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DEMOCRACY, SOVEREIGNTY AND UNIONIST POLITICAL THOUGHT DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD IN IRELAND, c. 1912–22*

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines ideas about democratic legitimacy and sovereignty within Ulster unionist political thought during the revolutionary period in Ireland (c. 1912–22). Confronted by Irish nationalists who claimed that Home Rule (and later, independence) enjoyed the support of the majority of people in Ireland, Ulster unionists deployed their own democratic idioms to rebuff such arguments. In asserting unionism's majority status, first, across the United Kingdom and, second, within the province of Ulster, unionists mined the language of democracy to legitimise their militant stand against Home Rule. The paper also probes the unionist conception of sovereignty by examining the establishment of the Provisional Government of Ulster in 1913, which was styled as a 'trustee' for the British constitution in Ireland after the event of Home Rule. The imperial, economic and religious arguments articulated by unionists against Home Rule are well known, but the space given to constitutional rights and democratic legitimacy in the political language of unionism remain obscure. While the antagonisms at the heart of the revolutionary period in Ireland assumed the form of identity politics and sectarianism, the deployment of normative democratic

language by unionists reveals that clashing ideals of representative government underpinned the conflict.

In 2002, the late Peter Hart made a clarion call for the revolutionary period in Ireland (c. 1912–22), then the subject of a historiography dominated by the drama of the high political narrative, 'to be reconceptualised and to have all the myriad assumptions underlying its standard narratives interrogated'.[1] Historians have responded in kind, with an upsurge in innovative works that have charted the revolutionary process from a number of angles.[2] However, the history of political thought during this turbulent decade, which opened with the Ulster crisis in 1912 and led to the partition of the island and the winning of independence for three-quarters of Ireland, remains obscure. This is partly explicable, as Ian McBride has observed, by the absence of a tradition of intellectual history in Irish historical writing, a trait particularly marked in the historiography of modern Ireland. Historians of Ireland have largely displayed little interest in the rise of the 'Cambridge School' during the 1960s and 1970s, which, with different emphasises depending on the individual scholar, advocated a contextual approach to understanding political discourse.[3] In 1993, the editors of a volume on

* I am very grateful to Ultán Gillen, Matt Kelly, James McConnel, Caoimhe Nic Dháidhéid, Graham Walker, and the two anonymous readers for their insightful reading of earlier drafts of this work.

[1] Peter Hart, 'Definition: defining the Irish revolution', in Joost Augusteijn (ed.), The Irish Revolution, 1913–1923 (Basingstoke, 2002), 30.

[2] See, for example, recent works by R. F. Foster, Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890–1923 (2014); Fearghal McGarry, The Rising: Ireland, Easter 1916 (Oxford, 2010); Senia Pašeta, Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918 (Cambridge, 2013); James McConnel, The Irish Parliamentary Party and the Third Home Rule Crisis (Dublin, 2013); Charles Townshend, The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence, 1918–1923 (2013).

[3] Ian McBride, 'The edge of Enlightenment: Ireland and Scotland in the eighteenth century', Modern Intellectual History, vol. 10, no. 1 (2013), 135.

Irish political thought lamented that the history of ideas in Ireland 'is largely unwritten'.[4] This essentially remains the case. While more recent work has demonstrated an increasingly sophisticated and sensitive interpretation of political ideas within Irish life during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,[5] the chief emphases of the Cambridge School – understanding the range of political languages used in a society in the past, the spatial and temporal shifts in ideas, the role of ideas in legitimating action – remain at the fringes of Irish historiography. While scholarship identified as 'revisionist' has transformed the writing of Irish history by unshackling the past from nationalist and unionist pieties, we risk losing sight of the meanings of the polemics of the past. The point is not merely to bring historical fallacies to light; it is to understand why such beliefs permeated politics and culture, what meanings they carried and how contemporaries engaged with such activities. Languages evolved to articulate what was deemed legitimate in the realm of politics, and should be, thus, an important aspect of the work of political historians of Ireland.[6] Merely debunking the beliefs of historical actors will not result in understanding.

This article examines aspects of unionist political thought during the revolutionary period, when 'Ulster' firmly replaced 'Irish' before the 'unionist' designation.[7] Ulster unionist political activism within the broader history of Ireland – from the apocryphal stories of Fred Crawford signing the Ulster Covenant of 1912 in his own blood, to Ian Paisley

[4] D. George Boyce, Robert Eccleshall and Vincent Geoghegan, 'Introduction', in same (eds.), Political Thought in Ireland Since the Seventeenth Century (1993), 1.
[5] See, for example, M. J. Kelly, The Fenian Ideal and Irish Nationalism, 1882–1916 (Woodbridge, 2006); David Dwan, The Great Community: Culture and Nationalism in Ireland (Dublin, 2008); John Bew, The Glory of Being Britons: Civic Unionism in Nineteenth-Century Belfast (Dublin, 2009).
[6] Some of the best and most original work within Irish political history over the past decade is distinguished by an engagement with political languages and ideas: see the books mentioned in note 5 and, especially, Richard Bourke, Peace in Ireland: The War of Ideas (2003).
[7] Jennifer Todd has provided an overview of unionist political thought after partition: 'Unionist Political Thought, 1920–72', in Boyce, Eccleshall and Geoghegan (eds.), Political Thought in Ireland, 190–211.

denouncing the Pope as the anti-Christ in the European Parliament in 1988 – can appear as the triumph of hysteria over reason. Ulster unionists have been all too easy to caricature as 'irrational, backward and deviant'.[8] Yet this image has been challenged by scholars such as Paul Bew, Alvin Jackson and Graham Walker, who have probed the complexities of unionism from the nineteenth century to the present day, setting out the rationale of unionist politics.[9] The fine line between 'respectability and radical militancy' that Ulster unionists and their supporters balanced during the revolutionary period has been well illuminated.[10] Despite such advances in uncovering the militant and constitutional strategies embarked on by Ulster unionism, there remains, however, little work on unionist political ideas, particularly concerning democracy and sovereignty. Given the radicalising impact of the struggle against the third Home Rule bill within unionism, the role of ideas, both in legitimising action and articulating alternatives, deserves more attention than it has hitherto received. Words are needed to justify action, particularly if that deed crosses the boundaries of normative constitutionalism. This is where Ulster unionists found themselves from 1912. Their militant stand against Home Rule, which led to the formation of an underground government and private army, demanded a political language to legitimise such a course. Tellingly, it was a democratic idiom that was developed to communicate the unionist case.

[8] Ian McBride, 'Ulster and the British Problem', in Graham Walker (ed.), Unionism in Modern Ireland: New Perspectives on Politics and Culture (Basingstoke, 1996), 1

[9] Paul Bew, Ideology and the Irish Question: Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism, 1912–1916 (Oxford, 1994); Alvin Jackson, The Two Unions: Ireland, Scotland and the Survival of the United Kingdom, 1707–2007 (Oxford, 2012); Graham Walker, A History of the Ulster Unionist Party: Protest, Pragmatism and Pessimism (Manchester, 2004).

