

UNIONIST VOICE POLICY STUDIES



*Report on Cultural Expression
within PUIL community*

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Foreword

This piece of work by the Unionist Voice Policy Studies ('UVPS') Cultural sub-group is a vital contribution to the development of a Charter of Fundamental Cultural Rights. The Cultural sub-group will take the lead on this ambitious project, supported where necessary by the legal sub-group and the overarching UVPS steering group.

The production of this report flows from six-weeks of work by the sub-group, which I am pleased to say includes twenty-two selected persons from across the broad Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist ('PUL') community, all from different socio-economic backgrounds and strands of the PUL family. This allows for a diversity of opinion and frank exchange of ideas and viewpoints. Many of these discussions were robust, but always respectful and within the context of the shared aim of collectively developing strategies, ideas and arguments to advance the culture and identity we all value and cherish.

There is a fantastic mix of contributions which brings together those coming from a more academic background, with those who come from a perspective of their views being shaped by a grassroots 'hands on' experience. This mix is productive and brings together different perspectives and skills (*each equally complimentary to, and as valuable as, the other*).

There are some who would seek to act as 'gatekeepers' which- regardless of any positive intent which *may* (but does not always) motivate such 'gatekeeping'- serves only to stifle free thought and the development of new ideas and strategies, forged in the furnace of intellectual combat in the tug of war testing theories and views.

UVPS's underpinning ethos is to act as a gateway and space for debate, discussion and the encouragement of all within the PUL to consider relevant issues by engaging with the substantive points raised on all sides of an argument, and forming an individual view which is not coloured, coerced or implanted by any third party.

I wish to commend the sub-group who have produced this report (*I had no input beyond writing this foreword*) and especially give credit to Ms Emma Shaw who acted as the lead on the project in terms of collating the views, moderating discussions and pulling together the various submissions both oral and written into this short but compelling report.

The next stage is the development of a robust- politically, legally and culturally- Charter of Fundamental Cultural Rights which we hope will act as a fundamental document to be drawn on by the entirety of the PUL community. The 'big idea', if you wish to describe it as such, is to create a Cultural Constitution, pulling together all the culture and identity issues that are valued and cherished across our community. This, of course, shall not be without its challenges given the diversity of views within the PUL community. That is not to say that such diversity is negative; it plainly is not. It provides the opportunity for an intellectual feast.

We must not of course be blind to the reality the PUL community must confront. The Belfast Agreement spawned a 'process' which offers no protections to the substance of the Union. Section 1 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 merely protects the symbolism of the Union (the last tie, or as John Larkin QC aptly described it- the last lowering of the Union flag). In short; everything but the last thing can be changed without triggering the legal protections for the Union. That presents a huge challenge of the PUL community in terms of culture and identity.

There is a cultural war and I make no apologies for evangelising with the message that we must become combatants in that conflict, using the weapons of the law, academic, media and any other form of activism necessary to not only protect, but enhance our fundamental cultural rights.

Jamie Bryson

July 2021

Unionist Voice Policy Studies

*A Report on Cultural Expression within the Protestant,
Unionist, Loyalist Community*

Introduction

This report has been compiled by our policy studies group following extensive private consultation with a range of stakeholders from local community groups, bonfire groups, bands, loyal orders, churches and the Orange Order.

The core cultural working group- representing a wide variety of our community both geographically and culturally/politically- comprised twenty-two people.

As is routine at this time of year in Northern Ireland, the media outlets and others put a negative focus on aspects of PUL culture including parades, flags, and bonfires. They rarely provide an overview of the positive work that goes on within the community – this report aims to fill that gap.

What is often misrepresented or outrightly ignored is the work at a grassroots level between community groups, local councils, and local stakeholders such as PSNI, NIHE and NIFS to ensure that cultural traditions and events can pass off without incident. Event organisers cannot be held responsible for the behaviour of those who attend any more than Belfast City Council can be held liable for dog owners who allow their dogs to foul on their grounds. Even so, organisers like the Orange Order endeavour to marshal parades and in fact provide training for members in areas such as event planning, marshalling and health and safety.

The Orange Institution describes itself as *“a membership organisation comprised of Protestants who are committed to the protection of the principles of the Protestant Reformation and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 which enshrined civil and religious liberty for all. Our members celebrate these principles publicly through our annual colourful parades”*.

This report will discuss the benefits of PUL cultural traditions and will conclude by advocating for a Charter of Fundamental Cultural Rights. The next phase of the UVPS Cultural Policy Sub-group’s work will be to develop the Charter of Fundamental Cultural Rights via a process of broad engagement across the PUL community.

