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THE ART AND EFFECT OF POLITICAL LYING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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ABSTRACT

This article explores one of the paradoxes of the Belfast Agreement. On the one hand, the provisions of the agreement are presented as a model of democratic ingenuity and political inclusion. On the other hand, the creation and maintenance of the agreement have been judged to involve lying and deception. The article is divided into two parts. The first part examines the relationship between modern democratic theory and the art of political lying. The second part assesses how suspicion of deceit informs the mood of certain constituencies of opinion within Irish republicanism and Ulster unionism. The article concludes with the suggestion that the longer-term effect of political lying, which was a necessary to achieve the agreement, is to undermine the essential attribute of agreement, namely trust.

Speak boldly and daringly what you think; an Irishman was never accused of cowardice, do not let it be thought possible that he is a coward. Let him say what he thinks, a lie is the basest and meanest employment of men, leave lies and secrets to courtiers and lordlings; be open, sincere, and single hearted.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, *An Address to the Irish People*, 1812

Recognising a paradox can often be a step towards political knowledge. In the recent literature on Northern Ireland there appears to be a very obvious paradox which requires some thinking through. That paradox is not the one normally recognised by writers on the subject, which is usually expressed in terms of the ends of politics (O'Malley, 2001: 302). In short, how can the Belfast Agreement of April 1998 both secure the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (the end required by unionists) and establish the framework for transition to Irish unity (the

end required by nationalists)? The paradox which sets in motion the reflections of this article is not about ends though it cannot, of course, be distinguished entirely from them (see, for example, the exchange between Newey (2002) and O'Neill (2000; 2002) on rights, democratic theory and Drumcree). It is about means and conditions. In sum, how can the agreement be a model of democracy, as some have claimed, if its creation and its sustenance hitherto have been achieved, as others have claimed, by lying and deception? The article represents an attempt to explore this paradox, though it does not claim to provide a resolution of it.

Stating the Paradox

The first part of the paradox involves a dramatic claim. In the style of Virginia Woolf's *jeu d'esprit* that in 1910 human nature changed, John Dryzek has argued: 'Around 1990 the theory of democracy took a definite deliberative turn'. This was a shift from traditional liberal concerns, such as voting and interests, to locating democratic legitimacy in the 'ability of all individuals subject to a collective decision to engage in authentic deliberation about that decision' (Dryzek, 2000: v). A local elaboration of that theoretical turn was set out in, for example, Norman Porter's *Rethinking Unionism An Alternative Vision for Northern Ireland* (1996). For Porter, dialogue, or what he also calls dialogic rationality, is at the heart of the 'civic republican' view of politics he advocates. Dialogic rationality requires

inclusive public spaces open to the disparate voices in society. It is by arguing with and listening to one another, by proposing and counter-proposing, agreeing and disagreeing, evaluating and judging together, that we may hope to reach decisions about our collective life with which we can all live and to which we can be committed (Porter, 1996: 211).

Dialogue not only involves 'authenticity' but is also a requirement for such authenticity. It 'makes central a recognition of the integrity of the other interlocutor(s), it operates according to a principle of reciprocity, it allows us to engage in the process of articulating *who* we are that is crucial to the development of a healthy self-interpretation, and it opens up to creative possibilities for the future' (Porter, 1996: 15). Dialogue, Porter concludes, is indispensable because the notion that a free society can be secured by elites is an abomination. In the absence of such authentic dialogue between citizens 'it is hard to say that we have politics at all'. This view assumes, then, that dialogic rationality will be open and truthful (for how otherwise can we approach an authentic understanding of ourselves, our situation and the needs of others?). The second edition of his book

 THE ART AND EFFECT OF POLITICAL LYING

welcomes the agreement as opening up a future 'with worthwhile prospects for citizens'. In short, Porter endorses, almost in the manner of Shelley's quotation above, the new dispensation as a practical model of dialogic rationality which promises 'an end to constitutional gridlock and undemocratic practices; a future heralding an era of political partnership and equality between the North's divided people' (Porter, 1998: vii–viii).

