

The Orange Order in Northern Ireland



Has decline in social capital,

power proved the greatest challenge?

sectarianism, secularism, or loss of political

Introduction

The conflict in Northern Ireland is arguably less one of rival ethno-national territorial claims, and is more one of sectarian divides. The popular belief that the region has been transformed into a peaceful, harmonious society needs qualification. One of the organisations accused of promoting sectarianism is the Orange Order, which remains one of the largest and most significant organisations within civic society in Northern Ireland and represents an unyielding form of British Protestant unionism. The Order provides an institutional focus for the distinctive social, religious, and cultural traditions associated with Protestant unionism in the province. However, having gone from a commanding position at the outbreak of the Troubles in 1968 with 100,000 members, the Order has been reduced to a membership base of around 40,000.

The aim of this research is to identify what factor has had the most detrimental effect on Orange Order membership. Through a qualitative study never before undertaken, the research tests four possible hypotheses: (1) the decline in social capital; (2) sectarianism; (3) secularism; and (4) loss of political power since the collapse of Northern Ireland Parliament in 1972. The research compares the impact each factor has had since 1972 and deduce which has presented the most fundamental challenge to the institution in order to clarify our understanding of how a distinctly ethno-religious organisation has attempted to survive amid changed political and religious contexts.

Methodology

This research utilises a qualitative evaluation, using methods including interviews and observations, to collect substantive and relevant data. It will conduct thirty-five interviews with members of the Orange Order at all levels. At the elite level, it looks to interview a number of senior members of the Orange Order including former Grand Masters, the Reverend W. Martin Smyth and Robert S. Saulters. Furthermore, it looks to interview the current Grand Master, Edward Stevenson, and Assistant Grand Masters, David McNarry and the Reverend A. Smyth. In addition, it intends to interview a substantive number of members at the grassroots level. Taking members from a representative sample of both rural and urban lodges, this qualitative approach is valuable due to the varying experiences and perceptions of the decline in Order membership. Furthermore, the research will also interview a selection of Northern Ireland's Unionist Assembly members to better comprehend the effect of political isolation on the Order.

Decline in Social Capital

With the expansion of social networking, levels of political engagement and membership of political and religious organisations have fallen across the continent and beyond, as have levels of engagement in civic society. When considering social capital in the American experience, Putnam found that the number of times the average American entertained friends at home fell by half between 1975 and 1998 (R. D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000). Some members identified the biggest challenge to Order membership to be that 'society has changed considerably' and, in schools, young people 'haven't been encouraged to take part in team sports' fostering a culture un conducive to institutional membership. However, even if Putnam's findings can be applied to Northern Ireland, one must be wary of how easy it is for those within the Order to project blame onto societal changes alone.

Abstract

Northern Ireland's conflict is arguably less one of rival ethno-national territorial claims and is more one of sectarian divides. One of the organisations accused of promoting sectarianism is the Orange Order, which represents an unyielding form of British Protestant unionism and provides an institutional focus for the distinctive social, religious, and cultural traditions associated with Protestant unionism in the province. This research explores whether: the decline in social capital; sectarianism; secularism; or loss of political power since 1972, has posed the greatest challenge to Order membership in recent years to understand how a distinctly ethno-religious organisation has attempted to survive amid changed political and religious contexts.

Sectarianism

The recent history of the Orange Order has been plagued with internal disputes and controversial decisions regarding sectarian issues, but how has this impacted upon its membership? The behaviour of some marching bands associated with the Order (particularly the activity of the commonly known "Blood and Thunder" bands) and events, such as the Drumcree controversy, serve to undermine levels of middle-class respectability of the institution.

To assess this, the research interviews grassroots members to understand how sectarianism affects their view of the Order and its management. Understanding the importance the seniority within the Orange Order places on how sectarianism is interpreted by the public further benefits this analysis.

Secularism

Church groups and religious organisations are seemingly in decline throughout the United Kingdom and all over Europe, but Northern Ireland has always been less secular than her mainland neighbours. As elements of secularism become visible in the province, have they attributed to the decline of Order membership? With little ambiguity over the position of the Protestant faith for the Order – one respondent saying its advancement was 'most definitely' the priority of the institution – many within the institution anticipate their decline to mirror that of church attendance figures; Sunday trading, televised sport over the weekend and the emergence of a multi-cultural society being identified as catalysts for this evolution.

Loss of Political Power

Since 1972, the Orange Order has faced cataclysmic divisions within the Protestant bloc, the prolonged absence of any form of devolved governance and the establishment of a consociational executive, the brokering of which exposed how far the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and Order had drifted from their historical closeness. It now operates as a prominent pressure group within the Legislative Assembly and, as John McCallister MLA noted, for the first time in its history, none of the three, main unionist party leaders – those of the UUP, Democratic Unionist Party and Traditional Unionist Voice – are members of the Orange Order. But is it the case that the decline of political presence can so dramatically affect the membership of a religious organisation?

Conclusion

Northern Ireland has changed considerably since the dissolution of the regional parliament in 1972. The combined effect of declining social capital and secularism in Northern Ireland, as well as the Order's limited political presence and fall in middle-class respectability in response to sectarian tensions, has significantly reduced the circumstances in which the Orange Order in Northern Ireland is able to function.

With a strong membership base at the start of the Troubles, the Order was instrumental in maintaining the cross-class alliance upon which unionist socio-political hegemony was based. The Orange Order – non-partisan and unaffiliated – must now fight to remain relevant in the changing social, religious and political circumstances of Northern Ireland.

