

THE LIMITS OF LIBERALISM: THE CASE OF QUEEN'S ACADEMICS AND THE 'TROUBLES'

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THIS article is concerned with analysing the role of those academics at Queen's University, Belfast (QUB), who are seen to represent part of the liberal ground in Northern Ireland. This is drawn out in terms of their individual desires and actions to understand, influence and change the nature of Northern Irish politics. First though we need to situate such academics in their institutional context.

Placing itself above the 'troubles', committed to a non-sectarian standpoint, Queen's University likes to see itself as essentially no different from any other British civic university. Thus, in the wake of the 'troubles', to maintain its position, Queen's has become especially concerned with the question of its national and international standing. In many ways, however, Queen's has a strong provincial character. This character is reflected in the local composition of Senate (Queen's Senate is the equivalent of the Council at most British universities), with its high level of interlock with Northern Irish big business, revealing an organic relationship between the University and the Northern Irish state (Taylor, 1986b). Senior administrative staff are also predominantly locals, but the most obvious respect in which Queen's is a provincial university is with regard to student intake.

Most students are from Belfast and from areas east of the river Bann. Of the new entrants in 1980-81, 31 per cent were from Belfast, with an additional 41 per cent from the counties of Antrim and Down (Chilver, 1982, Table 9.14). Queen's has never attracted a large number of students from outside Northern Ireland and in 1980-81 there were just 16 new entrants from Great Britain. Correspondingly, around Queen's, students' social networks are narrow and closed. Students are tied together in networks linking where they live and what school they went to. It is very much a 9 am to 5 pm university: the university precincts are very quiet after dark. There is a large measure of segregation between Protestant and Catholic students (Taylor, 1986a): a survey which asked 200 students to list ten friends found that 48 per cent made no mention of any one of the opposite religion. Whilst before the Second World War Catholics were under-represented amongst the student body (Cormack and Osborne, 1983, p 184), they are so no longer. By 1978-79, primarily as a hidden effect of the 'troubles', Catholic numbers had leapt to 42.5 per cent of the full-time undergraduate body, their representation being noticeably skewed towards the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences at 57.5 per cent (Taylor, 1986a).

Queen's has always admitted staff and students without regard to their religious background, but there does appear to be some anomaly in the fact that whilst among students Catholics are not currently under represented, the same cannot be said for the composition of the academic staff. Tables 1 and 2 reveal that the numbers and increases for Irish Catholics are low. While over the period 1968-69 to 1982-83, the (Irish) Protestant proportion has risen from 28.9 per cent to 40.4 per cent, the Catholic percentage has only moved up from 8 per cent to 10.3. It seems unreasonable to argue that Queen's practises discriminatory appointment procedures but the fact that the ratio of Irish Catholic to Protestant staff is actually worse in 1982-83 than in 1968-69 is a cause for concern and the issue has prompted an investigation by the Northern Ireland Fair Employment Agency (Taylor, 1986b).

Unlike the composition of the student body, academic staff are more cosmopolitan. For, in the desire to escape from its provincialism and to be seen as a British university, Queen's has always aimed to attract high calibre staff from national and international labour markets – the University has favoured Oxbridge applicants and staff (Whyte, 1983, p 12). Tables 1 and 2 show that, despite the deterrent of the 'troubles', in 1982-83, 41.7 per cent of academics were from Great Britain (as compared to 52.6 per cent in 1968-69). This representation is skewed towards the arts; there is in fact an English presence alone of around 50 per cent in the arts. Given that Queen's is primarily a science based university this is significant, because academics attracted to Queen's from outside the island of Ireland can be seen to fulfil the role of privileged

Table 1: Queen's full time academic staff by religion, 1968/9 (numbers)

| | NIRC | NIP | IRC | IP | GB | O/U | Total |
|-----------------------------------|------|-----|-----|----|-----|-----|-------|
| Professors | 1 | 14 | 2 | 2 | 50 | 5 | 74 |
| Readers and senior lecturers | 3 | 41 | 1 | 1 | 65 | 16 | 127 |
| Lecturers (incl. then assistants) | 22 | 73 | 9 | 7 | 136 | 29 | 276 |
| Total | 26 | 128 | 12 | 10 | 251 | 50 | 477 |

| | | |
|--|---|--------------|
| Irish (north and south) Catholics | = | 8.0% |
| Irish (north and south) Protestants | = | 28.9% |
| English, Scottish, Welsh, (GB) | = | 52.6% |