[10] Graham Walker, 'The Ulster Covenant and the Pulse of Protestant Ulster', National Identities, vol. 18, no. 3 (2015), 314. As well as ibid., see, for example, Timothy Bowman, *Carson's Army: The Ulster Volunteer Force,* 1910–22 (Manchester, 2007); Alvin Jackson, Sir Edward Carson (Dundalk, 1993).

One of the most obvious features of unionist politics during the revolutionary period was the shift from an all-island political organisation and perspective to an Ulster-centric body. The partitioning of unionism, as a precursor to the partitioning of Ireland in 1921, has been charted by various scholars.[11] What remains obscure, however, is the language that Ulster unionists deployed in making this transition. This is a serious omission in our understanding of unionism, as the transformation of unionist politics into a northern-focused fusion of constitutional and violent impulses was accompanied by the development of ideas relating to democratic rights and sovereign responsibility. This was not merely polemical rhetoric, but an attempt to reformulate the unionist position to suit the wider Edwardian political zeitgeist. From the late-Victorian period, the wielding of power and the boundaries of legitimate action in the United Kingdom were increasingly tied to notions of democracy, both in terms of parliamentary politics and wider political culture.[12] As the result of what John Stuart Mill called 'controlled' expansions of the franchise during the nineteenth century, democratic sentiment during the Edwardian age largely shed the fears of the mid- and late-Victorian generations.[13] Political discourse on the eve of the First World War, for example, shared little in common with the anti-democratic mood of Victorian intellectuals such as Sir Henry Sumner Maine, James Fitzjames Stephen and W. E. H. Lecky.[14] In 1896, Lecky, the most notable Irish unionist intellectual of the nineteenth century, condemned the notion of

[11] The classic work are Patrick Buckland, Irish Unionism II: Ulster Unionism and the Origins of Northern Ireland, 1886–1922 (Dublin, 1973) and Peter Gibbon, The Origins of Ulster Unionism: The Formation of Popular Protestant Politics and Ideology in Nineteenth-Century Ireland (Manchester, 1975), but see the important revisions by Alvin Jackson in The Ulster Party: Irish Unionists in the House of Commons, 1884–1911 (Oxford, 1989) and Ireland, 1798–1998: Politics and War (Oxford, 1999).

[12] A fascinating approach to the (uneasy) Victorian transition to parliamentary democracy in Britain is found in Marc Baer, The Rise and Fall of Radical Westminster, 1780–1890 (Basingstoke, 2012).

[13] Marc Mulholland, Bourgeois Liberty and the Politics of Fear: From Absolutism to Neo-Conservatism (Oxford, 2012), 84.

[14] Rodney Barker, Political Ideas in Modern Britain: In and After the Twentieth Century, second edn. (1997; first published 1978), 116.

democratic equality as destructive to 'the balance of opinions, interests, and classes, on which constitutional liberty mainly depends'.[15] The most perfect constitution was, for Lecky, found in Britain between the reform bills of 1832 and 1867, which he believed successfully represented the competing 'interests and opinions of a great nation' while formally excluding the great majority of people from the franchise.[16] Despite Lecky's elevated status within Irish unionism, very few unionists of the Edwardian generation followed his lead in assaulting the principle of democratic representation. Indeed, the opposite occurred: unionists in Ulster embraced a particular democratic idiom to legitimise their stance against Home Rule. The unionist case against Home Rule in 1912 largely remained the same as it had done in 1886 and 1893; the difference was that opposition to Irish self-government was articulated in terms of normative democratic rights during the Edwardian period.

While the revolutionary period was profoundly shaped by national and religious antagonisms, it was also a democratic tangle between competing interpretations of 'the will of the people'. Democratic discourse became intertwined with the unsettled national question: the enmity was heightened because there was considerable variation in what 'democracy' actually meant to contemporaries. In this sense, 'democracy' was a fluid concept, and this contributed to the intractability of the Irish problem. This was not a problem that was 'solved' by partition. Richard Bourke has made the distinction between the 'absence of a democratic state in Northern Ireland' after partition and the 'existence of a democratic government' based in Belfast. While Northern Ireland had the trappings of a democratic regime (elections, universal suffrage at the devolved level, press freedoms), the Catholic minority were

[15] W. E. H. Lecky, Democracy and Liberty, 2 vols (1896), I, 212.
[16] Ibid., 18.

permanently excluded from influencing the direction of sovereign power. Democracy, as it existed in Northern Ireland, Bourke notes, 'produced dissension, not cohesion, among its people'.[17] That said, unionists eagerly embraced the language of democracy to legitimise the maintenance of one-party rule after 1921. While republicans critiqued the 'fascist nature of unionist rule',[18] the dominance of the Ulster Unionist Party was rationalised by its advocates as an expression of majority (and thus democratic) opinion in Northern Ireland in favour of the union with Britain.[19] The origin of this unionist interpretation of democracy, which was firmly rooted in majoritarianism, is, however, found in the decade just before partition. Bourke's case for the centrality of democratic ideas within unionist political thought after partition can be extended back into the revolutionary period. During the Home Rule crisis of 1912–14, unionists appropriated the language of democracy, stressing their majority status within, first, the United Kingdom, and second, within the province of Ulster, to counter the similar majoritarian arguments made by Home Rulers. What is striking, then, about political discourse in Ireland before, during and after the First World War is the widespread articulation of democratic arguments across the Irish political spectrum. The emergence of democracy as a legitimising idea, however, added to the rancour of the period, as majoritarianism – majority rule, with different conceptions of the design of the majority – underpinned the competing sovereign claims of unionism and nationalism.

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[17] Bourke, Peace in Ireland, 4.
[18] Gerry Adams, Before the Dawn: An Autobiography (Dingle, 2001; first published 1996), 91.
[19] See, for example, Terence O'Neill, Ulster at the Crossroads (1969), 11.

J. W. Good was the literary editor of the pro-Home Rule newspaper, the *Freeman's Journal*, during its final years in the early 1920s. During that time, he penned two penetrating books on the nature of the 'Ulster question' within Irish politics, Ulster and Ireland (1919) and Irish Unionism (1920). Good was implacably opposed to the Ulster separatism that emanated from the unionist leadership under Sir Edward Carson and Sir James Craig after 1912, but realised that, in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, circumstances had changed utterly. While he condemned the unionist campaign against Home Rule as an attempt to create a new Protestant Ascendency in Ireland, blocking the political will of the Catholic majority, Good wearily realised that unionism's appropriation of the language of separate political rights chimed with newly established international thinking. In August 1918, Carson issued a public letter to Woodrow Wilson, the President of the United States of America, depicting Ulster unionists as 'devoted adherents to the cause of democratic freedom'. The Irish problem, Carson informed Wilson, sprang from the Home Rulers' insistence on '"self-determination" for themselves, combined with coercive domination over us'.[20] Carson took to describing the Ulster unionist position in 1919 as marching 'hand in hand with the democracy of the Empire', the outgrowth of popular loyalism that spanned the imperial world.[21] But as will become clear, the political language of Ulster unionism at the onset of the Irish revolutionary period anticipated the democratic wave of the Wilsonian post-war milieu, which emphasised the rights of small nations seeking self-determination. This may have been accidental, as the original case against Home Rule was made to destroy the scheme for Irish self-government,

