# In Search of the People: The Formation of Legitimacy and Identity in the Debate on Internment in Northern Ireland

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Abstract
The identification of and with "the people" has important effects in political discourse. It works to legitimise political goals; it constructs inclusion and identity, and it produces exclusion of those who do not fit the characteristics attached to "the people." The current article examines how different concepts of 'the people' were constructed by various political groups in Northern Ireland in the debate on internment in the early 1970s. Internment was introduced in August 1971 in order to curb the escalating conflict, but came to increase rather than reduce the level of conflict. The article discusses how exclusionary concepts of "the people" worked to widen the gulf between the groups, and identifies four main sets of "peoples" constructed in the debate: "the loyal people," "the responsible people," "the moral people" and "the risen people."

Key words: Northern Ireland, internment, legitimacy, identity, "the people," political discourse, exclusion, inclusion, conflict

## Introduction

> "The people" is one of the trickiest and most dangerous of all political phrases. It is also indispensable. That being so, no occurrence of it ought ever to be taken for granted or allowed to pass without examination. (Sparkes 2003: 148)

The empirical focal point of this analysis is the debate on internment in Northern Ireland from its introduction in August 1971 until it was ended in December 1975. It is striking how frequently the concept of "the people" appeared in the debate. But who were "the people"?[1] To be able to trace the different meanings attributed to this designation, it is

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[1] This question is inspired by the title of Peter Shirlow and Mark McGovern's collection on unionism, Protestantism and loyalism in Northern Ireland. They also relate "the people" to the establishment of legitimacy stating that "[. . .] 'the people' possess a series of concepts which constitute a discourse of political legitimacy" (Shirlow and McGovern 1997: 5).

necessary to evaluate not only the label "the people" as such, but its application in the context of the various statements in the debate.

The construction of "the people" will in the following be studied as discursive practises that constitute the objects of which they speak (Foucault 1989: 49). I will pay attention to how the concept functions in the formation of identity and political legitimacy, and how "the people" are produced through processes of "othering" (Spivak 1985). It is, important to stress that these processes are complex and ambiguous. The post-colonial theorist, Homi Bhabha, points out that the concept of "the people" has two simultaneous functions: one, as historical "object" of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; and the other, as "subject" of a process of signification that demonstrate the principle of "the people" as the continual process by which the national life is signified as a repeating and reproductive process (Bhabha 2010: 297). He argues that the tension between the pedagogical and the performative aspect turns the reference to the people into a problem of knowledge that haunts the symbolic formation of social authority (Bhabha 2010: 297).

The political theorist Sofia Näsström has stressed the importance of critically exploring how "the people" are constructed in order to understand the process of legitimacy formation: "To speak 'in the name of the people' is to speak the language of power. It can be used for a variety of purposes" (Näsström 2007: 624). Given this background Näsström is critical of many political theoreticians who have assumed a "Maginot line" between the legitimacy of the people and democracy, thus dismissing disagreements on the constitution of the people as external to democracy (Näsström 2007: 656). Näsström claims that this renders the question of "who legitimately make up the people" into something unquestionable within political theory, just "a fact of history." Against this, she argues that it is important to regard the constitution of the people, not as a finalised historical event, but an "ongoing claim that we make" (Näsström 2007: 645).


*Political Context*
The political landscape before and during the debate on internment in Northern Ireland was rapidly changing in the early part of the 1970s. On the unionist side, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) experienced a growing

internal division as well as increasing opposition from other unionist parties, in particular by Rev. Ian Paisley and his Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), founded in September 1971. DUP soon became an important force in Northern Irish politics and a persistent threat to the traditional dominance of the UUP. The UUP was also challenged by a new right-wing pressure group, Ulster Vanguard, and several loyalist paramilitary groups, such as Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and Ulster Defence Association (UDA). On the other side of the political spectrum, the UUP also lost supporters to a new moderate and liberal party founded in April 1970. This party, called the Alliance Party, gained support from a section of liberal Unionists who had left the UUP and from some former members of the Labour party. The party hoped to draw support from both Protestants and Catholics.

On the nationalist side, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), founded in August 1970, rapidly became the most important political force rapidly surpassing the old Nationalist party. It presented itself as a radical, left-of-centre party and was backed by former supporters of the Nationalist party, as well as the civil rights movement. The other strand within nationalist politics, the republican movement, was in 1970 split on the issue of recognition of the Belfast and Dublin Parliaments. The party Sinn Fein then became two parties: Official Sinn Fein (for recognition), and Provisional Sinn Fein (against recognition).[2] The Official party had a pronounced Marxist approach, whereas the Provisional party, linked to the Provisional IRA, predominately focused on the demand for British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.

An increasing militarisation and polarisation ran parallel to ever more focus on security measures, and the Unionist government decided to introduce internment in Northern Ireland on 9 August 1971. The decision to use internment was defended as a necessary step in the fight against the increasing IRA violence, but internment came under immediate attack. Nationalist and republican groups, as well as the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), protested, and an anti-internment campaign was launched. People were urged not to pay rent and rates, and nationalist representatives withdrew from local

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[2] The political activities of the Official Sinn Fein were in the first half of the 1970s conducted under the label Republican Clubs.

councils. At the same time, the number of riots and the level of violence rose to new dimensions.[3]

Following the suspension of the Northern Ireland government in February 1972, internment was continued by the British government, which operated internment (or detention as it was re-named) until 5 December 1975. Between August 1971 and December 1975, 1,981 people were interned: 107 loyalists, and 1,874 republicans. The number of internees reached its peak in late March 1972, when 924 people were held (*Irish Times* 6 December 1975).

In the following, I have chosen to group my findings into four sets of "legitimising collectives": "A loyal people," "a responsible people," "a moral people" and "a risen people." However, this general pattern was muddled by complexities which will be discussed during the analysis. I will stress that these groups are my constructions, established on the basis of overall patterns and tendencies.

