In an event at Queen’s University in February 2000, Ervine stated ‘Tribalism is wrong, you know it’s wrong’, but ‘from my point of view as a Protestant child’, such views were ‘never challenged by me’:

I didn’t know where ‘they’ lived – there was a chapel close to my home – but as a child we were fed this constant diet of misunderstanding. It allows one to develop bitterness. How much easier it is to blow somebody’s head off, how much easier to deny them employment, if you know nothing of the man; if you have no concept that their wants are similar, that they have similar pressures and similar problems...the most

fundamental corruption that existed in our society was the refusal to give influence to the minority. There was two sets of citizenship; one was the citizen we did not give opportunities to. I think of my complicity in that. (*Talking to One's Opponents*, 2001: 13–15)

It is simply unthinkable to imagine any modern Unionist or Loyalist politician uttering similar sentiments in a public setting.³

Release and Rebuilding

On his release in 1980, Ervine took time to adjust to life on the outside. He became a milkman but continued his self-education, and like his father could often be seen with a newspaper or a book in his hand (Brian Ervine, interview with the author, 28 January 2011). Some of his Long Kesh training was also surfacing, mostly – as he conceded – in the pubs of east Belfast. In one incident he found himself talking in the Cosy Bar ‘about equality and the responsibility of Unionism to sell the concept of the United Kingdom to Nationalists’ when a man who ‘hadn’t a shoe on his foot nor an arse in his trousers, hit me a dig in the gob, and shouted, “You’re a fucking communist.”’ Ervine was naturally taken aback but refused to retaliate (Moloney, 2010: 387). Spence’s nurture had stuck; it enabled him ‘to realise what was expected of me. It was almost like, “Get out there and breed. Go and confront others as I confronted you”’. Ervine believed that those cultivated in Long Kesh such as himself, Billy Hutchinson, the late William ‘Plum’ Smith, the late Billy Mitchell, and Eddie Kinner fulfilled this, ‘not only in the political arena but in the streets and on the roads where we were resident. We have consistently questioned and argued and indeed, I think, helped to create a wind of change’ (Garland, 2001: 174–5).

The wider political scene which Ervine emerged onto following his release was also showing signs of change. The late Hugh Smyth was first elected to Belfast City Council in 1971 with clear proximity to Loyalist paramilitaries, if not quite their *de facto* candidate. Yet Smyth was also a champion of working-class political unity, and would from 1977 until 1981 combine with councillors from other parties as part of an ‘unofficial caucus’ which ‘made real progress on socioeconomic issues’ (Seamus Lynch interview with the author, 19 January 2012). Included in this set were SDLP leader Gerry Fitt, independent socialist (and former SDLP founder member) Paddy Devlin, the Workers’ Party’s Seamus Lynch, and liberal Unionists like John Carson. Smyth himself recalled this ‘golden period’ with collaboration on ‘issues in working class areas, housing, education, health’, Left-leaning representatives voting across sectarian lines for ‘a better deal for our people’. All the aforementioned councillors would meet, determined ‘to influence that council’ and ‘would have said “Right what way will we vote?”’ This group was decimated by the impact of the 1981 Hunger Strikes, with the resulting tribalism destroying what Smyth referred to as ‘all the good work we had done’ (Hugh Smyth, interview with the author, 19 February 2012). Nevertheless, it was in this time-frame that Smyth launched the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), which officially came into existence in 1979, and five years later it was Smyth who recruited Ervine into the PUP after hearing about his growing reputation as an independent Unionist spirit (Sinnerton, 2002: 108–9). The following year Ervine took his electoral bow for the district area of Pottinger in the 1985 municipal elections, receiving 394 first-preferences and finishing in ninth place.

