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Denominational Forces and Their Impact on the Reform of Education in Northern Ireland, 1922–1926

John Dallat*

This paper is concerned with the origins and development of the education system of Northern Ireland between 1920 and 1925. These years are chosen because the new state of Northern Ireland was founded in 1920, while in 1925, the first piece of legislation to lay the foundations of a new state system of education for Northern Ireland, the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1923, was in that year amended. The paper will examine the factors which caused this to happen but begins with a brief examination of the political situation in 1920 which will help contextualise the educational developments to which the paper will refer. The Government of Ireland Act 1920 will be an appropriate starting point for this purpose.¹

The Act partitioned Ireland in two, 'Northern Ireland' consisting of six counties in the northern part of the country, and 'Southern Ireland', which consisted of the remaining twenty-six counties of the land. Each would have its own parliament with various ministries to oversee developments. The first election to the Belfast parliament was held on 25 May 1921. This resulted in the return of forty Unionists and twelve Nationalist candidates. The Unionists supported partition and therefore 'union' with Great Britain, whereas Nationalists were opposed to both, their allegiance lying solidly with the government and people of Southern Ireland with whom they shared religious and cultural affinities. Politically and culturally Northern Ireland in 1920 was a deeply divided society. This occasioned civil unrest and instability, prevalent even at the very moment of the state's inception. "Terrible, horrible times, a disgrace to civilisation and humanity"² is how Joseph Mac Rory, Roman Catholic bishop of Down and Connor who lived in Belfast, described the years from 1920 to 1922. As one senior Church of Ireland clergyman explained, Northern Ireland was "hagridden by the prejudices of a bygone time. It does not quite realise that we are living in the twentieth century."³ In July 1922 the Cardinal Primate, Michael Logue, wrote to Sir Shane Leslie, the writer, "God help us, we have terrible times here."⁴ The situation was clearly desperate. Against this background, a new ministry of education was created, 7 June 1921.

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¹ Government of Ireland Act, 1920. 10 and 11, Geo. 5.

² J. J. Murphy, *The People's Primate* (Dublin: The Frederick Press, 1950).

³ State Papers Office, Dublin Castle, Quoted in a Provisional government source entitled *Example of Atrocities: Belfast Summary*, DE 2/347.

⁴ National Library of Ireland, Leslie Papers, Ms 22840, Logue to Leslie, 8 July 1922.

The first prime minister of Northern Ireland was James Craig, an astute, experienced politician who had entered the British House of Commons as the Unionist Member of Parliament for East Down, in the general election of 1906. Though skilled in political terms, he “was not an outstanding orator”⁵ but if his words “lacked colour and passion [...] they did not lack force.”⁶ Craig became leader of the Unionists on 25 January 1921, succeeding Sir Edward Carson.

The minister of education was Charles Vane-Tempest-Stewart, seventh marquess of Londonderry. Though English-born (London) and educated (Eton and Sandhurst), his family retained strong links with Ulster, owning estates in Counties Donegal and Down. At the time of his appointment Londonderry was parliamentary undersecretary of state for air in the British Cabinet. He was not therefore an elected member of the Northern Ireland parliament. Referring to his appointment he stated: “There was a real call of the blood in this invitation, for my family had been so long associated with Ulster. My father always sought to persuade me to make the Irish question the main theme of my political activities [...] and if I had turned my back on the offer which James Craig had given me, I should never have forgiven myself.”⁷

His resolve would prove enduring. In December 1922, on being asked by the Conservative prime minister, Bonar Law, to join his Cabinet, Londonderry explained how he was “pledged to Ulster [...] in the difficult times through which we are now passing.”⁸ For all that, he had reason to bemoan “the narrow and selfish Belfast spirit,” adding that “a desire to decry and destroy me exists in fairly influential circles.”⁹ Perhaps his liberal politics had caused offence, since “[...] nothing [would] give him greater pleasure and satisfaction in years to come, and the sooner the better, than the knowledge that the government of Ireland Act was but [...] a preliminary stepping stone to a united Ireland,”¹⁰ though he believed such unity should occur within the context of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

Both Craig and Londonderry considered the reform of education a priority, Craig emphasising in September 1921, in his opening speech to a new parliament, that it was “admitted on all sides that our educational system is not one that can be amended, but one that requires to be absolutely rooted out of the soil [...]”¹¹ To this end, Lord Londonderry inaugurated a Committee of Inquiry under the chairmanship of Robert Lynn, a Unionist MP and editor of a Unionist newspaper, the *Northern Whig*, to examine the state of provision in education at the time, and make recommendations for its

⁵ Patrick Buckland. *James Craig* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1980) p. 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Londonderrys - A Family Portrait* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), p. 143.