*A Loyal People*

The term "loyal people" appears in the statements of several groups, the Democratic Unionist Party, Vanguard, and the loyalist paramilitaries in particular. These groups disagreed on the issue of internment with the DUP being against it from the start, whereas Vanguard mainly supported it, at least in the first phase. The loyalist paramilitaries became particularly involved in the debate on internment after the internment of the first loyalists in February 1973. This led to immediate riots and loyalists called a one-day general strike with the backing of the Loyalist Association of Workers (LAW), the UDA and several other loyalist paramilitary groups. What DUP, Vanguard and the loyalist groups had in common is that they identified a collective characterised by "loyalty" as a key virtue—a collective which these groups communicated with and from which they built authority as representatives of "the people."

The virtue of "loyalty" was highlighted by the frequent use of the term "loyalist" and "loyal." Vanguard contended that it was speaking for "the vast section of loyalist opinion," when it argued against the release

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[3] The trend was to continue: In the two years prior to internment, 66 people were killed; in the first 17 months of internment, the number had risen almost tenfold to 610 (Dixon 2001: 118).

of nationalist internees (*News Letter* 10 August 1972). And when declaring a hunger strike against the internment of some of its members, the UDA explained that it hoped the hunger strikers' brave undertaking would "open the eyes of the loyalists" (*Irish News* 14 August 1973). DUP representatives also regularly appealed to "loyalists" and "loyal Protestants" to act in certain matters. For instance, "loyalists" were called to oppose internment *(Irish News* 21 February 1973),[4] and "loyal Protestants" were requested to reject violence (*Protestant Telegraph* 17 February 1973).

The meaning ascribed to the terms "loyalist" and "loyal" can also be traced through negative descriptions of "the other," those being disloyal. It was, for example, claimed by Vanguard that the Northern Ireland secretary, William Whitelaw, had gone out of his way to satisfy the minority, which had not the welfare of Ulster at heart "as they have gone on record as saying that their aim is the unification of Ireland" (*News Letter* 10 August 1972). Loyalism was the negation of working towards a unification of Ireland; true loyalism was about defending Ulster against such attacks.

"The loyal people" were often portrayed as a persecuted people. Disloyal republican paramilitaries were assisted, while those loyally abiding the law were humiliated, the Londonderry Branch of Ulster Vanguard claimed (*News Letter* 18 July 1972). The persecution of "the loyal people" was not only carried out by the nationalists, but also by the Northern Ireland secretary and representatives of the Unionist establishment. The persecution from the representatives of the state was regarded as particularly unreasonable, because the loyalists' only "crime" was "the protection of Ulster." This representation of persecution fostered an image of the "loyal people," fighting a heroic battle against all odds. Ian Paisley vigorously proclaimed that he was absolutely confident that "no matter how the enemies of Ulster rally and conspire and no matter how many false friends we have who praise us today and betray us tomorrow; the loyalist people of Ulster are going to win this battle" (*News Letter* 19 February 1972).

Such declarations show that one of the main characteristics of "the loyal people" was its bond to Ulster. The term "Ulster" was regularly

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[4] Ken Gibson, chairman of the Ormeau Democratic Unionist Party Association. Gibson was at the time of the appeal detained in the Maze Prison.

employed in DUP statements, and it was to the "Ulster people" that Ian Paisley first and foremost felt responsibility. He argued that the Ulster people were being made second-class citizens and that DUP's duty would be to see that the Ulster people had the chance to become full citizens (*News Letter* 27 March 1972). Moreover, Paisley spoke of "Ulster's agony" (*News Letter* 10 August 1972), and alleged that the Unionist Party had failed in its duty to the people of Ulster (*Irish News* 27 November 1971).

The bond to Ulster was also underscored by both Vanguard and the UDA. When arguing against the release of republican internees, Vanguard claimed that it would not stand by and allow the final betrayal to take place, but was prepared to "lead the Ulster people to fight against such a conspiracy" (*News Letter* 10 August 1972). In another example, the UDA made use of the same term when objecting to internment being used against loyalists. It was claimed that the government used internment "not only to destroy the structure of the IRA but also to silence those who would speak and act in the defence of Ulster" (*Irish News* 14 August 1973).

The frequent use of the notion of "Ulster" situated "the people" in a particular geographical territory as well as in a historical and cultural setting. The application of the name "Ulster" was of course no coincidence; it had a particular resonance that, for instance, the term "Northern Ireland" had not. Ulster was the historical name of the northernmost province of Ireland and emphasised tradition and continuity in contrast to the modern invention of "Northern Ireland." The concept of Ulster thus denoted a unique identity and history, as different from the rest of the island.[5] Hence, as well as pointing to a geographical and historical location, the use of the term "Ulster" also authorised a specific reading of the history of partition and the process of establishing Northern Ireland—a reading that identified partition and the founding of Northern Ireland as the inevitable product of a unique "Ulsterness." In other words, the use of the term "Ulster" limited the legitimising

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[5] In particular the Ulster identity has been characterised by the strong perception of being under siege from a hostile minority inside the state and from what was seen as an aggressive neighbour in the south. The unionist identity has therefore been linked principally to the narrative of territoriality and the image of the garrison. See: Arthur 2001: 64; Deane 2003: 21; Anderson and Goodman 1998: 11.

collective—"the people"—to those sharing an allegation to the Northern Irish state and its history. Thus, on the one hand, the term "Ulster" activated mechanisms of exclusion to bar nationalists from "the people," and consequently from having a legitimising potential. On the other hand, it also activated objects of identification, thus linking together those included as worthy members of the "loyal people." Even though the Ulster Unionist Party was frequently criticised by DUP, Vanguard and UDA, the Ulster Unionists and their supporters were still regarded as persons to appeal to and to communicate with. They were considered to be a part of "the loyal people," and hence, in spite of the criticism directed at them, embodied legitimising potential.