Dialogic rationality also informs the work of Colin Harvey. Citing Dryzek approvingly, Harvey argues that support for the Belfast Agreement 'represents a firm commitment to a dialogical form of open-ended democracy'. Its democratic structures also represent an exercise in 'inclusion', for only on the basis of such inclusion can the new dispensation hope to fulfil the promise of keeping going 'a critical dialogue'. Harvey provides a sophisticated and balanced exposition of what such a critical dialogue entails, drawing this time not on the hermeneutic philosophical tradition of Porter but on a radical legal tradition which grounds itself 'in a conception of democratic law with a firm commitment to deliberative democracy' (Harvey, 2001: 11). Harvey, of course, is not naive enough to believe that the reality of life in Northern Ireland fully matches the ideal of the agreement. He does believe that 'the normative basis for a new beginning is clearly established' (Harvey 2001: 1). The 'rational discourse' which Harvey envisages implies some level of honest debate, some minimum condition of sincerity, beyond purely 'expressive' politics. In the case of both Porter and Harvey, inclusive democratic debate is the source of political virtue and upon it the (authentic) character of the new Northern Ireland is to be shaped. It is not a means to an end but is both means and end (i.e. the legitimacy of ends is defined by the means employed to attain them and the legitimacy of the means prescribes the sorts of end presently attainable).

The second part of the paradox owes its lineage to Hannah Arendt's famous observations on political lying in *Crises of the Republic* in 1972. Arendt begins by proposing that the idea of *political* truth is essentially coercive. Those who think they possess the truth are usually not disposed to tolerate error. Correspondingly, political lying *can be* an expression of freedom in the following way. Deliberate 'denial of factual truth – the ability to lie – and the capacity to change facts – the ability to act – are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: imagination'. Lying, she argued, did not creep into politics by accident of sinfulness and moral outrage will not make it disappear (Arendt, 1972: 11). In politics, facts and opinion inhabit the same space and both appear contingent. Facts can be treated as mere opinions and mere opinions as facts. The lie may be more appealing than the facts and, therefore, more creative and constructive and, ultimately, more liberating. Simple truth telling in politics

IRISH POLITICAL STUDIES

is difficult because the truth-teller's facts themselves are bound up with contingency and opinion. Telling the truth may not always be politically wise. Perhaps something like this (positive) notion of political lying informed David Trimble's celebrated description of the agreement as an exercise in 'constructive ambiguity'. Claims to possess the truth in Northern Ireland have promoted political intolerance. Liberation from destructive certainty may be a valuable political achievement (Aughey, 2000).

Opposed to this positive, imaginative possibility of the political lie is Arendt's other identification of a modern tendency which was, she believed, wholly negative. She traced it to the influence of two new characters in the employment of government. The first is the image-maker. Some intellectuals, according to Arendt, believe that half of politics is 'image making' and the other half the art of making people believe in the imagery. Here, Arendt's celebration of imagination returns to haunt political life and to distort it. The second character is the problem solver drawn from think-tanks and academia. The problem solver tries to get rid of contingency by way of logical formulae. Unfortunately, these do not solve problems. At best they displace them, at worst they compound them. People will not be fooled nor will their opinions be radically altered by image-making and problem-solving jargon. The real danger is that politicians will deceive themselves. A world of political manipulation becomes further divorced from everyday experience and the consequence is an electorate become disillusioned, cynical and confused. In other words, it is the *professionalisation* of political lying that poses a danger to imaginative politics (Arendt, 1972: 30).

One local examination of what might be called this Arendtian ambivalence about lying can be found in the recent work of Paul Dixon. Dixon begins by enumerating the political skills required to achieve the Belfast Agreement. Consideration of these (nine) particular skills leads Dixon to ask a moral question of the peace process: 'is deception justifiable?' In response to that question, and applying the insights of others such as Cliffe, Ramsay and Bartlett (2000) and Rynard and Shugarman (2000), Dixon outlines two perspectives. The first is the absolutist position which holds that democracy is violated by deception. Both unionist and republican critics of the agreement, he argues, adopt this view and criticise 'the pro-peace process politicians for their choreography, manipulation and deceit'. The second is the realist position which holds that, in politics, deception and lying can be justified on the grounds that they promise peace and a lasting settlement. Dishonesty, in other words, may often 'be thought the lesser of two evils'. There is little doubt that Dixon is disposed to favour the realists over the absolutists, if only for the reason that, while 'normatively' the absolutist position is preferable, it not only underestimates 'the problems of political persuasion' but also overestimates

