James Scott – Political Visionary

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In the early 1950's Queens University Belfast was a small compact institution housed essentially within the Lanyon cloisters built one hundred years previously. Although the engineering and medical students pilgrimaged to other sites at different points in their career, for most students the original University building was the focus of their student existence. Many of those students in their passing to and fro would have noticed James Scott who was known to teach something in the medical and dental fields. He was more conspicuous than most other faculty members crossing the quad as he shuffled along, obviously hampered in his gait by some physical disability. Perhaps even more eccentric than his posture was the fact that he was often accompanied by his young children – a man walking his children was quite novel in Belfast in those days.

A regular figure in the quad, he was also a regular attender and participant from the floor, at student debates and readings – another mark of singularity in an institution where the mostly expatriate staff did not set a high valuation on staff-student socializing. He was then, a character, and that image was accentuated not only by the harsh guttural tones in which he spoke, but also by the content of his contributions. In a community in which nearly every topic from the regularity of trams to the advent of television could be debated in terms of Nationalism/Unionism, many of his student listeners found it very difficult to place James Scott in the political chasm which was Northern Ireland. It was a fixed law of nature that you had to be on one side of the divide or the other. Anybody attempting to straddle it had to fall to their doom. Only a wacky old academic would attempt it, but it was nevertheless intriguing to observe, and it conferred on Jimmy Scott a status in the University few of his colleagues attained. He was indeed a rum cove!

It was hardly surprising that given his catholic interests in science, politics, theology and literature, that in his extra mural activities he was drawn to the Irish Association for Cultural, Economic and Social Relations and indeed was Secretary of the Association at the time of the publication of the ground breaking study "The Northern Ireland Problem". This was the first sociological study of Northern Ireland and had been commissioned by the Irish Association and carried out and written by Denis Barritt and Charles Carter. The empirical nature of the study was consistent with James' own scientific background but it seemed to be in his nature always to want to overlay his scientific analysis with a humanistic poetic intensity. Despite that intensity the relatively civil tone of Irish Association meetings was congenial to him and even possibly preferable to direct political activity.

Even had he been temperamentally drawn to it, the opportunity for political activity in Belfast in the mid fifties was limited, and any individual with a radical perspective on affairs was not likely to get much of a hearing. One such individual was the Non Subscribing Presbyterian Clergyman, Rev. Albert McElroy who had

established the Ulster Liberal Party hoping to tap into the thread of Presbyterian liberalism which Rev. William Armour had personified at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although the Liberal party did succeed in gaining a seat in the Stormont parliament when Sheelagh Murnaghan was elected as a member of the four seat constituency composed of Queens University graduates, it never attained any popular support and was never able to establish a base beyond that founded on personal friendships. For a short period James Scott was drawn to it but was quickly disillusioned by what he viewed as the dilettantism of its members.

It is likely that he would have confined his contribution to public life to his engagement with the Irish Association had it not been for the sense of impending crisis within the Northern Nationalist community which was becoming evident throughout the fifties. There were three elements which were contributing to this. By that time a generation had come of age which had never lived in a politically united Ireland. For them the border was a fixed condition and since they had never known any other dispensation they had no sense of reverting to a status quo. The IRA Border campaign which had been launched in 1956 was occasioning the deaths of RUC personnel and IRA volunteers and disrupting community life outside Belfast, while large numbers of republican sympathizers were interned. The expansion of local government services in the delivery of the Welfare State had generated a tremendous increase in the number of relatively low level jobs such as school bus drivers and clerical assistants in the health services. Local authorities had thus become significant employers and thus an instrument of partisan patronage. The discrimination on religious grounds practised at this level in employment procedures thus attained a level hitherto unexperienced, and this was becoming a major source of resentment amongst the Catholic community, many of whom could acquiesce in the constitutional settlement of Northern Ireland.

The position of the various political spokesmen for the Nationalist population towards these developments was one of vacillation, uncertainty and division. Outside of Belfast, Nationalist politicians were ambivalent about recognition of the State institutions and a tradition had emerged that their elected representatives would attend Stormont, but abstain from attending Westminster. It was a pragmatic accommodation between constitutional Nationalism and physical force Republicanism. In Belfast Nationalist spokesmen tagged themselves with some compound Labour label and constantly amalgamated and split apart as they squabbled over issues such as the nomination for an aldermanship on Belfast Corporation.

That variety of response was probably merely reflective of the uncertainty within the wider Catholic community. People lamented "What is to be done?" but got no answers. One line of development spelt out most explicitly in the address of G.B. Newe to the Social Study Conference held in Garon Tower, Co. Antrim in 1958 was that the community should afford both de jure and de facto recognition of the Stormont establishment, and co-operate at all spheres of public life. The message essentially was "Give up your ould grievances". Other

public figures such as J.J Campbell and Brian McGuigan tended to support this approach. In the West of the province a group began to coalesce around Patricia and Conn McCloskey and Fr. Denis Faul. This grouping stressed that the grievances should be pursued at every level and particularly at the Westminster level, but that lobbying should be restricted to social issues and should avoid the constitutional issue.