In addition to the term "Ulster," there were other mechanisms working in the same manner. One of these was the repeated emphasising of "Protestantism" as a hallmark of "the loyal people." To those suggesting talks with the IRA, the Reverend William McCrea of the DUP declared: "Any man who calls himself a Protestant, and would attempt to sit at a table with the IRA murderers, is no Loyalist or true to the Protestant cause. We must be strong" (*Sunday News* 11 June 1972). True Protestantism was the same as loyalism, and speaking to the IRA was a negation of both. As shown in the quotation, "Protestants" corresponds to "we," and such use of plain words like "we," "us" and "our" intensified the image of "the loyal people" as a united group. This line of reasoning can also be illustrated by a quotation from James Rodgers, a member of the Vanguard executive, who when the first loyalists were interned in February 1973, observed that: "This will be looked on as a watershed. It shows that the law is being turned against us. More and more Protestants are going to be picked up, and in the face of this threat new moves for unity will almost certainly come" (*The Times* 6 February 1973).

Rodgers spoke of the laws being turned against "us" and then in the following sentence identified "Protestants" as the next to be picked up by the security forces. In doing so he identified "us" as "Protestants." This type of discourse not only created an image of a united Protestant people, but pointed to the existence of "they"—"the other"—which in a Northern Ireland context would read as "Catholics."

What about those who were not "one of us": who were they? In general, "Catholics" and "nationalists" were rarely referred to in the statements of DUP, Vanguard or UDA. Neither the Catholic people nor

the nationalist parties were regarded as people it was necessary to appeal to. The image of "the other" was thus first and foremost an image of disloyalty: Catholics/nationalists were the enemies of Ulster because they conspired to create a united Ireland. They were the complete negation of "the loyal people." In the words of James McClelland of the DUP:

> The Protestant people of Northern Ireland have persistently demonstrated their loyalty to the British throne. They have helped and encouraged and supported Her Majesty's forces in the execution of their duties in the province. [. . .]. The Roman Catholics have consistently done the opposite. They have secretly and openly encouraged and fomented rebellion against our sovereign, and even in the last few days a large group of their clerics have launched a diatribe of abuse at the troops. (*Irish Times* 22 November 1972)

The enemy was in some cases named more specifically, as when Ian Paisley hit out against the civil rights movement: "It will be a day when the boom of the Civil Rights movement will be smashed forever" (*News Letter* 19 February 1972). Yet, in most cases the enemy was labelled in more general terms, such as Paisley's description of nationalists as the Irish prime minister's "cohorts in Ulster" (*News Letter* 10 August 1971). The Republic of Ireland was described by DUP representatives as "a neighbouring hostile republic" (*Belfast Telegraph* 17 December 1971), and "a hostile country, sheltering murderers" (*Belfast Telegraph* 26 February 1973). A Co. Down branch of the DUP went so far as suggesting that since the IRA and its sympathisers were destroying Ulster, the government should "deport all Irish foreigners, both in Britain and in Ulster, who were not British citizens or loyal to the British Crown" (*News Letter* 29 August 1972).

The accounts of the DUP leaders contain few signs of any nuances and gradations in the image of Catholics/nationalists.[6] Both the SDLP and republican groups were portrayed as part and parcel of the one enemy. The SDLP leaders were, for instance, branded the spokespeople of the IRA *(News Letter* 26 November 1973). It did not matter that the SDLP condemned the actions of the IRA, McCrea argued, because

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[6] I have found some exceptions. For example, one where Paisley stresses that also Catholics live in fear of the IRA (*Irish Times* 24 February 1972), and another where William Craig underlines that also many Catholics were against the IRA (*The Times* 12 February 1973).

"although they strenuously deny any connection with the IRA, their goal and negotiating terms are the same" (*Irish Times* 22 June 1972).

As shown above, there was an inclination to present Catholics/nationalists as one monolithic group. This group had no legitimising potential; it was not appealed to, and no attempt was made to represent it.[7] The largest unionist party, the UUP, however, did not fully partake in the legitimising collective of the "loyal people." Instead its statements appealed to the "responsible people" for legitimacy.

*The "Responsible People"*
On introducing internment, Prime Minister Brian Faulkner assured his listeners that:

> This is not action taken against any responsible and law-abiding section of the community [. . .]. Its benefits should be felt not least in those areas where violent men have exercised a certain sway by threat and intimidation over decent and responsible men and women. (*Belfast Telegraph* 9 August 1971)

Here Faulkner divided the population of Northern Ireland into a responsible majority and a violent minority. The decision to introduce internment was necessary for the protection of "decent people" (*Daily Mail* 16 September 1971). Faulkner wished to safeguard a collective whose defining qualities were "responsibility," "decency" and "innocence." These features sum up the collective that most Ulster Unionist representatives appealed to, and drew authority from. But what did it mean to be "responsible"?

"The responsible people" were presented as a "non-violent" people—not in the sense that they were pacifists, but in the sense that they rejected non-state violence. It was regularly pointed out by the UUP that most of the people of Northern Ireland were opposed to violence. James Molyneaux asserted that "The vast majority of Ulster citizens want to live at peace" (Letter in *The Times* 16 August 1971), and Brian Faulkner agreed: "[. . .] the people causing violence, and I would say that they are but a tiny fraction of the population—are not in the least

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[7] Alan Finlayson has carried out a somewhat analogous analysis of loyalist discourse on "the people" after 1994, and his findings to a certain degree indicate continuity in the loyalist construction of "the people" (Finlayson 1997).