A significant player in the early development of the PUP was former Northern Ireland Labour Party strategist and candidate David Overend. Born and brought up in Yorkshire, he moved over to Belfast and quickly built up connections in the Northern Irish Labour movement, even if his northern English accent was sometimes frowned on by individual

members (David Overend, interview with the author, 28 April 2015). Overend rose to the National Executive of the NILP and polled strongly as the party's candidate for North Belfast in the March 1966 Westminster election, receiving 19,927 votes (43% of the vote) and coming within several thousand of taking the seat from the Ulster Unionist Party candidate Stratton Mills (Overend claims his opponent's election agent later told him that thousands of Labour votes had been stolen and that the NILP should have won the seat).⁴ It was Overend's acumen at drafting papers which helped the PUP devise innovative documents at a time when the established Unionist parties, the Official Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party, pursued a basic integrationism, i.e. the insistence on direct rule, with all power over Northern Irish matters lying at Westminster. Overend was initially a go-between for the NILP and Loyalist prisoners, approaching Smyth to form the PUP and selecting a name which evoked the Ulster Progressive Unionist Association, an organization which campaigned in the 1938 Northern Irish general election on social and working-class issues (Novosel, 2013: 190).

With Ervine and Overend now in the PUP, the party promoted a new culture of rights and socialism as the 1980s drew on. Overend was an understated but vital element in nurturing this process as Secretary of the PUP, with his presence noted by the late Sam McAughtry on a visit to the PUP's Shankill office in July 1985, flanked by Hugh Smyth and recently-released 'Theorist and Political Researcher' Gusty Spence (McAughtry, 1985: 11). With Overend drafting a number of the PUP's early policy documents, a political programme emerged, with support from the UVF/Red Hand Commando both inside and outside the prisons, ultimately published under the title 'Sharing Responsibility'.⁵ Thus 'as far back as 1978, the Progressive Unionist Party issued a concrete, viable and democratic blueprint for the option of devolution in this region' (Overend, 1986: 1; see also Novosel, 2013: 179–205), along with calls for a cessation of violence, a Bill of Rights, and an amnesty. Overend clarified how other players in the PUP were keen on Loyalist prisoners' interests to be built

into the new party's constitution, even if the political and socialist elements were more imperative to him. With Jim McDonald Chairman of the PUP and Chairman of the Loyalist Prisoners' Welfare Association, 'the prisoners came first with other people' (Interview with the author, 28 April 2015), even if Overend also ensured that the PUP incorporated the British Labour Party's Clause IV (advocating public ownership and nationalisation) into its own constitution.⁶

An Irish Dimension

Spence, who had been released from prison in December 1984, was pushing carefully for a cessation of Loyalist violence. Part of the UVF leadership were aware of a political space opening up as mainstream Irish Republicanism was beginning to wind down its military operations in favour of politics (Rowan, 2015, 31; Edwards, 2017: 203). Cognisant that they would have to be involved in this movement at some point, the leadership identified an individual from the Republic of Ireland who they trusted enough to be able to help them in this process. This man was the Reverend Chris Hudson, a trade unionist and at present a Unitarian minister in Belfast, who met David Ervine properly in early-1992 at a private political gathering in Dublin (Sinnerton, 2002: 136). Ervine later jokingly said to Hudson, 'We were interviewing you for a job. We badly needed somebody to open doors for us in the south so we could be inside the tent, not outside' (Chris Hudson, interview with the author, 20 January 2011). Hudson confirmed that the UVF and the PUP 'knew something big was happening on the Republican side, on the Provisional [IRA] side, but they were terrified they were going to be left out of any discussions. So my job was to push some doors for them and act as a conduit' – or, to use Ervine's language, 'set the mood music' (Interview with the author, 20 January 2011).

This was not as simple as it sounded. Hudson laid out his own cards from the off: ‘Remember the UVF had murdered one of my closest friends Fran O’Toole out of the Miami Showband’, in an horrific incident on 31 July 1975 when the UVF (and personnel from the Ulster Defence Regiment) put a bomb on a car and then opened fire on members of the Miami Showband rock group when it went off prematurely. With the band’s lead singer Fran O’Toole among the victims (having been shot 22 times), Hudson ‘had no love for the UVF, but talking to David Ervine, [he] felt that I would help to make sure that there were no more Fran O’Tooles’ (Interview with the author, 20 January 2011). Critically, it is essential to remember Ervine’s continual allegiance and proximity to the UVF, even if he was not personally active. A recently-published history of the outfit details a possible assassination attempt its members planned on Ervine in March 1999, in a continuation of a feud which followed the killing of another Loyalist volunteer named Frankie Curry (Edwards 2017: 267). Generally, Ervine merged both political and paramilitary worlds at this time: a duality essential to understanding his existence.

