

### Abstract

The flag protests that occurred during the tail of 2012 and early 2013 gained international media attention. Much of the media attention focused on the involvement of young people and sought to seek answers to how young people who had grown up in more peaceful times could be involved in violence that belonged in Northern Ireland's past. Research being conducted by the authors during the course of the flag protests on young people's experiences of living in post conflict Belfast enabled the researchers to gain insight and clarity on the flag protests, why they had occurred and underlying factors that fuelled the riots and violence that followed, giving a snap shot of the strength of feeling and overall mood of the Protestant community at that time. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, 2 focus groups with 14 young people aged between 15-24 ( $M=17$  years), were conducted followed by more in-depth semi structured interviews with 6 young people from the focus groups and a further 6 interviews with youth and community workers from the East Belfast area.

**Keywords:** Flag Protest, Rioting, Young People, Identity, Unionist, Loyalist, East Belfast, Culture

## When Peace Is Not Enough: The Flag Protests, the Politics of Identity & Belonging in East Belfast

During the tail end of 2012 and early 2013 members of the Protestant, unionist, loyalist (PUL) communities of Belfast took to the streets to protest about the removal of the British flag from Belfast City Hall. While in the main the protests were peaceful, the strong sense of anger, and betrayal by the cities politicians soon erupted into violence and riots on the streets of Belfast. For months, riotous exchanges became a nightly feature bringing fear and echoes of the past to many, but particularly to East Belfast where most of the more serious incidences of rioting took place. In common with many other incidents of violence in recent years there were a high numbers of young people involved in the riotous exchanges, leaving some media commentators to question the stability and future of peace in Northern Ireland, especially if the young are viewed as the future (Nagle: 2013, Gibson: 2013). A media spotlight<sup>1</sup> focused attention on the violence, and the sectarian Loyalist youths involved, giving the overall impression that the flag protests were nothing more than the ugly face of militant Ulster loyalism raising its head again, effectively reducing any legitimacy the peaceful protests may have had to nothing more than sectarian ranting<sup>2</sup>.

But was that really the case? Why did the decision to remove the flag from Belfast City Hall encounter such a strong reaction? Were the protests just a manifestation of sectarianism or were they manifestation of a deeper malaise highlighting the increasing marginalisation and disaffection felt by many within the PUL community? It is the intention of this paper to attempt to shed light on these questions by drawing on interviews conducted as part of a wider research project looking at the legacy of the conflict for young people in East Belfast. The research coincided with the flag protests and it was against this back drop that our research was conducted. The research reported here was conducted as a small-scale study, using a framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)<sup>3</sup> during a three month period covering March to May 2013 in the East Belfast area with young people and youth/community workers. However, the research was initiated before the flag protests and there was never any intention to directly research the flag

dispute. As such, no questions directly dealing with this issue had been planned or prepared, nevertheless during the course of interviews and focus groups with both young people and youth workers the interviews naturally turned to current events and in particular the flags protests. During the course of the interviews young people, and youth workers talked candidly about the protests, giving insight and clarity to the mind-set of those involved. Highlighting that while indeed there may be deep rooted problems that have still to be resolved there is still a strong sense of optimism and hope for the future particularly amongst the younger generation in East Belfast. As such, what follows is an examination to the background of the protests, why it evoked such a strong reaction amongst the PUL community, and their hopes and fears for future peace in Northern Ireland.