⁸ PRONI (Public Records Office of Northern Ireland), CAB 6/9, Londonderry to Bonar Law, 23 October 1922.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Durham County Records Office, Londonderry Papers, D/Lo/F/592(3), Typescript of speech with notes and amendments by Lord Londonderry, n.d.

¹¹ Northern Ireland Commons, I: 21 September 1921.

improvement.¹² Craig described Lynn as “a live man” and a good politician,¹³ which perception Lord Londonderry held of him as well though he also considered him to be “[...] almost a bigoted Presbyterian.”¹⁴ It is Lynn¹⁵ who provides a fascinating picture of the leadership qualities of Craig and Londonderry seeing in the latter a man more worthy of the premiership than Craig: “You must take your natural position as Ulster’s Leader [*sic*]. J[ames] C[raig] has never got hold of the Ulster people — he always reminds me of the man who is trying to mount a spirited horse and who only gets one foot in the stumps when the horse bolts.”¹⁶ This was a remarkable statement, emanating as it did, in 1925, from one of the more influential of the Unionist politicians of the period. It is however impossible to state how many other Unionists may have believed likewise at that time.

The Committee which Lord Londonderry established would clearly be an important body. He therefore wished that it should be representative of all shades of political and religious outlook. Cardinal Logue was asked to nominate representatives but refused on the grounds that “an attack [was] being organised against our Catholic schools.”¹⁷ The Committee of Inquiry would simply be used “[...] as a foundation and a pretext of that attack.”¹⁸ The Committee was therefore deprived of Catholic influence, which Professor Akenson considers the “single most important determinant of the educational history of Northern Ireland to the present day.”¹⁹

The Committee recommended greater local involvement in school management which was reflected in the creation of Local Committees for Primary Education.²⁰ New schools built and equipped by these committees would also be managed by them. This would include appointing teachers. These schools would be known as Class I schools. In Class II schools, on the other hand, managers who did not wish to relinquish all control, might accept “a modified form of local administration” consisting of two representatives of the Local Committee for Primary Education and four representatives of the patron or patrons of the schools.²¹ Managers who wished to remain “entirely independent” of local control would occupy Class III.²² In Class I schools, the Local Committee for Primary Education would pay all costs of heating, maintenance and repair from local rates, while

¹² The findings of the Committee were presented in an Interim Report on the Educational Services in Northern Ireland, September 1921, Cmd. 6.

¹³ PRONI, Carson Papers, D1507/1/3/26, Carson to Dawson Bates, 13 June 1917.

¹⁴ PRONI, CAB 6/19, Londonderry to Craig, 20 August 1921.

¹⁵ Lynn was a staunch supporter of Lord Londonderry. He was MP for West Belfast.

¹⁶ PRONI, Londonderry Papers, D3099/2/11/14, Lynn to Lady Londonderry, undated, but the context of the letter indicates that it was written in 1925.

¹⁷ PRONI, CAB 4/18/2, Logue to Londonderry, 2 September 1921.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ D. H. Akenson, *Education and Enmity: The Control of Schooling in Northern Ireland, 1920-1950* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973), p. 52.

²⁰ Interim Report of the Departmental Committee of Inquiry, 1921, Section 104.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Section 105.

²² *Ibid.*

Class II schools would receive half the cost of maintenance, repair and heating from local rates, but Class III schools no funding whatever for these necessities.²³ Moreover, in respect of capital expenses, for example new buildings, Class I schools would receive two-thirds funding from central government and the remaining one-third from local rates and Class II schools two-thirds funding from government, one-sixth from local rates, with the balance being provided by the school. Managers of Class III schools might borrow monies from the ministry of education but they would be required to repay the borrowed amount.²⁴ The salaries of all teachers would be paid by the ministry of education. While these structural recommendations could be clearly understood, the same could not be said for the Committee's proposals on religious education, which were "ambiguous and thoroughly confusing."²⁵