Unionist mediators assured Ervine and the UVF that Hudson was well-connected to people in the Irish Labour Party, and through his trade union contacts would open doors in Irish government buildings. A Fianna Fáil-Labour coalition was then in power in Dublin, and as part of an intriguing working-class dynamic, Hudson’s links to Irish Labour were preferable in the eyes of the UVF to Fianna Fáil. While Spence and Ervine met the Taoiseach Albert Reynolds in secret meetings in Dublin and Belfast (Reynolds, 2009: 366–70), the broader UVF paramilitary leadership felt more comfortable working with Irish Labour and Tánaiste Dick Spring rather than Reynolds in the heart of the Irish government. Eventually, some of the information the UVF worked through with Irish government intermediaries, especially six bullet points in paragraph 5 of the Downing Street Declaration relating to ‘the

right of free political thought' and 'the right to freedom and expression of religion', was replicated exactly in the Joint Declaration of December 1993 (Sinnerton, 2002: 150–1).

There was another important aspect to the meetings between Belfast man Ervine and Dubliner Hudson. Ervine had found another mentor, like his father and Gusty Spence, who challenged him in new ways, helping him to develop a political philosophy. As someone 'slightly divorced from the nationalist community up here, he could bounce these things off me, to get a response'. Hudson would point out to Ervine that only a tiny minority in the south of Ireland espoused the kind of exclusive, violent Republicanism propagated by some northern nationalists. But it was a two-way process: 'I used to have these conversations with David Ervine about where do Loyalists see themselves going. Like what sort of Northern Ireland do they hope will happen? Are they looking back to the good old days of Unionist domination and practically a one-party state? Are they looking back? Or are they looking forward?' (Interview with the author, 20 January 2011). In some respects Loyalism is still wrestling with these questions, though back in the mid-1990s it was hard not to feel Ervine's 'wind of change' drifting through.

A few weeks before the Loyalist ceasefire of October 1994, Hudson was in Blackpool speaking at a fringe meeting of the British Labour Party. When he finished he looked out to an appreciative audience and could see Gusty Spence and Ervine giving him a standing ovation (see *The Guardian*, 6 October 1984: 4). Spence approached him afterwards, shook his hand, and said 'By the way, good news. The Ceasefire's going to be called within the next couple of weeks.' Hudson replied that he was elated but disappointed that he was going to be in Asia at the time. Spence jocosely offered to hold it off until he came back, an offer kindly but firmly refused by Hudson, who also joked that his main complaint about being in Pakistan in October 1994 watching on the BBC World Service the Loyalist Ceasefire being announced was that he was 'stuck in a dry hotel', in a Muslim country with no alcohol and

only Coca-Cola to celebrate (Chris Hudson, interview with the author, 20 January 2011). On 13 October 1994, as representative of the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC), Spence orated the Loyalist ceasefire statement, which offered ‘to the loved ones of all innocent victims over the past 25 years abject and true remorse’ (*Irish Times*, 15 October 1994: 10). The CLMC also stated it was satisfied that the Union was safe, something immediately disputed by Peter Robinson, deputy leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (*Irish Times*, 14 October 1994: 7). This is the organization and caste of Unionism to which we shall now turn.