 THE ART AND EFFECT OF POLITICAL LYING

‘the possibilities, *within the current context*, for an informed, open and democratic debate’ (Dixon, 2000: 16, italics in the original). This is an implicit criticism of the Porter–Harvey position, not in terms of its values but in terms of its contemporary relevance. Dixon admits that the boundary between persuasion and manipulation is far from clear and perhaps its fuzziness is rather too convenient for those ‘elitists’ – party leaders, government ministers and officials – who tend to favour realism. Therefore, he shows a willingness to understand rather than to condemn the realist position. One must have a sympathetic *contextual* understanding of the distinction between the unfortunate (but necessary) means and the fortunate (and desirable) end. However, it is only a qualified sympathy for Dixon argues that there is actually available a third position.

That position is the position of the ‘democratic realists’. Democratic realism holds ‘that the “credibility” gap between political spin at the front of the political stage and the back stage political “realities” should be and could be reduced and democratic debate and accountability enhanced’ (Dixon, 2000: 17). Democratic realism is, unfortunately, a notion that Dixon fails to develop. That he should resort to quotation marks around the key words ‘credibility’ and ‘realities’ is rather suggestive. The implication is that the distinction between truth and lie or between fact and fiction may be far from clear to either insiders or outsiders. Dixon’s conclusion, however, is that, in the course of the last decade, the temptations of realism have displaced opportunities for democratic realism. The Belfast Agreement is presented as a stage-managed strategy, the purpose of which is to ‘spin’ the people of Northern Ireland into an accommodation ‘rather than to persuade supporters and public opinion to support the peace process’.

Lies Noble and Ignoble

An initial response to Dixon’s critique might be to argue that the origin of the agreement (necessary deceptions or ‘imagination’ in Arendt’s view) does not exhaust the potential of the agreement (democratic stability). That is a response which has some merit. However, it does pose a number of further problems. Firstly, that resolution of the paradox poses a challenge to Harvey. He has argued that it was the very foundation of Northern Ireland which became the source of violence and therefore has to emphasise the importance of its re-foundation in the principles of the agreement and not in the historical contingencies of negotiation. For Porter, too, the agreement intimates a shift of unionism and nationalism from their traditionally narrow and self-referential perspectives. The elitist deal suggested by Dixon, founded in manipulation, contradicts the normative substance of Porter’s

IRISH POLITICAL STUDIES

analysis which assumes that not only does politics matter but that politics helps to constitute identity. The public authenticity he seeks is contradicted by skills of lying and manipulation. Dixon tends to treat political lying as a technique. However, it could just as well be the *condition* of politics in Northern Ireland (Arendt's 'image makers') which is also something which Dixon fears. If this is so, then the paradox re-asserts itself. Only the virtue of dialogic democracy can restrain the vice of elitist politics.

Second, Dixon's rather sympathetic defence of the political skills employed to achieve the Belfast Agreement assumes that lying is excusable when it is undertaken for the best of purposes, to make people, in Plato's words, more inclined to care for the state and for one another. This tradition of the 'noble lie' distinguishes a myth necessary to stability and social harmony from venal deception. The nobility of the deceit is in its intent and in its consequence. Yet as Bok has noted, the Platonic tradition may not look so benign from the perspective of the deceived. Absolutists or not, we cannot take for granted 'either the altruism or the good judgement of those who lie to us, no matter how much they intend to benefit us' (Bok, 1978: 169). As she argues, the realist criticism that 'those who raise moral concerns are ignorant of political realities' should not entail dismissal of such concerns as irrelevant but should 'actually lead to a more articulate description of what those realities are' (Bok, 1978: 170). To address *this* problem there needs to be the democratic inclusion promised by the agreement. Moreover, the classical tradition of the 'noble lie' assumes a distinction between ruler and ruled which is at odds with the values of contemporary politics (and certainly those of the agreement). Here the democratic instinct, however self-righteously, must reject the proposition that deception can be justified. Deception in this case would mean *self*-deception for the prince now is the people. To paraphrase Lord Acton, lying corrupts and foundational lying corrupts absolutely. And if, like power, lying is unavoidable, it is even more essential to provide for protection of the lied-to against corruption by those in authority. And what better way is there to do this than by open dialogue and transparent decision-making?