### **Background to the Flag Dispute**

The decision to limit the number of days that the British flag was flown from Belfast City Hall was taken on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2012 when Belfast City Council voted in favour of a proposal to only flying the Union flag on 18 designated days. The vote came on the back of the original proposal from nationalist/republican councillors who had wanted the complete removal of the British flag, as a way of comprise Naomi Long then MP for East Belfast and a member of the Alliance party suggested limiting flying the flag to designated days such a public holidays, and civic occasions of local and national importance such as St Patrick's Day or Remembrance Sunday. This decision brought Belfast City Hall in line with the rest of United Kingdom where the Union flag is only flown from government buildings on specific days of the year. The decision was opposed by Unionist councillors and in the weeks leading up to the vote the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) distributed leaflets in East Belfast criticising the decision, and encouraging residents to protest, claiming it was an attack on the cultural identity of the unionist community, part of a wider 'culture war' by nationalists/republicans on 'Britishness' in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the concept of a 'culture war' being actively waged by nationalists/republicans has been propagated by unionist/loyalist politicians for some time arguing that there is a republican agenda to rid Northern Ireland of unionist/loyalist culture, whether this is true or not, the suggestion

is enough to evoke the siege mentality that resides within the psyche of Ulster unionism and loyalism, which has so often been used by the political elite to mobilise the PUL community against any proposal or changes that are seen to be an attack on either the union with Great Britain or their British identity (Dawson, 2010: 261-264).

The DUP/UUP call to protest, was successful, and both parties were heavily criticised both within and outside the PUL community for proliferating tension, and in the following weeks and months the protests occurred throughout Belfast, and beyond, while in the main, most protests were peaceful, given the height of feeling some turned to violence and angry exchanges between protesters and the PSNI occurred. In addition, Alliance Party offices in East Belfast and Carrickfergus were attacked and vandalised. The protests continued into 2013 with further violence and violent confrontations erupting between republicans and loyalists along the Short Strand interface.

While for many political commentators the protests were unexpected, others such as the community and youth workers interviewed for this study, saw it coming, viewing it as a timely wake-up call to both local and national politicians and indicative of a deeper discontent with the peace process, local politics and wider socio-economic issues that had been festering amongst sections of the PUL community for years. Certainly, during the course of interviews with youths and community workers a common theme raised was the insistence that it was important to understand that the flag protest wasn't simply about a flag, but the protests were symbolic of wider discontent with the political process and socio-economic concerns. Indeed, at the core of this discontent stems what some unionists/loyalists see as an attack on their cultural heritage and identity, which for the PUL community is invariably tied to the United Kingdom and the Crown, the British flag therefore becomes an important symbol of their cultural identity<sup>4</sup>. Accordingly, core to comprehending the roots of the flag protest is to understand Unionist and Loyalist cultural/political identity

### **Unionist and Loyalist Identities**

A defining feature of Northern Ireland is the importance of cultural and political identity in shaping the communities where people live; creating a sense of identity that is akin to tribal (Bell, 1990: 63-66; Ferguson, Muldoon & McKeown 2014:372-389). A continual stumbling block throughout the peace process has been around issues of culture and identity, as observed recently with the collapse of the Haass/O'Sullivan negotiations, and the continuing impasse over contentious Orange Order parades (Belfast Telegraph, 2013). Indeed, cultural and political identity is intrinsically linked to the political conflict and as the above demonstrates remains as important now than at any time in the recent past. It does not therefore take much to understand the deeper significance and symbolism of the British flag for the PUL community (Bryan et al, 2010: 19-20). As such, Protestant communal identity stems from a "*sense of self [that] is closely bound up with self-expression. ... [...] to display their symbols in public, and have them accepted by everyone.*" and is intrinsically tied to a notion of Britishness (Liechty & Clegg, 2001:299).

The PUL community derives its legitimacy from the notion of a common identity and a communal right to self-determination according to the principles of a sovereign nation-state, however, for the PUL community the nation state is the United Kingdom rather than Ireland (Todd 1987, Bruce 1994, McKay 2005). The historical context of Ulster Protestant identity is crucial to understanding not only the Unionist political elite that dominated the corridors of Stormont for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but also the seemingly fragmented and confused dichotomy at its core (Todd 1987, Cochrane 1997). Traditional accounts of Unionist/Loyalist identity hold that it is historically tied to the notion of a Protestant ascendancy, encapsulating a rich heritage dating back to the plantations of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. The plantations brought settlers from England and Scotland to settle in Ireland, thus creating an historical legacy that still reverberates today and is the cornerstone of Protestant cultural identity in Northern Ireland<sup>v</sup>. This historical legacy has very much laid the foundation, via kin and faith, the ties that bind Unionist/Loyalist identity to a sense of Britishness (Bruce 1994). Indeed, while in the modern era we are increasingly a secular society the importance of Protestantism in cementing Unionism with Britishness cannot be underestimated