Challenging Unionism

Though the Republican and Loyalist Ceasefires of 1994 felt euphoric to many, Ervine’s job convincing many of his fellow Loyalists and Unionists that the siege was reaching its endgame was only just beginning. He was increasingly frowned on as a Loyalist putting his head above the parapet, and the pressures of hard-line Unionist rhetoric, now turned on ‘progressive’ Loyalists such as himself, took on a new intensity. The Reverend Ian Paisley portended in the days following the Ceasefire that ‘The Union is not safe, the Union can be betrayed. We would repeat to John Major and the Dublin government the challenge of Lord Carson – interfere with us if you dare’. In the same source, Ervine calmly kept his head to retort simply that the Union was safe and that ‘Unionists have a legitimate political philosophy which they must go out and sell’ (*The Guardian*, 26 October 1994: 22). As his eventual successor as PUP leader and MLA for East Belfast Dawn Purvis identified, Ervine – and indeed all Loyalists who sought a Left alternative within Unionism – were always contending with a hostile Unionist culture and establishment:

Our Unionist superiors, ‘Lord this’, ‘Captain this’, ‘Major this’ are the political elite, and we are this lowly mass of people who are just thankful to have a job and be working for this political elite. You have a political leadership telling you that everything’s wonderful and you’re great and you know why, because ‘Look at them ones [Catholics]; they’re worse off.’ The PUP and the Loyalist political project was starting from a different political position. It’s starting more from a class-conscious position. No everything’s not great. Everything’s not rosy in the garden. We are struggling as a working-class population. (Dawn Purvis, interview with the author, 20 January 2012)

The problem for the PUP was attempting to articulate this in a divisive system when ‘you’re seen as a traitor. When the PUP started to become prominent you had Paisley and the DUP: “Lundy! Traitor! sell-out!”.’ Purvis explained that traditional Unionists further disapproved of a party which was connected to paramilitaries. This is nicely captured in a quote from the DUP’s former Minister of Finance and current Westminster MP Sammy Wilson: ‘I used to think when I saw some of the people who went around canvassing for the likes of Davey Ervine in East Belfast, “I hope you keep knocking doors”. Because I know that regardless of Davey’s fine words, people will judge Davey by the kind of people who he has going round knocking the doors there for him’ (Interview with the author, 10 February 2012). Such contemptuous attitudes towards working-class Ulster Loyalists are often expressed by Unionist politicians who then benefit from many of the same people they disparage voting for them in large numbers.

Because of his willingness to separate himself from traditional Unionism, Ervine was occasionally viewed as Irish Republicanism’s ‘favourite Loyalist’ (Dudley Edwards, 2007: 27). Though his working-class analysis could place him close to certain discerning

Republicans, this would be a serious miscalculation. In the wake of the ‘Flag Protests’ which erupted in December 2012, in response to the democratic decision of Belfast City Council to fly the Union Jack on no more than eighteen designated days instead of all year, Ervine was regularly invoked on glib social media and local online outlets like Slugger O’Toole as a figure who would have led Loyalists away from such disturbances, and as someone who would not, as his successor as PUP leader Billy Hutchinson presided over, get involved in them. There is of course no way of knowing this. However, given his encouragement of Dawn Purvis and others during the last decade of his life, it is equally as possible that he may have approved of the crop of young women PUP recruits who emerged during this time, including Julie Ann-Corr (a direct recruit from the protests), Izzy Giles and Sophie Long, all of whom ran as electoral candidates from 2014 until 2016. Likewise, Ervine could bear his Loyalist teeth in negotiations. At the end of 1997, he said the PUP might not return to talks after Christmas because of concessions to Republicans (Flackes & Elliot 1999: 244), and six years later withdrew the party from talks with Republicans, the British government and disarmament bodies, ‘furious at the IRA for failing to stop its terrorist activities, and at the government for side-lining loyalist politicians’ (*The Guardian*, 18 January 2003: 9). More generally, he resented being viewed by Republicans as ‘some kind of deluded Irishman’, never quite forgetting that they had looked down on him and other Loyalists as a lower class of combatant when they were thinking things through in Long Kesh (Sinnerton, 2002: 64–5).

