

## Cambridge - Masters in Modern European History Application

### Statement of Intended Research

**Title of Proposed Research:** 'Loyal to Whom? The Relationship between Loyalist Paramilitary Politics and the Protestant Working Class, 1966-2001'

The rationale and premise of my research would be to explore the relationship between loyalist paramilitary politics and the working-class Protestants it purported to defend. Did Protestants in deprived areas of Northern Ireland feel represented by the paramilitaries? Did they tacitly support them, or outright reject them? The significance, appeal and limitations of paramilitary loyalist political ideas and initiatives would be explored, alongside its relationship to and impact upon those who belonged to its constituency. Loyalists considered themselves to belong within the Protestant working classes, and thus attempted to promulgate their ideas to this section of the electorate. However, the Protestant working-classes emphatically rejected loyalist paramilitary parties at the ballot-box in comparison to the success enjoyed by Sinn Féin within Catholic/nationalist areas, especially after 1981. In my research I intend to cover the period from 1966 – the year the UVF were formed as a self-declared reincarnation of Carson's 1912 Ulster Volunteers – up until 2001, when the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP, formerly Ulster Democratic Loyalist Party and affiliated with the UDA) disbanded, leaving the PUP (the UVF linked Progressive Unionist Party) as the only political party left standing representing paramilitary loyalism in Northern Ireland.

Much historiography on the subject seems to have too easily explained away the failure of loyalist parties to appeal to Protestants and unionists, citing a loyalist inclination towards violence putting Protestants off. Yet, for a number of reasons this seems to dismiss the experience of loyalist political development. Firstly, it ignores that many Catholics who supported Sinn Féin deplored the methods of republicanism, yet still ended up voting for its representatives. In addition, it dismisses the publication of credible loyalist political initiatives that not only offered attempts to escape conflict, but also explored issues of class and citizenship with the hope of ameliorating the deprivation and marginalisation felt by loyalists, as well as addressing the communal divide between Catholics and Protestants. Thirdly, loyalist paramilitary failure in elections seems less obvious when one considers a general disillusionment among many Protestants with mainstream unionism, and a lack of attempts at conflict-resolution by the DUP and UUP. Further to this, the ability of Sinn Féin to not just pose a threat to the SDLP, but eventually dislodge it as the main mouthpiece of nationalist ambitions, suggests paramilitary loyalist politics was not always doomed to failure, especially considering loyalists were influential in the Good Friday Agreement. In addition, the ability of the DUP to dislodge the UUP by 2005, despite their continuing opposition to the peace agreement, suggests the paramilitaries merely seeming stubborn, reactionary and not 'respectable' to ordinary Protestants may not be enough to explain their failure: it seemed to be working well for the DUP.

Thus, my research proposal would attempt to address an area of the Northern Ireland conflict – the relationship between loyalists and their constituency - that has been little explored. Academic work and journalistic narratives on loyalism have often portrayed it as the terrorism opposing republican violence, only with a less legitimate cause; loyalists are seen to be reactionary, unimaginative, and offering simplistic answers to questions they seemingly fail to understand. It has thus been an area often ignored in favour of the more widely understood and discussed republicanism of the Catholic/nationalist minority within Ulster. Since much attention to loyalism has focused upon violence perpetrated by small numbers of 'active' loyalists, the relationship between the paramilitary organisations and Protestants who lived in the areas of influence of the UDA and UVF has often not been looked at, aside from a few studies by the likes of McAuley and Crawford. These studies have admirably placed the loyalist experience within the lives of ordinary Protestants and loyalist communities, instead of portraying loyalists merely as 'psychopathic' and distorted by ethno-sectarian notions. In addition, existing literature on the matter of loyalist paramilitary politics, its electorate performance and its influence within loyalist communities seems to fall into one of two camps. Many discredit the ideas and electoral appeal of loyalist organisations, Steve Bruce labelling it the *dismal*

vision in his seminal book on the topic: *The Edge of the Union: the Ulster Loyalist Political Vision* (1994), while more recent studies, such as Novosel's *Northern Ireland's Lost Opportunity: the Frustrated Promise of Political Loyalism* (2013), attempt to revise this trend, seemingly going too far in the other direction, lamenting the nature of loyalism as criminally misunderstood and undervalued.

In terms of primary sources, I would focus on pieces of literature disseminated by the loyalist paramilitaries within their immediate localities, as well as documents published to a wider audience, especially ideas released to the major Northern Irish parties, such as the 1979 *Beyond the Religious Divide* paper and the 1987 *Common Sense* document. Literature intended for those living in loyalist areas would include the magazine *Ulster*, the official mouthpiece of the UDA, and the UVF's counterpart, *Combat*, and documents promulgated by the *New Ulster Political Research Group*, founded in 1978 by members of the UDA. I would also use loyalist interviews with media outlets, election speeches, pamphlets, manifestos and policies that were displays of loyalist political thinking. In addition, I would like to make use of contemporaneous and retrospective oral testimony to consider the views of those 'active' in loyalist paramilitaries, loyalist volunteers and community workers (who remain so resonant in loyalist areas), and ordinary Protestants who lived in areas with a heavy loyalist paramilitary presence. The performance of loyalism and unionism generally in local, Northern Irish and Westminster elections would too be used to understand the relationship between loyalist paramilitaries and Protestants.

I would enjoy the chance to be supervised in this research by either [REDACTED] of Sidney Sussex College, or [REDACTED] of St. Catharine's College, though would happily take recommendations from either if they were to feel another supervisor would be appropriate.