Third, Dixon's interpretation also appears to assume that there is a type of knowledge to which insiders are exclusively privy (back-stage realities) while the rest of us exist in a cloud of unknowing. For those like Harvey and Porter, that would betray the requirement of democratic transparency and they could point to the referendum of May 1998, the result of which 'highlighted the huge groundswell of public support for peace and for devolved, inclusive government in Northern Ireland' (Tonge, 2002: 212). Here, it can be argued, is the real mandate for change and evidence that the ideal of deliberative democracy is no 'mere' ideal but also represents the popular will. But what does a referendum really tell us about political

THE ART AND EFFECT OF POLITICAL LYING

reality? Does the May referendum significantly qualify Dixon's argument? Mo Mowlam, secretary of state for Northern Ireland when the referendum was held, once argued in an academic study of Switzerland that there is little evidence that referenda increase 'elite responsiveness to public demands'. Elites have ample talents and resources to turn the outcome of such deliberation against popular expectations and openness in politics is not always what it appears (Mowlam, 1979: 193–5). It is clear that a substantial proportion of the electorate in Northern Ireland, mainly but not exclusively unionist, hold this view strongly and they would cite in evidence Tony Blair's failure to honour his pledges made during the referendum campaign (see McCartney, 2001). Even popular consultation, they would argue, is framed within political dishonesty.

In this case, the only possible popular response would be to reverse La Rochefoucauld's maxim and argue that deceit on their part justifies suspicion on our part (La Rochefoucauld, 1979: 48). This suspicious state of affairs, as all commentators acknowledge, is profoundly dangerous for democratic politics. Just how radical such suspicion can be is revealed in specific republican and widespread unionist responses. Here, unfortunately, Dixon's categories of realist and absolutist only partially map the range of opinion. One must explore the concerns about political lying a little further for they shed interesting light on the public mood in Northern Ireland.

Republicanism: The Ambiguity of Process

The context of political deceit on the republican side is quite complex. There are at least two possible dimensions to it. The first dimension is bound up with the ideological meaning of 'process'. The original republican definition of 'the peace process' assumed a law of historical development moving inexorably towards the achievement of nationalist destiny. The design of this argument has implications for the principle of consent. The justice of Irish unity here governs the principle of consent. Interim political structures, like those of the Belfast Agreement, can only be legitimate insofar as they facilitate Northern Ireland's shift from its present UK status to its natural all-Ireland framework. Arrangements must be clearly transitional to Irish unity and what was once called the 'dynamic' of the process has to be transparent. This means that the nationalist aspiration to Irish unity must not only be recognised but the structures must 'facilitate' the attainment of that aspiration. The unionist veto, as Gerry Adams once felicitously put it, must be transformed into the positive power of consent. Persuasion of unionists, then, would not be by argument but by the logic of circumstance. In other words, the legitimacy of abandoning the 'war' is based on the expectation that

delivering peace will achieve republican objectives. The end is defined by the logic of the means (and anti-agreement unionists think republicans are right).

For those republicans critical of Sinn Féin's strategy (those whom Dixon calls 'absolutists') there is no necessary process in the agreement towards Irish unity. Anthony McIntyre, for example, argues that there is no sign of unionists having lost on the 'great philosophical question of consent' (McIntyre, 2001: 217). Rather, the peace process 'witnessed republicanism describing its strategic failures as either "new phases of struggle" or as "staging posts"'. It is a transitional process, certainly, but a transition from a strategy of honesty to 'a strategy of deception' (McIntyre, 2001: 206). In the course of this transition, the meaning of process has been transformed from movement towards a predetermined end (republican logic) to limited progress, circumscribed by facts and realities (unionist logic). The Union, albeit a significantly reformed Union, is 'safe' because process involves normalisation within Northern Ireland as a part of the United Kingdom and all-Ireland arrangements have been made consistent with that status. Therein lies the defeat that is being sold as victory. The tone of McIntyre's critique employs a variety of terms – 'spin', 'spin on spin', 'deception', 'lies', 'linguistic mazes', 'creative ambiguity' – but the message is clear. Sinn Féin's strategy is a tissue of bad faith. It would appear that the force of McIntyre's criticism is directed not so much against the trajectory of Sinn Féin's strategy as it is against Sinn Féin's continued reliance on the discourse of process (at least when addressing its own constituency). There is another possibility, however, which McIntyre does not entertain. What if the republican leadership is indeed telling the truth (as it sees it) to its own constituency? What if it has remained true to the old faith and has accommodated itself to the new dispensation only in order to subvert it (as many non-republicans suspect)? The term for this variation on the art of political lying can be called *ketman* and it transcends categories of realist and absolutist. This is a phenomenon explored in an essay by the Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz. 'He who practices Ketman lies. But would he be less dishonest if he could speak the truth?' (Milosz, 1981: 80). (In politics, perhaps, this must remain always an open question). The use of *ketman* in this article is rather different from Milosz's use of it but there is enough correspondence to sustain a common intelligibility. *Ketman* has a double relevance for politics in general and for Sinn Féin in particular.