While Ervine was no Republican dupe, he eventually came to conclude that a larger danger to the Union came from a slew of Unionist figureheads and leaders who had abused Unionist principles by mistreating the minority of Northern Ireland, building Ulster Unionism on fear and intolerance. At a conference held the month of the Loyalist Ceasefire, Ervine once again invoked Carson, ‘who said “Look after the minority”. We didn’t, and have we suffered for it. Unionists brought the pain upon themselves by refusing to move the barriers

of sectarianism and division in this society' (*Beyond the Fife and Drum*, 1995: 22). Three years later, in election campaign literature, Ervine reiterated:

My party and I are bringing fresh thinking and new approaches into the stale parochial corridors of what has passed for politics in our country and the "old brigade" the "born to rule" boys don't like it one little bit. Don't let any of this bunch kid you about Unionism. It is they who have dragged its name in the mire and so twisted it so as to be unrecognisable as to what it was intended to be. We are here to rescue it and return it to its' rightful and honourable standing in the eyes of the world. (Ervine, 1997a: n. pag)

The same year he confirmed the PUP's commitment to the report of US diplomat George Mitchell, then painstakingly stewarding the talks which would lead to the 1998 Belfast Agreement, and Ervine conceded how his party had 'problems because we were born out of Loyalist Paramilitarism and that is being held against us by some of the Parties at the Stormont talks'. In a particular dig at the DUP, Ervine denounced how 'They reek of sanctimonious and nauseating piety and wallow in their new-found "respectability". Least said about the hypocrisy concerning flirtations with Paramilitarism in the past, and not so distant past, the better' (Ervine, 1997b: 2).

It was reported that other Loyalist militant figureheads of the 1990s less committed to the peace process, such as Billy Wright and John 'Grug' Gregg, took particular exception to Ervine's Left-wing politics, as did voluble victims' campaigners such as William 'Willie' Frazer, who bemoaned Ervine's stated atheism and queried 'how [can Protestants] 'vote for such a man?' (McKay 2000: 167, 196). Frazer may have questioned how people could vote for a man like David Ervine, but – in a break from history – they did, and with the party polling 20,634 votes overall, Billy Hutchinson and Ervine were elected to the Northern

Ireland Assembly in June 1998. This predictably led to further tensions with the established Unionist parties, as observed by PUP stalwart Hugh Smyth:

At one time we had about 7 or 8 councillors and I think it was at that stage that Paisley and them ones were saying, ‘Never remind the republicans – we need to get rid of the PUP.’ And I believe that they did make a determined effort to destroy us in every way they could politically. In particular they were afraid of David Ervine in East Belfast because David was a genius. You only get David Ervines once in your lifetime, and they definitely seen David as a threat. I think they seen me as a threat too in the Shankill, so they would have been saying ‘Reds under the bed’, and we were traitors. ‘Oh they talk to Gerry Adams, they’re communists now.’ (Hugh Smyth, interview with the author, 15 February 2012)

Other Unionists typically used Ervine’s past to try to undermine him (see Vance, 2008: 92, 121), which later led an upset Jeanette Ervine to point out that ‘although my husband came out of prison and worked for peace, moving things on politically, you’d hear people saying he was an upstart, that he had that past and was almost unclean’ (*Belfast Telegraph*, 7 February 2012: 24).

Perhaps the main political mistake David Ervine made in his career occurred in May 2006 when he agreed to be co-opted on to the Unionist group in the quiet Stormont Assembly. It was a salutary, pertinent lesson for smaller Loyalist parties being burned by the larger Unionist ‘family’, and it came about because Ervine thought he could do business with those same Unionists he had spent much of his later life battling. The then-Ulster Unionist Party leader Sir Reg Empey justified that ‘mainstream Unionism hadn’t done as much as it could have done for those people. Davey on the other hand was somebody that I believe was

committed to peace and I thought that by providing this avenue for people, it would defuse, take them away from these paramilitary organizations, because they would then have a political avenue through which they could have travelled. That was the idea' (Interview with the author, 11 November 2011). Empey's rank and file did not see things that way however, with public complaints from senior party members such as the UUP's only Westminster MP Sylvia Hermon (*Sunday Tribune*, 21 May 2006: 17), and the Young Unionist chairman and Councillor Peter Bowles defecting to the Conservative Party in protest (*Irish News*, 12 June 2006: 7). Paisley denounced the move, claiming it allied the Unionist party with 'terrorists'. Such an experience is historically and presently resonant for many Loyalists in their dealings with mainstream Unionist parties, who want to control what Loyalists are doing at the same time as deprecating their working-class status and murky activities. A more recent example of this was the Unionist Forum, which as one of the more judicious commentators noted was set up in January 2013 to bridle the momentum of working-class Loyalist agitation then whirring through the 'Flag Protests' (Kane, 2013: 15).