Table 2: Queen's full time academic staff by religion, 1982/3 (numbers)

| | NIRC | NIP | IRC | IP | GB | O/U | Total |
|------------------------------|------|-----|-----|----|-----|-----|-------|
| Professors | 7 | 34 | 3 | 5 | 56 | 3 | 108 |
| Readers and senior lecturers | 32 | 145 | 14 | 4 | 161 | 33 | 389 |
| Lecturers | 16 | 107 | 5 | 5 | 92 | 20 | 245 |
| Total | 55 | 286 | 22 | 14 | 309 | 56 | 742 |

| | | |
|--|---|--------------|
| Irish (north and south) Catholics | = | 10.3% |
| Irish (north and south) Protestants | = | 40.4% |
| English, Scottish, Welsh, (GB) | = | 41.7% |

● NIRC = Northern Ireland Catholics. NIP = Northern Irish Protestants. IRC = Southern Catholics. IP = Southern Protestants. O/U = others and unknown or where data insufficient.

arbiters, in the sense that they will inculcate the liberal values of objectivity, impartiality and open-mindedness in what is a highly charged political atmosphere. Preserving the conception of the university as the embodiment of liberal tradition, such academics can be expected to operate as a kind of buffer to keep local political issues and sensibilities out of the university environment.

More generally, to many people academics at Queen's represent part of the liberal, middle ground in Northern Ireland. But just what does this mean? To what extent are they aware of, and counter to, the sectarian division?

The University's position is that academic staff may exert their influence at an individual level as long as they make it clear:

that any opinions they express on political, religious and allied matters (other than those that fall within their professional competence) in the Press or when speaking on radio or television are their personal views only (Directive of Academic Council, 1974).

Pressure for any involvement by the University at the direct corporate level is ruled out. On the grounds that universities which play politics end up having politics played on them, Queen's has endeavoured to keep politics out:

Direct university involvement in society negates professional independence and academic style and proclivity and also jeopardises the *contract social* that gives autonomy to the university in return for its institutional neutrality (Froggatt, past QUB Vice-Chancellor, 1977, p 6).

As Kolakowski has observed, the only real defence a university has against political pressures is its recourse to political neutrality, 'though as a means, not as a goal in itself' (1975, p 80). At Queen's it is understood that academic staff should not compromise the neutrality of the University. But to what extent, at the individual level, do academics speak out? How great is their desire to understand, influence and change Ulster politics?

In talking of the liberal ground, we are referring more to English and other outside members of academic staff than to the local contingent. Some local academics are active in Northern Irish politics, and there is a spectrum of political opinion that covers nearly the whole range – from the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) to the fringes of the Protestant paramilitaries. Here the risks of taking a political stand are shown by what happened to two Queen's lecturers who were active in local political issues, both of whom had been supported or approvingly mentioned in the sectarian press (such papers as *Ulster* and *Republican News*). Miriam Daly, a lecturer in economic history, who was past President of the IRSP and on the National H-Blocks Committee, was shot dead. On 26 June 1980, 'Mrs Daly was bound by her hands and feet, and repeatedly shot through the head . . . There was no forced entry . . . Mrs Daly's body was found by her ten-year old daughter when she returned from school' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 27 June 1980). No one admitted responsibility for the killing, although some suspect possible British Army undercover involvement (Faligot, 1983 withdrawn, p 113). Then, on 7 December 1983, Edgar Graham, a lecturer in law and emerging intellectual force within the Unionist Party, had just got out of his car by the Faculty of Law when he was shot dead by the IRA. I arrived on the scene of the shooting within minutes. A large crowd of staff and students gathered; some were in tears and others were sombre and quiet.

Three Liberal Responses: Turning Inwards

As far as the liberal ground is concerned, we shall show that we can essentially distinguish three positions. There are some who do not fully connect liberal values to the Northern Ireland situation and are content to try and lead a normal life in South Belfast. There are however a few who do make connections, are concerned and attempt to take public issue stands. There are some who are also concerned but are silent as they see their path blocked.