Republicanism: The Politics of Ketman

It can mean, first, self-deception. Understanding *ketman* begins with the acknowledgement that all human behaviour involves a significant amount

THE ART AND EFFECT OF POLITICAL LYING

of acting and in politics it means assuming a role or, to use contemporary terminology, it means accepting a 'line'. Once this substitution of the collective line for independent thought becomes habitual, a politician may 'no longer differentiate his true self from the self he simulates, so that even the most intimate of individuals speak to each other in Party slogans'. The parrot-like phrases of political convenience then become automatic and this is precisely the criticism one finds of the Sinn Féin leadership in the journal *The Blanket* (<<http://lark.phoblacht.net>>). Such phraseology deludes its users into thinking that they are winning the argument when all they are doing is, to use one of Marx's famous dismissals, merely combating the phrases of this world. The real battle is over and the great objectives have been lost. The cleverness of the discourse only 'brings relief and permits a relaxation of one's vigilance' (Milosz, 1981: 55). The party fools itself because it is necessary for it to be fooled. Fooling itself is the condition of making sense of its own position. The real subtlety of *ketman*, however, and also its slipperiness, is to be found in its second meaning.

The actual word '*ketman*' Milosz found in a work by Gobineau called *Religions and Philosophies of Central Asia*. It is the philosophy, as described by Gobineau, of those in possession of a truth who must not sully that truth in the presence of those whom God has chosen to keep in error. One must hide one's true opinion, one must resort to all manner of deceptions in order to wrong-foot one's enemies. It is also necessary to go through the motions of conformity to rituals and practices of the existing order. 'One must, therefore, keep silent about one's true convictions if possible'. But this outer conformity is all a sham and all the more necessary to sustain the inner purity of fundamental belief. Bad faith in the service of the true faith brings with it feelings of superiority and its own pleasures of secret knowledge. Whatever the condition of the practitioners of *ketman*, however much they may experience a sense of injustice, nevertheless they walk in the light while others remain in darkness. There will certainly come the day when it is possible to throw off the veils of deceit. Then the truth will be revealed. 'Ketman was useful in the preparatory period, but when they felt themselves sufficiently strong, they proclaimed their heresy openly' (Milosz, 1981: 57–9). That mentality, not unusual, one might think, in the long and secretive tradition of Irish republicanism, can provide an insight into the ambivalent character of Sinn Féin politics today.

On the one hand, the absolute distinction between the inner truth of purpose and the external lie of conformity is one option for the leadership to sell the peace process to its own constituency. The followers are brought comfort, permitted to keep their dream of *what will be*, 'and even the enclosing fence affords the solace of reverie' (Milosz, 1981: 80). Sitting at Stormont, helping to administer the six counties, taking office space at

IRISH POLITICAL STUDIES

Westminster, having to distance Sinn Féin from the armed struggle, all of these things and more become palatable insofar as republicans remain assured that their leaders are practising *ketman*. This cannot be a 'sell-out', for ultimately the humiliation is the British Government's and, more importantly, the betrayal is the unionists'. In the early days of the peace process the spirit of *ketman* was revealed in the TUAS strategy. The public meaning of TUAS was relayed as Totally Un-Armed Strategy while to the faithful it was defined as Tactical Use of Armed Struggle. The cleverness of the distinction secured the privileged knowledge of the few while making fools of the many. Significantly, it also allowed the republican leadership to make the 'strategy' serve whatever purpose it thought fit. The only compromise involved, it seems, is that unionism will be compromised and that assumption alone brings enormous psychic gratification (and the reported claim of the republican leader Brian Keenan that the only decommissioning he ever envisaged was the decommissioning of the British state in Ireland served a similar purpose). Since this sort of *ketman* is consolidated by the appropriate external responses, the outrage of unionists is functional to its success. Republican cleverness is confirmed, the terminal political ignorance of one's opponents is revealed, the certainty of final victory made even clearer as Sinn Féin marches through the institutions of governance. A united Ireland, then, can be only a matter of time. There is pride in the lie and solace in the secret knowledge (see Clarke, 2002).