The End

On 3 January 2007, at the age of 53, Ervine suffered a heart attack, stroke and brain haemorrhage, dying two days later. There were 800 mourners at his funeral, held at the Methodist Mission Church on the Newtownards Road, attended by opponents from across the political spectrum. This was also a purposeful political moment because Irish Republicans and certain Unionist politicians were able to join together to pay tributes to the departed PUP leader, aware to some degree of the loss of an important voice for the Protestant working-class and Loyalism. Victims' campaigner Alan McBride, who lost his wife and father-in-law in the Shankill Road bomb in October 1993, called the presence of Sinn Féin leader Gerry

Adams at the funeral ‘very important’. At a critical point in ongoing negotiations to restore power-sharing at Stormont, McBride remembered feeling ‘We are so close’ (Rowan, 2015, 21). Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Hain agreed that Ervine’s passing nudged Republicans and Unionists towards the final strait, more generally finding Ervine ‘by miles the most progressive of any of the unionist politicians’ (Hain, 2012: 323, 342). Even in death, Ervine improved the political dialogue of Northern Ireland.

Ervine provided an introspective challenge to his own tribe, doing with his own group what his father did with him growing up and Gusty Spence encouraged him to do in Long Kesh. ‘Our relationship with the British government was, we thought, the be-all and end-all’, Ervine told the journalist Roy Garland. ‘Absolute nonsense, the world is an evolving place and unionism, if it doesn’t evolve, will be left behind. The need is to create a unionism that is vibrant and sensible. This begins with the recognition that if unionism doesn’t embrace a new generation and doesn’t embrace that sense of evolution, then it’s in demise and is going nowhere. It will slowly but surely die’ (Garland, 2001: 309–10). Many would argue this is an ongoing project, and one Unionism continues to struggle with.

Ervine was not alone historically as an articulate, politically-successful Loyalist. He was joined in this endeavour by Billy Hutchinson, who remains active in Belfast politics as a councillor for the Court area, Dawn Purvis, and others such as Hugh Smyth – who put in place much that Ervine built on – and Glenn Barr. In a detail which has never been made public before, Barr revealed that Ervine had telephoned him the night before he suffered his fatal heart attack. He said to Ervine,

‘Davey I’ve been thinking seriously, what’s going to happen to all working-class Protestants if we don’t do something seriously now?’ He says ‘Glenny I agree with you, we need to be doing something better big time’, and we’d agreed that we were

going to start talks on that, but the following day he died. And Davey was carrying the can at that stage for myself you know on behalf of working-class Protestants, because I was also attacked. I was called ‘a communist’. I was lambasted, the Unionists worked all sorts of rumours about me all over the place. (Glenn Barr, interview with the author, 28 November 2012)

The attacks on Barr from other Unionists clearly speeded his early retirement from politics. Though he worked in public life for the same working-class constituents in Derry, it is once again emblematic of the struggle for progressive Loyalism, and the stultifying pressure it receives mainly from fellow Unionists.