[20] Belfast News-Letter, 23 August 1918.
[21] Belfast News-Letter, 16 January 1919.

not to politically split the island.[22] The unionist cause drew from many wells, imperial, national, economic, and sectarian, but when articulated through democratic language, resistance to the island-wide jurisdiction of a Dublin parliament stumbled into self-determination. While it appeared logical for Éamon de Valera, the president of Sinn Féin, to cite Wilson's mantra that 'every people has a right to choose the sovereignty under which they shall live' in constructing the case for Irish independence, unionists were also able to tap into contemporaneous developments in political language. [23]

In reviewing the Irish situation in 1920, Good was all too aware of this. Reflecting on the 'emergence of the idea of self-determination', he wryly commented that it 'actually strengthened [the unionists'] case'. With the protection of democratic rights entrenched in the post-war environment and two political blocs in Ireland calling for 'self-determination', Good grimly concluded that 'partition was inevitable'.[24] In this reading, the political conflict in Ireland transcended its ethnic, national and religious dimensions and became a democratic problem consisting of two competing, and mutually exclusive, rights. Good highlighted a distinct irony in this: he believed that the protracted unionist campaign against Home Rule was profoundly anti-democratic. In his previous book from 1919, Good's coverage of the remarkable events of 'Ulster Day' in September 1912, in which the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant was unveiled as a mass petition against Home Rule, was contained in a chapter entitled 'A Covenant against Democracy'. In opposing Home Rule, Good asserted that 'Sir Edward Carson linked opposition to Irish self-government with the general campaign against

[22] David W. Miller, *Queen's Rebels: Ulster Loyalism in* Historical Perspective (Dublin, 1978), 105.
[23] Éamon de Valera, *Ireland's Request to the Government of the United States of America for Recognition as a* Sovereign Independent State (Washington, DC, 1920), 5. Wilson's argument from 1916 can be found in Charles J. Herold (ed.), The Wisdom of Woodrow Wilson: Being Selections from his Thoughts and Comments on Political, Social and Moral Questions (New York, NY, 1919), 88.
[24] J. W. Good, Irish Unionism (Dublin, 1920), 232–3.

democracy'. Carson collaborated, according to Good, with British Conservative politicians to 'cripple democracy' and re-affirm oligarchic ruling principles in the wake of New Liberalism's socially progressive welfare reforms.[25]

For Good, Ulster unionism stood guilty of doublethink. Unionists were 'against democracy' in their opposition to Home Rule; their embrace of 'self-determination' was thus 'the crowning triumph of political hypocrisy'.[26] Indeed, he reasoned that the 'successes' of the unionist campaign under the leadership of Carson (most notably the traction it gained from the British Conservative Party) undermined the ethical rules of politics, draining the 'virtue ... out of constitutionalism'.[27] Accusations that Carson's conception of democracy represented a form of 'Hibernian Caesarism' were made by other opponents.[28] As nationalists refused to consider Ulster as a separate political entity from the rest of Ireland, the appeal made by unionists carried little purchase in the south of the country; instead, the widespread belief was that Carson headed a subversive movement against the true democratic Irish sentiment in favour of Home Rule. The leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, John Redmond, had set the tone in February 1912 by condemning the 'arrogant and intolerable claim on behalf of a small minority… to override the will of Ireland'.[29] Similar language was adopted by the Liberal Prime Minister, H. H. Asquith, during the second reading of the Home Rule bill in 1913: 'we cannot admit, and we will not admit, the right of a minority of the people…to veto the verdict of the vast body of their countrymen'.[30] Home Rule was backed by numbers in Ireland, and this, according to a Redmondite-Asquithian reading, constituted a

[25] J. W. Good, Ulster and Ireland (Dublin, 1919), 200–201.
[26] Good, Irish Unionism, 235.
[27] Ibid., 233.
[28] George Peel, The Reign of Sir Edward Carson (1914), 51.
[29] Quoted in Dermot Meleady, John Redmond: The National Leader (Dublin, 2014), 208.
[30] Quoted in Alan O'Day, Irish Home Rule, 1867–1921 (Manchester, 1998), 248.

democratic will, rendering unionism's resistance politically illegitimate. The logic of this interpretation of democracy – the equation of a majority with political supremacy – was not lost on unionists in the north of Ireland. Ulster unionists sculpted a democratic self-image and, in turn, deployed the language of democracy to challenge the nationalist monopoly over legitimate political rights. Crucially, this process began before the postwar democratic new world order was born.

II

In unionist folk memory, the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant holds a cherished place as a political creation myth.[31] The Covenant was publicly unveiled on 'Ulster Day', 28 September 1912. Thousands of people turned out in Belfast to witness the leader of unionism, Sir Edward Carson, sign the document in a ceremony replete with symbolic meaning. More than 218,000 men across Ulster followed Carson's lead in adding their signatures on the document, with almost 229,000 women committing to a separate declaration of support. The text of the Covenant, with its implicit threat of violence to resist the implementation of Home Rule, encapsulated the defiant 'radical populism' that sustained unionism during what became known as the Ulster crisis.[32] The popular activism that surrounded the signing of the Covenant made it akin to a unionist 'People's Charter', the

[31] Alvin Jackson, 'Unionist myths, 1912–1985', Past & Present, 136 (1992), 164.
[32] Walker, History of the Ulster Unionist Party, 35.

founding document of the nineteenth-century Chartist movement.[33] Like the People's Charter, the Covenant was unveiled amidst much political theatre, and became the source of a widespread mass petition. Through the ritual of signing the document, the unionist population became tied to one another; the Covenant, and the subsequent mobilisation of unionism, gave the ordinary man and woman in the north of Ireland a taste of direct political participation.

