

THE DEMOCRATIC UNIONIST PARTY

The DUP was formed in 1971 and emerged from the political and street disturbances that had troubled Northern Ireland since the mid-60s. In fact the DUP was formed around a core based on an earlier party, the Protestant Unionist Party, which also had Mr Paisley as its leader and a group of assorted unionists from various sources. The significant features which influenced the new party were the first signs of the break-up of the hitherto monolithic Unionist Party. But perhaps more significant were the zealous protestations of Dr Paisley, and many of his Free Presbyterian supporters who followed him into the DUP, coupled with the pragmatic influence of a former unionist MP Dessie Boal, a prominent local barrister. Between them they set out to mould a party which would be more working class and thus produce a challenge to the structure of the Unionist Party, which they saw as middle class and inflexible; but yet would resist the sort of concessions to the other tradition that the unionists had made under the leadership of O'Neill. Consequently Boal described the party at the outset as "right wing in the sense of being strong on the constitution, but to the left on social policies."

Structure

2. The DUP relies, to this day, on the twin strands of the Free Presbyterian Church and the political party. This duality was even more evident in the early days of the party - despite the fact that it relied upon some prominent dissident unionists - so that in 1971 of 15 appointments within the DUP 13 were Free Presbyterians or members of the DUP, only 2 were dissident unionists. Perhaps the most unusual aspect of all this, in political terms, was that many of the party's decisions were only taken after discussion in the Presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church. For example in 1973 this was the forum that decided that 3 Free Presbyterian clergy (the Reverends James McClelland, Ivan Foster and William McCrea) should not stand for the 1973 Assembly Elections.

3. There remains without question a strong correlation between progress in the DUP and membership of the Free Presbyterian Church. Thus, based on such analysis as can be conducted of peoples allegiance to a particular faith, the results of the 1981 local council election show that of all DUP councillors 60% admitted being Free Presbyterian; within the party decision-making process a DUP Year Book of the early 80s showed that 10 out of 11 on the Finance and General Purposes Committee and all of those in the Rules and Revision Committee were Free Presbyterians.

4. This close relationship between the church and the party, with the Reverend Ian Paisley as the leader of both, suggests that his influence should be all pervasive in the party. By the overt analysis of the DUP itself this is less evident and the official party structure (Annex 1) places the leader in an important but not pre-eminent position. It suggests also an important role for the Central Executive Committee and the Central Delegates Association.

5. However even cursory examination of the DUP shows this to be unrealistic and unrepresentative of the actual workings of the party. A closer analysis of the true state is depicted in the unofficial party structure shown in Annex 2. This demonstrates with clarity that very little of any significance happens in the DUP without the leader's knowledge and approval. The effect of this on policy and the internal relationships within the DUP is described under other headings below. However one matter which is obvious from this structure is that in the DUP, unlike many parties where grass roots opinion is a major factor, the ordinary member has little power or influence. Party conferences, which have been infrequent in the past, are largely stage-managed and provide no opportunity for the rank and file to influence policy-making. Indeed in the power structure shown in Annex 2 the influence of the Conference falls some way below that of the Central Delegates Assembly, a smaller group more closely associated with the party machine, and therefore can be more readily directed from above.

6. This structure has 2 major safeguards. It ensures that even the most senior tier of the party cannot take decisions independent of the leader. Also it provides that the upper tier cannot be taken over by a faction or sub-group because party officials are members of every committee and sub-committee and they report to the leader. Since Paisley is also a member of all committees at all levels, he can personally intervene to block any suggestion with which he is unhappy.

Political Philosophy

7. The original aim when the DUP was formed was to produce a party which was in the first instance strong on the constitution. It set out therefore to uphold and maintain Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom and this has consistently been a standard carried by all DUP candidates. However the DUP also set out to be rather more and, in calling for improvements in social welfare and other matters, attempted to present itself as left of centre. The aim was to provide the unionist population (most of whom are working class) with an alternative to the traditional Unionist Party which Paisley saw as inflexible and largely based on an aristocratic/middle class ascendancy.

8. There were however some fairly obvious anachronisms in this ideal. Paisley's own brand of rigid doctrinal Presbyterianism meant that many of his views on social issues could be interpreted as ultra conservative. Certainly his strong views on such subjects as alcohol and gambling, were not necessarily designed to attract popular support. Indeed on some occasions, particularly in the earlier days of his political life, the position he took on issues such as the opening of public parks on Sundays attracted a certain amount of ridicule both to him personally and to his party. The fact that the DUP survived and expanded despite these setbacks is an indication of the personal following that Paisley has generated and his ability to recognise and seize the political high ground of unionist politics.

