Citizens and tribesmen

Two 'nations' in the siege narrative of Ulster Unionist rhetoric

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This is intended as an illustration of the use of the narrative of the Siege of Derry (1688-89) in the rhetoric of Ulster Unionism, the political expression of Ulster Protestantism. The political uses of the founding myth of the Siege often, like Unionism itself, contain a contradiction between two of the types of modern nation identified by Anthony D. Smith (e.g., 1986, 1995, 1998) as, on the one hand, the 'civic-territorial' nation, typically defined by citizenship rights and territorial origin – i.e., citizens are full members of the nation by virtue of origin in the national territory, regardless of racial or ethnic background – and on the other hand, 'ethnic' nations, where membership is defined by birth into the appropriate *ethnie*, or ethnic group.

The example chosen for this illustration is taken from *The Londonderry Sentinel*, the main mouthpiece of Unionism in (London)Derry, the second-largest city of Northern Ireland. The article in question was published in the paper soon after the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993, a declaration of intent by the British and Irish governments, which was to become the blueprint for the peace process that ultimately led to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement on 10 April 1998. The text I examine (given in full in the Appendix) consists almost entirely of direct or indirect quotation from a New Year's message issued by Gregory Campbell, who at the time represented the Democratic Unionist Party on Derry City

Council, and has since (June 1998) been elected for that party to the Northern Ireland Assembly, which was set up following acceptance of the Good Friday Agreement in referendums held simultaneously in both parts of Ireland. The point of Campbell's message is to rally opposition to the 1993 joint declaration of the British and Irish governments; he does so from a position rooted in an ethnic-based 'Protestant'[1] nationalism, but with allusions to an inclusive, civic-territorial nation – the tribesman is trying to promote a view of himself as a citizen.

Defending the faith – the Siege in Protestant culture

One of the most powerful symbols of Ulster Protestant/ Unionist culture is that of the Siege of Derry (Stewart 1989; Buckley 1989, 1991). In Oliver MacDonagh's assessment:

> The siege of Derry of 1689 is their original and most powerful myth. They see themselves in that, and since then, as an embattled and enduring people. Their historical self-vision is one of an endless repetition of repelled assaults, without hope of absolute finality or of fundamental change in their relationship to their surrounding and surrounded neighbours. (MacDonagh 1983:14)

This is a function which the Siege narrative began to acquire in the mid-nineteenth century, and which was firmly established by the time Irish politics had taken on the shape of a dichotomy between Irish Nationalist and pro-British Unionist blocs in the 1880s (see McBride 1997). The Siege story functions as a metaphor of the group's historical position as settlers in a new colony, surrounded on all sides by enemies.

[1] As is clear from Campbell's message, the terms 'Unionist' and 'Protestant' are to be understood as synonyms here.

In broad outline, the raising of the Siege of Derry saw the loyal Protestant British in the city facing a serious dilemma. In December 1688, James II – who had recently fled to France and been replaced on the British throne by his own daughter, Mary, and her husband, William of Orange – ordered the Earl of Antrim to take his regiment to Derry to protect the largest settlement of the northern Plantation in his remaining Irish kingdom. But Antrim's soldiers were Irish Catholics, sons and grandsons of those who had massacred Scots and English settlers in 1641, and whose kin had in turn been slaughtered in the Cromwellian conquest of 1649; in other words, they were simultaneously the soldiers of King James II of Ireland and the enemies of the city and the colonists within it. In the most defining act of the Siege, while the city fathers prevaricated, debating the implications of defying their king, thirteen apprentice boys took matters into their own hands and shut the gates of the city in the face of the royal troops. Providing another essential part of the myth, Colonel Lundy, the city's military governor, in whose judgement as a professional soldier the city was impossible to defend, slipped away before the siege was raised in earnest, and for this treachery his effigy is ceremonially burned every December by the Apprentice Boys Memorial Society. In August 1689, the relief of the Siege was the first in a series of important Williamite victories that lost James the last of his three kingdoms and turned Ireland, too, into a Protestant nation in the terms of that age (see e.g., MacDonagh 1983:15-33).[1]

In the story of the Siege of Derry, we see Protestant Ulster for the first time revolting – paradoxically – against its British rulers, in protection of its links with Britain, its Protestant religion, its English and Scots cultural heritage. The success of

[1] This brief account of the story of the Siege of Derry builds on the following historical sources: Colby (1837), Simpson (1847), Moody (1939), Simms (1967), Macrory (1980), Foster (1988), Stewart (1989).

the revolt, witnessed by the survival and development of Protestant Ulster, is seen as its own justification.