Ervine was incredibly jaded at the end of his life. Hugh Smyth remembered that ‘Davey, unfortunately, was convinced that he wasn’t going to be elected again [to the Assembly] when he died. And little did he know how much he was thought of because his funeral proved that. But David, for whatever reason, had confided “I’m not gonna be re-elected”’ (Hugh Smyth, interview with the author, 15 February 2012). It must be said he was exhausted and needed more support. He was aided, of course, by Hutchinson, Purvis and a few others, but these few appeared to carry the torch of progressive Unionism alone, in treacherous conditions. One of the others in that mould was the late William ‘Plum’ Smith, who believed:

That’s probably what killed Davey. He wasn’t just a spokesman on the political side of things – [he was] spokesman on everything, spokesman on roads, spokesman on water. At the end of the day it’s about resources. I’ll give you an example. During the whole talks, which lasted for two years, there was maybe 6 or 7 us that done everything. Once you got into Stormont, if you were elected, bam – that was it. There were two people up there: David Ervine, Billy Hutchinson. Had to do everything. (William ‘Plum’

Smith, interview with the author, 14 March 2012).

Smith revealingly pitched this in economic terms. Though the DUP were against the 1998 Belfast Agreement, when it came to the ensuing arrangement at Stormont they ‘never missed a day’ and ‘went up there and took everything, and that’s what actually paid for them for to enhance their political party. If you look at the first years of the Stormont Assembly, the DUP were up there every day – they brought groups up and claiming every expense that they could claim.’⁷ Another PUP councillor John Kyle agreed that, in contrast to other parties, the PUP suffered from an old kind of working-class honesty which prevented them from procuring money easily (an ethos also found in the NILP). ‘Sinn Féin would spend more on stationery than the PUP would have on budget’, Kyle confirmed (Interview with the author, 11 November 2010).

Conclusion

The playwright Gary Mitchell agreed that ‘Since David Ervine’s death, everything has been up in the air because we don’t know what’s really going on’ (*Irish Times*, 2 May 2009: 49). Ervine had helped secure him a house when he had been forced out of his home by a dissident UDA faction on the Rathcoole estate in November 2005, for the apparent treachery of writing plays which were celebrated in Dublin. Mitchell was talking about his own situation but appeared, in a sense, to be commenting on the wider Loyalist community. Since Ervine’s passing, progressive Loyalism and that Left wing, Labour strain within Unionism can be seen as like a ship without a captain, drifting slowly but surely into obscurity. Ervine’s charisma and articulacy won him the contempt of some Unionists in his time, with spurious ‘insults’ of ‘The Man Who Swallowed a Dictionary’ and ‘Dictionary Dave’ (*The Times*, 12

August 2002: 2), as if being articulate and having a good vocabulary is a drawback. Ervine used his abilities, skills and charisma to try and convince those around him to move away from violence, though the limitation was that not everyone joined him on the journey. Ervine managed to change himself but did not necessarily ‘bring enough people with him’ (Emerson, 2002: 27).

Ervine’s brother Brian continues to articulate some of the themes pertinent to the life of his brother, the constituency of East Belfast, and the struggle for progressive Loyalism. Speaking several months before he himself led the PUP into the 2011 Northern Irish Assembly election (where it lost its only Assembly seat), he called for ‘gathering the Unionist working-class vote, [to] be a voice for people who live in these streets. Because basically middle-class Unionism doesn’t speak for them, they don’t have a voice. Now that the Assembly’s up and running they’re quite happy to be there and let these people go to the wall. The terrible tragedy of course is that these people vote them in time and time again’ (Interview with the author, 28 January 2011). With an Assembly now departed, and with little prospect of a quick return, Ervine’s estimation of a voiceless Protestant working-class is even more acute, as is the final summation that the same parties continue to be voted in. The main opponents of his brother’s political life – those who scorned David Ervine for being a ‘terrorist’, then benefitted from things he pioneered – were fellow Unionists, especially of the hard-line and conservative variety. They continue to hold the Westminster seat of East Belfast, two of Belfast’s other four seats in the House of Commons, and three of the five Assembly seats for the same constituency.

Ervine once said that the key to change in Northern Ireland was education, clarifying that this was not a literal, integrated, or third level education. It was an everyday process: ‘The change can be enhanced by us being intolerant of those who are intolerant. You can do it in your workplace. It is about talking to your opponent. So what do we find out when we talk?’

