



**UNIONIST  
VOICE**

**INTERIM REPORT ON IMMIGRATION  
PROTESTS**

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## **Introduction**

This report has been compiled following short and intensive work over the period of 3-5 August 2024. It is inevitably a piece of work which can be described as 'interim', and this report plainly is not, nor does it purport to be, as fulsome and detailed as we would wish it to be.

The decision was taken by the Unionist Voice Policy Studies advisory panel to expedite engagement and the publication of an interim report on the basis of a perceived urgency in respect of the matters unfolding.

In this regard, the Terms of Reference were as follows:

**To engage with as many voices and views as possible in the unionist/loyalist communities within an initial period of 3-5 August 2024 in order to seek to understand the fears and concerns held around the issue of immigration, and drawing upon these views to produce an expedited interim report setting out the main areas of concern and outline preliminary suggestions as to potential policy changes which could address these issues.**

It will be apparent from the Terms of Reference that firstly the timescale was short and focused, and in consequence the extent of engagement has plainly not been widespread and could be more accurately described as anecdotal; secondly, the proposed policy solutions are naturally not fully developed and this requires more work; thirdly, the extent of the report is focused on 'headline' issues in the abstract; and fourthly, our engagement as would be expected is exclusively focused on unionist/loyalist communities and confines itself for now to Northern Ireland.

However, the interim report is a valuable and important document. It provides an overview and considered articulation of issues which are causing concern in primarily working-class unionist/loyalist communities (and likely other communities as well) and provides a vehicle for these concerns to be set out in an accessible and coherent manner. In addition to that, there is contained herein important suggestions and recommendations around policy areas worthy of exploration, and importantly suggestions as to how to avoid a repeat of the unwanted and unjustified violence witnessed in isolation in some areas of Belfast on Saturday.

The content of this report will not necessarily find favour with the orthodox thinking within what would be commonly described as the 'liberal elite', 'political class' or 'intelligentsia'. These are terms used to refer to what many ordinary decent people across the UK feel is an establishment bound together not by class or financial status, but rather by virtue of a social status attained by subscribing to populist liberal or 'hyper-woke' causes, with an informal network in the media and civic society credentialing and amplifying voices which share their 'popular' view.

## **Background and Context**

The protests of 3 August 2024 were for the most part seemingly spontaneous in response to largely anonymous social media calls for protests at various locations. It is not clear from where these calls for protest emanated, and what could commonly be known as ‘bad actors’ cannot be ruled out, but crucially such calls found fertile ground and attracted a surprising level of community support in many areas. This reflects the growing concern amongst many ordinary hard-working people that their views and concerns are not being listened to or are being actively demeaned.

In the view of many people we spoke to who had attended protests outside of the one held at Belfast City Hall, there was a strong feeling of being ignored and/or smeared as “racists or bigots” for daring to speak against what they feel is unacceptable levels of immigration and the impact of this. In Bangor, Co Down, a large community protest took place. This was made up of families and ordinary people from the local area. There were no masks, no threats, no intimidation, no damage to property and the PSNI on duty described the atmosphere as “almost jovial” and “relaxed”. As the protest was ongoing, an ice cream van was serving young children.

At one point the crowd began to move to the Marine Court hotel which in recent times has become the focus of local concern due to the housing of immigrants. It was not clear at the time how this had come about. There have been conflicting reports as to whether it was a spontaneous reaction from the crowd, or whether this was planned. It appeared to take many in attendance by surprise, with participants unsure whether this was an organised notified procession or a spontaneous event. There was no suggestion from the PSNI there was anything unlawful about this turn of events nor announcements to that effect, and there was no effort to prevent the peaceful dignified walk. Therefore, the vast majority of participants obviously believed they were acting entirely lawfully, evidenced by the absence of any effort by the crowd to conceal their identity or otherwise evade public attention.

It became apparent subsequent to the walk that there were social media comments around whether the procession to Marine Court was notified. As will be addressed in the policing response section of this interim report, many people expressed the view that having witnessed the handling of the Bobby Storey funeral and the nationalist legacy activist parade in Londonderry to Bishop Street courthouse, both of which went unpunished for Covid and parading regulation offences respectively, there was significant confusion as to the scope of the law in this arena.