In Belfast a group which felt that the constitutional issue should be addressed head on and primarily within the internal context of Northern Ireland began to consolidate around the figure of James Scott. The group was composed in the main of graduates who had known James from Queens days, and others who had come into contact with him through the Irish Association or indeed the Ulster Liberal party. Some of the group had had contact with the Tuairim study group in Dublin and had been impressed by the quality of their contribution to political debate in the Republic. A feature of the success of the Tuairim group was their non-party stance and this consideration influenced the thinking of the group which began to meet regularly at the home of James and Olive Scott.

The initial discussions were informal and unstructured but it soon became apparent that there was a general acceptance of a common thesis. This was the notion that the organic development of a national consciousness had been frustrated by the events of 1912-1922, and the partition of the country, and that some mechanism must be found to regenerate that development. Implicit in that stance was the realization that such a development could not be secured by the coercion of any group within the national community – the concept of unity by consent was the central theme which held the group together and led them in 1959 to form the organisation National Unity.

The relatively small group involved – about a dozen people – did not envisage engagement in political campaigning or electoral politics. The purpose rather was to explore the implications for Irish Nationalism of the existence of an established political entity in the Northern Ireland governmental structure. This entailed examining areas of agreement and accommodation within Northern Ireland and between the Southern and Northern administrations. It was predicated on the belief that active participation in the political machinery of the Northern entity did not entail nor imply repudiation of the nationalist vision. The underlying principle, that the nationalist goal of a reintegrated Ireland should and could be brought about with the consent of the citizens of Northern Ireland represented a radical departure from the received wisdom of the nationalist community since 1921, even though most nationalists would by that time have acknowledged it as the only realistic one.

In the exchanges which led to the establishment of the organisation and in the development of the group's activities, James Scott was undoubtedly the driving force. His wide circle of academic contacts and his local prestige enabled the new organisation to attract high quality contributors to the series of public meetings it sponsored both across Northern Ireland and in Dublin. Such meetings enabled the group members to develop their thinking and promote their message as the meetings attracted considerable media publicity. It also afforded them the

opportunity to make contact with influential figures within Fianna Fail, and the Irish Labour Party, such as Erskine Childers, Eoin Ryan and Brendan Corish. There was a focus on trying to persuade the Dublin government to abandon the 'sore thumb' policy on the North and to cease constant invocation of the 'four glorious years' mantra.

While engaged in such lobbying they also attracted considerable criticism from both Unionist and Republican circles. Within a few days of the first public meeting of National Unity, a Unionist Senator, A.J. Walmsley had attacked the organisation bracketing it with the Irish Association as having a common aim in 'the evident liquidation – in its most subtle form – of Northern Ireland as a political and economic entity. The vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland will not be hoodwinked' (BNL 9/2/60).

It was ironic that although a Unionist spokesman could detect little difference between the goals and purposes of National Unity and the Irish Association, the latter body was so conscious of their totally different roles that they asked Jamses Scott in 1962 to resign his secretary-ship of the Association in case the Association became identified in the public mind with his now openly proclaimed nationalist stance. This he did reluctantly, seeing it as a concession on the Association's part to the dichotomous fault line in Northern Community life. As he wrote at the time in a letter to the Belfast Telegraph "The 'border within the Border' is a much more harmful thing than the present division of Ireland because it is the cause of much more bitterness and frustration" (BT 18/10/62).

In the many meetings, seminars and colloquiums which National Unity promoted over the five years between 1960 and 1965 the three dominant themes were community relations within Northern Ireland, relationships between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and the role the Northern Nationalist community could play in the governance of Northern Ireland. Because of its openness and its willingness to confront taboo subjects it attracted support from some local politicians such as Harry Diamond and Cahir Healy and from some politicians in the South such as George Colley, and commentators such as Garret Fitzgerald and Ernest Blythe, and the Nationalist dilemma was for the first time being addressed in terms which went beyond abstention or recognition. When in 1964 the organization launched a monthly magazine The New Nation this provided a further medium for development of the new departure. In all twelve issues of the journal appeared and James Scott contributed to each of them (sometimes under a pseudonym) in which he grappled with the themes noted above. In as far as they identify his main political concerns it might be helpful to quote from a number of these.