On the other hand, republican critics can and do argue that this strategy is too clever by half. The truth is not to be found within the hearts of the republican leadership but in the politics it practises. The consequence of *ketman* may be that republicans are included in the political process but only at the cost of excluding republicanism (McIntyre, 2001: 217). Even if Sinn Féin does maintain fidelity to the cause, that cause is contradicted by the adjustments republicanism has to make in order to sustain the peace process (like the real decommissioning which the leadership said would never happen). The politics of the pure heart is the politics of pure romanticism, of wishful thinking, ultimately of liberal, bourgeois decadence – McIntyre actually uses Simon Jenkins' expression 'middle-class and middle-aged'. Republicanism has returned to the old axiom that a united Ireland is inevitable, that the trajectory, demographic as well as historical, is towards that end. This republican historicism is the ghost that haunts the agreement. For those republicans not convinced by what they observe, the political 'law' at work here is of a different variety altogether. It is the 'law' by which revolutionaries, having made their compromises with the 'system', now become the most vigorous defenders of it (see, for example, in a different context, Rosa Luxemburg, cited in Polan, 1984: 179). And for those who tried to 'wreck

 THE ART AND EFFECT OF POLITICAL LYING

the place', and paid a price for it, that is the biggest and most painful irony of all. This is a point referred to by Eamon McCann. His conclusion, though, is very different from McIntyre's (whom he cites). 'The reason Sinn Féin supporters', he argues, 'aren't outraged by the movement's slide towards respectability is that they have sensed from an early stage that the attainment of the Republic wasn't the practical objective at all'. The objective was civil rights by other means. 'On this score', according to McCann, 'Sinn Féin rank and filers have no reason to feel betrayed' (McCann, 2002). This is being economical with the truth. McCann may accurately judge the mood of Sinn Féin rank and filers but his reasoning is hardly persuasive. Their contentment is related not to ideological consistency. Nor is it because Irish unity was never that important. The source is not the unfolding inner logic of their argument though some may see it that way. It is, rather, the effect of the peace process on unionism.

Unionism: The Consolation of Stoicism

The anti-agreement case within unionism is now well known (Farrington, 2001). Dixon's use of the term 'absolutist' to describe the moral critique of these unionists is perhaps appropriate. However, to stop at this description would be to ignore the variety of opinion with profound doubts. This opinion is not necessarily hostile to the agreement, though it has difficulty swallowing it whole (it accepted the deal, as Paul Bew once put it, 'holding its nose'). But it is sceptical. This is a rather complex and disparate constituency. The concern it manifests about the agreement could be well summarised in another of La Rochefoucauld's maxims; the reason we criticise those who act on our behalf is the anxiety that they may sacrifice our best interests 'in the interest of the negotiation itself, which they make their own concern for the honour and glory of having succeeded in what they have undertaken' (La Rochefoucauld, 1979: 74). Political reputation may become of greater significance than justice. If there is a personal component to unionist scepticism it may be found here – the conviction that Tony Blair certainly, and David Trimble possibly, cannot differentiate their own honour from the event and are thus committed to the agreement irrespective of its consequences. As the mantra has it, this is a unionism that favours the agreement but is alienated by the implementation of the agreement. This scepticism may be simplified into two broad dispositions.