interested in reform" (*Irish Times* 27 November 1971). When Faulkner explained the reasons for introducing internment, he emphasised that the measure had not been directed against Roman Catholics as a religious group, but against the organisations that sponsored and practiced violence *(Guardian* 16 September 1971): "We are quite simply at war with the terrorists [. . .]. We are now acting to remove the shadow of fear which hangs over too many of you" (*Belfast Telegraph* 9 August 1971). The first sentence separated the population of Northern Ireland into good ("we"—the majority) and evil (the terrorist minority). The identification of an extensive collective of "ordinary people," who were not terrorists, served to provide weight and democratic authority to the decision of introducing internment. The "decent" majority was highly praised when Faulkner in 1973 summed up the previous troubled year:

> The one bright aspect of the Ulster scene since 1972 was to be found in the indomitable strength of human character displayed in the steadiness of the ordinary people of the Province, who carried on their lives and work in the face of every danger and discouragement. (*News Letter* 23 February 1972)

But who were *not* being included in the "vast majority"? First of all, they were obviously the IRA. One might also add members of the People's Democracy and the civil rights association, since several of them were interned—and correctly so, according to the UUP. Whereas Faulkner and many representatives condemned loyalist violence, other party representatives also argued that the loyalist groups were merely defending their country (see for example, Austin Ardill, UUP, *Irish Times* 25 July 1974). Consequently, some UUP statements included loyalist paramilitaries in "the responsible people," whereas others assigned them to "the violent minority."

The UUP often tried to go beyond the Catholic-Protestant dualism. On the whole, Unionist representatives, and Faulkner in particular, emphasised the importance of "non-sectarianism" as a feature of responsibility. "Non-sectarianism" was closely linked to issues such as neutrality and religious bias. In a debate with SDLP leader, Gerry Fitt, Faulkner declared that there was no justification for any kind of sectarianism in the courts, and he asserted that there never had been a single Act passed that went against people on the grounds of religion (*Irish Times* 15 April 1972). Faulkner strongly denied claims that the internment of Catholics only showed religious bias on behalf of the

Northern Ireland government. On the contrary, it was those who argued against internment who were guilty of such bias:

> Nor has internment any religious basis or bias. Those who proclaim that it has should reflect that it is surely sectarian to say "I am against Mr. X being interned because he is my co-religionist." Which is more important—Mr. X's church affiliations, if he has any, or his involvement in arson, murder and destruction? (*News Letter* 13 September 1971)

Faulkner insisted that sectarian separation of people as Catholic and Protestant was inadmissible because the conflict in Northern Ireland was not about religion: The essential conflict was between democracy on the one hand, and the terrorism on the other (*Irish Times* 27 November 1971; see also *Irish Times*, 13 September 1971). Faulkner pointed out that the whole Ulster community—Catholic and Protestant—was suffering from "the campaign of violence" (*Irish Times* 13 September 1971). Moreover, most Catholics were not against the state, he argued. There was, Faulkner claimed "a desire among the vast majority of the Catholic population to play their part not only in eradicating the cancer of terrorism from the community, but in co-operating with the work of achieving economic and social progress" (*Irish News* 11 September 1971). Faulkner reminded the reader that for 50 years the Catholic population had remained in Northern Ireland and multiplied, and that their MPs had played a part in Parliament (*Irish Times* 15 April 1972). Thus, when the Catholic population did not speak out against the IRA, this was only a result of fear and intimidation, Faulkner argued (see for example *Belfast Telegraph* 9 August 1971, and *Irish Times* 27 November 1971; see also *Irish Times* 15 April 1972).

The "responsible people" of the UUP thus differed from the "loyal people" of Vanguard, DUP and the loyalist paramilitaries. Whereas these groups stressed the significance of religious affiliation, Faulkner and the UUP toned down the religious difference and the traditional Catholic/nationalist-Protestant/unionist dualism. This had two significant effects connected to the question of legitimacy. Firstly, the statements produced an image of the majority of Catholics as "decent people," as persons worth representing and appealing to. Secondly, the Northern Ireland government was portrayed as an inclusive, non-sectarian and representative government, keen to listen to—and to represent—the wishes of the vast majority of the country's people. Hence, in this way

"the responsible people" appeared as a quite inclusive legitimising collective, excluding only a tiny violent minority.

Some UUP statements, however, told a different story. These statements primarily concerned general condemnations of both nationalist political organisations, and Catholics in general, for not co-operating with the institutions of the state. Other criteria for the inclusion in the "responsible people" were thereby introduced, producing a somewhat more exclusive legitimising collective. For example, Faulkner hit out at the nationalist boycott of the Stormont Parliament, and the rent and rates strike introduced after internment ("Statement of the Government of Northern Ireland" 21 September 1971). The Catholic community, or at least a large part of it, was branded as a sectarian community discharging its obligations (*News Letter* 13 September 1971).

It is significant that while the term "Catholics" was employed frequently, the term "Protestant" rarely figured in the UUP statements. When it did appear, it was predominantly in relation to the violence of the IRA, under which "the whole Ulster community—Catholic and Protestant—was suffering" (*Irish Times* 13 September 1971. See also *Belfast Telegraph* 9 August 1971; and James Molyneaux, *The Times* 16 August 1971).

The "absence" of the term "Protestant" has two, partly contradictory, implications. On the one hand, it could imply a rejection of "Protestantism," as a suitable symbol of "the responsible people." This of course fits into the image of "a responsible people" transcending religious divisions. Yet, if this was the case, one might ask why the term "Catholics" appeared so regularly? By employing this term, the religious division was inevitably evoked, even though the other half of the traditional dualism was not mentioned. A further possible implication was that Protestantism invoked a universalistic image, whereas the image of Catholicism was "particular" or "restricted." Gender studies regularly point out how women have been viewed as a particularised "second" sex, while men have been granted the position of representing universal qualities connected to being human (see for instance de Beauvoir 1994). It is possible to trace a similar line of reasoning in the UUP statements presented above. It was unnecessary to declare the existence of "Protestantism" because it was taken for granted; it was the norm to which everything else was compared, evaluated and determined.