Concerning these, the Committee's principal recommendation was that the original aim of the system of National Education, introduced in 1831, should be maintained. This object was "to afford combined literary and moral and separate religious instruction, to children of all persuasions, as far as possible, in the same school, upon the fundamental principle that no attempt shall be made to interfere with the peculiar religious tenets of any description of pupils."²⁶ The Committee further recommended that scriptural and denominational instruction to which parents and guardians of the children did not object, should be given but at fixed and stated hours. No teacher should be compelled to give religious instruction.²⁷ However, as Professor Akenson explains, the Committee's recommendation concerning the maintenance of the original objectives of the system of National Education was "nonsense, for the Irish primary schools had been religiously segregated and de facto denominational in curricular matters since the middle of the nineteenth century."²⁸ In reality, therefore, the Committee's recommendation on religious education, "was not suggesting that ecumenical education be pursued but that denominational schooling be continued [...]. The old rules were to hold [...] it being explicitly stated that the clergy or others to whom the parents and guardians of the children did not object had the right of access to the school to give 'scriptural and denominational' instruction at fixed times."²⁸ These fixed times, the clergy believed, would occur during the hours of compulsory attendance, though this was not in fact stated in the Lynn Committee's recommendations. Lord Londonderry, on the other hand, believed that religious instruction of a denominational kind could not be given during the hours of compulsory attendance. On these very issues, he would write to the Church of Ireland bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore, Dr Grierson, to say: "Religious instruction [...] will only be given outside the hours of compulsory attendance. This involves no change from previous

²³ *Ibid.*, Section 106.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ D. H. Akenson, *Education and Enmity*, p. 56.

²⁶ Interim Report of the Departmental Committee of Inquiry, 1921, Section 136.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Section 141.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Section 140.

practice.”²⁹ The minister added a further clarification. Referring to the definition of the term “elementary education” — Section 7 of the Act — which stated that this meant “an education both literary and moral” he stressed to Bishop Grierson that moral instruction “must by necessity be absolutely undenominational,” adding that it could not “include reading from the pages of the Bible itself.” As if this were not offence enough, the minister’s new reforms also stated that (a) local education authorities would be enabled only ‘to afford opportunities’ for religious instruction, in other words they were forbidden to provide it (Section 26); (b) religious instruction would not form part of the time during which any child was required to attend school (Section 28); and (c) as was stated in Section 66(3): “The power of appointing teachers [...] shall be exercised by the education authority and shall not be delegated by them to a school committee appointed under the Act.” According to the same Clause, the education authority could not require that teachers appointed to provided or transferred schools should be teachers who “belong to or profess the tenets of any particular church or religious denomination.”³⁰ The terms “provided” and “transferred” were adopted by Lord Londonderry to refer to the schools designated by Lynn as Class 1.

Critics of the reforms were to argue that Lord Londonderry was creating a nondenominational and secular system of education at odds with the Lynn Committee’s recommendation that the original objective of the 1831 system of National Education should be maintained. To the Protestant representatives on the Lynn Committee this meant the maintenance of denominationalism. How could they otherwise have allowed themselves to support the Committee’s recommendations, those on religious education in particular? As one leading opponent of the reforms would argue, “When the first draft of the Education Bill was published [...] it was found on examination that little or no consideration had been given to the findings of the Lynn Committee on many important matters, such as [...] the method of appointing teachers;[and] continuance of religious instruction as heretofore.”³¹ He continued: “The Bill was designed to take from the people of Northern Ireland the provision of religious instruction in their state-aided schools a privilege which had been given them by the British Government and which had secured religious instruction being provided in the Model and National schools for over ninety years.”³²

Between March 1923 and June 1923, in which latter month the Education Bill received the Royal Assent, the voices of the mainstream churches were increasingly raised in opposition to the new reforms. The power of local committees in the appointment of teachers and perceived relegation of religious education within the curriculum, were the specific targets of clerical opposition. After the First Reading of the Education Bill, 17 March 1923, for example, an official statement by the Catholic Church in

²⁹ PRONI, D3099/5/9, Londonderry to Grierson, 26 April 1923.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ The Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1923, 13 and 14 Geo. 5, Cmd. 21, Section 66(3).

³² W. Corkey, *Episode in the History of Protestant Ulster, 1923-1947* (Belfast: Dorman and Sons, nd), p. 19.

relation to the Bill was issued by the northern bishops, all of whom were signatories to it. The statement emphasised that: "Religious instruction imparts Christian knowledge and develops Christian feeling. It is the most precious education the child can receive [...] To put religion out of the schools in the most plastic years of the child is a retrograde step." The statement concluded that Class I schools would be "impossible for Catholic children."³³ The Church's position on the appointment of teachers was unequivocal: "The essential point for the Catholics is for the manager to appoint the teachers. That is a thing the managers can never willingly forego."³⁴ On this issue also the Presbyterians were to adopt an inflexible stance: "The Synod is convinced that the proposal of the Bill to deprive School Committees of the power to appoint teachers, and of the ordinary powers of management, in provided or transferred schools, and to vest these powers in Regional Committees drawn, as a rule, from areas embracing one-fourth of a county would not give effect to the principle of local control, and would not foster local interest in schools, or serve the best interests of education."³⁵