The first disposition may be defined as stoical and, in moral repugnance at the way in which politics is currently conducted, it turns away from public engagement altogether (Voegelin, 1968: 6). The main concern is to remove oneself from moral contamination by it. This is the 'Protestant in the garden centre' first identified by Henry Patterson and later used to

IRISH POLITICAL STUDIES

describe a mood by Paul Bew and Eoghan Harris. This is the person who seeks, as far as possible, to live a privatised (meaning an apolitical) existence. This is not a new character. It is one who has a recognisable place in unionist history. In 1912, for example, the *Ballymoney Free Press* captured the mentality perfectly. It explained the anti-Home Rule attitude thus: 'the statement of Unionist Ulster is that it merely wants to be let alone ... unfortunately since Satan entered the Garden of Eden good people will not be let alone' (cited in Bew, 1994: 47). This may be a rather self-righteous position but one should not necessarily assume that it is 'absolutist' in the way Dixon uses that term. The sentiment is that of Montaigne, who accepts that Satan has to be confronted and that the methods needed to do so may not be entirely virtuous. However, Montaigne also accepts, like the Protestant in the garden centre, that such work requires persons of a more vigorous nature than his own. 'If vicious deeds should become excusable insofar as we have need of them, necessity effacing their true qualities, we must leave that role to be played by citizens who are more vigorous and less timorous, those prepared to sacrifice their honour and their conscience, as men of yore once sacrificed their lives for the well-being of their country' (Montaigne, 1993: 893). There is, obviously, potential here for the Democratic Unionist Party to tap this sentiment to its own advantage and the DUP leader has always been conscious of the dual benefit strategy of self-righteousness and political bloody-mindedness. However, the longer the DUP remains not only in the assembly but also in the executive the less credible that strategy becomes. On the other hand, David Trimble also appeals to the spirit of toughness in pursuit of virtue and justifies his accommodation with Sinn Féin by reference to the Craig-Collins pact (Trimble, 2001, pp.v-vii). One suspects that Trimble's problem with the 'Protestants in the garden centre' is that, like the fatalists they sometimes are, they can appreciate the deeds of men of yore but lack confidence in the men of today (Aughey, 2001: 184).

Nevertheless, one may speculate that a substantial proportion of unionist stoics suspended their *disbelief* in politics, re-engaged with the public realm and virtuously voted for the Belfast Agreement in May 1998. Here, perhaps, was the possibility of a new beginning after which ordinary people would be left alone to get on with their lives. Their subsequent (perhaps overly precious) experience of the outworking of the agreement has been disillusioning. It remains the case that 'good people will not be let alone' but, this time, the defences to protect their interests may have been breached (hence the deep anxiety over the reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary). Immorality appears to have become vested in the mode of governance and this is the source of their alienation. The consequence may not be a turn to absolutism (though this cannot be ruled out) but to the consolidation of

 THE ART AND EFFECT OF POLITICAL LYING

political apathy. For the twenty-first-century unionist stoic, the alternative to a corrupt and deceitful *polis* can take two forms. The first, implied in the garden centre, is not so much the spiritual consolation of the cosmos as the material consolation of globalised consumerism. The second is a retreat into nostalgia to protect against the disintegration of values and against a political world in which there is nothing left to respect.

Unionism: The Politics of Absurdity

The second disposition experiences politics as absurdity. It is the sort of situation one finds in Pirandello. In one of his short stories, *Signora Frola and her Son-in-law*, *Signor Ponza*, the inhabitants of the small town of Valdana are confronted with a serious problem. They have to determine which of these two characters, Signora Frola or her son-in-law, is mad. Both claim to be sane and both claim that the other is mad. When they are questioned each appears to engage in rational discourse. Yet it is beyond doubt that one of them is mad and that one of them is sane. In the process of their determination, the inhabitants lose all faith in the integrity of language and in the possibility of rational judgement. As Pirandello observes: 'to deprive people of all foundation for any kind of judgement, so that they can no longer distinguish between fantasy and reality. It's sheer agony. You live in a state of perpetual bewilderment.' Widespread within unionism is a sense that the distinctions between madness and sanity, reality and fantasy have become dangerously blurred. They respond with pained bewilderment. One columnist in the *Belfast Telegraph* has observed that those who wonder why so many people have become disenchanted with the peace process 'should consider what it is like to live in this, our parallel universe'. In this universe there appears to be no firm principle upon which policy is grounded, nothing that's white that just can't as well be black, no truth that cannot just as well be a lie. Its claim, in short, is that government policy is promoting an inversion of political and moral values (McDowell, 2002). An unsympathetic commentator might dismiss this as a predictable response of the conservative for whom change is painful and for whom innovation is tantamount to subversion. This may be partly the case but to dismiss the claim as merely the expression of conservative outrage would be misconceived.

