

Intra-Unionist Disputes in the Northern Ireland House of Commons, 1921—72

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THIS is a report on a research project carried out in 1972, and again in 1973, by students taking the special subject in the Government of Ireland, in the Political Science Department at the Queen's University of Belfast. The object was to ascertain, from the division lists printed in the Northern Ireland Hansard, to what extent and on what issues Unionist back-benchers were likely to vote against the government.

Each parliament was studied independently by two or three students. They were asked:

(a) to establish who were the Unionists sitting during the parliament, including those returned at by-elections. Those deprived of the party whip were included, but those who transferred to another party were excluded from the date of their change of allegiance. Independent unionists were also excluded.

(b) to note the divisions in which one or more Unionists voted against the government, and to establish the point at issue. Free votes were excluded from the calculation.

The results form only an imperfect guide to intra-Unionist tensions. On the one hand, issues which we know from other sources were causing discontent within the party sometimes left no trace in the division lists. For instance, no Unionists voted against the government in the early months of 1943, when dissatisfaction with the Andrews government was coming to the boil. Nor did the extent of opposition to the O'Neill administration make itself shown in the division lists. On the other hand, some minor issues had a disproportionate effect

on the statistics because they provoked several divisions in which a group of unionists voted against the government. Examples are the Summary Jurisdiction Bill of 1934, and the grant of £6,000 to Maze and Downpatrick racecourses in 1963. Again, no account is taken of abstentions, which could sometimes be as significant a sign of disapproval as an outright vote against the government. Despite these limitations, however, the material seems to throw sufficient light on intra-Unionist difficulties to be worth summarising.

I. STATISTICAL OUTLINE

<i>Parliament</i>	<i>Number of divisions</i>	<i>Number of divisions in which 1 or more Unionists voted against government</i>	<i>Number of Unionists sitting for all or part of Parliament</i>	<i>Number of Unionists who voted on 1 or more occasions against government</i>
1921	20	20	40	20
1925	497	35	34	8
1929	137	15	39	6
1933	117	25	40	12
1938	142	44	52	25
1945	152	14	38	11
1949	50	16	46	23
1953	59	18	43	20
1958	259	24	44	19
1962	124	42	39	15
1965	78	20	40	16
1969	225	53	38	21

II. A PARLIAMENT-BY-PARLIAMENT SURVEY

1921 Parliament

Leading dissidents:

W. Coote	Ferm. & Tyrone	9 ¹	H. S. Morrison	QUB	9
R. Crawford	Antrim	6	G. B. Hanna	Antrim	5

In this parliament only Unionists took their seats, so all opposition perforce came from within the party. It came chiefly from a group of right-wingers (e.g. Coote, Morrison, Crawford) concerned with the level of government expenditure. Some of them (e.g. Coote, Crawford) were also concerned with safeguards for protestantism in the educational system. A scattering of other issues arose, however: 3 out of Hanna's 5 dissident votes arose on a licensing bill which he considered too severe on publicans.

¹The number which appears opposite the name of each leading dissident shows the number of times that he voted against the government in that parliament. All those who voted against the government five or more times in the course of a parliament are listed.

The dissidents' greatest success occurred on a motion setting the level of ministers' salaries. In this division, only the second ever held in the Northern Ireland House of Commons, 11 Unionists voted against the government—the largest number of dissident Unionist votes ever recorded in the chamber's history.

1925 Parliament

Leading dissidents:

W. Grant	N. Belfast	26	R. Crawford	Antrim	5
Sir R. Lynn	W. Belfast	5			

In this parliament the right-wing group so prominent in the previous one was visible but less active (e.g. Crawford, Lynn). The most assiduous critic of the government was Billy Grant, a shipyard worker who repeatedly opposed it on social welfare issues, usually in company with Labour.