Parades/Bands

The participants of a focus group discussed how being in a band provided them with not only a sense of purpose and a feeling of belonging but also with a support network. Young men within Northern Ireland have some of the highest rates of suicide across the UK and Europe, especially within inner city areas and whilst bands are not solely males the vast majority of them represent this demographic. As one member noted *“bands are the fabric of working class unionism with many being a social hub and educational base for many young unionists – what other collective group takes thousands of young people of the street at least one night a week and teaches them a musical instrument?”*.

What should be pointed out here is that this musical tuition is always free of charge to the band members who do not have the opportunity to learn an instrument anywhere else.

Young people are provided the opportunity to learn not only an instrument, but many receive training in areas such as Child Protection, Good Relations, Risk Assessment, Health & Safety, Events Management, Conflict Management and Charity Issues. Some young band members have also participated in research work and steering groups to produce reports on band culture which provides many more transferrable skills that can be used in employment.

Author of 2013 book, **‘Blood and Thunder: Inside an Ulster Protestant Band’**, *Darach MacDonald* spoke of his lack of understanding about band culture before spending a year embedded in a local band. After spending a year with the band, he went on to state: *“Loyalist flute bands instil pride of place and identity, as well as confidence and skills in the estimated 30,000 young people in their ranks. They are fundamentally important to the communities they represent, articulating the story of the past in the present, while providing hope for the future. Yet, most of all, these bands are about cultural heritage”*.

Recently on social media a band member and his young family were attacked with vicious, sectarian bigotry, highlighting how little some understand about band culture.

Many bands have rules and guidelines for members around proper attire and behaviour, some even include statements regarding chanting or slogans that some may find offensive are not allowed. Yet continually in the media and indeed on social media the inaccurate portrayal of band culture continues to be the dominant voice. Being a member of a band helps to build confidence and self-esteem, along with that it provides learning opportunities, life skills and builds friendships that last a lifetime.

Social impact of bands

A 2013 report was conducted to ascertain the socio-economic impact of parades in Northern Ireland. The research showed that Loyal Orders and Bands contributed an estimated £38.64 million through provision of facilities, community/volunteer work and fundraising for charities. Much of the community/volunteer and charity work happens at a local level and is completed without any PR or fanfare.

Bands as well as other community groups have worked tirelessly throughout covid to ensure that local vulnerable members of the community were able to receive food parcels, prescriptions delivered, and sometimes just someone to talk too – none of this impact can be easily quantified. If we were to use the same methodology as the 2013 report, the figure in 2021 would exceed £46.84 million per annum.

Economic impact of bands

The report also factored the economic impact of bands to the local Northern Ireland economy which excluding tourism was estimated to be £15.4 million per annum. The economic impact is quantified by the area of spends of bands, for example purchasing uniforms and instruments. It also factored in costs associated with hiring of minibuses and other travel as well as catering, rental of facilities and training.

The above figures do not include any revenue that is produced in Northern Ireland by tourism to Northern Ireland, for example those who travel to Northern Ireland to observe or participate in parades. These visitors spend on ferries, car hire, restaurants, bed and breakfast establishments and hotels. In addition, a high percentage of Northern Ireland band and lodge members attend parades across Northern Ireland, spending money on food and drink at these events. Unfortunately, an accurate

estimate of these spends does not currently exist, however it is thought that the tourism spend figure would be significant.

Flags

Every year at the start of the marching season flags are erected across Northern Ireland, as has been done for many years and is tradition within PUL communities. There has been research carried out within communities in terms of flags such as the 'Flags & Emblems Report in Glebeside Estate' and 'Explaining the history of flags and emblems' by REACT (Reconciliation, education and community training) discussing the issue and seeking community input.

Within PUL traditions, erecting the flags is the mark of the beginning of cultural celebrations. After community discussions many areas have flag protocols for when flags are erected and when they are taken down, most follow a similar pattern of end of June for flags going up and coming down on or around Ulster Day. It is also widely acknowledged within the communities that any flags that become tattered should be immediately replaced. Contrary to media reports, community residents are not harassed or intimidated for money to pay for these flags and other bunting or decorations, though many community residents choose to contribute.

The erection of flags and bunting is a sense of pride in PUL identity as we prepare to commemorate certain dates and events, such as 1st of July and the Battle of the Somme where many in the area can still recall when loved ones paid the ultimate sacrifice. The dignity and pride that community members feel, sharing the stories of their family members who went off to war for their country is difficult to put into words. One of the most shared speeches within PUL communities on 1st of July is by Captain Wilfred Spender who stated:

*"I am not an Ulsterman but yesterday, the First of July,
as I followed their amazing attack, I felt that I would
rather be an Ulsterman than anything else in the world"*

Erecting flags and bunting along arterial parade routes and in areas along smaller community routes some even places flags and bunting outside their houses promoting

a sense of community spirit at one of the most important and revered times of year for PUL culture.