These implications are reinforced by the regular use of the term "Ulster" to epitomise Northern Ireland in UUP statements, as we saw earlier in the statements of the DUP and Vanguard. James Molyneaux wrote in a letter to *The Times* of "terrorism in Ulster," "the vast majority of Ulster" and "Ulster citizens" (*The Times* 16 August 1971). In a similar manner, Faulkner spoke of "the problems of Ulster" and "the Ulster community" (*Irish Times* 13 September 1972).

Like the UUP, the Alliance Party also combined a quite inclusive and pluralist ethos, with a dual image of Catholics as simultaneously responsible and irresponsible. Oliver Napier for instance warned that "there is one issue, and only one issue, upon which virtually every Catholic without exception, moderate and extremist, anti-partition and pro-partition, is united, and that is an almost psychopathic revulsion and fear of internment" (*Belfast Telegraph* 12 August 1971). He continued, attempting to explain to Protestants the behaviour of the Catholic community:

> Many decent Protestants may find Catholic reaction to internment childish and irrational. Maybe it is. It is the result of history and environment [. . .]. Remember that [. . .] internment has never been used against Protestants and therefore they can consider it without emotion. (*Belfast Telegraph* 12 August 1971)

It is obvious that the Alliance spokesman tried here to put the behaviour of the Catholic community in perspective and to rationalise an apparently "irrational" conduct. His attempt at explanation might thus be viewed as a sign of inclusion. However, the statement also produced exclusion, when referring to the Catholic community such as "almost psychopathic," "childish" and "irrational." Catholics were thus being identified as "not rational Protestants." This "deficit" was "excused" by historical developments, but this did not change the fact that Catholics were evaluated and defined by their deficiency.

In short, both the UUP and the Alliance party presented an ambiguous legitimising collective: on some occasions Catholics were included in "the responsible people," on other occasions they were excluded. It is neither possible nor desirable to determine which of the two images of "the responsible people" constitutes the "essence" of the legitimising collective in the UUP statements. The two images existed side by side in the debate. A similar ambiguity was displayed in the

statements of moderate nationalism in the SDLP, to which we shall now turn.

*A Moral People*

Shortly after the introduction of internment, John Hume of the SDLP stressed that throwing stones or petrol bombs, or using guns in a confrontation with the British Army was pointless. In his speeches, Hume consistently imagined a people characterised by fighting spirit, moral courage, suffering and non-violence (see for example *Sunday Press* 22 August 1971; and *Irish Times* 27 September 1971). Through the identification of and association with "a moral people," Hume's messages of non-violence and responsible resistance gained significance, confidence and authority.

The notion of "moral" serves as an overall indicator of several virtues characterising the "legitimising people," as portrayed in the statements of the SDLP. These statements appealed to, and obtained authority from a collective characterised by three basic features: non-violent protest, pluralism and suffering. The statements defined two different sets of in-groups and out-groups, whose composition depended on the issues being raised: The statements concerning non-violence and pluralism mostly created a dualism between "the vast majority" of people who condemned violence, and a tiny minority who employed violence. The statements concerning suffering and oppression, however, put forth other criteria of inclusion and exclusion.

The SDLP identified a people fighting against injustice, a people whose minds were firmly set on creating a new society. Paddy O'Hanlon warned the Unionist government that "[. . .] our hearts are hardened, and we will bring this corrupt system to an end in the near future" (*Irish Times* 24 August 1971). Such statements supported an image of a people who were confident, politically aware and ready for action. The people had to act responsibly and constructively, Eddie McGrady argued: "We must hold ourselves ready to act with responsibility and courage in the debate on the political future of this province, being at all times prepared to act for the good of the whole community" (*Irish News* 1 December 1973). Hence, the SDLP statements presented a legitimising collective of supposed high morality and a constructive political outlook. But who were "the moral people"? Let us take a closer look at the collectives

emerging in the statements of non-violence and see whether these were judged to be allies or enemies.

It followed from the message of anti-violence that the perpetrators of violence were fiercely condemned, and this covered both paramilitaries and the security forces. This implied that in some cases the distinction was drawn between those who supported the security forces versus those who did not, whereas on other occasions the main line of division went between those who supported the paramilitaries versus the non-violent majority. In the first case, most unionists were excluded, in the second case, the supporters of paramilitary violence were excluded.

It is significant that "the extremists" most frequently condemned by the SDLP were the IRA. The persistent and strong verbal attacks on the IRA strengthened the impression of a fight between a non-violent majority and a violent minority, in other words a fight that transcended the traditional dualism of Protestant/unionist and Catholic/nationalist. The situation in Northern Ireland was defined as a common struggle of the majority of innocent people, Protestant and Catholic, against violent extremists. Thus Gerard Fitt claimed: "We are just as horrified as the Protestant majority by the murderous attacks in which innocent civilians from both religions have been injured and killed" (*The Times* 30 September 1971).[8]

The transcending of the traditional Protestant/Catholic dualism was confirmed by the SDLP's focus on pluralism. The party's primary goal was the creation of a truly pluralist society, north and south (*Irish News* 1 December 1973). It sought to develop a society in Northern Ireland with "a genuine sharing of responsibility" (*The Times* 30 September 1971). Fitt underlined that they did not "seek to humiliate, coerce or discriminate against the Protestant majority because we have had quite enough of that ourselves" (*The Times* 30 September 1971). The importance of a cross-community approach was emphasised by Eddie McGrady in an appeal for an IRA ceasefire:

> In this area there are no victors. Only a broken people will remain, embittered, dour and hate-filled [. . .]. A love of one's country is a terrible thing—a terrible thing for

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[8] See also Paddy Devlin, quoted in *Belfast Telegraph* 24 November 1973; Eddie McGrady quoted in *Irish News* 1 December 1973; John Hume quoted in *Irish News* 1 December 1973, and Paddy Duffy quoted in *Irish Independent* 2 April 1974.