9. The other side of the coin, of course, is that many followers have been attracted by this very rigidity. There are many within the party who are convinced that in following Paisley's firm standards they are protecting Ulster and its Protestant heritage against the attacks of Catholic heretics and in this sense are doing God's work. An interesting off-shoot of all this concerns the finances of the party. Despite local stories about the transfers of funds there is no evidence that the Free Presbyterian Church actually supports the DUP, although, there is some benefit to the party in that those who are both party activists and church ministers can follow a full time political career, free from monetary worries, because of their stipends. On the other hand because of the churches strictures against alcohol and gambling DUP branches are unable to raise money through many of the fundraising events used by other parties such as Whist drives, and social functions with a dance and a bar. The Party survives largely on donations, significantly those from activists within the rural and farming community who believe that the DUP is the main protector of the Protestant faith.

Fragmentation Within DUP

10. Because of the close linkage between the party and the Free Presbyterian Church the DUP was one of the most cohesive parties in Northern Ireland. There were very few who left the party on arguments of principle, or because of internal conflicts, because to do so carried with it almost inevitable exclusion from the church. Indeed the relationship was two-sided and resignations from the faith meant that it was very difficult to carry on within the party. One or two of Paisley's associates in the party left the church because of personal problems associated with morals and were subsequently drummed out of the party.

11. Not only was party discipline held tight because of the church connection but also many of those who were elected as DUP councillors were both naive in political terms but also fairly limited in other abilities. Thus in 1983 40% of DUP councillors had less than two years experience. And whilst 50% of UUP councillors

had some experience of the system of local government prior to reorganisation the same was true of only 16% of DUP councillors. This lack of experience reduced the challenge to the leadership. Moreover whereas the path to progress in the UUP is through the "orange" system and hence debate in lodges, progress in the DUP is more through the church and acceptance of doctrine and rigid discipline. Hence many of those elected in 1981 were having their first taste of a political position and the only discipline they understood was that of the church and the DUP - both of which command strict obedience.

12. These two constricting influences are also coupled with lesser academic attainments and lower overall social standing among DUP councillors all of which conspires to make them more malleable and subject to control by the hierarchy and the leader in particular. This tends to reduce to a minimum dissension within the party and prevent the emergence of splinter groups or even individuals of differing views.

13. Recent events however have slightly dented the hitherto solid front of the DUP. Within the past year notable figures such as Jim Allister have gone and there was the temporary resignation of Peter Robinson from the deputy leadership. These events may signal three changes in the internal structure of the DUP. First, the sign that seven years on, after the gains of the 1981 local council elections, many DUP representatives have now gained sufficient political experience to develop a growing political maturity. This will carry with it less of a blind allegiance to the leader. It should not be forgotten that after Paisley and Molyneaux decided to field agreed unionist candidates in the June 87 election Allister resigned.

14. Second, a more open split between the Free Presbyterian wing of the DUP and the secular grouping who see the continuance of party politics as more important. Robinson is clearly in the second category and the fact that his resignation as Deputy Leader did not lead to the appointment of either McCrea or Beattie (as two of the more obvious candidates) has been interpreted as an indication that an all clerical leadership is recognised as undesirable.

15. The third strand of dissent is the lack of progress in bringing down the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the leader's obvious desire to keep to himself the various tactics that are currently being deployed (most notably the talks about talks). There are fairly clear indications that it was Robinson's unhappiness about tactics in the wake of the task force that caused his resignation. His return to the fold may be an acknowledgement by Paisley that matters are not what they were within the party. It is hard to conceive that the Paisley of five years ago would have rehabilitated anyone who had so publicly embarrassed him as Robinson did. All of this may indicate that Paisley now believes that the way forward involves some degree of compromise and a recognition by him that if he is to take the party along he will need a broad spectrum of support rather than the simple autocratic exercise of his power as leader.

16. None of this is to suggest that the DUP could be easily split up or that Paisley is under any threat as leader for as long as he wishes to continue. Rather it suggests that some of the more zealous and evangelical aspects of the party have been tempered with pragmatism and a greater political reality.

Power Structure

17. Throughout this paper the DUP and the leader had been almost synonymous and interchangeable terms. Certainly the ethos of the party is built around the nature and character of the "big man" as he is known in Northern Ireland. This sobriquet is, of itself, a clear illustration that Paisley has been a dominant figure in Northern Ireland politics for many years. His own particular brand of barnstorming electioneering has carried with it a high public profile for himself and his party and consequently for this reason, and his church position, he is the main source of power within the DUP.