At the Marine Court, one speaker- a former member of the armed forces- addressed the crowd. As a testament to the peaceful and relaxed nature of the crowd, around 500 people converging outside the Marine Court hotel were policed by two uniform PSNI officers. There were no issues whatsoever, and after around ten minutes the crowd dispersed peacefully with some families moving on to the local fun fair, restaurants or ice cream shops.

It appears this type of peaceful community protest was replicated at several other areas across Northern Ireland including in Carrickfergus, Rathcoole, Antrim, Carlilse Circus and York Street.

However, at Belfast City Hall it is apparent that the protest there was hi-jacked, at least in part, by a group of people wearing balaclavas or other face coverings and making much of flying the Irish flag alongside the Union flag. This was accompanied by some people making Nazi salutes and shouting racist abuse. Those we engaged with expressed complete rejection of any promotion of Nazi ideology and agreed that those endorsing Nazism present as big a threat to the UK and our values as those threatening violent Jihad. There were however decent genuine people attending the protest who have reported being upset that it was hi-jacked in such a way by a minority element. This protest was countered by a far left demonstration which brought together a coalition which included reasonable, genuine and concerned persons who support immigration, but also included far left groups such as Antifa who have been regularly involved in mass disorder, those who have indicated support for terrorist groups such as Hamas and the IRA and LGBT and Transgender activists.

It seems apparent that both of these protests contained within their number genuine, decent and hard-working people with opposing views on the contentious issue of immigration. This is legitimate and such views, on both sides, are legitimate and worthy of debate and consideration in a democratic society. These legitimate views, on both sides, ought not to be smeared or tarnished by virtue of reference to the lowest common denominator (i.e., extremists) on either side of what is commonly described as the far left or far right.

The protests at City Hall then broke off with a smaller group, reportedly led by individuals from Dublin, commencing a march to the Islamic center. There were many of those we engaged with who questioned the motives behind this and referred to 'bad actors'. The people we spoke to for this interim report wished to distance themselves from these characters and alliances, and all expressed the view that those turning up in balaclavas or intent on violence, in particular coming from a different jurisdiction for this purpose, were an entirely negative and unwanted grouping and many reported that they felt the legitimate views and concerns they as ordinary law abiding people held were being conflated with the most nefarious and negative actions of a small unrepresentative minority.

However, some of those we engaged with did express concern that some young people were being manipulated online by nefarious individuals aligned to a cross-border alliance of individuals intent on violence. There were no policing reports of paramilitary orchestration behind the events, and indeed it appears to be the case that loyalist organisations whilst supportive of peaceful protest and who share many of the concerns central to the ongoing issues, were not in any way supportive or willing to give cover to the minority violent elements. In equal terms, some of those we engaged with who would be close to the thinking of loyalist organisations also made clear that they were not prepared to be 'used' to 'police' the disorder, with one remarking that to do so would *"require banging a few heads together and then you'd end up taking ownership of something which is nothing to do with loyalist organisations and you'd be demonised and the worst in the world anyway"*.

It seems this was the prevailing mindset of loyalists in areas of disorder on Saturday evening. This approach must surely be understood in the context of how loyalists have often felt used by the PSNI or other statutory agencies in relation to the most contentious and sensitive issues, only to be thereafter cast to the side or in some

cases- such as the anti-Protocol rallies- for those who engage with the PSNI on the ground mediating thereafter finding themselves prosecuted for technical issues such as breach of the Public Processions Act for being on the ground doing the very meditating the PSNI encouraged.

Following the events of Saturday there have been other protests called. There are some of these protests which are legitimate community based peaceful protests organised in local areas by people from those communities. These are legitimate protests which must not be demonised and conflated with unlawful violence. In equal terms, there have been some anonymous and faceless online efforts to whip up tensions with the advertisement of various sporadic protests. We urge young people in particular to be mindful not to be used as pawns of 'bad actors', and we address this further in our recommendations.