This theme of the paradox of 'loyal rebellion' is central to Miller's (1978) history of Unionism during the Third Home Rule Crisis (1910-14), when Protestant Ulster raised a large private army to fight (against Irish Catholics and the British government alike) for its right to remain within the United Kingdom. Similar reactions can be seen in Unionist rejection of a series of more recent British government initiatives aimed at finding a settlement in Northern Ireland: from the 1974 experiment with a power-sharing Executive formed by both Catholic and Protestant parties; to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 that granted the Republic of Ireland a role in overseeing the government of the North as guarantor of Northern Catholics' rights and interests; the 1993 Downing Street Declaration against which Campbell rails in the text examined here; the 'Framework Document' of 1995, which set out procedures for the joint chairing by the British and Irish governments of negotiations on the future of the North; and finally, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 itself, which was opposed by Campbell's own and other Unionist parties, who fell just short of achieving a 50% anti-Agreement vote among Unionists at the Northern referendum. In all these cases, people who profess loyalty to the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and a belief in the superiority of British democracy, reject – sometimes by violent means – decisions made on their behalf by the British government and Parliament, because they regard them as adversely affecting Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom.

With politics in Ireland having developed along the faultline of the ethnic division represented in the original Siege narrative, in the late nineteenth century the story of the Siege took on intensified political overtones, which were to find institutional expression following the partition of the island in 1920. Throughout the Ulster Unionist Party's 50-year rule (until

1972), the Siege story was used as a symbolic means of supporting the regime and cementing the Union through stressing the importance of the link with Britain; it was, for instance, an element of every election campaign fought by the Unionist Party, as well as being a perennial part of the speeches delivered at the annual Orange celebrations (McBride 1997:66-77). This heavily politicised myth, then, became 'a key *political myth* of Ulster Loyalism', in the sense of:

> [...] a tale told about the past to legitimise [...] a regime; and [incorporated in] a political mythology, a cluster of such myths that reinforce one another and jointly constitute the historical element in the ideology of the regime or its rival. (Thompson 1985, cited in D. Bell 1990:71)

The potential of the political myth is indicated by its relevance as a paradigm for action in other spheres as well.

Beyond the political arena, Anthony D. Buckley's ethnographic studies of the community of 'Listymore' demonstrate the relevance of the Siege in relation to 'a wide range of social attitudes and actions' (1984:19). It provides a paradigm for the conduct of necessary rebellion against authorities one nonetheless wishes to remain loyal to: e.g., in relations between parents and children; husbands and wives; Ulster people and the English (Buckley 1983, 1984, 1987). Buckley's examination of the ways in which Ulster Protestants use history (1989, 1991) identifies three major uses:

1. political rhetoric that:
   a. lists past grievances awaiting redress, and
   b. asserts the group's superiority,

2. a 'charter' or blueprint: rules or guidelines for acting in the present, and

3. a focus for allegiance: '[...] commemorations of historical events in, for example, processions or rituals, [...] whereby ethnic boundaries are [...] defined and recreated (Buckley 1989:183-185, 1991:260-261).

This framework may usefully be applied to the text I wish to examine here as an example of Unionist political rhetoric.

Gregory Campbell's uses of history: still under siege

Gregory Campbell's New Year message (Londonderry Sentinel 1993; see Appendix) illustrates the significance of the Siege as a touchstone of Protestant political discourse. The report in which his statement is framed begins with references to the historical Siege: 'stand firm' in the headline echoes Unionist/Protestant slogans, like 'No surrender', 'Not an inch', 'This we will maintain', and 'Ulster says No', dating from the Siege itself and other times of crisis and threat. It immediately evokes historical memories of difficulties endured by the Protestant community in the past, and conflicts ultimately won by reliance on their own strength. From the beginning, therefore, the message is simultaneously political rhetoric, a charter for action in opposing the current threat posed by the 1993 Downing Street Declaration, and an evocation of a focus of allegiance in the Siege itself and the cultural celebrations that serve this purpose throughout the year.

The central tenet of Campbell's text is that Protestants, following the Declaration, once again find themselves surrounded by 'liars, deceivers and sons of Rome' (line 18 in Appendix), for which read the Irish and British governments and Northern Ireland Catholics, respectively. And they have to act as their forefathers did if they are to preserve their own religion and way of life, which is only possible within the Union with Great Britain. Campbell cites an impressive list of

grievances, including instances of particular incidents and more general states of affairs:

- the IRA mortar bomb attack (line 11)
- the end of the Christmas ceasefire (12)
- the Downing Street Declaration (20)
- the threat of betrayal by
  - a section of Unionism (19)
  - the British government (30)
- the Irish Republic's involvement in Northern Ireland affairs (32)
- those (Protestant paramilitaries) who use 'counter violence' (26)
- IRA violence (11, 34, 42, 47)

Against all these combined threats, however, the community to whom the appeal is made are equipped with the superior qualities necessary to resist their enemies, and Campbell enumerates these too in some detail:

- the determination of the defenders of Londonderry in 1689 (8)
- disinterest in party or self interest (14)
- dedication to building a British way of life for all (15)
- British citizenship (21)
- constitutionalism (26)
- a just cause (33)
- strength (36-37, 41-44)
- integrity and belief in truth (37-38)
- non-sectarianism (42)

But, in his own words 'The array of diplomatic, religious, and military might deployed against us is considerable' (34-35). And, just in case there might be any doubt, all the numerous enemies responsible for his grievances, and against whom all the above positive qualities must be mustered, are also spelt out in the text:

- the IRA (12, 34, 40, 42, 48)
- traitors within ('a section of unionism disposed to cobble together a deal') (19-20)
- (in Northern Ireland) the Roman Catholic population (27)
- (in Great Britain) the British Government (30)
- the Irish Republic (the 'priest-ridden, bankrupt, banana republic') (27-30)
  - the Dublin Government (27)
- 'others' (Protestant paramilitaries) who use 'counter-violence' (26)

Campbell wants to emphatically seize the moral citadel, arguing that he and his followers will prevail once more against the combined forces of all these enemies – provided his advice is followed.

In a dense, short text, Campbell weaves a fine mesh of history and current politics, linking today's legion threats with the most important founding myth of the Protestant past, in order to rally his people in opposition to the Declaration. Throughout the text, the Siege and its protagonists represent a charter and models for behaviour, explicitly so in the reference to 'the defenders of Londonderry [...] in 1689' (8-9), but also implicitly in the oppositions built up between, on the one hand, 'Protestantism' (14, 35, 38, 41, 43) or 'Unionists' (7) and 'Unionism' (19), and on the other hand, all the various enemies of that group. Politics is clearly conflated with ethnicity: Unionism/Unionists with Protestantism, and Catholics (27) with the nexus of Nationalism/the Dublin Government/the Irish Republic (27, 28, 32), evoking once again the threat from (Catholic) traitors within the North itself, who are in league with the external enemies of Ulster. This equation of ethnicity, religion and politics is also explicit in the reference to 'dogmas discredited 100, if not 300 years ago' (45-46), i.e., Irish Nationalism and Catholicism, respectively. And this picture of besieged and besiegers inside and outside the walls is replete, too, with the other main character of the Siege of Derry, the

traitor Lundy, represented here by the British government (30) and, more sinisterly, by sections of the Unionist community itself (19).

Allusions to the seventeenth-century Siege are linked to all the current threats to the Union. All the traditional enemies are paraded – including the British government, with whom Protestant Ulster has long had an uneasy relationship, requiring its protection and support, but always in the end lacking much trust in the ruling parties in Great Britain, in spite of the fact that Unionism is based on solid allegiance to the United Kingdom. Ulster Protestants are besieged on all sides, and threatened by the existence in their own ranks of potential traitors who would deal with their enemies. These threats can, in Campbell's words, only be countered by a strongly politicised Protestantism that believes in British nationality, a British way of life, and the Union, with the Protestant people pulling together to fend off attacks on their faith, values, country and nationality, even to the point of following the defenders of 1689 in openly rebelling against the government of the state to which they proclaim allegiance. The message is the reassuring one that if the Siege is still going on, traditional resistance to the enemies outside the walls is still capable of delivering ultimate victory.

Citizens united – civic-territorialism

Thus far, we see that the New Year message is an example of political rhetoric that appeals strongly to a central myth which is used to focus allegiance to the ethnic group and as a model for action in the present. But in this statement, Campbell places some emphasis on another major strain of Unionist discourse: the notion of citizenship construed in terms of freedoms perceived as essentially British. Opposed to this assumed free,

democratic British type of citizenship is its perceived negation in the Irish Republic. When Campbell speaks of:

> [...] a Protestantism, totally disinterested in party or self interest and dedicated to the building of a British way of life, to be enjoyed by all in Northern Ireland [...] (14-16),

it is contrasted with '[...] their priest-ridden, bankrupt, banana [Irish] republic' (29-30). This takes us right to the crux of the contradiction in his rhetoric between, on the one hand, the inclusiveness which lies at the heart of the civic-territorial or plural nation, and on the other hand, the essentially ethnic partisanship of the identification of these attributes with 'Protestantism' and 'a British way of life'. In the Northern Ireland context, this has the effect of excluding the 45% or so of the population who regard themselves as Catholic and Irish, rather than sharing his Britishness. The inclusiveness of Campbell's civic-territorial citizenship is, therefore, seriously undermined, because he defines it, too, in ethnic terms.