In the Church of Ireland there were similar concerns. E. V. Hobson, Dean of Armagh, for example, asked R. J. McKeown (Londonderry's parliamentary secretary) to guarantee that "strict regard" would be exercised so as to ensure "the appointment of a teacher of the same religious denomination of the owners or trustees of the school," adding: "According to the Bill a teacher is to be appointed quite irrespective of creed. Think how this would work. Imagine a Roman Catholic school having a non-Roman Catholic appointed as teacher or again imagine the opposite."³⁶ Writing to prime minister Craig, the Church of Ireland Primate, Dr D'Arcy, stressed that this was "a fatal policy" causing "very grave apprehensions in the border counties."³⁷ Given such views, it is not surprising that Lord Londonderry should eventually receive a deputation of representatives of the main Protestant Churches, 7 May 1923. They wished formally to express their growing disapproval of his educational reforms. The representatives included Bishop Grierson and Primate D'Arcy for the Church of Ireland, and on behalf of the Presbyterians, two former moderators, Dr Strahan and Dr Bingham, who were accompanied by that Church's joint convenor of elementary education, Dr William Corkey. The statement they presented to the minister, drawn up on 3 May 1923, also bore the signatures of three representatives of the Methodists but these were not present at the meeting of 7 May. The signatories demanded three specific concessions, each set in the context of their schools as "a sacred trust": that in provided and transferred schools, religious instruction should be given for a period of at least half an

³³ Quoted in *The Irish Catholic Directory*, Records of Documents, 1923, pp. 604–605.

³⁴ State Papers Office, Dublin Castle, S1011, A Statement of the Proceedings of the Advisory Committee of the Provisional Government on the North East, 11 April, 1922.

³⁵ PRONI, D3099/5/9, Statement of the Presbyterian Synod regarding the Education Bill, 24 April 1923.

³⁶ PRONI, D3099/5/9, Hobson to McKeown, 24 April 1923.

³⁷ PRONI, D3099/5/9, Primate D'Arcy to Prime Minister Craig, 24 April 1923.

hour each day or its equivalent each week (the statement clarified that the Churches “would not be satisfied with anything less than Bible teaching”); that teaching appointments would continue to be made by existing school committees and that the full cost of heating, lighting and cleaning of all the schools would be met by the local education authority.³⁸

While the meeting was clearly crucial for the Protestants, it did not however result in their feeling completely satisfied with the outcomes. They would gain one significant concession while failing to do so in respect of another. The concession was that the words “including teachers at the school” would be incorporated into Section 26 of the Bill, so that it would read as follows: “[...] and those clergymen or other persons, including teachers of the school [...] shall have access to the children [...] for the purpose of giving them religious instruction.”³⁹ What Lord Londonderry would not agree to, however, was an amendment to Clause 66(3) empowering the new local education committees to appoint the teachers to transferred and provided schools.⁴⁰ The clergy had asked that this clause read as follows: “The appointment of teachers in provided and transferred schools shall be made by the Committee of the Schools and that the principal teacher should be of the same religious denomination as the school’s transferors.”⁴¹ Bishop Grierson wrote Lord Londonderry that same day to say that the proposed amendment to Clause 26 appeared “to meet all we asked for,” though he added that “if a similarly happy position could be found for the difficult problem [of] the appointment of teachers in transferred schools [...] then, indeed, we would have reason to rejoice.”⁴² The issue of appointments was clearly a crucial one from both points of view. In the light of Dr Grierson’s comment concerning appointments, it is surprising that the Church of Ireland Primate, Dr D’Arcy, should write Lord Londonderry and say that “The proposed amendment to Clause 26 is, in my opinion, a perfect solution to all our difficulties. I can assure you that we are very grateful for the complete way in which our points have been dealt with.”⁴³ How could it have been? So far as Grierson was concerned, the battle was not yet won, whereas Primate D’Arcy was deeply anxious that his Church should not be seen publicly to be at loggerheads with government policy.

Only in private correspondence did the Primate allude to the inevitability of agitation and conflict, as on 2 June 1923, in a letter written to a clerical colleague about “the defect about appointment of teachers,” reflecting that, “After much consultation, I have come to the conclusion that we must wait until people come to understand the Bill more before we could carry through a successful agitation.”⁴⁴ He had learned from Lord Londonderry himself that “great pressure was being exerted from the side of the teachers against our [the Churches’] view. He [Londonderry] was not himself

³⁸ PRONI, D3099/5/9, Minutes of Proceedings, 8 May 1923.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² PRONI, D3099/5/9, Grierson to Lord Londonderry, 8 May 1923.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, D’Arcy to Lord Londonderry, 9 May 1923.