> good and for evil. At this time a love of one's country demands peace not war. I ask, not for me, not for the SDLP, or Unionist, not for any factions, but for this nation once proud, once honoured. (*Irish News* 1 December 1973)

The SDLP devoted many of its statements to allaying the fears of "the Protestant community." This was regarded as a necessity if peace were to be achieved in Northern Ireland. Hume argued that the history of Anglo-Irish relations showed that the problem could only be solved when the fears of the Protestant community were overcome. He asked Catholics to recognise that they were asking a lot of "the Protestant people of the North," and requested them to applaud "the generosity of those who agreed to a consensus" (*Irish Times* 3 December 1973). To calm Protestant fears, it was necessary to change the "moral codes" in the Republic of Ireland. The SDLP deplored what they regarded as an enshrinement of exclusively Catholic moral codes in the laws of the Irish Republic, and underscored the need to build a "new Ireland" (*Irish News* 1 December 1973).

Although these references to Protestant fears indicate that the SDLP's notion of "the legitimising people" included unionists, other statements point in a different direction. I refer here to the party's remarks on the verbal attacks on the unionist movement in the internment debate. Statements concerning the "unionist regime" dealt primarily with oppression and suffering of Catholics, and generated a different legitimising collective from that presented above. They involved other criteria for the inclusion as "one of us" that served to generate a predominantly non-unionist, Catholic legitimising collective.

Statements issued during the rent and rates strike illustrate this point. The strike was enthusiastically supported by the SDLP, and in a joint statement with the Nationalist Party, the Republican Labour Party and NICRA, they called on the general public to participate in the protest by immediately withholding all rents and rates: "We expect this from all opponents of internment and all opponents of the Unionist regime" (*News Letter* 10 August 1971. See also *Irish News* 10 August 1971). To be part of the in-group—"one of us"—one had to be willing to take part in an unlawful protest, as well as being opposed to internment and the Unionist regime. This obviously created a far more exclusive in-group than that of the "vast majority of non-violent people" presented earlier. By stressing the support of the rents and rates strike, as a crucial sign of true allegiance, a clear message was sent out: To reject the strike, was

not only to reject the campaign against internment, but also to reject "membership" in the collective as such.[9]

The image of the Catholic community as a suffering people oppressed by "the Unionist regime" was a recurrent and very striking symbol in the statements of moderate nationalism. Intertwined with the ideal of non-violence, "suffering" was portrayed as one of the main sources of morality (see for example John Hume: *Irish Times* 27 September 1971). John Hume and the SDLP pointed to the moral force of suffering, thus establishing a legitimising collective that included primarily Catholics and excluded Protestants. Since the suffering was viewed as orchestrated by "the unionist regime," the traditional dualism of nationalists and unionists was thus redefined as sufferers and oppressors.[10]

The two different kinds of legitimising collectives presented in the statements of the SDLP existed side by side during the debate on internment. But the collective of suffering tended to appear more frequently in the debate's early phases, while the collective of non-violence gained force with passing time. This trend paralleled changes in the role of the SDLP in Northern Irish politics. In the early phase of internment the party boycotted the elected institutions and declined to co-operate with the Unionist government, but from late 1972 and onwards, SDLP's involvement in the power-sharing Executive seems to have paved the way for a more inclusive approach.

### A Risen People

> For further changes there must surely be, if we are to have a society where the ordinary man's lot in life is to be improved. Flags and slogans are no cure for an empty stomach, and the ordinary man, having borne the brunt of the suffering over the past few years against the might of the British Army, must assert his will on the wily politicians who, even now, are snarling at each other in their attempt to claim political capital from a false victory. [. . .]. People have not forgotten how their

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[9] A similar effect was produced by the employment of the term "Irish" in some of the SDLP statements. Gerard Fitt, for instance, claimed in a TV debate with Brian Faulkner: "The people of NI were Irish and in the final analysis the only integration which would bring an end to the troubles would be integration with the rest of the island" (Fitt quoted in *Irish Times* 15 April 1972).

[10] For more on the construction of victimhood, see Rosland 2009.

peaceful legitimate demands were met with the full range of State-controlled violence from the batons of an ill-disciplined, sectarian and special police force. (Statement of the Long Kesh Camp Council. *Irish News* 25 April 1972)

This was how the internees in the internment camp Long Kesh portrayed the prospects of "the ordinary man" in Northern Ireland. The ordinary people—who had "borne the brunt of suffering"—were encouraged to rise against the establishment to improve their lives. An initial success was expected: "A united campaign of the risen people against repression and sectarianism will defeat Britain's plans for this country and destroy totally the basis of Unionism" (Joint statement by internees in Crumlin Prison *Irish News* 23 August 1971. See also statement from internees in Long Kesh, *Irish News* 5 January 1972).

Here, we see a fourth legitimising collective, "the risen people," which dominated in the statements of the internees and several republican and civil rights groups.[11] These groups constructed a rebellious collective of "ordinary," or "working class," people. Most statements represented the campaign against internment as a fight between the people on one side, and the political and economical establishment on the other. Nevertheless, the statements also precipitated other sets of in-groups and out-groups, their structure depending on the issues being raised.

Many statements of the internees and the republican groups were linked to a broader narrative of class conflict. Hence, "the risen people" were first and foremost a working-class people. The internees condemned the terror, imprisonments and destruction of working-class homes (Statement from internees in Long Kesh, *Irish News* 29 January 1972), and considered internment "an attack by the governing party on a section of the working class of the same community, on the Falls, Ballymurphy, Ardoyne, Duncairn and increasingly, on the Shankill Road" (*Belfast Telegraph* 27 January 1972). The Republican Clubs alleged that the Special Powers were used by the British government to "put down any and all sections of the working-class whatever their reasons for opposition" (*Irish News* 31 January 1974). It was insisted that only through "unity of the working class and united action against repression will the people achieve justice" (*Irish News* 31 January 1974).