The kind of citizenship advocated in these passages is, on the surface, a selfless, neutral, rational citizenship, based on a civic-territorial understanding of the nation which is clearly very much at odds with the ethnic focus that is so much to the fore elsewhere in the text. Thus, Campbell straddles Smith's (1986:134-144) dichotomy between the civic-territorial nation – defined by territory, laws and legal institutions, citizenship rights, and common culture – and ethnic nations – defined by common origins and descent, popular mobilisation, customs and dialects, and a shared ethnic history (Smith 1986:135-138). As Smith has observed of modern nations in the civic-territorial sense:

> The solidarity of citizenship required a common 'civil religion' formed out of shared myths and memories and symbols, and communicated in a standard language through educational institutions. (Smith 1986:136)

This combines both Anderson's (1991) emphasis on the emergence of print media in the creation of the nation as an 'imagined community', and Gellner's (1983) stress on the importance of a national education system as a prerequisite of the modern nation-state. In the case of Northern Ireland, it remains unlikely that there might emerge any such 'civil religion' capable of forming a common national identity in this sense. Not only is Britishness firmly the possession of one of the ethnies involved in conflict there for the last four centuries, and as such rejected by a large part of the population, but Campbell's 'British citizenship' is a highly contentious issue in a country where British citizenship rights are denied by the seeming permanence of emergency laws that have been in force since the partition of Ireland in 1920. The inclusiveness of the notion of citizenship invoked in places in this text is, therefore, at odds with the numerous references to Britishness, Protestantism and Unionism, as well as the active use of one of the most powerful founding myths of one of the competing ethnic groups.

Politics and ethnic nationalist history

Campbell's use of the story of the Siege of Derry for current political purposes exemplifies perfectly Buckley's uses of history among Ulster Protestants. His statement suggests a view of this group as an embattled people, dependent on their own resourcefulness in an apparently everlasting struggle for survival. It employs the Siege story to gather support for clearly-stated, immediate political objectives. It seeks to legitimise Campbell's political outlook and aspirations, and argues for their superiority over other world-views. It is a tightly-constructed ethnic discourse produced within a divided society, proclaiming a message that calls on the past in order to draw up a campaign of successful action in the political

present. As such, whatever benefits Campbell sees in membership of the civic-territorial nation which he believes the United Kingdom to be, his ethnic approach to preserving the link with Great Britain is perhaps more likely, in a situation of ongoing conflict, to be divisive – for it speaks primarily to members of his own tribe – rather than inclusive, and to delay any hope of developing some kind of 'civil religion' in the North of Ireland.

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Appendix: Press report of Campbell's New Year Message

DUP say stand firm

New Year message heavily influenced by Declaration

Unionists have been told to oppose the British-Irish declaration with the same determination that made the defenders of Londonderry what they were in 1689.

In a New Year message, DUP Alderman Gregory Campbell said hopes for peace had been dashed by the mortar bomb attack on Fintona police station, 15 minutes after the IRA's 72-hour ceasefire finished.

Alderman Campbell said a Protestantism, totally disinterested in party or self interest and dedicated to the building of a British way of life, to be enjoyed by all in Northern Ireland, must prevail.

He said: "1994 could well be the year for a breakthrough, but not in the sense that liars, deceivers and sons of Rome hope it to be, as they sense that a section of Unionism could be disposed to cobble together a deal under the Downing Street Declaration."

"Those of us who cherish our British citizenship would then be challenged, as never before, to decide on how to defeat this betrayal."

He continued: "The onus will be with those of us who have consistently adopted a constitutional avenue to convince others that more counter violence, either in Northern Ireland against the Roman Catholic population, or in the South against the Dublin Government, would not be the way to convince the Irish Republic that we aren't contemplating joining their priest-ridden, bankrupt, banana republic, whatever the British Government might decide."

Alderman Campbell said the task ahead was a mammoth one, but he added that the case against any involvement by the Irish Republic in the affairs of Northern Ireland was a just one.

"The array of diplomatic, religious, and military might deployed against us is considerable. Only a Protestantism which these reprobates have not seriously encountered is capable of emerging from the conflict with its integrity intact."

"This Protestantism exposes the lies and arrogant hypocrisy of those whose rhetoric is one of sharing and respect for diversity, while their practice is to decimate and destroy."

"This Protestantism cannot be defeated by those who say their campaign is non-sectarian, as they murder another person whose religion is different from theirs. This Protestantism cannot be crushed by those who maintain that they have moved into the 1990s, as they cling by their fingernails to dogmas discredited 100, if not 300 years ago."

Alderman Campbell predicted no end to the trial, terror and tears, until the Government confronted the IRA with an "immovable will" to win the war.

"...a war properly fought brings victory. Multiple onslaughts carried out against the IRA over a prolonged period, forcing them to concede."

"What price a peace born out of a scenario, where no community gains advantage, because of the actions carried out by a few on their behalf to extract the maximum concessions?"

(Londonderry Sentinel 1993:1)