

Despite all the obstacles, Liberalism survived in Northern Ireland after partition. **Berkley Farr** explains how.

# Liberalism in Unionist Northern Ireland

The partition of Ireland and the establishment of a devolved parliament in Northern Ireland in 1921 was a landmark in the history of both Ireland and the Irish impact on British Liberalism. Unionist rule from Belfast replaced the pre-Great War Liberal rule administered via Dublin. Ulster's leading Liberal and champion of Home Rule, Rev J. B. Armour declared that the Unionists 'had yelled about "No Home Rule" for a generation, and then they were compelled to take a form of Home Rule that the Devil himself could never have imagined'.<sup>1</sup> For almost half a century Ireland was to disappear as a major item on Britain's political agenda. Northern Ireland in 1921 was a highly polarised community following the turmoil of the previous years and as such was even less fertile soil than usual for Liberalism. Whilst the Liberal Party in Britain had declined to a shadow of its former self, it was to face virtual extinction in Ulster. Despite having had two MPs before 1918, the party failed to contest any general election up to 1929.<sup>2</sup> It thus missed taking part in the first two Northern Ireland elections of 1921 and 1925 held under proportional representation, as well as in the Westminster elections of the period.

PR by Single Transferable Vote was introduced to both parts of Ireland as part of the settlement in the Government of Ireland Act 1920. The 1921 Northern Ireland election was the first time in Europe that this system was used to elect all the members of a Parliament<sup>3</sup> and the results reflected the polarised position of the time. The Unionists took forty seats with the Nationalists and Sinn Finn taking six each. The second election in 1925 showed how PR could enable a weakening of the two extremes and the creation of a new middle group of MPs. The Republicans were reduced from six to two while the Nationalists went up to ten. The Unionists fell from forty to thirty-two with the new central group of

eight, comprising four Independent Unionists, three Labour and one Unbought Tenant (George Henderson in Co. Antrim).<sup>4</sup>

The Unbought Tenants' Association had been formed over the issue of tenants who had not been included in the 1903 land purchase scheme. Its president was Robert Nathaniel Boyd<sup>5</sup> and when this association developed into the revived Liberal Party for Ulster he was appointed the first president.<sup>6</sup> The land question had been a key issue for Liberals in Ireland since before the days of Gladstone. This was to be the final chapter in the struggle.

The Liberal revival of the late 1920s in Ulster was closely connected with the revival in Britain under Lloyd George and his programme to conquer unemployment. In particular the financing of the 1929 general election from the Lloyd George Fund appears to be a key factor in the number of candidates going forward. In April 1929 there were reports, following a deputation of NI Liberals to London, of a galaxy of candidates. Finance was the principal subject of discussion and there was to be substantial assistance for the imperial but not the local general election.<sup>7</sup> The financing of the Westminster candidates was an issue in the campaign with the Liberals being called remittance men and J. M. Andrews, Craigavon's future successor as Prime Minister, claiming it was unfair that Unionist candidates should be put to the trouble of a contest because Lloyd George had provided £7,000 or £8,000 for the Liberal candidates.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1929 election for the thirteen Westminster seats, the Liberals put forward six candidates, compared with eleven Unionists, three Nationalists and three others.<sup>9</sup> George Henderson MP and R. N. Boyd were leading candidates and were also among the five contesting the Northern Ireland Parliamentary election.

At the start of the campaign Henderson stressed

the need for an effective opposition and declared, 'I think there is a real danger that our politics in the Six Counties will become divided along sectarian lines. That was bad for our country in the past, and, I believe it will be bad for it in the future. The only Opposition that can combat this thing is a party along Liberal lines, that will bring to its support people of progressive thought from every creed and class of the community.'<sup>10</sup> The election slogan 'Not for Class or Creed – But for the Common Good' was used<sup>11</sup> and much emphasis was placed on the economic and farming programmes of the party. Johnston, incidentally, believed that motor taxation should be on the basis of petrol consumption instead of horse power.<sup>12</sup>

When the results were declared the Liberals in Northern Ireland had polled 100,000 votes in the UK election. All six candidates had straight fights with the Unionists and their percentage of the vote ranged from 25 per cent in East Belfast to 33 per cent in Armagh with combined proportions of 26 per cent and 27 per cent in the two-seaters of Antrim in Down.<sup>13</sup> Whilst the results were respectable no candidate was elected and it would be twenty-nine years before another Liberal stood in a Northern Ireland election.