(Bruce 1994). Historically, Britain is intrinsically linked to Protestantism and has been since the reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the monarch is head of the Church of England and much of Britain's cultural values and civic rights echo a Protestant worldview, as such a Unionist/Loyalist sense of Britishness is tied very much to this British Protestant tradition (Bruce 1994). However, it is also via the Protestant tradition that an underlying nuance of difference begins to emerge in the character of the PUL community, indeed, as contended by Todd (1987) the Unionist community belies two traditions creating the Ulster Loyalist and Ulster British dichotomy. Todd (1987) asserted that the first is linked to the Ulster Scots and the first wave of settlements in the 16<sup>th</sup> century which in the main embodies the Calvinism of Presbyterianism, and identifies as Loyalism. The second is linked more to the second wave of settlements from England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and to an Episcopalian strand of Protestantism that identifies primarily as Ulster British (Todd 1987). Consequently, while connected by Protestantism, Unionist and Loyalist sense of cultural or national belonging is both similar and divergent, as Cochrane (1997:36-37) asserts:

*“The first, Ulster loyalism, sees itself primarily as a self-contained cultural community with a secondary political allegiance to the British state. The other strand is an Ulster British tradition which defines itself as being an integral part of Greater Britain with a secondary regional patriotism for Northern Ireland”.*

Further both Todd (1987) and Cochrane (1997) contend that Ulster Loyalism should be seen as a cultural entity in own right, arguing that Loyalists are tied more to a sense of Ulsterness rather than Britishness which is secondary. As the following quote demonstrate:

*(the) “Ulster ‘loyalist’ tradition, which despite its self-description, is much less loyal to Britain than the British unionists, and equivocal about the national identity of Ulster Protestants. They display ‘settler insecurity’, and their primary imagined community is themselves. Their loyalty is to the Crown, rather than Parliament. Provided the Crown defends Protestant liberties in Ulster.” (Cochrane 1997: 38)*

This differential between Ulster unionism and Loyalism as created a dualism of ethnicity which while having a collective Protestant identity rooted in an historic legacy, fragments into alternative cultural visions

Unionist/Loyalist assertions of Britishness are often at odds with the contemporary world and is often seen as archaic, critics will often argue that Unionism sense of cultural belonging tied to Britishness lacks any legitimacy due not least to the lack of acknowledgement from the rest of Britain. Indeed, much of the discourse on the nature of Ulster Protestant identity has been traditionally to view it as problematic, with Unionism for the most part portrayed as an unchanging, unyielding ideological Goliath unwilling or unable to move forward, refusing to acknowledge a new Northern Ireland and/or a United Ireland (Farrington 2006, McAuley 2010, Smithey 2011). Nevertheless Ulster Unionism and Loyalism are intrinsically linked to each other, and their cultural expression of identity follows a similar path. For instance, the, monarchy, historic figures such as King Billy portrayed in murals, parades and the British flag are all poignant symbols and assertions of cultural identity for Unionists and Loyalists alike. Indeed the dichotomy that exists through the differential of 'Ulsterness' and 'Britishness' is intrinsically links cultural and religious identity to Unionist politics creating a shared sense of belonging and identity which ties Northern Ireland to the United Kingdom separated by mere geography (McAuley 2010, Cochrane 1997, Bell 1990,). It is this vision that despite any restructuring of Unionist and Loyalist politics in recent times remains intrinsic to Ulster Protestant identity.