### **Concerns and Solutions**

The vast majority of those with whom we engaged in a Northern Ireland context expressed concerns about the impact and pressure of public services (particularly Housing, Education and Health) which they felt was at the very least compounded by immigration. These concerns were amplified with deep opposition to the provisions of Article 2 of the Protocol/Windsor Framework which keeps NI aligned with the EU in respect of immigration rather than wider UK policy. This intolerable situation has caused anger in respect of the constitutional damage, but many people have correctly identified it makes NI a magnet for illegal immigration and asylum who will benefit from an EU regime in NI, which wouldn't apply in GB.

Proposed policy solutions for consideration (*please note, reference to British citizens is not intended to exclude, but rather taken to encompass, those who- consistent with the Belfast Agreement- were born and live in Northern Ireland but who identify as Irish*):

#### *Housing:*

- It is suggested that consideration should be given to reform of the housing points system to provide two categories of British citizenship points firstly at an enhanced level to those who were born in the United Kingdom and have been British citizens from birth, and secondly at lower level to those who have been British citizens for at least ten years.
- In respect of those who have come to the UK seeking asylum, for those being placed into social housing the Housing Executive or social housing providers, working in partnership with local community organisations, should develop a community engagement strategy whereby the views of established local residents can be heard regularly and this can form part of a 'community impact' assessment which should be introduced (see below) into the housing points system and be taken into consideration in the allocation of housing.
- A community impact assessment- contributed to by PSNI, local established and accredited resident's groups and political representatives- should be mandatory in the allocation of housing for those who are seeking asylum or who have been British citizens for less than ten years. The outcome of these

assessments should be taken into consideration by the Housing Executive or social housing organisations.

- The PSNI should monitor any significant community tensions by regular engagement with accredited based restorative justice schemes, political representatives and PCSP representatives. There must be a willingness to engage with these issues.
- In advance of designating any hotels/accommodation as suitable for housing asylum seekers there should be a full community impact assessment carried out by the relevant authority with input from and in consultation with local residents, community groups, PSNI and all political representatives. This community impact assessment should be publicly available for accountability purposes.

### *Education*

- In the allocation of school places, priority should be given (in a fair points based system, not as a means to exclude any child from any background who are all entitled to education) to those who have been British citizens from birth or for at least 10 years.

### *Health*

- In health care, priority for non-emergency appointments should be given to those who have been British citizens from birth, or who have been so for at least ten years. We suggest a points-based priority booking system, but also are alive to both practical and moral considerations around this proposal, which requires further engagement. This should not apply to emergency healthcare which should be available to all persons as and when necessary.

### *Article 2 of the Protocol*

- The issue of immigration is only going to get worse due to the effect of Article 2 of the Protocol/Framework. Northern Ireland must be subject solely and exclusively to UK law in respect of immigration policy, and treated exactly the same as the rest of the United Kingdom. This requires the scrapping of Article 2 of the Protocol (we maintain the entire Protocol should go, given its fundamental injustice). The effect of Article 2, in respect of immigration, has been to cause societal unrest and disruption and political representatives should therefore be making the case for the triggering of Article 16 to, in the first instance, disapply the provisions of Article 2 of the Protocol.

## **Media**

There was much discontent in those we spoke to about the ‘balance’ of media reporting. This has been a sentiment within unionist/loyalist communities for quite some time. There is a wider piece of work to be done on this disengagement and mistrust more generally.

However, focusing on the specific issue, many people felt that there was a disparity in reporting and the standards applied. In summary many people felt whilst those with anti-immigration views, which are wholly legitimate, were judged and smeared by conflating ordinary decent people with the lowest common denominator broadly on their side of the argument, whilst the pro-immigration side of the argument was viewed through the lens of the best and most reasonable manifestation of those on that side of the argument.

There were multiple examples given of how media outlets had placed significant emphasis on, for example, the thuggish and unrepresentative Nazi salutes, whilst failing entirely to question participants in the left-wing pro-immigration rally on the presence of Antifa flags (given that groups involvement in widespread disruption and disorder) or those waving Palestinian flags and shouting pro-Hamas slogans. In addition there appeared to be little appetite for pressing organisers and participants in the far-left rally on the contradiction between Palestinian flags and emblems, alongside Rainbow gay rights flags.