The comparison with Chartism can be pushed further, especially regarding the nature of rights, duties and obligations. William Lovett, the intellectual architect of Chartism, pressed the point in 1840 that no amount of legislative coercion on the part of government would stymie those 'determined to obtain their just share of political right at any sacrifice'.[34] Justifications for unionist resistance in 1912 mirrored this sentiment; rather than seeking full political rights, however, unionism made the case that the implementation of Home Rule would corrupt existing constitutional rights, which were taken to be natural. Unionists believed that Home Rule would lead to the eventual separation of Ireland from the United Kingdom, and was, thus, according to the Covenant, 'destructive of our citizenship'.[35] This was a powerful component of the unionist case against Home Rule. Thomas Sinclair, who contributed to the wording of the Covenant, warned that the founding of a Dublin parliament implied the removal of enshrined rights and liberties from the imperial parliament. 'Ulstermen', Sinclair feared, 'would thus stand on a dangerously lower plane of civil privilege than their fellow-citizens in Great Britain'.[36] What is particularly striking about this

[33] Malcolm Chase, Chartism: A New History (Manchester, 2007), 7–10. Also see Liam Kennedy, Unhappy the Land: The Most Oppressed People Ever, the Irish? (Dublin, 2016), 132.
[34] William Lovett, Chartism: A New Organization of the People (London, 1840), 2. Emphasis in original.
[35] 'Ulster Solemn League and Covenant' (1912). The document has been digitised by the National Library of Ireland: http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000509452 [last accessed 28 October 2016].
[36] Thomas Sinclair, 'The Position of Ulster', in S. Rosenbaum (ed.), Against Home Rule: The Case for the Union (1912), 174.

argument was how, like the Chartist campaign for inclusion into the political nation, it was constructed with an emphasis on democratic sensibilities. The Covenant was deliberately styled to project the force of numbers behind it, providing unionism with an overtly popular backing. Sinclair made a virtue of the fusion between numbers and capitalist energy in his reading of democracy in the north of Ireland: the unionist population in the northern counties formed 'an unmistakable majority' in Ulster, who formed the backbone of the material prosperity of the province.[37] While a minority within Ireland, unionists stressed their majority status within the north of the country. That the unionist case against Home Rule was buttressed by a democratic aesthetic and logic, albeit from a radically revised interpretation of the national territory, highlights the pervasiveness of democracy as a key legitimising idea at this time. Appeals to the integrity of the United Kingdom and Empire were not enough; the idea of maintaining (or, from a nationalist perspective, creating) representative government, underpinned by democratic sanction, was a vital dynamic in the Home Rule dispute.

The Covenant also emphasised the need for self-reliance within Ulster unionism – 'to stand by one another in defending, for ourselves and our children, our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom' – to overcome the unfolding constitutional crisis.[38] Historically, Ulster Protestants have styled themselves as the first line of defence of the British interest against a perceived threat from the Catholic majority in Ireland. David Miller has profiled this mentality within Ulster Protestantism, which originated with the arrival of English and Scottish 'planters' in the north of Ireland in the early seventeenth century. During the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, the planters' security was undermined by an

[37] Ibid., 170.
[38] 'Ulster Solemn League and Covenant' (1912).

unsettling fluctuation in the power of the state in Ireland; the Ulster rebellion of 1641, staged by Catholics against the usurpers on their land in the Province, reinforced the idea within Protestants in the north that 'public order derived in reality not from the sovereign authority… but from their own exertions on the ground'.[39] This led to the importing into Ulster of the Scottish covenanting tradition and, more potently, a tradition of 'public banding',[40] most tellingly in the formation of armed militia groups (such as the Volunteers in 1778), ready to maintain order in the face of an Irish Catholic and/or Jacobite threat. This pattern re-established itself during the Home Rule crisis. Carson declared in 1912 that '[t]he first law of nature with nations and governments, as with individuals, is self-preservation'.[41] A perception that the state had abandoned the union by siding with Irish nationalism lead to unionists mobilising in the name of 'self-preservation', most notably with the foundation of a mass militia in the form of Ulster Volunteer Force. Unionism rationalised that war against a corrupt (and, from a unionist perspective, temporary) British government was preferable to nationalists exercising a measure of political power over Ulster.

The Covenant highlighted four main reasons why opposition to Home Rule was an imperative from a unionist standpoint: material well-being, civil and religious freedom, protection of citizenship, and maintenance of the Empire. To preserve the 'equal citizenship' enjoyed by unionists within the United Kingdom, the Covenant made an implicit threat of violence, suggesting that 'all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland' should be deployed.[42] The beliefs

[39] Miller, *Queen's Rebels*, 16.
[40] Jacqueline Hill, 'Loyalty and the Monarchy in Ireland, c.1660–1840', in Allan Blackstock and Frank O'Gorman (eds), Loyalism and the Formation of the British World, 1775–1914 (Woodbridge, 2014), 89.
[41] Edward Carson, 'Introduction', in Rosenbaum (ed.), Against Home Rule, 18.
[42] 'Ulster Solemn League and Covenant' (1912).

uttered here were that the Liberal government, propped up by the votes of the Irish Party, behaved unconstitutionally in introducing Home Rule; that self-government for Ireland would create a repressive parliament in Dublin which would serve the interests of the Catholic Church; and that devolution would pull a thread from the union, starting a process inevitably leading to the unravelling of the United Kingdom and Empire. Such a disastrous chain of events lay at the heart of A. V. Dicey's influential politico-legal contributions to the anti-Home Rule cause since the 1880s, which gave unionism potent intellectual leverage within the realm of constitutional thought.[43] This line of argument had considerable purchase: champions of imperial union, such as Leo Amery, opposed Irish nationalist aspirations, fearing that 'Separatist Home Rule' would act as a constitutional wrecking ball to a wider scheme of inclusive federation across the Empire.[44]

The Covenant thus represented a genuine set of fears – national, religious, economic, and imperial – in a context of immense constitutional uncertainty. Indeed, debates about Home Rule were complicated because it was framed as both a domestic and imperial question. Both unionists and Home Rulers conceded that Irish self-government would alter the constitutional fabric of Ireland, the United Kingdom and the Empire, albeit with very different perceptions of the end result. But self-government in Ireland was also a democratic question. The Covenant's cry of protecting Ulster's 'equal citizenship in the United Kingdom' carried a hint of the precarious position that unionists, as a minority in Ireland, identified as a chief threat posed by Home Rule. The United Kingdom was a Protestant

[43] A.V. Dicey, *A Fool's Paradise: Being a Constitutionalist's Criticism of the Home Rule Bill of 1912* (1913). Dicey made his name in unionist circles for his brilliant attack on the Home Rule Bill of 1886 in *England's* Case Against Home Rule (1886).
[44] L. S. Amery, The Case Against Home Rule (1912), 12.

kingdom; the monarch was head of the Anglican Church, and the dissenting denominations enjoyed every religious freedom. The perceived 'Popish' impulses of the Catholic majority in Ireland were, from a unionist perspective, tempered by Irish absorption into the United Kingdom, which was the sole legal polity that spanned the two islands. Home Rule threatened this arrangement by creating a second jurisdiction in Ireland, which Ulster unionists would be forced, by virtue of living on the smaller island, to recognise. Ireland under Home Rule was envisaged as a dystopia by unionists; while nationalists would formally wield power, the fear was widespread amongst Ulster Protestants that the true political master in a Dublin parliament would be the authoritarian Catholic Church.[45] Unionism rejected nationalist claims to the contrary and, indeed, deployed the language of democracy to dispel the legitimacy of Home Rule. As the existing polity was the United Kingdom, unionists reasoned that the democratic mandate for major constitutional change should emanate from the two islands as a single bloc. That, from unionist perspective, was lacking. The Home Rule bill was introduced by a government that had failed to secure outright victory in two general elections in 1910, and found itself holding office only because it enjoyed the parliamentary support of John Redmond's Irish Party. Home Rule was not part of the Liberal manifesto at these elections. The unionist grievance intensified when it became clear that – as with Gladstone's handling of the Home Rule bills of 1886 and 1892 – the Liberal government refused to recognise Ulster's arguments for special treatment.[46] 'Every argument used by Home Rulers for giving self-government to one Irish Nation', affirmed F. E. Smith, a leading English Conservative advocate of Ulster unionism, 'can be used with equal validity to prove that the inhabitants of north-eastern Ulster should be allowed to retain

[45] Ian Cawood, The Liberal Unionist Party: A History (2012), 56.
[46] Eugenio Biagini, British Democracy and Irish Nationalism, 1876–1906 (Cambridge, 2007), 259–60.

the form of government that best suits them'.[47] This was an articulation of a double majority argument: if an appeal to the majority across the United Kingdom fell on deaf ears, then the argument should shift to another majority. In this case, it was the unionist majority in Ulster.