Accordingly the symbolism of the Union flag to many within the PUL community is a visible and intrinsic display of their Britishness, and as such it is arguable that many within the Unionist community did indeed see the removal of the flag from Belfast City Hall as a further indicator of the erosion of their culture and heritage, it would be erroneous to suggest or reduce the protests to being about nothing more than flag waving. As the participants in this study illustrate, many within the PUL community have felt increasingly isolated and marginalised politically, socially and

economically, as such the protests became a visible manifestation of the alienation and disaffection that many have started to feel.

#### Narratives from within the Community

Narratives around the flag protest was a common theme across all participants interviews and focus groups and was part of a wider narrative of discord perceived and discussed by research participants during interviews discussing the legacy of conflict. However, as this paper's focus is slowly comments related to the flag dispute, only extracts discussing this issue are used, further for clarity of reading, common themes in discussions around the flag dispute have been identified and highlighted. Accordingly, what follows is a brief synopsis of the general research narratives discussing the wider discord felt within the community, this is then followed by analysis of the narratives in relation to the flag dispute with interview extracts included to highlight the concerns and opinions provided.

#### *Overarching Narratives of Discord*

Throughout the research interviews respondents discussed unresolved issues pertaining to the legacy of conflict relating to sectarianism, paramilitaries, and dealing with the past, particularly in relation to how the past should be remembered and the responsibility of older members of the community to young people in ensuring that they do not glamorise the troubles and violence. In addition, there continued to be fear and anxiety within the community over the removal of 'peace' walls with many respondents, while expressing dismay that the walls existed in the first place, still felt that it was too soon to take the walls down.

"It's not like Belfast is amazing now, and like it's all ok, it's still has conflict and nobody ever really addressed the issue properly, like the Good Friday Agreement was there, but there's still like a lot under the surface that hasn't been talked about"

(Young Person B)

"I mean, honestly, right now, taking that peace wall down I wouldn't feel safe I wouldn't want to live there" (Youth Worker A)



Socio-economic issues also featured as an area of grave concern, with the lack of opportunities for young people being a significant issue. Youth workers expressed concern over a lost generation who lacked direction, and were increasingly despondent. Youth workers also felt more needed to be done with regards policy and investment to increase the life chances of young people from the most deprived areas of East Belfast and Northern Ireland. While young people interviewed showed concern that they would struggle to find employment and have to leave Northern Ireland. Overall, respondents cited continuing issues with sectarianism, paramilitaries, socio-economic issues, political alienation and a crisis of identity as factors in remaining tensions and an underlying cause of the flag protests.

“I think the people [politicians] who are making all those decisions they are so far away from what’s going on, on the ground y’know, they don’t know what it’s really like to be living in that kind of poverty and have no aspirations and worry about money constantly” (Youth Worker A)

### *Removal of the Flag*

The interviews demonstrated that young people who took part in the research did not care about the act of removing the Union flag from Belfast City Hall. As the extracts illustrate, some had even been unaware that a flag had been on City Hall until the protests started. Indeed, there was some debate as to whether those youths who had taken to streets and engaged in violence were actually aware of the flag prior to its removal by Belfast City Council.

“For me personally it doesn’t make a big difference because my identity is not based on a flag, but if it’s going the other way and there’ll be tricolour up and a united Ireland and joining the Euro and all this other stuff then that will impact on me, but taking flags down doesn’t really.” (Young Person A)

“I didn’t really notice it was there, to be honest, in the first place, so I think it’s better no flag than one flag because people do consider themselves to be British, but people also think of themselves as Irish and it’s a bit split, so you can’t be having one person’s national flag up there and not the other, so it’s better no flag.” (Young Person B)

“Lot of those people rioting didn’t even know it was there.” (Young Person C)

As these accounts illustrate, the initial act of removing the flag did not cause outrage or despair amongst the community, or negatively impact on the British identity, indeed many felt the Alliance compromise solution to be appropriate. However, this act caused a series of events or was indicative of a wider challenge to Britishness which did impact on the participants.