1929 Parliament

Leading dissidents:

Maj. J. H. McCormick	St. Anne's	11	R. Elliott	S. Tyrone	5
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1933 Parliament

Leading dissidents:

Maj. J. H. McCormick	St. Anne's	14	R. Crawford	Mid-Antrim	10
R. Elliott	S. Tyrone	8	W. Grant	Duncairn	8
H. Minford	Antrim	5			

Two fairly quiet parliaments, in which, however, both the right-wing group (e.g. Elliott, Crawford, Minford) and the left-wing critic (Grant) were in evidence. But the most active critic of the government was Major McCormick, representing the working-class constituency of St. Anne's, who combined a right-wing suspicion of governmental extravagance with left-wing demands for better social welfare. The measure which gave the government most trouble was the Summary Jurisdiction Bill of 1934, which provoked 4 divisions, with up to 7 Unionists voting against the government at a time. This measure, which eroded the traditional powers of J.P.s, was opposed by both McCormick and the right-wingers.

1938 Parliament

Leading dissidents:

J. F. Gamble	N. Tyrone	18	R. Elliott	S. Tyrone	16
Col. A. R. Gordon	E. Down	13	E. Warnock	St. Anne's	11
W. Dowling	Windsor	10	F. Thompson	Ballynaveigh	8
H. Minford	Antrim	8	Rev. R. Moore	N. Derry	7

This parliament, prolonged beyond its normal length by the absence of elections in wartime, was a difficult one for Unionist administrations. Its first two years were marked by a number of issues—such as bacon and milk marketing, and the

level of land annuities—in which a right-wing rural lobby (e.g. Gamble, Elliott, Minford, Moore) opposed the government for putting too many restrictions on farmers. Then, during the war, a new, mainly urban and more left-wing lobby (e.g. Gordon, Warnock, Dowling, Thompson) emerged, critical of the inadequacies of the social services and, in some cases (Gordon, Warnock) of the government's war effort. This group also challenged the government on the suspension of Belfast Corporation in 1942, provoking seven divisions.

1945 Parliament

Leading dissidents:

H. Minford	Antrim	10	H. Quin	QUB	8
A. F. Wilson	Windsor	5	W. F. McCoy	S. Tyrone	5
Mrs D. McNabb	N. Armagh	5			

1949 Parliament

Leading dissidents:

B. Faulkner	E. Down	7	A. F. Wilson	Windsor	7
W. J. Morgan	Oldpark	6	W. M. May	Ards	5
Prof. Lloyd-Dodd	QUB	5			

Two fairly quiet parliaments. Criticism came mainly from a right-wing group (in which all the dissidents listed above can be included) who, while not opposing the substance of the welfare legislation which loomed so large in these years, frequently criticised it for making undue extensions to the powers of ministers or civil servants. Most of this group (though not Wilson or May) were also critical of the government's policy of increasing aid to voluntary (i.e. chiefly Roman Catholic) schools.

1953 Parliament

Leading dissidents:

E. Warnock	St. Anne's	12	J. W. N. Martin	Woodvale	9
W. J. Morgan	Oldpark	8	S. Rodgers	Pottinger	8
N. Minford	Antrim	7	A. Hunter	Carrick	6

A generally quiet parliament, but with one big row: over a bill of 1956 which allowed a partial decontrol of rents. This provoked ten divisions, with up to seven Unionists at a time, including all those listed above, opposing the government. Most, though not all, the dissidents represented Belfast working class constituencies, and could be labelled, on this issue at least, "left-wing".

However, a "right-wing" suspicion of bureaucratic power seen in previous parliaments was still alive, and demonstrated by many of the same MPs (e.g. Warnock, Martin, Morgan). Its most curious manifestation arose on the Sale of Ice Cream Bill 1957, on which seven Unionists voted against a clause permitting inspectors to take samples of ice cream without paying for it.

