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A reply to John Barry

Abstract

In his analysis of the loyalist flag protests of 2012, John Barry (2019) finds within them the potential for a civic, progressive politics beyond ethnic grievance; a post-conflict politics that need not be post-political; an agonistic politics of struggle and contestation that need not be violent. As a means to achieve this, John defends the need for single-identity/internal conversations within loyalism. In my reply, I am broadly supportive, but I suggest that such conversations cannot take for granted the continuation of the constitutional status quo.

In his analysis of the loyalist flag protests of 2012, John Barry (2019) finds within them the potential for a civic, progressive politics beyond ethnic grievance; a post-conflict politics that need not be post-political; an agonistic politics of struggle and contestation that need not be violent. At the time of the flag protests, and in their immediate wake, I was similarly hopefully, and while now less optimistic, I remain convinced that working class Protestants must become part of a civic conversation that has the question of class at the heart of it. For this reason I am in broad agreement with John Barry, and my reply to his article is written in the same politically committed and *interested* spirit. It could hardly be otherwise. I live in town on the outskirts of Belfast, which at this time of year, approaching the 12th July, is bedecked in Orange insignia, Union flags, loyalist paramilitary flags, and this year, flags and banners showing support for the Parachute regiment. I suppose I would be perceived by others as coming from a Protestant and unionist background. However, I relinquished these religious and political designations decades ago,

largely because I never felt that either unionism or loyalism, despite their avowed Britishness, were sufficiently interested in, or committed to British social democracy, the welfare state or multiculturalism; achievements, which to my mind, once made British citizenship attractive. Now I fear this version of Britishness is gone and it is too late to invite loyalists, as John does in his article, to contemplate what Britishness means today.

The politics that have brought the United Kingdom (UK) to the brink of leaving the European Union (EU) have also brought Britain to breaking point. That is why the Democratic Unionist Party's support for Brexit appears contradictory and self-destructive, but it is also entirely predictable. The party's preference for tub-thumping populism and a conservative brand of Britishness made it a natural ally of the Brexit project with its promise to reboot British greatness. However, it has opened the way for a second Scottish referendum on independence and aroused again the question of the border in Ireland. The DUP seem undeterred by this, but the party might yet be in for a shock if the Brexiteer coat-tails it has been riding upon turn out to be those of an emerging English nationalism and not a resurgent Britishness. A recent YouGov poll has found that a majority of Conservative Party grassroots members would sacrifice the union with Scotland and Northern Ireland to achieve Brexit (2019). The Union is not safe; loyalism knows it and it needs to reflect upon its own role, and that of political unionism – the DUP in particular – in undermining it.

Even if the United Kingdom somehow survives Brexit, does it really matter what loyalists think Britishness means? They have neither the numbers, the cultural capital nor definitional authority to determine its meaning. Loyalism's relative powerlessness is glaring, and this feeds its anxiety. The political and economic pillars upon which loyalist identity and purpose depended are shifting. The United Kingdom is disintegrating; unionist power has waned; and the economic structures that sustained working class Protestants are all but gone. Now, in the aftermath of the flag protests, loyalism cannot even maintain the symbolic dignity it feels is its due. In response it has retreat into a politics of ethnic grievance and victimhood. To

be sure there are alternative versions of loyalism. The generation that emerged from the prisons and into the peace process in the 1990s were articulate exponents of a progressive, civic politics. That progressive voice is still there, but it is overwhelmed by mainstream unionism's consolidation around a conservative agenda that repels many, and its social imagination that is so narrow it excludes many others. Little wonder unionism has lost its electoral majority, but then again, when unionist parties have sought to reach out to constituencies beyond their base they have been punished at the polls by unionist voters. Meanwhile, the most audible voices coming from loyalism are the 'ethnic entrepreneurs' that John Barry refers to, facilitated by a commercialised media environment that thrives on controversy and outrage. This is utterly inimical to the sort of sober and deliberative conversation that loyalists need to have among themselves and it has also contributed to loyalism's dire public image and reputation.

If loyalists need an internal discussion about *who* they are, they also need to talk about *where* they are, because at the moment they look badly misplaced in contemporary Northern Ireland. As John Barry points out, referencing Conor McCabe (2012), Northern Ireland has undergone a 'double transition', from war to peace, and with that an attempt to integrate the region into the global free market. This transition has brought new ideas that emphasise the importance of economic competitiveness, both in terms of the region's fitness to compete against other centres of commerce and production, and in terms of encouraging people living in Northern Ireland to think and behave as competitive economic agents. This has potentially profound implications for how people live and experience life in the region. It entails a relaxing of the old communal passions and political allegiances that have defined Northern Ireland in the past, and in their place the promotion of competitive individualism and consumer lifestyles. In this emerging socio-economic landscape, loyalism looks averse. Its lively public assemblies and forms of communal solidarity are deemed a hindrance to the untrammelled pursuit of foreign investment, commercial interests and the accumulation of private profit. Indeed, John Barry argues that the flag protests "indicate or point towards forms of pleasurable active citizenship and practices of collective action" that stand in

opposition to “passive consumerism”. He is, perhaps, at his most provocative here, but the point he is making is an important one and should resonant beyond loyalism. For there is a danger that calls to drive loyalist demonstrators off the streets; to ban Orange parades and remove flags and emblems from public spaces, sets a precedent that impacts upon all forms of collective action, precisely at a time when climate breakdown and growing social inequality make such action necessary.

John Barry concludes his article asking, “what needs to happen within, for and to loyalism for it to feel secure, confident and fit for the agonistic and democratic constestatory politics to create a new Northern Ireland?” If it is too late for loyalists to talk about what it means to be British, it may be too late to create a new Northern Ireland given the current state of UK politics. Perhaps it is not, and the union can be saved! But surely loyalism (and maybe everyone else in the former UK) needs to talk about life ‘after Britain’ (Nairn 2000). Awful as this prospect might be for loyalists, it might also be liberating; freeing them from a dreadful melancholia that sees them engaging in bouts of nostalgia and morbid forms of heritage; and allowing them to at last properly mourn their very real loss.

There is a passage written by Onyekachi Wambu that I often return to when I think about the contemporary condition of Ulster loyalism. It is in a collection of writing from various authors, poets and academics, to mark 50 years since the SS Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury carrying hundreds of men and women from the Caribbean. A collection of writing about black Britain is not an obvious place to look for inspiration when thinking about loyalism, but the passage catches something of the experience of empire and the journey through its twilight that Ulster Protestants, in their own way, must make also. I quote it here at length.

Descending in our millions, we came in awe and in search of a missing part of ourselves, which we believed had been stolen. Starting from the margins, we walked with terrified boldness towards the centre of power which had held our imaginations enthralled, humiliated our bodies, taken over our economies, and captured our souls. The walk was over a stoney landscape of

contesting ideas and values about the equality, universality and possibilities of the human family. When we finally arrived at the huge hall where the centre of power lay, the first thing we discovered was that we had ourselves changed beyond recognition.

Next, expecting to see a coherent and supreme intelligence, we found, instead, that there was no centre, only aspects and fragments of luminous power confusedly darting back and forth in a spectacular hall with a thousand angled mirrors. When we peered closer into the mirrors we saw only our own image reflected. And we were shocked to have come all this way, only to find ourselves (1998, 22).

The journey of Black Britain is not the same as that of Ulster loyalism, although both have been forged by empire. Loyalism has its own 'stoney landscape' to negotiate and its own discoveries to make. It is a journey that is now irresistible; as is the internal discussion that John Barry defends in this article.

References

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