### *Rioting and Impact of Protests on Community*

Only one of the young people interviewed indicated that they had been actively involved in the riots, the rest reported that while they had not been directly involved they either knew people who had or had been affected by the violence through disruption to their day to day activities.

“Some did riot to just riot, but the majority were there because they did care about it.” (Young Person D)

“They’re only being told what to do by other people and out of fear they do it and the excitement, I think there’s a bit of excitement round that and it’s cool to be down there when all that’s going on.” (Youth Worker C)

“I live like two seconds from the Alliance office so when all that trouble was going on there I was like ‘aw flip I can’t even like, I have to go the awkward way to everywhere because I can’t go down that way and like my Mum wouldn’t want to drive me places at night time and stuff because there’s people getting chucked out of their cars and their cars being set on fire, and it’s just kind of like, annoying at the

same time, because it just disrupts your life, and you shouldn't have to be fearful to go out your own home and get on with your life." (Young Person B)

Participants who lived in the area of East Belfast where the riots had taken place also spoke of the fear they experienced, this was particularly true for one participant who lived on the interface, they spoke at length of the fear of their home being attacked and family getting hurt.

"What I think needs to be taken in to consideration is people who live in them interface areas, because I live on one, so does my sister with her kids and when all that over the Union flag protest was going on, we were the people in our houses having to watch people throw petrol bombs over and attack the back. My sister's house goes on to the back of Short Strand so the back of their houses were getting attacked and it's all families and on the other side of the walls it's exact same, so it's innocent people who don't want trouble but that's where it all kinda congregates."

(Youth Worker A)

### *Culture War and Identity*

When asked why they thought the flag protests and riots had occurred some cited '*cultural war*' as a factor and felt that their culture was being attacked and eroded.

"Think it goes back to politicians, parade commission, Sinn Fein want all the parades to stop, and the taking the bonfires down, changing direction of parades, just stamping on our culture and interfering with it." (Young Person D)

"The flag coming down was the stage that just made everyone flip." (Young Person C)

"They've taken everything away from us, and that's how the Protestant community feels, they feel that they're not getting a fair shake at everything here, they feel they're being misrepresented by their politicians, by their own people and it's leaned to trouble." (Youth Worker C)

Many felt the Government, had also been to blame while others looked to the older community raking up the past. All felt let down by politicians and blamed politics of the past for the protests and violence that had occurred. While participants also indicated the protests were symbolic of wider issues to do with PUL cultural identity.

“The flag protests, the flag issue should never have happened in my opinion, you look at it the, the education, deprivation is a big thing, the poverty in Belfast, if the flag is top of your list as a politician you’re not doing your job for the people. We’ve too many politicians talking about the past, the past, the past, the past, we need to get passed it, plain and simple.” (Youth Worker C)

“I hate the Government, they don’t care about us, see to be honest, I couldn’t really care about politics last year, but since the flag, took more interest, watch the news more.” (Young Person D)

“Problems not with the flag, it’s to do with their identity and not knowing who we are.” (Youth Worker B)

### *Policing*

While once the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) had been the perceived as the protectors of the PUL community, the Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI) were viewed as hostile and discriminatory towards Ulster loyalists. Indeed, some young people blamed the police and stated that they had been the cause of the riots.