The abolition of PR, except for the four Queen's University seats, resulted in forty years of electoral stagnation under single party government. The vast majority of new constituencies, with some gerrymandering, were safe seats for either Unionists or Nationalists and seldom changed hands. In nine general elections between 1929 and 1965 the number of unopposed MPs varied between nineteen and thirty-three out of fifty-two. In the remaining years of the Stormont Parliament the number of Unionist MPs never fell to the level of thirty-two in the last PR election of 1925 and the middle grouping of non-sectarian plus Independent Unionists never exceeded the eight elected in 1925. The Northern Ireland Labour Party reached a maximum of four MPs in 1958 and 1962.

The period from the 1930s to the 1950s was also the darkest period for the Liberal Party in Britain. Following

the bitter 'Chapelgate' Election in February 1949 a leading Nationalist, Shane Leslie, a cousin of Churchill, wrote to Lady Violet Bonham-Carter: 'If you are alive I presume there is still a Liberal Party!'.<sup>14</sup> He advocated the Liberals making a gesture towards Irish unity that might swing forty seats to them and he suggested Liberals stand again in Ulster. Lady Violet replied in a characteristically forthright manner reminding him of Ireland's neutral stance in the war and stating that the only way to bring Ulster in is to make her *want* to come in. Rejecting the bait, she declared: 'I only want votes to be given and seats to be won for the things I believe in'.<sup>15</sup>

The following year in the 1950 general election the North Down Labour candidate stated in his election leaflet: 'The tragedy of Irish politics is the virtual absence of any Liberal tradition'.<sup>16</sup> His name was Albert McElroy and six years later when the Ulster Liberal Association was reformed he became the driving force behind it and its President until his death in 1975.

The Ulster Liberal Association was reformed in 1956 following a letter to the press and Aubrey Herbert who represented the party in Britain addressed the founding meeting. The first electoral test was in the 1958 Stormont general election when Rev Albert McElroy contested the Queen's University constituency. Nationalists distrusted Liberals because of Lloyd George and partition while Unionists loathed Liberals because of Gladstone, Asquith and Home Rule. McElroy made no apology for his forebears and was convinced that Home Rule in Gladstone's time would have spared Ireland the bloodshed and bitterness of the following century. Standing against three Unionists, an Independent and a Northern Ireland Labour candidate for the four-seat PR constituency, McElroy polled 13 per cent of the first preference votes. This was greater than the Labour and Unionist candidates but the Labour voters' second preferences were insufficient to elect him. The result was promising and helped to spread the Liberal message to the graduate electorate.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1959 Westminster general

election the Liberals decided to contest South Belfast and the candidate was Sheelagh Murnaghan who had made her name as Northern Ireland's only woman barrister and as an international hockey player. Her grandfather had been a Nationalist MP and alongside Albert McElroy from the radical Presbyterian tradition they were the personification of the non-sectarian and progressive message that the Liberals were putting forward. Ulster Liberals were free to have their individual opinions for or against Irish unity but they were the first party to accept that Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the UK could only be changed by a majority of the people wanting to do so. They also advocated a programme of reform in common with the rest of the Liberal Party. *Liberal News* described Sheelagh Murnaghan as the bravest Liberal candidate among all the eleven score and 'a gallant fighter for social unity in a land of sterile conflict'.<sup>18</sup> Conservative South Belfast was not prepared for such a challenge and the 7.5 per cent Liberal vote was a disappointment.

The first Liberal meeting I attended in August 1961 included six other people (the then size of the pre-Orpington Parliamentary Party!) but the meeting nominated Sheelagh Murnaghan to contest the forthcoming by-election at Queen's University. Her November victory in becoming the only Liberal to be elected to the Northern Ireland Parliament was one of the greatest moments in Ulster Liberal history and it placed the Liberals in the forefront of reform throughout the 1960s in the years before the outbreak of 'the troubles'. During her time in Stormont until her university constituency was abolished in 1969 Sheelagh Murnaghan was one of the most active MPs campaigning for reform. On four occasions she introduced a Human Rights Bill despite inevitable defeat by the Unionist majority and she campaigned tirelessly on a wide range of issues including capital punishment, itinerants, and electoral reform. Many of her proposals were eventually to be introduced but only after her reasoned arguments were replaced by violence on the streets.



British and Ulster Liberals at the 1963 Liberal Assembly at Brighton (just after Jo Grimond's 'sound of gunfire' speech). From left: Kina and Eric Lubbock, Richard Moore, Chris Woods, Berkley Farr, Sean Kelly, Bob Huston, Rev. Albert McElroy and Sheelagh Murnaghan MP.