⁴⁴ University of Ulster (UU), Elliott Papers, D’Arcy to Craig, 2 June 1923.

unfavourable.”⁴⁵ In contrast, significantly, the Prime Minister had told D’Arcy “he had no doubt that an amending Bill would very soon be necessary.”⁴⁶

Presbyterians, on the other hand, were by this time, June 1923, more willing than others to agitate in a systematic manner against the reforms, and so on 3 June 1923, with the passing of the Education Bill imminent, Drs Bingham, Corkey and Strahan are found writing to the managers of Presbyterian schools urging them to voice their opposition to the powers of regional education committees since, “People immediately associated with the school will have no right to appoint the teachers or to manage it.”⁴⁷ Three days later, the Education Bill was passed by the Northern Ireland Commons. True to his word, Lord Londonderry had amended Section 26 as promised at the meeting of the Protestant deputation on 7 May 1923 but Section 66(3) remained as before. Not surprisingly, when the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church met on 26 June 1923, the Act was condemned as unacceptable and Presbyterian managers instructed not to transfer their schools to the Londonderry ministry. Dr Strahan, in an impassioned speech, compared the Act to a beautiful ring studded with precious jewels, “but possessing also a secret source of poison that may be deadly to the very best life of the community.”⁴⁸ Archdeacon Atkinson, Church of Ireland, had no doubt that the clergy would “willingly transfer if only they were satisfied that the children for whom they were responsible to Christ had secured to them instruction in the Christian faith [...but...] the whole tendency of the Act [was] toward the ultimate secularisation of education in Provided and Transferred schools.”⁴⁹ Referring to Section 66(3), he added: “Under this a Jew or an Atheist must be appointed to teach Christian children if his literary qualifications are superior to other applicants.”⁵⁰ To agree to such a system would be a betrayal of “our trust as shepherds of Christ’s flock...”⁵¹ In the same month came indication of another source of opposition, perhaps greater than any other. This was a resolution passed by the Ballymena Total Abstinence Loyal Orange Lodge, the officers of which placed on record their “unalterable opposition to the proposed elimination of Religious Instruction from the National Schools’ Curriculum.”⁵² But as Lord Londonderry continued to explain, for example in a speech to the Reform Club in Belfast, 9 November 1923, he had gone as far as the Constitution allowed him to go in the concessions that had been made. He therefore emphasised, as he had

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ PRONI, D3099/5/9, Bingham, Corkey and Strahan to Presbyterian Managers, 3 June 1923.

⁴⁸ Quoted in *Episode in the History of Protestant Ulster 1923-1947*, by Wm. Corkey, n.d., p. 25.

⁴⁹ PRONI, D3099/5/9, Atkinson to J W Andrews, Minister of Labour, 17 December 1923.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² PRONI, D3099/5/9, Resolution of the Ballymena Total Abstinence Loyal Orange Lodge, 24 November 1923, from J. A. Ross to Lord Londonderry.

done many times in the past, that there were limitations on his freedom to legislate.⁵³ The existence of Section 5 of the Government of Ireland Act 1920 was reality and it specifically forbade the government of Northern Ireland “either directly or indirectly to establish or endow any religion [...] or give a preference, privilege, or advantage, or impose any disability or disadvantage, on account of religious beliefs [...]”⁵⁴

Despite all pressures, the government was confident it would succeed in implementing the legislation. Such thinking was particularly reinforced by the attitude of Protestant teachers whose Union, the Ulster Teachers, had on various occasions expressed unqualified support for the Londonderry reforms.⁵⁵ Thus, at a critical meeting with a deputation from the Protestant Churches on 2 April 1924, Lord Londonderry emphasised that only an amendment of the 1923 Act, which he was clearly unwilling to effect, would bring about the changes being sought. His reply to the clergy’s request that he should place “on permanent record, where it will not be buried in oblivion, the expectation of the Ministry that the teacher will give religious instruction,” was minuted as follows: “The Minister cannot consent to put any compulsion, direct or indirect, upon the teachers. He will, however, cause to be inserted in the programme of instruction for public elementary schools, which will be issued to teachers and managers, the expression of the ‘hope and belief’ of the Ministry that teachers will give religious instruction.”⁵⁶