Furthermore, those with whom we engaged raised the issue as to how the protests were framed, with those opposing immigration labelled ‘far-right’ whilst those on the other side of the argument labelled an ‘anti-racist protest’. It was pointed out that such a framing is inherently biased as it suggests all those who have legitimate and genuine concerns about immigration are racist, and thus (given the quite correct dim view society takes of racism) morally repugnant, whilst those on the other side of the argument are the good guys. That is not only an incorrect, but an entirely distorted view.

The campaign by some low-level social media journalists, amplified by largely anonymous and often Irish nationalist social media accounts, alongside political nationalism to demand the ‘blacklisting’ of voices who express views which differ from theirs was a matter of concern. It was pointed out that this is an effort, which is been ongoing for some time, for a small cabal to direct and control public discourse. There was reference to individuals talking about banning from public discourse in the media ‘negative’ voices and it was pointed out that the obvious question is who decides who or what falls into that category? The answer, of course, is that those who are making such suggestions believe their views are the correct ones and therefore anyone who disagrees is negative. This is a profoundly concerning situation in any democratic society.

We make the following recommendations in respect of the media:

- Those who feel strongly about these issues should engage proactively with the media, feeling confident about expressing viewpoints.

- The test for which views are platformed should be a simple one: all views which are lawful are legitimate. There may be viewpoints found offensive or at variance with those held by the self-appointed 'liberal elite', but that does not mean such views are any less legitimate than those expressed by that elite and this is something such persons are going to have to come to terms with.
- The media must make a clear distinction between peaceful protest on issues of widespread concern, and those engaging in disorder or violence. If peaceful citizens are expressing concern via protest, even if such concerns aren't shared personally by elements of the media, then such persons shouldn't be smeared by a deliberate conflating of their lawful activities with thuggish unlawful behaviour.
- In reporting on events, the media must apply the same standard of scrutiny to both sides of the argument. There are deep and justified concerns, set out in the body of this section of the report, about how one side of the argument is smeared by reference to the worst extremes of those who identify with that side of the argument, whereas on the other side of the argument there is no such conflating.

### **Policing and Justice**

The PSNI plainly have a difficult job to do. There remains, particularly in loyalist communities, concerns around two-tier policing. In recent years, following the Bobby Storey funeral and the Sinn Fein influence over the suspension of two officers in relation to nationalist Covid breaches on the Ormeau Road, there has been a worthwhile and positive engagement effort by the PSNI under the direction of ACC Bobby Singleton and the community engagement teams he established. This work has been important and went a significant distance to repairing relationships.

In Chief Constable Jon Boucher there is a renewed hope and confidence that he will ensure fairness, balance and impartiality which has been seriously lacking in recent decades, with nationalism, and Sinn Fein in particular, exercising extraordinary direction and control over operational policing decisions. It is anticipated that such pressure will not yield results from Jon Boucher.

There remains work to be done, due to the systemic nature of two-tier policing and recent events in Armagh have undermined some of the positive work ongoing. Whilst the approach of the Chief Constable was, most agree, proportionate in the circumstances it is also felt it failed to take account of the significant issues of lack of confidence in policing within loyalist communities and the damage which would be done by this incident. In addition, whether he agrees or disagrees, we feel the Chief Constable should not simply dismiss concerns about two-tier policing because the reality is that the perception of such within unionist/loyalist communities is very real and cannot be wished away.

In respect of the criminal justice response to the events of the weekend, the PSNI have significant community support in pursuing violent and disorderly offenders- fairly and within the law- but it is imperative the PSNI do not take an over-zealous approach in dealing with any complaints in respect of minor non-violent matters such



as blocking a road or an unnotified public procession which occurred at wholly peaceful events.

The PSNI have particular credibility issues in respect of processions given the approach adopted by the PPS in respect of the unnotified parade led by Colum Eastwood MP and nationalist legacy activists from Londonderry center to Bishop Street courthouse. The decision of the PPS of February 2024 appeared to read into the statute several considerations verging on exceptions never previously considered. It is fair to point out that if this is how the law is applied to nationalists, then a different application to unionists/loyalists would significantly raise tensions on any analysis. If the PSNI are intent on pursuing such a unequal application of the law in respect of gatherings where were (i) wholly peaceful; (ii) caused minimal disruption; (iii) there was no disorder or legitimate community complaints in the locality and (iv) involved proactive engagement with police, then a disproportionate approach will create a significant further crisis of confidence in respect of unionism/loyalism and policing.