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[11] NICRA, People's Democracy, Republican Clubs (Official Republicans) and Provisional Sinn Fein.

But although a socialist republic was the eventual goal, the Republican Clubs were also eager to rally behind short-term goals:

> The present demands of the people are—and have been since the Civil Rights Association first attacked the Stormont totalitarian system—for peace, justice and democracy for all. While we are convinced that these aims are only truly obtainable when a socialist republic is established, we as a movement of the people support whatever short-term gains the people may obtain, congratulating them on their solidarity, dedication and refusal to be intimidated by the repressive Stormont regime supported by the British Government. (Statement from Long Kesh coordinating committee of Republican Clubs, *Irish News* 4 April 1972. See also *Irish Times* 28 July 1972)

Although this quotation presents an overall message of inclusion, "the people" were related to several specific defining characteristics: the support of the civil rights movement, socialism and opposition to the Stormont regime and the British government.

Nevertheless, the statements emanating from the anti-internment coalition generally defended inclusion and non-sectarianism. The Republican Clubs strongly emphasised that they fought for policies that would benefit the working class, no matter what their creed (*Irish News* 11 September 1971). The Provisional IRA argued that the voice of the working class, demonstrated through loyalist groups and the republican movement, had to be heard and listened to (*Irish News* 2 July 1974). NICRA and the People's Democracy underlined the importance of campaigning for the release of *all* internees: "We will not support sectarian demands for the release of Protestant or Catholic internees alone" (*Irish News* 7 July 1973).

Through emphasising universalism and stressing the class character of the internment issue, many statements of the anti-internment coalition challenged the traditional unionist/Protestant-nationalist/Catholic dualism. The enemy of the "ordinary man" was presented as the reactionary forces of unionism (*Irish News* 29 January 1972), the sectarian state (see *Irish News* 12 January 1972; 4 April 1972; 2 January 1973), the British Army (see *Irish News* 11 September 1971; 28 March 1972; 2 July 1974, and *Irish Times* 28 July 1972), and the economic elite (*Sunday Press* 5 September 1971). The enemy was perceived as the Unionist political and elite, not Protestants as such. Some statements also pointed to the leaders of the SDLP as part of this elite, a criticism that was triggered by the SDLP taking seats in the power-sharing Executive

after the Sunningdale Agreement, signed in December 1973. When the SDLP reversed its earlier policy and recommended an end to the rent and rates strike, the party was accused of collusion with the Unionist elite: "Now that they are in the new Assembly they are in power. They are now the jailers. They are now interning the people. The people must realise this and act by maintaining the rent and rates strike" (*Irish News* 4 January 1974).[12] From this moment on the SDLP was clearly not regarded as a part of the "risen people": the people were urged to ignore SDLP talk of moderation and instead rise against the establishment.

How, then, were "the risen people" to engage in rebellion? Descriptions of the revolt of "the risen people" were partly formed as appeals to "the people" to engage in protests ("we ask the people"); partly as an appreciation of the work "the people" had already done ("we thank the people," and partly as an assertion of "facts" about the attitudes of the people ("the demands of the people are"). As to what constituted the proper means of revolt, the groups offered somewhat different perspectives. Whereas the civil rights movement and the Republican Clubs both preferred political action, the Provisional republicans considered violence a necessary and legitimate device. Nevertheless, in spite of these differences, the statements concur on the idealised way of rebellion against internment: Participation in street protests and the rent and rates strike. In the words of the chairman of the Maidstone branch of NICRA: "We believe the greatest weapons of the people in the campaign are the civil resistance and disobedience" (*Irish News* 15 September 1971).[13]

The fight against internment was viewed as a common struggle involving political groups, the internees and the people. When some internees were released early in 1972, Bernadette Devlin invoked this combination of strength, by paying tribute to the courage and determination of "the men behind the wire, people who stood solid with them and the resistance campaign" (*News Letter* 8 April 1972). It seemed to be the function of the various organisations to help the people to organise their struggle (*Sunday Press* 5 September, 1971). But, it was made clear that it was "the people" who were the key to success: the

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[12] The internees had also earlier alleged that the SDLP attitude to internment had softened. See statement of Long Kesh internees, *Irish News* 9 May 1973.

[13] See also Provisional Sinn Fein statement: "Civil disobedience must be renewed [. . .]" (Quoted in *Irish News* 8 November 1972).

people's support was regarded as generous and invaluable (*Irish News* 9 November 1972) and it was only action by the people which could win justice (*Irish Times* 28 July 1972). It was underlined that the fight was the people's own fight, not somebody else's: "You owe it to yourselves and your children," the internees claimed, at the same time affirming their own commitment to the cause and thus setting the standard of dedication: "We are prepared to do our time" (Statement of internees in Long Kesh *Irish News,* 9 May 1973).

Hence, "the risen people" ought to work with the internees and the political organisations supporting the internees. In this coalition, the people, the internees and the organisations had different functions: The role of the internees was one of setting standards of commitment, the role of the people was to rebel, and the role of the political organisations was to help the people organising their campaign.

Since the campaign was presented as a joint struggle where everyone had a significant role, it also produced an identity for those supporting the campaign. Both those inside the internment camps and those outside belonged to the same people. For example, the internees called on: "[. . .] our people, badly pressed though they be, to stand up against this new despicable form of tyranny and corrupt government" (*Irish News* 8 November 1972). The use of the pronoun "our" is significant. The term "our people" points to an already existing bond between the internees and "the people," a bond that would be confirmed and renewed by supporting the campaign against internment.