In many ways, Smith hit at the crux of the matter. The Ulster crisis (and, indeed, the fiercely contested Treaty settlement during 1922–3) was underpinned by drastically different interpretations of the 'will of the people', with the conflict being over which people should decide the constitutional future of Ireland.[48] A majoritarian mind-set was common across the political spectrum in Ireland, which saw the winning of power purely in terms of the weight of numbers, with scant regard for minority opinion. Home Rulers frequently pointed to the overwhelming electoral successes that the Irish Party had enjoyed since 1874 as an argument for self-government.[49] Republicans insisted they represented a suppressed sentiment of the Irish 'people' for political independence from the British.[50] Rather than rejecting the democratic arguments of their enemies, unionists in Ulster turned them on their head by appropriating a similar majoritarian language, albeit within a revised image of the national territory. At first, in responding to the Home Rule threat, unionist argument stressed the opposition to Irish self-government that emanated from the entire United Kingdom, as expressed through the ballot box.[51] But the ineffectiveness of this message ensured that the

[47] F. E. Smith, Unionist Policy and Other Essays (1913), 105.
[48] For this angle during the Treaty controversy and resulting Civil War, see Tom Garvin, 1922: The Birth of Irish Democracy (Dublin, 1996); John M. Regan, The Irish Counter-Revolution, 1921–1936 (Dublin, 2000); Jason Knirck, *Imagining Ireland's* Independence: The Debates over the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 (Plymouth, 2006); Bill Kissane, The Politics of the Irish Civil War (Cambridge, 2005); Gavin Foster, 'Res Publica na hÉireann?: Republican Liberty and the Irish Civil War', New Hibernia Review, 16 (2012), 20–42.
[49] Alvin Jackson, Home Rule: An Irish History, 1800–2000 (2003), 61.
[50] See the illuminating series of essays in Iseult Honohan, (ed.), Republicanism in Ireland: Confronting Theories and Traditions (Manchester, 2008), which constitute a rare scholarly engagement with Irish republican ideas.
[51] See, for example, the speech of C. C. Craig in Belfast News-Letter, 27 February 1913. For unionism within Great Britain, see Daniel M. Jackson, Popular Opposition to Irish Home Rule in Edwardian Britain (Liverpool, 2009).

special circumstances of Ulster unionists, as a majority in the northern province of Ireland, soon came to dominate unionism's message.

This is clear from a reading of the most detailed account of the Ulster unionist position, which was given retrospectively by Ronald McNeill, a member of the Standing Committee of the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC). In 1922, he published *Ulster's Stand for* Union, which deployed a number of idioms – constitutional, national, historical, religious, and, above, all, democratic – to justify unionism's implicit and explicit threats of violence during the previous decade. In a key passage on competing national rights in Ireland, McNeill quoted from Sir Henry Sumner Maine's influential book from 1885, Popular Government: 'democracies are quite paralysed by the plea of Nationality. There is no more effective way of the majority to govern, but denying that the majority so entitled is the particular majority which claims the right'.[52] McNeill depicted the Irish question of 1912–14 as a microcosm of this national democratic problem. 'The will of the majority must prevail, certainly', he wrote. 'But what majority?'[53] When it became clear that the implementation of Home Rule would rest not on the will of the majority in the United Kingdom, as McNeill favoured, but within Ireland, unionists, using the same democratic arguments as nationalists, then stressed their own majority in Ulster as a buffer against self-government. The use of 'Ulster' as a political concept – something that McNeill emphasised in the opening line of his book – meant that the province (or, at least, most of it) could be reimagined as a solidly Protestant territory. This enabled unionists to employ a double majority argument, bringing together a powerful anti-Home Rule sentiment both in the northern counties of Ireland and the entire United

[52] Henry Sumner Maine, Popular Government: Four Essays, second edn. (1886; first published 1885), 28; Ronald McNeill, *Ulster's Stand For Union* (1922), 14–15.
[53] McNeill, *Ulster's Stand For Un*ion, 15.

Kingdom.[54] While Maine attacked both nationalism and democracy, McNeill's problem was solely with nationalism as a corrupter of democracy. McNeill wholeheartedly agreed with Maine's depiction of nationalists being the 'modern Irreconcilables' of political life, but he did not identify the Irish problem, as Maine might have, as one of 'popular government' itself.[55] Even the bitterest opponents of Home Rule maintained the importance of democratic legitimacy – in other words, asserting the backing of a majority – highlighting the intellectual distance travelled by Edwardian unionism from Maine's late-Victorian sensibilities.

Unionist discourse transformed Protestants from a minority in Ireland into a majority in Ulster and the United Kingdom to project power and resist change. To build an effective case against Home Rule, unionists challenged the nationalist monopoly of democratically-expressed Irish 'will'. Redmond was frequently denounced in the unionist press as the 'dollar dictator' during the Home Rule crisis, 'the Irish autocrat with swollen moneybags from New York' after successful fundraising trips in the United States.[56] The language chosen was deliberate: in pursuing the goal of Home Rule, Redmond, funded by American Fenianism, was subverting democracy. But the depiction of their nationalist enemies as undemocratic should not obscure the lengths to which unionism went to construct its own sense of democratic legitimacy. In 1911, a year before the introduction of the third Home Rule bill in parliament, the Unionist Associations of Ireland published a short guide book for speakers on British platforms. Containing 'Unionist answers regarding Home Rule', the Irish Unionist Pocket Book explicitly rebuffed twenty-nine claims made by nationalists in favour of self-government, with the very first one being the 'majority argument': '"The majority in

[54] Ibid., vi. McNeill explicitly deploys the double majority argument in 15.
[55] Maine, Popular Government, 27.
[56] Stephen Gwynn, *John Redmond's Last Years* (1919), 48–9.

Ireland", it is said, "want Home Rule, and being the majority why should they not get it?"' Speakers were advised to demolish this assertion by pointing to the majority across the United Kingdom against Irish self-government. But, crucially, the demography of Ulster, where 'there is a large majority against Home Rule', was flagged as a significant additional counter-argument.[57] Representing a majority, in other words, was essential in asserting a sense of political legitimacy. During the second reading of the Home Rule bill, T. P. O'Connor, the Irish Party MP for Liverpool, condemned the actions of 'the minority of the Irish people' who stood opposed to 'the primordial rights of the majority of Irishmen'.[58] Unionists responded in kind by transforming themselves from a minority to a majority, a shift of status which ensured they too should enjoy 'primordial rights'.