The years following the 1961 by-election were ones of expansion of the organisation and impact of the Ulster Liberals. Around half of the seats in Stormont were unopposed and Liberals tried to pick these, thereby avoiding most of the Belfast seats where the Northern Ireland Labour Party were established. In 1962 four seats were fought in the Stormont general election, the first councillor was elected and a by-election was contested.<sup>19</sup> The party began to have local branches and the NI Federation of Young Liberals was formed. Ulster Liberals had attended Liberal assemblies but they now took part in the regular activities of the various strands of the Liberal Party Organisation. This was a two-way process with visits by Pratap Chitnis and Michael Meadowcroft to advise on organisation and Mark Bonham-Carter and George Scott to speak in the South Belfast by-election.<sup>20</sup>

The 1964 Westminster general election was a major challenge with four of the twelve seats being fought in

four-cornered contests.<sup>21</sup> The result was disappointing but it was the start of a much wider geographical spread of Liberal activity across the province and an increase in the tactics of taking on Unionists where they expected no opposition.

In the 1965 Stormont election Sheelagh Murnaghan achieved the rare status of becoming an unopposed Liberal MP! Bert Hamilton polled 22 per cent in Mid Armagh and Albert McElroy, after a campaign needing police protection during physical disruption of his meetings, gained 34 per cent in Enniskillen. The most interesting result was in Derry City where Claude Wilton, a popular local solicitor and the son of a Unionist mayor, with Devon's Chris Trethewey as agent, won 47 per cent of the vote in an 80 per cent poll losing by 7,418 to the Unionist's 8,432. Northern Ireland's second city had for years felt neglected and disillusioned on many fronts but the decision to locate the second university in Unionist

Coleraine was to galvanise Derry into political action which had long-term consequences. Claude Wilton was one of the few Liberals in Derry but he headed a coalition of people wanting change, and among his supporters were John Hume and Ivan Cooper.

The Westminster election in March 1966 was to prove a major advance for Ulster Liberals, who achieved 29,000 votes in three seats. In North Antrim Richard Moore polled 22 per cent, after fighting four campaigns in England. In South Down John Quinn came second ahead of a Republican, with 19 per cent, while Sheelagh Murnaghan got 22 per cent in North Down after a late entry. In the latter case she polled 10,582 votes without an election address but was helped by the Unionist MP's complaining in his address about the election being forced on the rate-payers by the Liberals. The election was followed by the launch of the monthly *Northern Radical*. Later in 1966 another by-election occurred at Queen's in which Albert McElroy got the highest

ever opposition vote, but there were fewer Unionist abstentions and he lost with 44 per cent.

In 1967 visits by Jeremy Thorpe were soon followed by almost every leading Liberal. Young Liberal branches increased dramatically and following a letter to the press from McElroy, the ULP helped to set up a Liberal Party in the Republic. By-elections were soon fought in Wicklow and East Limerick with help from northern Liberals but the results did not meet local expectations and enthusiasm waned. The problems in Northern Ireland were increasingly exercising the concern of Liberal Party and at the 1967 Blackpool Assembly McElroy proposed an executive resolution urging reforms.

In March 1968 the former Prime Minister Lord Brookeborough resigned his Lisnaskea seat and Liberals seized the opportunity to oppose his son in the by-election. Most Nationalists, however, voted for an Independent Unionist and Stanley Wynne was a disappointing third with 12.5 per cent. As the year wore on politics increasingly moved from the polling station to the streets as the Civil Rights campaign gained momentum. Many Liberals became involved but McElroy did not as he believed it was easier to get people on to the streets than it was to get them off again and he dreaded the descent into bloodlust that the protests might bring.<sup>22</sup>

McElroy's fears were well justified as the street protests became more violent and the community polarised. As O'Neill belatedly tried to introduce reforms that were 'too little and too late' he tried to overcome the opposition of his own Unionist MPs by calling an election in February 1969. Liberals were in an increasingly difficult position with moderate O'Neillite Unionists and others appearing on the scene and in a desire to avoid vote splitting they only contested two seats.<sup>23</sup> Sheelagh Murnaghan had proposed trying to create a popular front of reformist parties but she and McElroy were too radical in their views for some Liberals who were key players in forming the O'Neillite New Ulster Movement which subsequently evolved into the Alliance Party.