In dissecting this liberal ground it emerges that some have no desire to obtain a deeper understanding of the conflict – let alone to act on any understanding – being content to try and lead a normal life in the environs of South Belfast. To understand this, we need to highlight the fact that Queen's is located in a distinctly middle-class district, well insulated from the 'troubles'. It is 'A Perfect Victorian Suburb': 'The University area is one of the city's greatest environmental assets and one of its most attractive suburbs' (*Country Life*, 23 June 1983). It is disturbed only by helicopters zooming overhead and Army vehicles driving along University Road on their way elsewhere. It is also the most cross-sectarian part of Belfast, with the University itself being (along with the newly formed University of Ulster) the most cross-sectarian institution in the Province. At Queen's the violence is glided over: 'I remember a Queen's professor telling me that he had no contact with the 'troubles' given where he lived and worked' (UK academic). Belfast can seem like living anywhere else and to some Queen's can resemble a 'little England' in which one's insistence on liberal democratic values and a secularised view of religion remains essentially unchallenged.

Reflective of this is the support, at Queen's, for the cross-sectarian Alliance Party, which stands for a non-sectarian definition of political issues. Alliance is stronger amongst Queen's staff than in Northern Ireland as a whole: in the 1987 general election, the party took 21 per cent of the South Belfast constituency vote compared to the party's overall 10 per cent. Several Queen's academics (and their spouses) have been or are active in the Alliance Party.

In this setting there is a lack of contact with conflictual sectarian beliefs. Most English and other outside academic staff interact socially with colleagues of a similar outlook. (Indeed many are advised not to talk to academics with strong committed views; I was informed by many Queen's lecturers 'You want to be careful who you talk to'.) Meantime their students attempt to submerge their sectarian values in the liberal and 'polite' environment of Queen's. Such academics find it hard to break into Northern Irish society:

I'm surprised at the lack of invitations I get to people's homes. Over here a lot of us become more insular, turn to our families, work harder, or drink more (QUB lecturer).

Many live in the Belfast 9, Malone area of Belfast, and, if they travel around Northern Ireland, tend to visit glens and beaches, not the Falls Road or the Bogside.

Those academics who occasionally venture into the sectarian abyss – usually from the comfort and security of their cars – find themselves in another, baffling world. For, outside the liberal orbit of the University environment, when they do come into contact with those who endorse committed sectarian positions, they rarely find their views directly challenged. An outsider who does not declare support for one side or the other is treated with suspicion. A liberal veneer may be put up or one may be ignored: 'In Northern Ireland you are considered futile or hollow if you don't express a committed opinion. You will be treated suspiciously or ignored' (UK reporter). Distance is maintained. Given that:

What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighbourhood; in other milieux, they move vicariously and remain spectators (Mills, 1959, p 3),

certain connections that exist between particular events and issues of social structure are not made. 'These things just happen'. Thus, for some within the world of 'little England' the political order within Northern Ireland can escape critical examination, being merely assumed as a quite distant framework.

Ineffectual Involvement

Some, however, do connect their liberal values to issues of social structure, being concerned about the injustices arising out of the conflict between individual liberty and the political order, the extent to which the Northern Irish state uses its powers to deny conditions for individual liberty. Outwardly we might indeed expect such liberals to address questions relating to human rights, discrimination and the law in Northern Ireland. Yet just what is the extent of involvement here? Is it in fact possible to take a non-sectarian public issue stand? Or in making such stands is there still a failure to overcome the divide?

To untwine the issues here we focus on the limits of taking a liberal public issue stand over such major issues as civil rights (the late 1960s), internment (1971) and the hunger strike (1981). Few have spoken out and those who have find they have little impact and face considerable risks. During the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the late sixties, before the eruption of violence, it was much safer to show one's public support, and indeed the six demands of the Movement – arguing for equal civil rights for Catholics – were supported by quite a number of academics. Although it had little support from the professorial staff, 20 academics from Queen's took part in the march of 9 October 1968 to Linenhall Street. Liberal academics justified their support in terms of civil rights rhetoric – the countering of discriminatory practices – largely unaware of the sectarian implications of such support, that such secular arguments would not be heard in an unsecular society (Beach, 1977). The inevitable spiral of conflict took many by surprise.