Writing in 1964 just after the Westminster elections of that year had seen the collapse of the Republican vote in the West of the province and the humiliation of Republican Labour in West Belfast, James asked the question "Who will speak for us?" and tried to answer it by offering a template for Nationalist organisation along the basis of consent. "What" he asked "are the Nationalist people willing to give in return for the establishment of a true democracy in which discrimination in all its forms would be abolished? Will any large number fully accept the

partition of Ireland on a permanent basis? This is unlikely. What they can do is to make greater efforts to render the ultimate acceptance of a United Ireland more attractive to the Protestant majority. A situation in which there was an open, honest agreement on both sides to accept the other's viewpoint as long as this represented the view of the majority, without misuse of power, would be a great improvement on the present policy of discrimination and mistrust." In the light of the Good Friday agreement this might seem fairly commonplace, but forty years ago this was a radical position for a Nationalist to adopt.

Later writing of the disarray within nationalism he observed "If the nationalist party is to play its proper role in the ending of partition it must become something more than the party of the Catholic small farmer. It must represent the city worker and the non-committed protestant. Between the Nationalist party and the other anti-unionist parties there must be some form of federation and co-operation and understanding if the national ideal is to be attained. It is very necessary that Nationalism should widen its boundaries and that its leaders should not be bound by merely local or sectarian problems." (NN October 1964).

The predictive dimension of this thinking was possibly most clearly marked in an article "The 50-50 flashpoint" written under the pseudonym "John Henderson" simply because he had another article in the same issue. In it he addressed "the crisis which will face the whole community when the number of adult Catholics with voting rights approaches 50 percent of the population." He offered two scenarios – a benign one of "open active and effective co-operation between the 'liberal' or constitutional elements on both sides" while the malign one envisaged "Unionist extremists using all available means including violence to defend the Protestant cause and maintain the link with England." (NN November 1965).

By 1964 the activities of National Unity and the themes it was addressing were widely acknowledged by social and political activists within the general nationalist community. These were the sort of people who were dismayed by the ineffectiveness of the Nationalist parliamentary opposition and who were totally chagrined by a television encounter between Brian Faulkner, then Minister of Commerce and James O'Reilly the Nationalist MP for Mourne.

The failure of O'Reilly when challenged by Faulkner to furnish evidence of discrimination, to do so seemed to typify the inability of Nationalist parliamentarians to develop a coherent political strategy. In their frustration some individuals looked to National Unity to initiate some move to remedy the situation. It was a recognition of the role which National Unity and in particular James Scott had established in articulating the concerns of Northern Nationalists. These approaches presented National Unity with a dilemma. It had from the beginning explicitly eschewed electoral politics and this position had enabled it to engage with a range of political interests. To take an initiative which could be seen as hostile to the Nationalist Parliamentary party would breach that non-partisan stance. Eventually James Scott encouraged his colleagues to take the view that the risk was worth taking and it was decided to convene a conference of all those

with an interest in Nationalism to consider future strategies. Some public representatives were personally invited but there was an open invitation to all – it was to say the least a hazardous manoeuvre since there was no way of controlling who would show or how the meeting might be managed. Eventually on April 19th 1964 the conference convened at Maghery in County Armagh and debated a motion calling upon the Nationalist party to establish a constituency based organization. The motion was never put because at the behest of the Nationalist parliamentarians present, the motion was withdrawn in place of a resolution to establish a National Political Front comprising members elected from the floor of the conference and representatives of the Nationalist party.

In the event the National Political Front did not survive its internal tensions very long and the lay members withdrew in 1964 to organize and oversee the formation of the National Democratic Party. Because of a foundation principle not to contest elections in marginal seats that party did not have much electoral success but did succeed in gaining control in two local authority areas but more importantly built up a network of constituency branches throughout the North. When in 1970 in the light of the formation of the SDLP the NDP dissolved itself, it was these branches which effectively provided the constituency base for the new party.

In his biography "All Hell will break loose", Austin Currie has observed "Maghery was an important development in the move towards the creation of an organised card-carrying left of centre political party."

The role of National Unity after the Maghery meeting was greatly diminished. Its primacy in the summoning of the meeting meant that its non-partisan image had been compromised and many of its members and adherents were engaged in the NDP but James never seemed at ease with the compromises and tactics essential to electoral politics. He had a sense that checking the electoral registers and deciding that a particular ward was a no-go area diminished the quality of political debate and corrupted the integrity of the vision. His health was failing and the resolution of earlier years was fading. When in 1969 the bulwark of moderation and rational debate was blown apart by the street violence there was no place for the sort of accommodation which James Scott had preached. It would be nearly thirty years before there was a general acknowledgement that that was the only sort of strategy which could ensure peace and a more humane society in Northern Ireland.

All historical debate centres around issues of causality. It is impossible to say whether the National Unity movement materially shaped what is now the received wisdom within the Northern nationalist community, or whether they were simply the first organised group to apprehend the sort of changes which were necessary and inevitable. Whichever it was, it was James Scott who effectively articulated their themes, introduced them to a wide public and offered that public the vision of a better future.