“Police started the riots, they only respect the other community, they don’t care about us.” (Young Person C)

“When the protests where going on, they started it (the police), cos people were starting to get angry, they were just letting the other side do stuff, the police are awful round here, police are one sided, they’re all for the other side.” (Young Person D)

### *Media Representation*

Anger over the representation of not only the protests but East Belfast and the unionist community as a whole were prevalent. All interviewees felt that the media had focused too much on the riots and violent incidences ignoring the wider peaceful protests giving the overall impression that the whole of East Belfast was engulfed in violence. For instance this youth worker stated:

“Not everybody was involved in that violence in East Belfast but it gave East Belfast a bad name and when you say you’re from East Belfast everybody automatically thinks you’re a rioter, and on the frontline throwing petrol bombs y’know, you mention East Belfast, aw you’re mad, she’s mad, she’s from East Belfast, don’t be going near her. Y’know it’s just kinda a perception now that East Belfast gets which isn’t nice.” (Youth Worker A)

“People think it, think it was the whole of East Belfast, it wasn’t it was a tiny, tiny part of it, a street here and there at any stage. They said there was hundreds of protests going on and maybe there was, but most of them were peaceful.” (Youth Worker B)

Overwhelmingly interviewees felt that young people were misrepresented and that the media’s focus on young people’s involvement in rioting had been disproportionate. The young people, in particular, were angry that they were continually portrayed as ‘violent thugs’, with the media’s representation of them and the area they were from being mainly negative.

“It makes people think we’re all like that, and we’re not. When the riots were on, people would look at you, a bit scared, just cos I had my hood up, but it was raining! It’s only a small minority who actually like do that, and go out and riot. Like I don’t know anybody who was involved, most people I know would be against it, and just think it’s stupid.” (Young Person C)

### *Exploitation of Young People*

Both youth workers and young people discussed how older members of the community had manipulated younger people into participating in the violence, stating that paramilitaries had been actively involved.

“There was young people involved but there was adults involved in the violence, to tell the truth, there were adults that were instigating that violence and that’s what needs to be taken in to consideration when the media is reporting. That, they’re just targeting young people and saying it’s just young people involved because they see them on the front line throwing stuff, but they’re actually being instigated by adults and being controlled by adults which is what people don’t actually know, and that won’t be heard because you got your reformed community leaders who are up there and speaking and saying they’ve done this and they’ve done that. But they’re actually instigating what’s going on which is never reported because obviously there’s been money put across for them to be calming the area down and the point of the violence is when they click their fingers, if they wanted that stopped they could have clicked their fingers and that would’ve been over. It’s as easy as that, but they wanted it to continue for a reason and it’s the young people who get affected by it, y’know what I mean?” (Youth Worker C)

#### *Political Re-Engagement and Moving Forward*

However, some respondents saw a positive face to protests and spoke about how they hoped the violence would wake politicians up to unresolved issues and encourage the community to be more politically active. Further they blamed political apathy amongst the unionist community for the alienation and discontent that many cited as an underlying factor in the protests and riots.

“Positive side to the protests is more people taking an interest in politics, East Belfast is one of the lowest voting areas in Northern Ireland, that’s why East Belfast doesn’t have voice. Hopefully, [the protests] woke the government up to the continuing problems across communities. Relative peace is not enough; hopefully

this will push policies to deal with the legacy of conflict. We've [the peace process] looked at the physical side, of the action of it, now need to go into attitudes, hearts and minds." (Youth Worker B)

### **Summary**

It is clear from the responses that for many of the participants the flag protests were not just about the removal of a flag but were multi-faceted in nature. Indeed, the participants all highlighted deep-seated grievances around cultural identity and what they view as an attack on unionist traditions. Further, unresolved issues around the past and legacy of the troubles still linger in East Belfast and beyond, particularly around identity, and remembering the past. Indeed, young people and youth workers cited issues with older community members raking up the past and the negative impact this can have on young people. Further, youth workers cited continuing issues with paramilitaries encouraging young people to engage in rioting and violence remains a factor, while many young people felt that the police contributed to the riots through discriminatory practices. Anger over media representations of the protests were particularly prevalent and were seen as indicative of wider negative stereotyping and labelling attributed to the PUL community. Respondents felt that the media's misrepresentation and focus on the violence and riots, particularly that of young people gave an inaccurate picture of the protests and wider community. While, little attention was paid to underlying factors, such as socio-economic and wider political discord felt by members of the community, participants hoped this might force politicians and the Government to deal with these issues.