We find out that they have the same fear, the same sense of desire. Yet something has consistently stopped this and we know what that is, it's tribalism. There are people who have done very well by keeping this society apart, some people who have prospered wonderfully and some people still do' (*Talking To One's Opponents*, 2001: 16). This extended to Ervine's response to what working-class Unionists regard as ongoing 'cultural warfare', something Ervine showed flashes of addressing strategically rather than violently or self-defeatingly. Two months after the 1994 Loyalist Ceasefire, he observed:

When you're threatened, your symbolism takes on greater importance, you fly your flag higher. I've seen that nationalism kills Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter, but our religion and politics have fused together so much as to alienate those Catholics who consistently vote for the Union. The hypocrisy of the IRA is that they like to see a frightened nationalist community, so it's imperative that loyalists don't retaliate in any way to provocation. (Sharrock, 1994: 3)

Had he lived, Ervine would still be grappling with a strain within Protestant working-class history in Northern Ireland, the kind one of his mentors would also have pinpointed – the clash between Red and Orange, 1 May versus the Twelfth of July, different kinds of marching. Ervine's own example on the discussion exists very plainly. He was not a member of the Orange Order, but could be seen every May Day, marching through the centre of Belfast alongside Labour banners. This was not a posturing Left-wing identity, temporarily spouting platitudes and slogans. It was a personal, working-class, common-sense kind of socialism that resonated for decades with the Labour voters of East Belfast (David Bleakley was returned for the NILP in the constituency as late as the 1975 Constitutional Convention). 'There was always a form of socialism within us, a caring politics with us', Ervine confirmed,

‘but not in an ideological sense. Spence always tried to avoid ideology because he believed the purist emerges when the ideologue emerges’ (Moloney, 2010: 371; see also Edwards, 2017: 146–7). Whatever his ambivalences, Ervine gave a forward-thinking language to Loyalism in a way no-one thought possible: ‘saying things without changing the essence and the truth of the thing, but saying it in a way that could bring people in’ (Chris Hudson, interview with the author, 20 January 2011). It temporarily disabused many from a sense of siege, even if it is also now the case that the community has chosen, mostly, to forget its own progressive heritage and Labour history.

¹ Ervine received 5,687 votes in this contest, taking 14.4% of the vote and finishing in third place ahead of Sinn Féin, the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, and the Alliance Party.

² Ervine was also a regular visitor to Dublin’s Abbey Theatre (Stuart Graham, interview with the author, 8 October 2011).

³ Another celebrated example of this was the ‘Somme Journey’ documentary, televised by BBC 1 Northern Ireland on 6 November 2002, featuring Ervine and Sinn Féin’s Tom Hartley, a former councillor, Lord Mayor and author, visiting the battlefields of World War One. Though Hartley was a compromising influence within Sinn Féin, the sight of a convicted UVF man and a former member of the H-Block Committee navigating the fields of France and Flanders together, exchanging thoughts on reconciliation and shared history, with both men clearly moved by the experience, appears in the present climate of political gridlock to be remarkable (*Irish News*, 4 November 2002: 42). Both former militants were able to acknowledge the hurt and pain suffered by Irish Nationalism and Ulster Unionism in 1916–17.

⁴ There is no evidence for Overend’s assertion, but in a mould that still seems resonant, another former Labour activist remembered: ‘If you wanted Stratton Mills you would have had to go to the Bahamas or somewhere to see him. But I mean that was the type of person people voted in. That’s what you were up against’ (Jim McDonald, quoted in Edwards, 2009: 132).

⁵ Then-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland James Prior told the PUP that their document made them ‘twenty years ahead of their time’ (Moloney, 2010, 397).

⁶ It is worth noting that unlike the British Labour Party, which revised Clause IV under Tony Blair in 1995, the PUP retains it.

⁷ This claim appears to be verified by former DUP leader Peter Robinson, who confirmed his party, under the d’Hondt formula, ‘took the departments to which we were entitled’ when devolution commenced in December 1999. However, ‘we didn’t take up our places at the table’ (*Belfast Telegraph*, 14 October 2011: 37).

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