18. However others have begun to emerge who have some personal profiles of their own. Those who have mirrored his career both in their allegiance to the party and his church (even in some cases

going as far as to ape his style of preaching) have carved a niche for themselves but one which is very much in his shadow. Foster, McCrea and Beattie fall in this category. Others have emerged who rely less upon the influence of the church or the emotional pull of Paisley's style of rhetoric and delivery. It was the emergence of Robinson in the General Election of 1979 in East Belfast (largely helped by the UDA) and Allister's appointment as EEC Adviser that gave fresh impetus to the party and it was at this point that the DUP could be said to be likely to survive as an independent party should anything happen to Paisley.

19. However those within the party who wish to develop their position have to be careful not to appear to be trying to do so at the expense of the leader. This leaves opportunity for the politically ambitious at the local level because, by the nature of proportional representation, those who wish to be elected need a local popular support. Robinson has demonstrated himself to be by far the most able in achieving this and in his local area (Castlereagh) he has been a dominant figure for several years. Indeed there are those within the DUP in Castlereagh who might be said to owe their allegiance more to Robinson than to Paisley. He was able therefore to push through the building of the Ice Bowl at Dundonald during his period as Mayor despite the supposed boycott of councils by unionist councillors. Building such a power-base carries with it, of course, the possibility of drawing the leader's wrath. There are some cynical views that Paisley encouraged Robinson along the path that led to Clontibret, the Dublin trial and Robinson's subsequent embarrassment when forced to choose between a fine and prison. Whether Paisley is sufficiently devious or far-sighted enough to plan all of that sequence is questionable but there is plenty of apocryphal evidence to show that he did little or nothing to soften the difficult position his deputy found himself in.

Policy

20. In seeking to provide an alternative to the Unionist Party it was necessary for the DUP to create an identity of its own and

independent policy positions. An important aspect of this was the trenchant and sustained demand for better law and order in Northern Ireland. This plays upon the fear within the unionist community, developing through 20 years of violence, that not enough is being done to defeat terrorism. Other unionist politicians and political groups over the years have pursued similar lines but there is a perception in the unionist community that Paisley is the one man with the strident voice and the determined will who has constantly championed their cause. There is of course a strange dichotomy here in that the DUP has maintained links with the UDA and Paisley and others (notably Robinson at Clontibret) have on a number of occasions broken the law and opposed the police. It says much for the chord that Paisley and his party strikes in the hard-line unionist community that such excesses are accepted as necessary in the fight to preserve the union.

21. The DUP's position on internal Northern Ireland politics is that they have steadfastly refused to consider sharing power with the SDLP or other nationalists. The logic of their position is that majority rule is the basic principle of democracy and hence those in the majority in Northern Ireland should rule it but they have been prepared to entertain some alternatives, in a future devolved assembly, in terms of chairmanship of committees and other technical ploys and have recently used the phrase "share responsibility with all constitutional parties at the highest executive level". They maintain of course that they would accept being in opposition should a majority government be formed by a coalition of (say) the UUP, SDLP and Alliance. This however avoids the reality of Northern Ireland politics and their dogged stance (which is seen in sections of the unionist community as firm resolve) is defended by allegations of Machiavellian takeover plots by Dublin, Northern nationalists and others - all of which play on the fears of the unionist community. However this is not to say that the DUP reject entirely any form of cross-border understanding. In recent statements Paisley and others have said that progress could be made if a replacement for the Anglo-Irish Agreement could provide new relationships within these islands. These references, albeit in

could words, to an Irish dimension are interesting in that they appear to signal some acceptance of a role for Dublin probably in the perspective of a triangular relationship involving Belfast, Dublin and London with Belfast as an equal partner.

22. For those who believe that progress depends on consensus in Northern Ireland there may be some minor consolation in all this is that at least the DUP is overtly devolutionist. There is no wing within the DUP which reflects, in any significant strength, the integrationist wing of the UUP.

23. There is therefore a strong affinity between the DUP stance on many issues, and the force with which they put them forward, and the most basic unionist perceptions and fears. However the DUP loses out in the international field and also among many of the more moderate and conciliatory unionists. Much of this stems directly from Paisley's own strong anti-Catholicism and reaction against ecumenism. The DUP maintain that, as a party, they are not anti-Catholic and indeed some defend the party by saying that all elected DUP representatives, including the leader, worked equally hard for all their constituents. Stories abound in Northern Ireland about Paisley's influence being brought to bear to help his Catholic constituents. It has also been pointed out that it is unfair that the DUP are branded as a sectarian party, and the SDLP are not, there is some evidence (from proportional representation transfers) to suggest that the SDLP and the DUP attract similar percentages of their votes from across the sectarian divide (0.4% and 0.3% respectively). However these DUP defences are merely token and there is a broad acceptance, even within the moderate realms of the DUP, or perhaps one should say the more politically sensitive and astute members of the DUP, that the close association between the leader and the Free Presbyterian Church and the DUP's views means that for a foreseeable future the DUP will remain perceived as a sectarian party.