But how did this emphasis on "the risen people" as a rebellious people activate mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion? To be included in "the risen people," one had to be against the state, as well as the unionist (and to a certain degree the nationalist) establishment. In addition, one had to be ready to participate in illegal actions and support the activities of the civil rights movement or similar organisations. Hence the "requirements" clearly worked to exclude unionists, for the quintessence of unionism was the support of the state. A similar tendency to exclude unionists was evident in the statements on suffering. The issue of victimhood predominantly constructed the collectivity of "the risen people" more along the lines of the traditional dualism.

Several statements of the republican groups additionally made use of the term "Irish" to characterise "the risen people." In a New Year's message the internees in Long Kesh stated: "We know that we are

echoing the most fervent wish of all the Irish people when we hope that this year will bring peace to our community and to our country" (*Irish News* 5 January 1972). The Provisional IRA claimed in a similar statement: "The demand from all sides was for an end to internment. If this was what the Irish people wanted then this is what they are entitled to" (*Irish News* 2 July 1974). The Republican Clubs also employed the term "Irish" in their statements, arguing that: "the Irish people must control their own lives politically, economically and culturally," in a society "whose laws will not permit discrimination on the basis of religion, in which Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter will rejoice equally in the common name of Irishman" (*Irish Times* 10 December 1971).

The discourse of the anti-internment coalition thus reveals a significant ambiguity in the coalition's approach to inclusiveness. On the one hand, the statements idealised non-sectarianism and universalism, portraying a legitimising collective that could include Protestants. Yet, on the other hand, the statements applied the term "Irish," apparently ignoring the fact that there hardly were any Protestants in the public debate that explicitly identified themselves as "Irish." And when commenting upon the unionist rejection of an Irish identity, some republican statements almost insisted on Protestants being Irish. Thomas MacGiolla of the Republican Clubs said he utterly rejected the notion that the Protestants of Northern Ireland were not part of the Irish nation (*Sunday Press* 5 September 1971), and Maire Drumm, vice-president of Provisional Sinn Fein, confirmed the ethnic bond: "We have always said we would talk to our Loyalist brethren. They are Irish as we are" (*Irish News* 5 April 1974).

The republican position thus resembles that of the Unionist government, whose "responsible people" claimed to have the support of most Catholics, even though little support really came forward. Statements like these displayed an apparent inclusiveness, but were built on an ignorance of difference: an ignorance that made the preferred identity—"Irish" or "Ulster"—look more inclusive.

## *Legitimacy, Identity and Conceptual Gerrymandering*

> A society needs a system of legitimation and, in seeking for it, always looks to a point of origin from which it can derive itself and its practices [. . .]. But the search for origin, like that for identity is self-contradictory. Once the origin is understood to

> be an invention, it can never again be thought of as something "natural." A culture brings itself into being by an act of cultural invention that itself depends on an anterior legitimating nature. (Seamus Deane 1990: 17)

The current article has aimed at exploring how the system of democratic legitimation and its relation to identity rests on the tension between the identification of a "natural" origin, on the one hand, and on the continuous acts of invention, on the other. The study has examined how the concept of "the people" was used by various political groups in the debate on internment in Northern Ireland. I found that the loyalist statements most frequently appealed to and idealised "a loyal people," a people characterised by being Protestant, faithful to the state and loyal to Ulster. The Unionist party was more ambiguous: Whereas the party appealed to and claimed to represent the vast majority of people, "the responsible people" were regularly restricted to those supporting the existing state of Northern Ireland. Moderate nationalism demonstrated a similar ambiguity: SDLPs "moral people," proposed to include "the vast majority of non-violent people," but the people idealised in the statements were frequently limited to Catholics victimised by the Unionist regime. The republican groups also presented "the risen people," through a dual and ambiguous set of characteristics, appealing both to the working class "no matter what creed," and to a common Irish identity.

The historical identities being emphasised in the debate on internment were mainly an Ulster identity and an Irish identity. Neither the Irish nor the Ulster identity was perceived as constructed by those who declared their commitment to them; the identities were simply seen as reflecting existing realities. In this sense these identities are predicated on "forgetting" the history of how they are made (Bhabha 1990: 311).[14]

The notion of "the people" thus has a key role to play in political discourse because it transforms political proposals into "collective requests" and in theory constitutes the concluding and unifying judge: the ultimate authority to which all proposals must concede. Judging from the extensive use of the concept, "the people" was indeed recognised as the fundamental source of legitimacy by the participants in the debate on internment. But through continual acts of "conceptual gerrymandering" the various political parties employed different and often exclusionary

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[14] See also Renan 1990: 11, and Calhoun 1995: 233-35.

concepts of "the people," thus producing a fragmented popular mandate and fundamentally widening the gulf between the groups.

The decision to introduce internment was meant to curb the escalating conflict in Northern Ireland, but, as shown above, the result was the exact opposite. When internment ended in late 1975, cease-fires had come and gone. Peace proposals had emerged and failed severely and more than 1,300 people had died.

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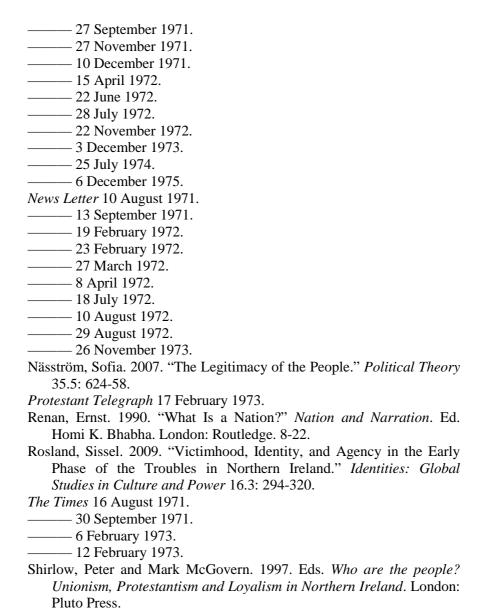
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