Once the violence began (the riots of August 1969) many withdrew. Academics became apprehensive of being involved in any way. Although the then professor of Greek, an Englishman, did stick to his principles, refusing to pay tax on his literary and television earnings, arguing 'No British taxation without representation' and attempting to stall any comment from Unionists by declaring 'I require no lectures on the subject of loyalty to the Crown from backwoods Orangemen' (*Gown*, 3 December 1968), such a stand placed his life in danger. He received telephoned threats:

Of course, I take the threats seriously, but I am not upset by them. My life has been threatened at 2.30 am; I do not mind. My children's lives have been threatened at 3.30 am and I *do* mind (*Gown*, 3 December 1968).

We might have expected the introduction of internment in August 1971, authorising imprisonment on mere suspicion (without trial), to have met with protest by some for violating liberal conceptions of justice. Whilst strong divisions were generated within the University,

amongst the professional staff only three English professors had the conviction firmly to stand up and argue against it and urge that Queen's take a corporate position on it. One of them recalled:

In those days we were always having meetings, then people would pretend to be on your side, they would come to these meetings and then dwindle away leaving only the committed.

These three subsequently had difficulties gaining acceptance by Protestant elements in the University. Said one, 'I don't think I've been trusted ever since'. Despite attempts, the Association of University Teachers refused to take a policy stand over the issue. Whilst seven law lecturers condemned internment in a letter to the *Belfast Telegraph* (October 1971), they did not use the University's name.

Apart from humanitarian issues, the hunger strike raised the question of the strikers' legal status: both were avoided by Queen's academics. Although three lecturers went on a hunger strike march down the Falls Road, there was a realisation amongst the liberal ground that a humanitarian position just could not be maintained in abstraction from a political position. 'It was a real issue. Against it internment was nothing. The hunger strike was a straightforward referendum for or against the Provisionals as a political force' (QUB lecturer). Outwardly we might also have expected some liberal academics to have protested over the role of, and the means employed by, the security forces – such issues as the use of interrogation techniques and plastic bullets. Again few have done so. Most medical people in Northern Ireland are also silent on these issues; those doctors who choose to address them come under heavy pressures (Fields, 1980, pp 217–18).

The problem with all these issues is that there is in fact no cross-sectarian agreement in Northern Ireland about what a defensible position could be: the correct liberal response is unclear. Thus one of the reasons the University refused to take a corporate stand on the issue of internment was uncertainty 'what would have been the "correct" position?' (Froggatt, 1977, p 6). With two sets of rights (Protestant and Catholic) to be understood, the liberal's universalistic views of truth and justice are seen as hollow and such claims end up being used for their sectarian capital. The problem facing Queen's academics (and others) is that there is no universal agreement about the 'facts' of the Northern Ireland situation. To take a public issue stand is then in effect to take a sectarian position, whether one wants to or not. Liberal reason disappears beneath Protestant 'facts' and Catholic 'facts' and we must, it seems, question the view that truth can be established by reason alone.

Conscious Retreat

In the late 1960s and even the early 1970s, there was a greater belief in change, a willingness to address the issues. But as nothing appeared to change, this spirit died. By 1972, 'Members of relevant disciplines sometimes hesitated to go into print with ideas which might offend the hard men of either side' (Scott, 1973, p 132). Now to take a stand leads to one becoming caught in the middle, never being fully acceptable to either side.

I see myself as a liberal concerned with social justice, one side sees me as a lackey of the British state, the other side sees me as a radical subversive (QUB lecturer),

A liberal position is not widely accepted, we have little audience, and our effect is not very great (QUB lecturer).

And inevitably one will face threats, although some threats may not be serious (and there is always the possibility that threats may be used for essentially personal rather than political reasons). One thing to avoid is mention in the sectarian press: those academics who have been named there admit to eerie, unnerving feelings. The only way to avoid this is to be silent. Concerned liberals end up retreating to protect themselves and their families.