When Strahan insisted at the meeting that the Act must be amended without delay, he was told by Lord Londonderry that this request could not be met with “if he were to continue in office.”⁵⁷ The minister pointed out that circumstances in Ulster had changed ‘radically’ with self-government, and that the decentralisation contained in the 1923 Act was “a necessary corollary to the new position.”⁵⁸ When Londonderry then insisted that the Churches must be prepared to surrender “their privileged position in education,” Strahan and Corkey both intimated that they were “quite prepared to do so,” once the Churches had received assurances that (a) the teachers would be required to give religious instruction and (b) Protestant teachers would be appointed to Protestant schools.⁵⁹ On being asked to change the clauses of the Bill which prevented Class II and Class III schools from obtaining full grant aid, the minister replied that “the full cost of heating and cleaning can only be obtained if a school is transferred [...] No change from the present basis of charge in dividing the burden between the local authority and the private manager could be made by anything short of legislation.”⁶⁰ The minister added that he was unable to agree with the deputation that teachers

53 PRONI, D3099/5/9, Address made to the Reform Club, Belfast, 9 November 1923.

54 Government of Ireland Act, Section 5.

55 The Minutes of the Ulster Teachers’ Union are an invaluable source. They include resolutions adopted at Annual Conferences. The Annual Conferences of 1923 and 1924 passed resolutions supporting the Londonderry Reforms.

56 PRONI, D3099/5/8, Minutes of Proceedings, 2 April 1924.

57 *Ibid.*

58 *Ibid.*

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Ibid.*

would exploit Section 26 of the Act and refuse to give religious instruction. He did not "anticipate any such difficulties as Dr Strahan fears."⁶¹ The ministry's ongoing refusal to capitulate therefore witnessed the formation, in December 1924, of the United Education Committee of the Protestant Churches, which became an influential source of opposition to the Londonderry reforms. Its joint secretaries were Dr William Corkey (Presbyterian), Chancellor James Quinn (Church of Ireland) and Dr William Smyth (Methodist). One of the Committee's essential tasks was that of harnessing lay support for its stand on the education issue.

Curiously, the Protestant clergy were confident that they, too, commanded the support of the province's teachers. Dr Corkey, for example, had written in the Unionist paper the *New Letter*, January 1925, that it was imperative on the government to amend the Act without delay, considering "the united voice of the teachers in condemning it."⁶² This, however, was a mistake on Corkey's part which the vice-president of the Ulster Teachers' Union, Isaac McLoughlin, was quick to seize upon in a published reply to Dr Corkey's claim. "The public knows very well, indeed, that the united voice of the teachers has always been raised in favour of the Act as it stands, and against any amendment which would place the appointment of teachers in the hands of individuals or small committees."⁶³ Continuing, he criticised the clergy for clinging so tenaciously to the right to appoint teachers, claiming that this was an advantage which they would "naturally hate to forego," and for "making the flesh of the public creep by conjuring up horrible visions of the Bible banished from the schools, of Communists and Atheists corrupting the morals of the rising generation [...] and the worst bogey of all, Catholic teachers appointed to Protestant schools."⁶⁴ The clergy's insistence on having the teacher compelled to give religious instruction had been due largely to their known reluctance to undertake this duty themselves. He could "truthfully say that a Presbyterian clergyman never gave five minutes religious instruction" in his school, adding that "Teachers did not relish compulsion."⁶⁵

But what of other lay organisations, the Orange Order for example? While sympathetic to the clergy's position, leaders within the Order had certain misgivings about opposing the government. It would appear, however, that rank and file members were not quite as sensitive about this. As Lord Londonderry's private secretary, Hendricks, explained to the minister, 3 February 1925, "responsible heads of the County Orange Lodge in Belfast were doing their best to check the spread" of a resolution which "the riff-raff of the Order" had passed "in face of all advice," at a meeting of the County Grand Lodge some days earlier. The resolution had condemned those clauses of the 1923 Act which it was believed had placed the Protestant religion in jeopardy.⁶⁶

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Belfast News Letter*, 10 January 1925.

⁶³ *Belfast News Letter*, 12 January 1925.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ PRONI, D3099/5/9, Hendricks to Lord Londonderry, 3 February 1925.