Ulster unionism was thus sensitive to the need to claim democratic legitimacy in the campaign against Home Rule; constitutional, economic or more overtly sectarian arguments were not enough. This is not to underestimate the importance of these impulses – they were vital in moulding the unionist mindset[59] – but to assert the significance of unionism's appropriation of democratic values in making the case for excluding the north of Ireland from the jurisdiction of a Dublin parliament. The language of democracy was an essential part of unionism's toolkit during the revolutionary period; the democratic norms championed by unionists were loaded with more established assumptions about the perils of Irish self-government, which drew on nineteenth-century precedent.[60] The crisis over the third Home Rule bill differed from earlier episodes in the widespread deployment of democratic

[57] The Irish Unionist Pocket Book: Containing Radical Questions and Unionist Answers Regarding Home Rule (Dublin and Belfast, 1911), 7–8.
[58] Hansard, 9 June 1913, vol. 53, c. 1309
[59] Bew, Ideology and the Irish Question, 27–53.
[60] Walker, History of the Ulster Unionist Party, 30.

rationalisations by the major protagonists. The anti-Home Rule case articulated by unionists from 1912 was made with normative justification, which provided (they believed) legitimation for potentially militant action. The Ulster crisis was, then, as much a conflict over numbers and majorities as an ethnic, national or religious dispute.

While asserting unionism's own majority status across the United Kingdom and within Ulster was a priority in constructing a democratic case against Home Rule, how did unionists conceptualise the term 'democracy'? There was an explicitly conservative slant on 'democracy' within unionist discourse, which mirrored the tendency by British Tories to accentuate the perceived anti-radical instincts of the 'people'.[61] 'Democracy' was thus imagined within late nineteenth- and twentieth- century conservative political thought as a potentially unifying force, the method by which to 'improve' the working class and counter the fracturing class conflict impulse of socialism. Similarly, Ulster unionists loaded the term 'democracy' with such a meaning, emphasising the cross-class appeal of their message. When the unionist candidate for West Belfast, Stewart Blacker Quin, declared in 1913 that 'there never was a greater democratic movement than the Ulster Unionist movement', he was referring to its cross-class appeal; cheers also greeted his promise to sponsor measures that led to the 'uplifting of the working classes'.[62] Indeed, the broadening of the class basis, and the geographical narrowing, of Edwardian unionism – from a gentry-dominated all-Ireland movement to a largely middle- and working-class northern-centred body – made Ulster's democratic credentials conceptually clearer than hitherto realised. The Ulster Unionist Labour Association, the overtly working-class wing of unionism, which was founded in

[61] Robert Saunders, 'Democracy', in David Craig and James Thompson (eds), Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain (Basingstoke, 2013), 162–3.
[62] Belfast News-Letter, 15 March 1913.

1918, claimed to represent 'the feelings of the democracy of Ulster'.[63] Carson spoke in paternalistic terms about the Protestant working classes of Belfast as 'the only true democracy in Ireland', the proletarian bulwark against the revolutionary nationalism and socialism.[64] Indeed, Ulster unionism might be seen as a particularly regionalised form of nineteenth-century 'Tory democracy' – the means by which conservative principles such as patriotism, imperialism and veneration of property gained purchase from the 'respectable' working class – the political principle personified by Benjamin Disraeli, Randolph Churchill and, from an Irish unionist perspective, Standish O'Grady.[65]

III

The most notable expression of Ulster unionism's embrace of democratic legitimacy was the declaration of a Provisional Government of Ulster in 1913. This body became a reality the following year, but was eclipsed by the outbreak of war in Europe in August 1914. There is only one surviving copy of the 'Ulster Provisional Government Proclamation', which is held in the Ulster Museum in Belfast. It was signed by six leading unionists, including Edward Carson, Lord Londonderry and Thomas Sinclair. Declaring that Ulstermen were 'Born into Possession of Full Rights and Privileges under ONE KING and ONE IMPERIAL PARLIAMENT', the Proclamation affirmed traditional unionist thinking on the ideas of

[63] Belfast News-Letter, 10 September 1918.
[64] Quoted in H. Montgomery Hyde, Carson: The Life of Sir Edward Carson, Lord Carson of Duncairn (1953; first published 1974), 315.
[65] Robert Eccleshall, English Conservatism Since the Restoration: An Introduction and Anthology (1990), 118–31; Standish O'Grady, Toryism and the Tory Democracy (1886).

citizenship and the intrinsically unitary nature of British sovereignty which Home Rule, by virtue of creating a parliament in Dublin, threatened to undermine. Given the imminent and perilous threat of Home Rule, and the Covenant's previous assertion that unionists would refuse to recognise the authority of a Dublin parliament, the Provisional Government of Ulster was established to fill the potential political vacuum in the North. If a Dublin parliament was established, this Provisional body would, according to the Proclamation, take over 'the Government of the Province IN TRUST for the British Nation'.[66]

The language of trustees of the nation would, of course, appear again in another, better known proclamation by an Irish provisional government in 1916. The leaders of the Easter Rising embraced the form of the 'Provisional Government of the Irish Republic', made up of the seven signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic. This Provisional Government was, according to the Proclamation of 1916, tasked with administering 'the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people', until a national government can be established.[67] The idea of a Provisional Government, a revolutionary administration proclaiming itself the true sovereign representative of the nation, is long established in Irish separatist history. Both the 1803 and 1867 risings were accompanied by proclamations from republican entities styling themselves as the 'Provisional Government of Ireland'.[68] The vanguard of the 1916 Rising were, however, as much inspired by the actions of the Provisional Government of Ulster as their own republican ancestors. Patrick Pearse, who read

[66] 'Ulster Provisional Government Proclamation' (1913): available at http://antiquesandartireland.com/2012/05/auction-ulster-proclamation/ [last accessed 4 November 2016]
[67] 'Proclamation of the Irish Republic' (1916): available at http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/pir24416.htm [last accessed 4 November 2016]
[68] The 1803 Proclamation was printed by never distributed: the text is reprinted in R. R. Madden, The Life and Times of Robert Emmet (Dublin, 1847), 303–17. For the text of the 1867 Proclamation, see *Freeman's Journal*, 8 March 1867.

the Proclamation of the Irish Republic aloud on the first day of the rebellion in Dublin, recorded his admiration for the audacity of the Provisional Government of Ulster in 1913. Pearse went as far as asking the unionist leaders to extend its remit to the rest of Ireland, as he recognised the potential for Ulster's underground state to subvert formal British sovereignty.[69]