I don't want to lay myself open, we're vulnerable, there is no protection, Belfast is a small and insular place, who knows what gets said about you, anyone could know where I live (QUB lecturer).

Most retreat after becoming disillusioned, asking themselves 'What has my involvement achieved?'. 'We don't want to admit that we are irrelevant, but we are' (QUB lecturer). Similarly most socialists keep a low profile: 'I had a troops out view when I was in Manchester, but I'm more careful over here' (QUB lecturer).

For those liberals and socialists who do take a stand, the dangers of sectarian contamination may also affect their career prospects – tenure, promotion and academic respectability may come under threat. Such considerations do act as a deterrent:

I'm not going to get involved with political issues. I come up for tenure soon and I'm not going to do anything to raise problems for myself (QUB lecturer).

Some cite the non-appointment of Gill Boehringer: an investigation by the Campaign for Academic Freedom and Democracy concluded that he was not appointed because of his political activities (Downing, 1974). Although strongly denied by Queen's, the case has served as a caution to others.

Those whose efforts have been thwarted and paralysed by the force of sectarianism retreat to the sanctuary of the 'little England' or decide to leave Northern Ireland altogether. This journey towards disillusionment caught up with one Queen's professor. 'Does your move south reflect your disillusionment?' I asked.

Yes. People get shot here. If you could look into the future and be guaranteed that Belfast would remain at the present state of conflict it would not be so bad. But this place could explode at any moment. Belfast is no place to bring up a family.

The social construction of a 'little England', as well as being a 'natural orbit' for some, does provide a refuge from the personal problems that the political situation can lead to. For, within this orbit – as long as one follows a careful routine of whom to talk to and where to go – one is likely to be safe. We find that, except with certain protocols or amongst friends, many academics refuse to discuss the issues: 'Politics are not discussed directly over here, in the common room there is a silence on these things' (QUB lecturer). If pressed, evasive tactics will be employed; some lecturers visibly shake with unease if you persist in questioning them.

On the whole academics are not targets; as one professor insisted:

I have never received any threats, the paramilitaries do not operate at that level. They wouldn't know who was who. They know who I am but I've never had any problems.

Yet, at the height of the 'troubles', in the early 1970s, several staff in the social sciences, in response to threats, went ex-directory and some even moved house.

Then we were all getting threats, letters from both sides (QUB professor), I was getting nasty phone calls, later my doorbell rang in the middle of the night. I wasn't going to answer it. I then decided to move house and have been ex-directory ever since (QUB lecturer).

As Scott has remarked

As specific issues appeared on which opinion tended to divide on sectarian lines – internment without trial, for example – petitions were circulated which required an act of self-identification by either signing or not signing. No caveats or qualifications were acceptable: 'You're either for us or you're agin us'. There was no place to go for a timorous agnostic liberal (1973, p 130).

In fact there was a place to go – out of Northern Ireland. Scott, an Australian, returned home in 1972.

It is not that academics do not care; for some it is a problem of manifesting concern. It is true that some academics fail fully to connect their liberal values to the Northern Ireland situation,

but the silence that exists must not be taken for overall indifference. Those liberals who attempt to take a stand are paralysed by the force of sectarianism. They find that their positions cannot be defended. Given all these constraints, it is only the courageous or naive who persist at this level. It is easier and more reasonable 'to keep one's head down'.

I cannot understand why these people don't care . . . why are the academics silent? They always fall short of publicly speaking out (Catholic priest),

He assumes that if the academics spoke out they'd be on his side. Perhaps they see that the situation is more complicated. There's more than one lot of oppressors in Northern Ireland' (QUB professor).

Not only is it unclear that a correct liberal position should be on specific political issues but fear and apprehension serve to reinforce a position of non-involvement and detachment.

The tension between what one believes as a concerned liberal and how one can live up to it in such a divided society seems unresolvable. For a few this is not sufficient reason to give up trying. 'I'd agree that Northern Ireland is probably irreformable. But that's no reason to give up trying' (QUB professor). 'We must never regard the difficulties as insoluble' (QUB professor).

For what are the alternatives?

Notes

The unattributed quotes are drawn from semi-structured interview material gathered in the period April 1982 – April 1984. Due to the sensitive nature of this article anonymity has had to be given.

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