Chancellor Quinn also confirms this initial division in the Order's ranks, recalling how the organisers of one of the first rallies to be held against the Act — the venue was the Albert Hall, Shankill Road, Belfast, no less — decided not to ask Sir Joseph Davison, the grand master, to make an address lest he should refuse.⁶⁷ Quinn was told at this meeting by Thomas Moles, MP for South Belfast and editor of the *Belfast Telegraph*, that the teachers wished to see the clergy defeated: "Moles proceeded to lay down the law on the Education (sic) controversy and to tell me all the teachers, one of his aunts having been one, had suffered at the hands of tyrannical clergy. He warned me that the Act should not be attacked from the pulpit."⁶⁸ "I replied," Quinn added, "Mr Moles anything I can have done up till now is the merest earnest of what I am prepared to do, unless and until the Education Act has been amended."⁶⁹ At this, Moles "collapsed like a prickled bubble."⁷⁰

But could this initial reluctance of the Orange leadership to openly confront the government be relied on to prevail? Seemingly it could not be. When Hendriks met with William Drennan, honorary secretary of the County Grand Lodge of Belfast, in order to assess the Orange Order's opinion, February 1925, Drennan informed him that he was having "the greatest difficulty" restraining members, "the hotheads" in particular.⁷¹ Drennan believed that Orangemen were in increasing numbers becoming sympathetic to the clergy's demands.⁷² Hendriks informed Lord Londonderry of this in a letter dated 4 February 1925, in which he also stated he had met Bishop Grierson at the Ulster Club Belfast, the previous day, only to be informed by him that the clergy would never give in until the "peccant clauses" of the Act had been "cut out of it."⁷³ Drennan's assessment is not surprising considering the fact that the United Education Committee of the Protestant Churches was highly effective in its efforts to impress upon members of the Churches which it represented how real and dangerous a threat the 1923 Act posed to the Protestant religion and culture.

Londonderry's reply to Hendriks on 5 February 1923 is highly significant, for in it he emphasised that he had no intention of having the Act amended, and that he was much annoyed by Grierson's failure to negotiate directly with him as minister of education. Clearly Grierson, for one, considered the minister was by this stage a lost cause. "Why cannot he write to me direct?" fulminated Lord Londonderry, adding: "These churchmen always like going the round about way. I think it very inadvisable to amend what he calls the 'peccant clauses'. I am really not prepared to make an alteration nor do I think that there is any genuine body of opinion in favor

⁶⁷ Presbyterian Historical Society, Belfast, Corkey Papers, Quoted in Chancellor Quinn's unpublished autobiography, *Behind The Scenes, The Education Acts - Northern Ireland, 1923–25–30*.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ PRONI, D3099/5/9, Hendriks to Lord Londonderry, 4 February 1925.

⁷² PRONI, D3099/5/9, Hendriks to Lord Londonderry, 4 February 1925.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

[sic] of any alteration.”⁷⁴ This, however, was a miscalculation concerning the Orangemen in particular, Londonderry believing that if he interviewed, privately, “as many of the malcontents” within the Order as cared to see him, stressing “our case and our determination to stick to it,” their opposition might dissipate.⁷⁵ Writing from London, 9 February 1925, he therefore instructed Hendriks to arrange the proposed meeting,⁷⁶ only to telegram him two days later to postpone it on account of his having been asked “to meet the King and Queen at dinner.”⁷⁷ That same day, 11 February 1925, Hendriks wrote impressing on Londonderry the fact that the situation with the Orangemen was becoming graver by the minute: “I was speaking to Harry Burns today and he is rather pessimistic about what will happen if the Government goes to the country without amending the Act.”⁷⁸ Burns was a leading member of the Belfast County Grand Lodge.

The minister and the Orangemen did not meet until 23 February 1925, and when they did, Lord Londonderry was still emphatic that the Act could not be amended.⁷⁹ As the meeting drew to a close, Sir Joseph Davison asked him if he had given his final word and he was told that he had: “The minister replied that he could not comply with the wishes of the deputation,” which subsequently withdrew.⁸⁰ In a statement to the press shortly afterwards, Londonderry emphasised that he simply could not alter course for reasons connected with the Constitution and religious liberty: “It would clearly be a violation of every principle of religious liberty.”⁸¹ The statement defended the right of teachers themselves to decide whether they wished to give religious instruction, acknowledging their willingness to do so in the past and hope that they would do so again in the future.