1958 Parliament

Leading dissidents:

N. Minford	Antrim	11	E. Warnock	St. Anne's	7
Dr R. Nixon	N. Down	6	D. Boal	Shankill	5

1962 Parliament

Leading dissidents:

Dr R. Nixon	N. Down	19	N. Minford	Antrim	15
P. O'Neill	N. Antrim	9	D. Boal	Shankill	6
D. Little	W. Down	5			

All the dissidents listed above, except Boal, can be grouped together. Like the right-wingers in previous parliaments, they were suspicious of governmental extravagance (e.g. on grants to racecourses), and of bureaucratic insensitivity to local interests (e.g. on closure of railways). But it would be misleading to label them simply as "right-wing", for they also demanded more action from the government to develop the economy, and some favoured the abolition of capital punishment. Their strongest showing came on a motion in 1959, calling for particulars of official contracts to be made available to the public. Ten Unionists voted against the government on this motion, the second highest number of dissidents recorded in any division in the history of the Northern Ireland House of Commons.

Rather detached from the above group was Desmond Boal, whose denunciations of the government's economic failures, and strong advocacy of the abolition of capital punishment, made him appear the most left-wing Unionist since Billy Grant.

1965 Parliament

Leading dissidents:

P. O'Neill	N. Antrim	10	N. Minford	Antrim	8
B. Kelly	N. Down	5			

This is the parliament in which division lists are least effective as an indicator of Unionist discontents. No trace is left in them by the back-bench movements against Captain O'Neill in 1966 and 1967, nor by the right-wing opposition to his "appeasement" of the civil rights movement in the winter of 1968-9. Such dissent as is evidenced comes largely from the same group as in preceding parliaments. In this parliament they showed a suspicion of governmental encroachments on back-benchers' rights, while maintaining a relatively liberal attitude on, e.g. capital punishment. Basil Kelly's criticisms were a special case: a lawyer, he cast all five of his anti-government votes on technical legal points.

1969 Parliament

Leading dissidents:

W. Craig	Larne	20	H. West	Enniskillen	17
Capt. R. Mitchell	N. Armagh	13	J. Laird	St. Anne's	13
J. McQuade	Woodvale	12	J. Burns	N. Derry	8

1969 Parliament—contd.

Leading dissidents:

R. Babington	N. Down	7	Mrs A. Dickson	Carrick	7
P. O'Neill	N. Antrim	6	D. Boal	Shankill	6
A. Anderson	City of Derry	6	H. Whitten	C. Armagh	6
J. Stronge	Mid-Armagh	5			

In this parliament the division lists provide clear evidence of the tensions in the Unionist party. The number of divisions in which some Unionists voted against the government, and the proportion of Unionists who voted at least once against the government, was higher than in any previous parliament (see the statistical outline above, p. 100).

The main opposition came from a group of right-wing Unionists (e.g. Craig, West, Mitchell, Laird, McQuade, Burns, Boal). Their target was not so much the government's reform programme—though the Police and Housing Executive Bills attracted some hostile votes—as its failure to maintain order, an issue on which critical motions were repeatedly put down.

Many of the dissenting votes, however, cannot be classified under this "right-wing" umbrella. The volume of legislation in this parliament was exceptionally large and diverse, and issues were thrown up in which back-benchers generally sympathetic to the government found themselves in opposition to its policy. For instance, a bill reforming the law of leasehold, and another relaxing the licensing laws, provoked several adverse votes. It is not easy to find a pattern in these issues, but a thread connecting some of them is the distrust (found in preceding parliaments as well) of unnecessary encroachments by government departments. For instance, a bill providing for the conservation of water resources provoked up to four hostile votes from Unionists normally friendly to the government (e.g. Babington, Mrs. Dickson, Phelim O'Neill), on the ground that it gave excessive powers to the ministries concerned.

Conclusions

1. Unionist governments faced a small amount of criticism from back-benchers to the "left" of them—e.g. Grant in the twenties and thirties, Boal in the early sixties, several over the rent bill of 1956.
2. More of the dissidents, especially in the early parliaments and in the final one, could be labelled as to the "right" of the government.
3. But a third type of dissident combined "right-wing" suspicions of governmental extravagance and bureaucratic encroachments with "left-wing" demands that the government do more for the socially disadvantaged. This combination, which first emerged with Major McCormick in the 1929 parliament and which is to be found in all parliaments thereafter, can best be labelled as "populist". It is the attitude most characteristic of Unionist dissidents.

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