This call for expansion was ignored by the unionist leadership, but the territorial claim of Ulster's Provisional Government remained fluid. The Proclamation of 1913 decreed a Provisional Government within rather than of the Province of Ulster, a subtle but important distinction, until either Home Rule was abandoned or nationalists recognised the unionist right to self-determination. Carson was on record in claiming that the jurisdiction of a Provisional Government could not extend beyond 'those districts of which they had control', implying that its remit was limited to the mostly Protestant, eastern counties of Ulster.[70] Exclusion of a number of counties of Ulster from the jurisdiction of a Dublin parliament had been mooted since the appearance of the Home Rule legislation in 1912, but it did not become a prominent feature of unionist thought until 1913.[71] In framing the (limited) territorial extent of the Provisional Government of Ulster, unionists in essence adopted the argument aired by Thomas Agar-Robartes, a Liberal backbencher, who made an early (but rejected) amendment to the Home Rule bill in 1912 to exclude four northern counties from the scheme on the basis of their Protestant majority.[72] The jettisoning of the western counties of Ulster was one of the most extraordinary acts by the unionist leadership during the

[69] Pádraic Pearse, Collected Works of Pádraic H. Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches (Dublin, [1922]), 187.
[70] McNeill, *Ulster's Stand For Union*, 51.
[71] Jackson, Home Rule, 124.
[72] Colin Reid, The Lost Ireland of Stephen Gwynn: Irish Constitutional Nationalism and Cultural Politics, 1864–1950 (Manchester, 2011), 108–9.

revolutionary period; the virtue of 'Ulster' as a political entity was, for unionists, its very malleability. Indeed, when Alice Stopford Green, the nationalist historian, mocked the 'Council of the half-province' headed by Carson in 1918, she merely highlighted the ruthless pragmatism of unionism's leaders, while missing the democratic principle that they had followed.[73] The rationale behind the partitioning of Ulster was simple: as Protestants were in the majority in the eastern counties, they would gain political control in a new administration. Majoritarianism was a pressing instinct within unionism and the shedding of minority status within Ireland was imperative for political protection in the face of the Home Rule threat. If this meant that the historic province of Ulster was divided between two jurisdictions, then so be it; unionists reasoned this was a price worth paying for the maintenance of an unimpaired union for the majority of Protestants in the north of Ireland.

The Provisional Government of Ulster was unlike the Provisional Governments of Ireland declared in 1803, 1867 and 1916 in that it was more than a metaphysical entity. The Provisional Government of Ulster was in fact the Ulster Unionist Council, transformed into what was called a 'Central Authority'. Various Committees and Boards were formed, prepared to take over the administrative departments of government and a scheme for a separate judiciary was drafted. While the language used to justify such an extraordinary step was rooted in a Burkean restoration of rights – the UUC resolved that the Provisional Government would remain in force until Ulster again resumed unimpaired her citizenship in the United Kingdom – a clear motivation underpinning the organisation of this audacious counter-state was fear of the perceived rupture to Irish life that Home Rule would bring.[74] As

[73] Alice Stopford Green, Ourselves Alone in Ulster (Dublin, 1918), 17.
[74] McNeill, *Ulster's Stand For Union*, 145–6.

a motivating emotion, a means to galvanise a political campaign or providing the rationale to destroy one, the role of fear within Irish political thought has been underexplored. [75] Certainly the fear of the loss of state authority, chiefly a threatened collapse of law and order, was a vital mobilising component of unionism's anti-Home Rule campaign. The logical end of the Home Rule crisis from the vantage point of 1913–14 was civil war in Ireland. The Provisional Government of Ulster was thus constituted as an authority to protect unionists in the north from the likely anarchy that would follow the establishment of a Dublin parliament. While unionists rejoiced at the near-mutiny of senior Army officials at the Curragh barracks in March 1914 – they let it be known that they would not enforce Home Rule in the north – the rupture in civil and military administration was a sign of dangerous times, with uncertain consequences. Indeed, the Curragh 'incident' did not stop unionists from importing some 25,000 rifles and three million rounds of ammunition into the north the following month, ensuring that the Provisional Government of Ulster – like a state – possessed coercive power.[76]

The language used by unionists was Hobbesian in channelling dystopian visions of a Home Rule Ireland, with echoes of a regression to the brutal state of nature. Vivid postcards were produced that depicted booming industrial and commercial towns in unionist heartlands, such as Belfast and Carrickfergus, failing into dilapidation under a Home Rule parliament.[77] Carson colourfully recorded in 1912 that 'Ulster see[s] in Irish Nationalism a dark conspiracy, buttressed upon crime and incitement to outrage, maintained by ignorance and

[75] Corey Robin's pioneering Fear: The History of a Political Idea (Oxford, 2004), which chiefly focuses on the United States, makes a number of suggestive points in this regard.
[76] Ronan Fanning, Fatal Path: British Government and Irish Revolution, 1910–1922 (2013), 111–16.
[77] A number of these dystopian postcards have been digitised by the Linenhall Library in Belfast: http://www.postcardsireland.com/category/political [last accessed 4 November 2016]. Also see John Killen, *John Bull's Famous Circus: Ulster History Though the Postcard, 1905*–1985 (Dublin, 1985).

pandering to superstition'. [78] The perceived excesses of Parnellism from the 1880s were used to remind unionists of the dangers of Irish nationalism. In *Ulster's Stand for Union*, McNeill repeated the resolution adopted by the Ulster Convention of 1892, which was set up to resist Home Rule:

> That we express the devoted loyalty of Ulster Unionists to the Crown and Constitution of the United Kingdom… [and] we record our determination to have nothing to do with a Parliament certain to be controlled by men responsible for the crime and outrages of the Land League, the dishonesty of the Plan of Campaign, and the cruelties of boycotting… [W]e declare to the people of Great Britain our conviction that the attempt to set up such a Parliament in Ireland will inevitably result in disorder, violence, and bloodshed.[79]

The Ulster unionist perspective in 1913 was that Home Rule was highly probable, meaning that political collapse and public disorder would follow. The Provisional Government of Ulster, underpinned by the guns of the UVF, was designed to counter the catastrophic breakdown of sovereign authority in the north in the face of a threatened Catholic 'takeover' of state power via Home Rule. In this sense, unionist militancy – with decided irony – was presented as the means by which to avoid public disorder.

David Miller has highlighted a potent contractarianism within the Ulster Protestant political psyche, which hinged on a steadfast relationship between political rights and the obligation of the state.[80] Certainly, unionists believed that they possessed a natural right, in a

[78] Carson, 'Introduction', in Rosenbaum (ed.), Against Home Rule, 25.
[79] McNeill, *Ulster's Stand For Union*, 33–4.
[80] Miller, *Queen's Rebels*, 28.

