FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 23.04.2021 | Katy Hayward

A ritualised exhibition of violence

The recent violent scenes from Northern Ireland show that many unionists feel betrayed by London. But not only Brexit is to blame for the escalation

The sociologist Randall Collins argues that violence is difficult. And it is difficult to do well, too. We are hard-wired against resorting to it, he claims, and so when individuals act violently it is often in an incompetent and erratic way. The conditions of hopelessness, poverty, and indoctrination are not, in themselves, satisfactory explanations of violence.

It is worth bearing this in mind when trying to comprehend the recent violent scenes from Northern Ireland. On the one hand, they are all too easy to explain: the formula of violence in this small region has been the same from its creation a century ago. Violence erupting out of organised protests. Incidents concentrated in particular urban areas, many of which suffer from persistent and multiple problems of deprivation. The police bearing the brunt of the anger.

But, we should not overlook Collins' point. The petrol bombs were ready in carrier bags. What led unknown people to make them and young men – most of whom were born after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement – to hurl them at police? In his theory, Collins explores the ways by which people overcome their internal inhibitions in the use of violence. One of these is the context of a 'ritualised exhibition'. This is a useful way to understand what has given rise to these violent occurrences.

Stories of betrayal and loss

First, the element of 'ritual', which is more than habit. Although riots are by nature incidents of disorder, these events contain a certain form of predictability. These relate to the location, the target, the participants, and the interaction between them. Such patterns inform the tactics of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, from the use of water cannons to the behind-the-scenes communications with community 'representatives'.

Another feature of ritualised behaviour is the shared sense of a higher purpose or legitimation. In this case, there were two main contributing narratives. One is a story of betrayal. The other is a theme of diminution or loss.

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Both narratives have been present in loyalism – understood as the hard-line version of unionism, the political aspiration to see Northern Ireland remain part of the United Kingdom – for some time and evident in previous loyalist demonstrations. What has changed recently is that, after two decades of post-Agreement power-sharing, both these narratives have now been taken up by unionist political leaders.

The rise and fall of unionism in UK politics

Unionism has been on an extraordinary journey since the referendum on the UK's withdrawal from the European Union on 23 June 2016. What unionist politicians, and their loyalist constituents, are now beginning to fear is that that journey has taken them from a brief foray in the heart of the UK government to the very precipice of the UK union.

Theresa May's post-2017 election Conservative party depended on a confidence-and-supply deal with the 7 MPs of the Democratic Unionist Party to form a government. This was a remarkable boost to power for the provincial party, particularly coming just months after the devolved Assembly and Executive collapsed in the wake of a scandal in which the party, including its leader, was closely implicated. The party was determined to make the most of this influence. Reflecting the fact that the largest proportion of unionists and loyalists were pro-Leave – and thus in a minority position in Northern Ireland on that point – the DUP was closely affiliated with the hard-line Brexiteers among the Tories. Alongside the ERG, in the first quarter of 2020, the DUP voted down May's Withdrawal Agreement three times because it contained the 'backstop' Protocol for Northern Ireland.

Within the year, their fortunes had changed. Boris Johnson replaced Theresa May and negotiated a new Withdrawal Agreement which would enable him to deliver the hard Brexit demanded by his Brexiteer supporters, albeit at the price of a 'frontstop' Protocol which saw Northern Ireland in a special arrangement with the EU. The DUP were

outraged at what they termed a 'Betrayal Act', but their protestations were all but unheard. Johnson went to the electorate and gained a huge majority, closing the door of 10 Downing Street to the Northern Ireland unionists.

The fight over the Protocol

Still, the UK government continued to downplay the significance of the Protocol. The threat to breach the terms of it through the UK Internal Market Bill in 2020 was in part aimed to reassure unionists that there were limits to what the EU could demand of Britain's relationship with Northern Ireland. However, the end of the transition period on 1 January 2021 meant the dawning of the post-Brexit reality. Goods arriving in Northern Ireland across the Irish Sea, as per the terms of the Protocol, needed to be accompanied by new forms of documentation and certification, and were subject to checks.

The fact that these new controls and requirements came within the UK internal market in order to keep the Irish land border open was salt to the wound of pro-Leave unionism. In simple terms, this seems a 'loss' to the union, and a 'win' for Irish nationalists aspiring to a united Ireland. Unionist anxieties have been further exacerbated by rising confidence among Scottish and Irish nationalists, both of whom wish to see an end to the UK union.

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Unionist unease at the Protocol was propelled into alarm and anger by the EU's move to trigger safeguard measures over the UK-EU coronavirus vaccine row. It was easy to portray Northern Ireland as but a pawn in UK-EU battles, and for the Protocol to be seen as the means of making it so. Thus, it forms the focus of unionist and loyalist anger because it represents both betrayal and loss. They want it 'scrapped'. This narrative is repeated in the Stormont Assembly. It is repeated on the airwaves. It is repeated in the newspapers. It is repeated in posters put up by masked figures in loyalist communities. It is repeated in social media posts, including by anonymous accounts which call on 'patriots' to join in protests against the Protocol and in defence of Ulster.

Peace can be harder than violence

Another crucial part of the violence was that it was performed by individuals acting as part of a group. Young people have been bereft of civil forms of group activity for many months now, with no school, no sports, no youth clubs. And they were spurred on by an audience – something that is essential for any 'exhibition'. By the fourth night of disturbance, international media attention had been drawn, as well as small crowds of locals, some of whom even drove to hillside locations to get a good view of likely hot spots.

The conditions of a ritualised exhibition may have enabled some individuals to overcome their inhibitions in the use of violence. But what happens to that anger now? The DUP would like to see it channelled into electoral support in next year's Assembly elections. They hope the Assembly's 'consent vote' on the Protocol scheduled for the end of 2024 will mobilise unionist and loyalist voters of all ages in 2022 (and thus stop nationalist Sinn Féin topping the poll).

But the journey from violence at an 'interface' area to casting votes in a polling booth can be a long one. To make it, young people need to have confidence in a democratic future. This is a challenge for all society, particularly in a context of deep uncertainty and change.

Violence may be difficult, but peace can be harder.



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