### **Discussion**

While the removal of the British flag from Belfast City Hall was seen by some in the PUL community as a further indicator of the erosion of their culture and heritage, wider issues of political polarization were an underlying issue. During the course of interviews youth workers and young people from the PUL community in East Belfast pointed to unresolved issues surrounding dealing with past, political apathy, continuing presence of paramilitaries. While the above only

gives a snap shot of the PUL community in East Belfast and as such is not representative of the wider PUL community it is clear from the respondents that much of the discourse around the flag protests both within and outside the Unionist camp has distorted perceptions on way the flag dispute occurred.

The participants clearly expressed and demonstrated that the flag protests where more than just about the flying of a flag, with many respondents stressing that their identity was not '*defined by a flag*'. As such, it would be erroneous to dismiss the protests as no more than sectarian ranting; there are clearly remaining issues that need to be resolved. Indeed, many respondents while expressing concern that their traditions were being eroded and the need to take a stand, more were concerned with the dissatisfaction they felt with their politicians, the political process, and policing who were seen rightly or wrongly as having instigated violent clashes. Young people in particular were vocal in expressing the view that the police had been a major cause of the violence.

Much has been made regards the so called 'culture wars', seen by many in the unionist community as a sustained attack on their cultural heritage and British identity, while Irish nationalism/republicanism advances a slowly and steadily towards a United Ireland and this was reflected in these interviews.

The removal of the flag from Belfast City Hall was viewed by some in the PUL community as another example of cultural encroachment on Unionism, and worsening tensions within the community that over spilled into the flag dispute. The concept of a culture war and the erosion of PUL culture is intrinsically linked to issues of identity and feeds into insecurities embedded in PUL communal psyche over their ties to the UK and their identification with British Identity. As such, to understand the flag protests fully you first need to understand the complexities and nuances of Ulster Protestant identity, and while it is not the intention of this paper to give an in-depth account on the historical context of PUL identity, it is however important to note that PUL identity is more than just a political stance on the Union with Britain but an integral part of sense of self that is celebrated through a variety of cultural symbolism such as the Union flag. The removal of the



Union flag therefore hit at the very heart of symbolism of British identity for unionists and tapped into existing insecurities helped along by unionist political parties and evoked the siege mentality. The notion of a cultural war is often decried by critics that it is nothing more than unionist political propaganda by political elites who cannot accept the changing political landscape and loss of power.

Whether this is the case or not, what is clear is the PUL community feel an increasing sense of polarization from the peace process (Brewer, 2013). Indeed, the flag protests are indicative of wider issues with the peace process, as asserted by one of the respondents '*relative peace is not enough*', attitudes and legacy of the past also need to be dealt with more effectively than is currently the case. Further, as asserted by Brewer (2013) reconciliation of Catholics and Protestants has not been as successful as envisaged by the peace process. Key to this lack of process are issues around parity of esteem which were intended in part to ensure equal respect of both communities culture, clearly for the PUL community this is not perceived as occurring, indeed as one respondent stated Protestants '*don't feel they're getting a fair shake of everything here*', and if further disputes such as those evoked by the removal of the flag are to be avoided surely this needs to be addressed.

Central to addressing this perception would be to move away from the notion that PUL identity is nothing more than a political stance linked to a desire to remain part of the United Kingdom, underpinned by assertions that PUL identity lacks legitimacy due not least to the lack of acknowledgement from the rest of Britain; this view is simplistic and negates the historical context of Ulster Protestant identity (Cochrane, 1997: 36-40). Indeed, much of the discourse on the nature of Ulster Protestant identity has been traditionally to view it as problematic, particularly in the wake of the peace process with unionism for the most part being portrayed as an unchanging, unyielding ideological Goliath unwilling or unable to move forward, refusing to acknowledge a new Northern Ireland and/or a United Ireland (Farrington, 2006: 2-12). However, as Farrington has stated much of the documented problems with Unionist identity has been the tendency to assess it through the prism of Irish Nationalism (Farrington, 2006: 5). George Bernard Shaw's famous line '*that being*