While some in the media and indeed politicians stoke the flames when it comes to flags, community engagement indicates high support for flags within PUL communities.

When discussing flags in general it would be remiss to not include the flying of what is deemed a foreign flag in Republican and Nationalists areas across Northern Ireland. These flags are flown all year round and it is insulting to consistently have the flag debate aimed at our community without acknowledgement of the inconsistency at addressing the issue within Nationalist and Republican communities.

Bonfires

It could be said that out of all PUL traditions, bonfires are the most contentious, but like parades and flags, bonfires are one of the cornerstones of PUL culture.

As part of Norwegian sankthans celebrations, around summer solstice, the town of Alesund builds a large bonfire that takes 30-40 people several days to build. This is to honor the birth of John the Baptist. Across the UK on Guy Fawkes nights, local communities have bonfires to remember the attack on Parliament – many children growing up will be familiar with the rhyme “remember, remember the 5th of November”. At Halloween bonfires are built again across the UK to celebrate, this tradition is believed to be part of Samhain and the bonfires warded off evil spirits. None of these events receive the same level of antipathy as bonfire culture within PUL communities. Indeed, even in Northern Ireland, within CNR communities there would have been a traditional bonfire to celebrate the feast of the Assumption, the principal feast of the Virgin Mary, this has mostly been replaced with anti-internment bonfires which are lit on 9th of August to mark the anniversary of the introduction in Northern Ireland of internment without trial in 1971.

Within PUL culture, 11th of July bonfires are lit to commemorate William of Orange and the Williamite forces arrival into Ulster for the Battle of the Boyne. This battle is one of the most significant dates recognised within PUL culture and bonfires remain an integral part of the celebrations.

Historically in the PUL community, each street would have had a bonfire at the end of it and youngsters would have collected door to door anything that could be added to the bonfire. As Northern Ireland’s economy began to grow after ‘the Troubles’ stopped and there was investment in inner city areas, around 2006 councils put together working groups comprised of local community members and other relevant stakeholders such as NIHE, PSNI and NIFS. The aim was to minimize disruption that bonfires caused, and local communities worked to reduce the number of bonfires on streets to fixed areas within the community. In some areas this meant reducing 8-10 bonfires down to 1 site, which is historically where they have remained.

Local bonfire groups work with the community to put on a cultural celebration on 11th of July which usually comprises of a fun day for local families during the day, perhaps a small kid's bonfire that is lit earlier than the traditional at midnight and then the larger bonfire. Local businesses often donate either money or juice and treats for the community event.

The fact that bonfires have been politicised by many who seek to destroy PUL culture and traditions or those who do not understand the significance have led to political statements being made, such as the burning of the tricolour or other effigies. This needs to be understood in the wider context on the consistent belittlement of traditional PUL culture and the sectarian abuse that PUL communities are subjected to. The constant signs "Brits out" or "Think32" and other slogans that are purposefully directed at the PUL community are a continual reminder that the PUL traditions and culture will never be accepted on a shared island.

Those who wish to see the dissolution of our culture and do not provide the same respect that they expect for their own only serve to further divide our communities.

A Cultural Constitution?

The development of the Charter of Fundamental Cultural Rights will, in essence, provide the basis for a cultural constitution. This has the capacity to provide a touchstone for the entire PUL community to root the expression of our culture.

The members of the Cultural sub-group believe that this Charter, and thus effective Cultural Constitution, can only have a fundamental core value if it is derived from broad collective consensus from across the Unionist and Loyalist community. As with every constitution, this will at times require compromise on peripheral issues internally between competing views within the PUL community; however, there will be core ideological commitments which underpin the very essence of PUL culture and tradition; these issues will plainly not be up for compromise.

Our report on key cultural traditions does not, by any means, encompass the entirety of PUL culture, identity, and tradition, but rather focuses on some prominent areas of same.

In 2021, Northern Ireland's centenary year, we feel it is imperative that the meaning and core values of our cultural identity is codified within a fundamental core document that can command broad support.

We would encourage all within the PUL community to engage in the coming process of dialogue and discussion, which will flow from our workshops and roadshows to develop the ideas and principles that will ultimately underpin our fundamental cultural rights.

It is notable that engagement on cultural issues with statutory agencies are often undermined by the changing roles of points of contact in agencies such as the PSNI. Developing trust and working relationships takes time, and the high turnover of officers- in PSNI and other statutory agencies- makes this difficult. Moreover, there is a feeling that there should be cultural engagement all year round, and not only during the 'marching/bonfire season'.

A cultural constitution could assist in encouraging more consistent dialogue.