The appearance of troops on the streets of Derry and Belfast in August 1969 utterly changed the situation from a solely Northern Ireland problem to a British one. At Brighton the following month McElroy declared to the Liberal Assembly that we were not dealing with a rational body of political thought but a state of mind bordering on a psychosis. He expressed his personal hope for a united Ireland based on a union of Irish hearts not lit by a Celtic twilight or Orange midnight, but outward looking in a united Europe.<sup>24</sup>

Violence struck the Liberals in February 1970 when a bomb exploded outside Sheelagh Murnaghan's house and the polarisation of society was reflected in the June Westminster election.<sup>25</sup> Despite an electoral collapse, Liberals continued to play an active role campaigning for reforms and when Stormont was suspended Whitelaw appointed Sheelagh Murnaghan to his Advisory Commission. Whitelaw accepted almost all the ULP proposals, including STV, but Liberals gained no electoral benefit.<sup>26</sup> The Ulster Liberal Party continued as a political entity until it becoming part of the Liberal Democrats but it was only to contest one further election, with James Murray in 1979.<sup>27</sup>

What is the Liberal legacy in the homeland of Paddy Ashdown and Lembit Öpik? When Albert McElroy died the Irish Times declared 'he championed the cause of justice, equality and fair play in Northern Ireland a very long time before it was profitable or popular'.<sup>28</sup>

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- 1 W. S. Armour, *Armour of Ballymoney*, 1934, p. 332.
- 2 The last Irish Liberal to be returned to Westminster was unopposed in 1914 following the death of the winner of 1913 Londonderry City by-election.
- 3 James Knight and Nicholas Baxter-Moore, *Northern Ireland The Elections of the Twenties*, 1972.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Boyd had been Liberal candidate for South Tyrone in December 1910 when he polled 47 per cent, losing by 300 votes.

- 6 *Northern Whig*, 18 May 1929.
- 7 *Northern Whig 'London Letter'*, 13 April 1929. The election for the Northern Ireland Parliament was held on 22 May, eight days before the Westminster election.
- 8 *Northern Whig*, 23 May 1929.
- 9 George Henderson MP and R. N. Boyd contested Co Antrim (two seats), R. D. Pollock and David Johnston (First President of the Ulster Farmers' Union) fought Co Down, W. R. Todd fought Armagh and Capt. Denis Ireland (later to be a well-known writer and first northern resident in the Irish Senate) stood in East Belfast. In the election for the Northern Ireland Parliament Henderson fought Bannside, Boyd North Antrim, Johnston East Down, Todd Mid-Armagh and James Boyd Ards.
- 10 *Northern Whig*, 20 April 1929.
- 11 D. Johnston and Ireland election addresses.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 In the Northern Ireland Parliament election, with PR abolished, Henderson polled 38 per cent in Bannside with Boyd getting 40 per cent in N Antrim, Todd 29 per cent in Mid-Armagh, J Boyd 11 per cent in Ards and Johnston 44 per cent in E Down. Bannside and Ards were three-cornered fights involving Labour candidates.
- 14 Mark Pottle, *Daring to Hope: the diaries & letters of Violet Bonham-Carter 1946-1969*.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Gordon Gillespie, *Albert H. McElroy: the Radical Minister*, reviewed in this issue.
- 17 Gordon Gillespie, *The Ulster Liberal Party 1956-73*, MSS dissertation, QUB.
- 18 *Liberal News*, 1 October 1959.
- 19 Sheelagh Murnaghan was elected on the first count at Queen's with 25 per cent of the vote; Albert McElroy polled 29 per cent in Ards, Arthur Burns 31 per cent in North Down and Judith Rosenfield got 13 per cent in the three-cornered Ballynafeigh (S. Belfast) contest. Brian Wimpess became the first elected councillor in Bangor and Bob Huston polled 13 per cent against both Unionist and Labour in the December Cromac by-election.
- 20 Bert Hamilton polled 10 per cent of the vote in the October 1963 by-election.
- 21 Giles Fitzherbert, a son-in-law of Evelyn Waugh, polled 11 per cent in Fermanagh and South Tyrone despite physical attacks. Major Hamilton Simonds-Gooding polled 10 per cent in South Down, McElroy 6 per cent in North Down and Rosenfield 5 per cent in South Belfast.
- 22 Op. cit.
- 23 Sheelagh Murnaghan, on the abolition of her Queen's seat, got 15 per cent in North Down in a straight fight while Claude Wilton polled 35 per cent and lost by only 710 votes in Derry City with an O'Neillite coming third.
- 24 Op. cit.
- 25 As Paisley took North Antrim Richard Moore's vote fell to 4 per cent while in South Down John Quinn polled 12 per cent. Simonds-Gooding in North Down and Rodney Smith in South Antrim only got 1 per cent of the vote.
- 26 In the first PR elections for the Assembly in 1973 the votes for Sheelagh Murnaghan in South Belfast and myself in South Down were around the 1 per cent level.
- 27 It was felt that the party with the longest pro-European record should fight the first European election but the result was still under 1 per cent.
- 28 *Irish Times*, editorial, 15 March 1975.