*born in a stable doesn't make you horse*' is oft quoted by second generation Irish Nationalists living in Britain and elsewhere, to underline that though they may be British born their identity is firmly rooted as Irish, it is perplexing therefore that the same sentiment cannot be applied to the PUL communities connection to Britishness. The continuing problematizing of PUL identity serves only to alienate the PUL community preventing meaningful dialogue and discourse on the future of Northern Ireland. This dialogue is particularly important if young people in Northern Ireland are to have a brighter future.

Media coverage of the protests plugged into negative stereotypes of the PUL community, particularly the working class, this was further reflected in social media which further distorted perceptions of the PUL community. Indeed, media representations of political violence in Northern Ireland have been criticised in the past for inaccurate and ill-informed portrayals (Miller 1994). As such, focus on the involvement of role of young people in the riots exaggerated the extent not only of violence but also numbers of young people giving the perception of East Belfast was not representative of either the community or its young people. As one respondent stated *'it gave East Belfast a bad name and when you say you're from East Belfast everybody automatically thinks you're a rioter'*. As such, the media has served to further demonise the PUL community and the anger expressed from respondents underlines the polarization the PUL community increasingly feel.

Young people from the area were extremely articulate in expressing their irritation with young people who got involved in rioting and violence, stressing that violent exchanges such as those witnessed with the flag dispute did nothing except hurt their own community. Further, they expressed optimism for the future stressing that the flag dispute was not a sign that the peace process was redundant but that it indicated that more time was needed for old wounds to heal and reconciliation to take place. As one youth worker stated *'Hopefully, [the protests] woke the government up to the continuing problems across communities. We've [the peace process] looked at the physical side, of the action of it, now need to go into attitudes, hearts and minds.'*

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it would seem that the flag protest was symbolic of wider discontent amongst the PUL community. While for the outside world the reaction of the PUL community to the removal of the flag may have seemed extreme, for members of the PUL community the removal of the flag became the *last straw*". Media representations did little to aid understanding, indeed it could be argued the media reportage further maligned the PUL community adding to the anger already felt. All of the respondents stressed that much more needs to be done by all communities in Northern Ireland if peace is to move beyond its current boundaries. Not least was the necessity for local politicians to move beyond the past and respond positively to the legacy of conflict and engage with the communities they claim to represent. The peace process brought hope to Northern Ireland and should ensure that the young people have the chance of a brighter and more prosperous future than any generation before them; however for that process to become complete and to move beyond relative peace the political process needs to be seen to serve all the people of Northern Ireland regardless of identity.

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<sup>1</sup> The flag protests placed Belfast and Northern Ireland back in the media spotlight with nightly news bulletins from for instance the BBC, and Sky News broadcasting images of the protests and riots beamed around the world. Similarly, local, national and international press reported on the protests and riots on a daily basis. For examples see Belfast Telegraph, The Guardian, The Times, or The New York Times.

<sup>2</sup> Social media sites such as Twitter was prevalent with comments about the flag protests and protesters with accusations that the protests were little more than sectarian, with protesters often referred to as 'fleggers'.

<sup>3</sup> For more details of the methodology see Appendix 1

<sup>4</sup> The literature on PUL identity and history is wide the following therefore is indicative of suggested further reading see Bell 1990, Bruce 1994, Bryan 2000, Buckley & Kenny 1995, Cochrane 1997, Campbell 1991, Coulter 1999, Jarman 1997, Loftus 1990, McAuley 1994 & 2010, McGovern & Shirlow 1997, McKay 2005, Porter 1996, Smithey 2011 and Todd 1987.

<sup>v</sup> See note 4