In some ways, eighteenth-century Protestantism's detestation of casuistry is just as relevant to twenty-first-century unionism's detestation of official rhetoric. In the eighteenth century, argues Condren, two forms of moral concern generated paradoxical political intensity. On the one hand 'was the concern that granting exceptions to the rule would compromise the authority of principle'. On the other was the concern

‘that without the possibility of such exceptions, without some court of moral equity, the rules would become absurd, irrelevant and lead to moral obscenity’. Condren concludes by identifying philosophically the condition grasped journalistically by McDowell. ‘Paradoxically, at the meta-level, casuistry exhibited the rationalistic propensities to rule-mongering to which, at the level of moral conduct, it was opposed, generating distinction after distinction to minimize the contingency involved in an appeal to context, cases, consequences and conscience’ (Condren, 1997: 101–2). This is a paradox which both nationalists and unionists confront. Both condemn exceptions to the rule when they seem not to be in their interest and demand exceptions when they do. The difference in mood between the two is not that unionists are more moral than nationalists or have access to some superior truth. They simply feel that not only have too many exceptions been made that are inimical to their interests but also that the principle of the agreement is only adhered to rigidly when demanded by nationalists. The sense of absurdity attaches to the slippery transitions in government policy between the authority of principle and the necessity of exceptions. The ‘moral obscenity’ in this case is the perceived appeasement of (threatened) terrorism, a betrayal by weakness of principle as much as by calculated self-interest or a desire to appease. And even if one discounts a large degree of self-pity from this view, there is a real political issue which cannot be discounted. The distinctive unionist sense of absurdity, and the belief that there exists a state of fraud, is related to the gap between what is felt – the unnecessary evils of paramilitary irresponsibility, political manipulation and government appeasement – and what is asserted – the agreement is the best possible of all possible worlds and everything in it is a necessary good. Which is, of course, the paradox with which this article started.

Conclusion

It is one of the ironies of post-agreement politics, then, that the attribute which ‘agreement’ entails – trust in the language of politics – is the very thing that is missing. As one comparative study concludes, even the most impeccably drafted accord ‘will fail if it is not supported by a genuine political bargain’ (Noel, 2001: 224). One may formulate this into the following aphorism: there is an Agreement but little evidence of agreement (at least between unionists and republicans). In other words, there may be (though this is still uncertain) broad understandings, implicit acknowledgements and unwritten assurances amongst the leading players (elites), but these are not the stuff upon which public confidence is likely to be sustained. Indeed, they are not the stuff upon

THE ART AND EFFECT OF POLITICAL LYING

which confidence is likely to be sustained at the elite level either. On the contrary, experience obliges us to believe that this sort of politics promotes a culture of suspicion in which dialogic democracy appears inconceivable. It is easy, then, to be pessimistic about politics in Northern Ireland. As Dixon has argued, communities continue to draw on deep wells of hatred and rage. In the unionist electorate especially but not exclusively, there is a mood of disillusionment eating 'into the culture of democracy, producing cynicism and resentment' (Dixon, 2001: 306–7). What *is* perceived is not the democratic imagination of Arendt's political lie but the manipulation and deceit of organised falsehood. The point may now have arrived, as Dixon suggests, when 'the public is no longer able to make the distinction between truth and lies', a pathological state in which reasoned political communication of the sort promised in the agreement becomes impossible (Dixon, 2000: 17).

But there remains some reason to be hopeful. If democratic inclusion implies anything then it surely implies 'taking responsibility for the narrative source of our identity' and this means an 'endless task of re-interpreting ourselves *critically* – that is to say, in the interests of emancipation and openness, rather than deceit and closure' (Patrick, 2000: 44 emphasis in the original). Responsibility and openness may be difficult values to promote but they are not entirely absent in the behaviour of the parties. The operation of the Policing Board shows that it is possible even in the face of atavistic hostilities. It is correct to identify responsibility and openness as the normative measures of the new institutions. It is equally correct to identify deceit and closure as major components of the present culture of politics. The ideal of responsibility is worthy of pursuit but one should not entertain absolute confidence of success. Deceit will always be present for it remains part of the political art. It is, however, the balance between responsibility and deceit which is the large question in Northern Ireland today and it is the popular assessment of that balance, especially amongst unionists, which will determine the future of the agreement.

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