Lockean interpretation of the social contract, to resist a government that jeopardised the constitution and undermined their British privileges.[81] But the air of cataclysm within unionist discourse during the Home Rule debates chimes more with Hobbes's theory of rights and obligation. For Hobbes, writing in the context of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, the one and only duty of the sovereign is the protection of those under its power; if the sovereign fails in this responsibility, the natural right to protection reverts back to the subjects.[82] As the legal authority – the British government – gravely undermined the safety of its subjects in Ireland through an embrace of Home Rule, unionists believed that government had made itself illegitimate. The constitutional obligation facing unionists, they rationalised, was to continue a 'legitimate' form of British rule through the stewardship of the Provisional Government, as this represented the only method by which to avoid the loss of effective sovereign protection. By banding together as an underground government with its own citizen army, unionists aimed to fill the power vacuum threatened by the implementation of Home Rule. The stress on public order was an articulation of the precarious position of Ulster unionists: a minority who held onto strong folk memories of the 1641 massacres, who were surrounded by a perceived hostile majority and were cut off from the protection afforded by state.[83] There were thus special circumstances for unionists to enjoy what the Belfast News-Letter described as a 'love of law and order' in 1887.[84] Tellingly, the application form to join the Ulster Volunteer Force contained the subheading 'For the Preservation of the Peace': in joining the militia, volunteers committed to act 'for the mutual protection of all Loyalists, and

[81] John Locke, Political Writings, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis, IN, 2003), 88.
[82] Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford, 1996; first published 1651), 21.114.
[83] Alvin Jackson, 'Irish Unionism', in D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day (eds.), The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy (1996), 130.
[84] Belfast News-Letter, 31 December 1887.

generally to keep the Peace'.[85] The ironies of such unionist activity – resisting the state while upholding the constitution, running guns while preaching about the maintenance of the law – were obvious. But to dismiss the unionist rationale as paradoxical, or (in the words of one historian) a 'shameless appropriation of the clothing of lawful authority', is to miss the importance of long-established ideas concerning constitutional continuity, sovereign responsibility and the maintenance of law and order. [86] These had long been embedded into the political culture of unionism, but they were given their most forceful iteration during the years of the Ulster crisis. The UVF and the Provisional Government of Ulster were manifestations of these ideas in an era of immense political disturbance.

IV

In the aftermath of the Ulster crisis, unionist apologists made the case that the radical events of 1912–14 – from the Covenant to the formation of the Provisional Government, via the setting up for a paramilitary force – did not represent a rebellion, as unionists did not have revolutionary intent. One observer argued that the astonishing actions of unionists represented an 'effort to get back to the old and valued Government of the United Kingdom'.[87] Ronald McNeill believed that the actions of Ulster unionists in this regard were 'without precedent, a solitary instance in the history of mankind'. While rebellions have

[85] Application form to join the Ulster Volunteer Force, NLI: http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000148771 [last accessed 28 October 2016].
[86] Geoffrey Lewis, Carson: The Man Who Divided Ireland (2005), 114.
[87] 'A True Irishman', Pampered Ireland: Fact, Not Fiction (Belfast, 1919), 6.

occurred since time immemorial to emancipate a people or overthrow a government, McNeill asked 'has there ever been a "rebellion" the object of which was to maintain the status quo?'[88] This sense of Irish exceptionalism permeated the mind-sets of contemporaries and indeed later historians; the events of the Irish revolutionary period seemed so extraordinary and thus defied comparison. Yet, this crisis was about competing interpretations of universal concepts such as political rights, democracy and sovereignty as much as a bewildering ancient 'ethnic' dispute. In this light, the dynamics of the Ulster problem appear less exceptional; rather than a sectarian-fuelled conflict over territory, the Home Rule struggle can be recast as a crisis of the idea of representative government. Unionist political thought was concerned with the maintenance of political and civil rights, which were underpinned by democratic backing, and the protection offered by sovereign authority. These principles were shaped in the context of a fractious political atmosphere, in which unionists believed they were forced to counter the seemingly inevitable coming of Home Rule for Ireland. The audacious proclamation of the Provisional Government of Ulster was a striking expression of unionism's conception of democratic sovereignty in action.

In the face of nationalist arguments based on a democratic demand for Home Rule, unionists appropriated their own version of the rights of a majority through a reimagining of the national territory. When appeals to majority opinion across the United Kingdom failed, an inward shift towards an Ulster perspective was prioritised. The emergence of 'Ulster' as a fluid political concept is one of the most striking features of the Irish revolutionary period. Unionists in the north were remarkably unsentimental in shedding their southern brethren, even within west and south Ulster, to create a viable political unit that stood apart from the

[88] McNeill, *Ulster's Stand For Uni*on, 140–1.

rest of Ireland. That north-east Ulster had a majority of Protestants permitted unionism to articulate powerful democratic arguments against Home Rule. But herein lies the antagonism of the Ulster crisis. The English commentator, W. F. Monypenny, argued in 1913 that the Irish problem seemed so intractable because it was a 'clash of two rights'.[89] These rights were based on competing readings of democratic legitimacy. As both unionists and nationalists cited the support of majorities for mutually exclusive political programmes, the concept of democracy itself became a problem: there was no agreement across the political spectrum as to which majority was the legitimate self-determining 'people'. The overwhelming need to construct a majority to assert political power also ensured that the rights of minorities remained largely a side issue during the Irish revolutionary period as a whole. Democracy was simply interpreted by unionists and Home Rulers as majority opinion, which almost led to civil war in 1914. The violent targeting of minorities in Ulster and Munster during the early 1920s can arguably be framed as a normative offshoot of such majoritarianism; Catholics in the north and Protestants in the south were not accepted by all in their hinterlands to be part of 'the people', with lethal consequences.[90]

Unionists expressed a contractual interpretation of sovereignty based on social and political order, which implicitly included the right to rebel against the government to protect existing rights. With the sovereign power threatening to undermine social order in Ireland through the implementation of Home Rule, fear of a return to the state of nature – which Hobbes equated to 'this war of every man against every man'[91] – gripped Ulster unionism,

[89] W. F. Monypenny, The Two Irish Nations: An Essay on Home Rule (1913), 3.
[90] T. K. Wilson, Frontiers of Violence: Conflict and Identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia, 1918–1922 (Oxford, 2010); Peter Hart, The IRA and its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916–1923 (Oxford, 1998); Gemma Clarke, Everyday Violence in the Irish Civil War (Cambridge, 2014).
[91] Hobbes, Leviathan, 13.13.

and justified resistance to the state. The Provisional Government of Ulster, backed by the armed UVF, provided protection for unionists by maintaining sovereign authority as a counterweight to political collapse in Ireland. Given their precarious minority position within Ireland, law and order was a sacred principle within unionist political thought. The irony of rebelling against the British state to uphold British law was one identified by many contemporary observers and later historians, but it is important to locate the rationale for unionist action if we are to fully understand its dynamics. Home Rule was interpreted by unionists as the destruction of the fabric of civilised society, which rested on the maintenance of perceived British values of constitutional stability, sovereign obligation and democratic legitimacy. While the religious, imperial and economic strands of the unionist case against Home Rule are well known, rather less attention has been paid to unionism's assertion of democratic entitlement and the protection of the rights supposedly guaranteed by the British constitution. The Irish revolution was thus as much about clashing ideals of representative government as it was a national, sectarian or ethnic conflict.