In approaching their criminal justice approach the PSNI must not only be proportionate, but consistent. It was noted by many that regardless of the purported motives, residents of the Lower Ormeau road led by republican Gerard Rice and a Sinn Fein MLA blocked the road, thus- technically- committing an offence. If PSNI were to pursue peaceful protestors for such technicalities, then it is imperative precisely the same application of the law is applied to the road-blocking on the Ormeau Road by a grouping which had, in effect, amassed in preparedness for vigilante action.

PSNI recommendations:

- The PSNI should apply a proportionate and context sensitive response to the protest events over the weekend, focusing attention on those engaged in violent disorder or incitement to same. If legal technicalities are to be maximised to pursue peaceful protestors, then such a maximalist approach must equally be applied to others, such as the gathering on the Lower Ormeau Road, for example. In the circumstances, and given the spontaneous nature of the incidents, the Human Rights compliant approach, we suggest, is to best serve the public interest by taking a proportionate and common sense approach in respect of peaceful incidents which have already occurred.
- In tandem with a common sense approach to peaceful incidents, the PSNI should assist the public going forward with the continuation of their information campaign on rights and responsibilities around protests and processions. This could perhaps also gain wider circulation if senior PSNI officers appeared on the media to explain their position and how the law is to be applied. It is suggested that if any processions come to the attention of the PSNI as being called for or organised, and there are legal issues arising, then the PSNI should in advance publicise the nature of any legal issues in order that the maximum number of persons are informed.
- The approach adopted by the PSNI in respect of style and tone of protest policing, and their criminal justice response, should be strongly guided by their 'community impact assessment' approach, with local police providing detailed

analysis and their assessment of vital localised context in the prescribed internal PSNI community impact forms. The proper recording of local police assessments and rationale provides accountability, and these assessment can thereafter be scrutinised in any judicial proceedings or, if failing within the relevant provisions, released under the Freedom of Information Act.

- There should be a continued PSNI emphasis on community engagement with all relevant stakeholders in order to ensure no repeat of violence or targeting of vulnerable persons, from any background.

## **Protestors**

The right to peaceful protest is a legitimate right. The concerns around mass immigration are genuine and held by a large swathe of the population. These concerns are not 'racist' or 'bigotry' but rather represent the views of many decent, hard-working families in not just Northern Ireland, but across the United Kingdom.

We recommend the following steps when protesting:

- Do not wear a balaclava, face-mask or other covering designed to conceal your identity. The cause for which protests are taking place is legitimate and there is no reason to shield your identity. The images of masked individuals sends out the wrong message, undermines legitimate concerns and provides a visual aide to those seeking to present a nefarious and negative image of those protesting.
- There is no place for Nazi salutes or racist slurs. Our forefathers fought the Nazis. Those who embrace that ideology pose as much of a threat to British identity and values as those who call for violent Islamic Jihad. There is no 'patriotism' in embracing Nazi ideology; those who do are enemies of the United Kingdom rather than patriots. In equal terms many decent hard-working people who are from a colored background and different religious or ethnic identity are full proud British citizens as much as we are. These are people who have embraced our way of life if they have come to our country and integrated fully, or who have been born here, the same as us as who are a valued part of our community. They pay taxes, they have fought for this country and they are our friends. The courageous and British thing to do is to challenge anyone engaging in this kind of behaviour. It has nothing to do with legitimate concerns about mass immigration and that failed policy.
- If confident, then engage respectfully with the media. The objective of protest must be to express a message. Take every opportunity to do so.

## **Conclusion**

This report, as identified from the outset, is inevitably incomplete and requires much fuller analysis and engagement with stakeholders. It is however produced in a short time frame, in order to provide a platform for concerns, and to provide policy suggestions in the here and now when tensions are at their height. All the ideas herein are worthy of further detailed discussion and 'stress-testing' and we will continue that work.