Thereafter, Protestant pressure was quite intentionally directed at the prime minister himself, Dr Corkey writing to him to say that open confrontation with the government now seemed inevitable, though he also emphasised that he did not wish to see this happen. But unless the government acted immediately, he could give no safe guarantees that public meetings and demonstrations would not be held against it throughout the Province. “Speaking quite personally,” Corkey added, “I deplore and detest the whole business of doing anything to embarrass the government, but I can see no other way.”⁸² He had no confidence in the men who had “got hold of the education machine. They were not men who have shown any interest [...] in the religious life of the community or the education of the youth.”⁸³ But he

⁷⁴ PRONI, D3099/5/9, Londonderry to Hendriks, 5 February 1925.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Londonderry to Hendriks, 9 February 1925.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 9 February 1925.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 11 February 1925.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 11 February 1925.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Ministerial Memorandum, 23 February 1925.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Presbyterian Historical Society Belfast: Corkey Papers, Corkey to Craig, undated; however, the text suggests late February 1925.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

would “not mention names.”⁸⁴ Corkey could see no justifiable reason why a teacher should not be asked to give religious instruction, emphasising that if this demand was not met religion would “gradually be dropped” in the schools.⁸⁵ Dr Corkey then elaborated on a major cause of clerical opposition, that if teachers were not compelled to give religious instruction they would simply refuse to do so. This adds a new perspective to the clergy’s case, with Corkey citing to Craig the fact that six of the seven National school teachers who had served on the Lynn Committee had voted in favour of a reservation to have religious instruction excluded completely from schools. Some “excellent men” had told him “that if religious instruction was optional they would not teach it in their schools.” He added: “We cannot see how Bible Instruction can be secured as long as the Act says that ‘The Education Authority shall not provide religious instruction in any such public elementary school.’”⁸⁶

Craig, then, was left under no illusion that only a promise to amend the Act, so as to secure Bible Instruction, would “immediately allay all strife.”⁸⁷ Strahan believed, however, the prime minister would not be moved. Writing to Corkey on 24 February 1925, he mentioned having had “a long conversation” with J. M. Andrews, minister of labour, the day previously, who informed him that “the whole cabinet was behind the prime minister,” and that the Churches must give the Act a chance.⁸⁸

Since it was unusual for Dr Corkey to be disarming, his fears about the teachers were obviously real. Londonderry’s argument that the teachers would automatically give religious instruction, and hence that legislation along these lines was unnecessary, would suggest that the minister had misjudged the nature of the relationship between the clergy and the teachers, whereas Corkey, himself a manager of thirteen schools in Belfast, had a much better understanding of that relationship.

Lord Londonderry’s determination to stand firm, and the fact that Cabinet support for him appeared to be secure, thereby sent a clear signal to the Churches that they were not going to have their way. The Churches, for their part, having accepted this, decided on a strategy designed to occasion the greatest difficulty and embarrassment to Lord Londonderry and the government. They organised, in conjunction with the Orange Order, a mass rally of protest, City Hall, Belfast, 5 March 1925. It is estimated that 20,000 people attended to hear Sir Joseph Davison pledge the support of the Orange Order to an amending act, though “not in a spirit of antagonism” to the Government of Northern Ireland, “but in defence of the Bible, our rule of faith.”⁸⁹ The Churches did not want “assurances and regulations,” he added, “but the Act itself to give us guarantees and safeguards.”⁹⁰ The Protestant

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Presbyterian Historical Society, Belfast, Corkey Papers, Strahan to Corkey, 24 February 1925.

⁸⁹ Author’s private papers, “The Irish Protestant”, April 1925, pp. 2–3.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Churches had clearly been treated unfairly, he stated, and it was quite impossible for him to understand “why a Government such as we have should endow — if they are not going to provide religious instruction — a college to teach Roman Catholic teachers in Belfast. There is no doubt that the college is being supported by Government money, and the teachers in training there will have to be placed in schools within the Six Counties.”⁹¹

The threat to Unionist unity having become so serious, it is scarcely surprising that, while the meeting was in progress, “news came from H. M. Pollock [minister of finance] to say the Government [wished] to confer with the United Education Committee and was preparing for an amendment.”⁹² At a meeting with representatives of the clergy and the Orange Order the following day, Craig exchanged two telegrams with Lord Londonderry, who was in England, on the amendment issue. The first informed him that he was trying to reach a settlement with those present, referring to the “two red rags,” Clause 26 and Clause 66(3).⁹³ Lord Londonderry’s reply, three hours later, stated: “Convinced we shall have great difficulty to justify alterations. Shall have a great difficulty in giving way.”⁹⁴ Craig replied, “All have promised strongest support if agreement reached. Would be most grateful if I could say Lord Londonderry has wired agreement.”⁹⁵ However, Londonderry was to reply that he hoped those who were opposing the government “would give up their campaign for religious instruction to be provided and teachers to be compelled to give it [...]”⁹⁶ But overriding his minister of education’s continuing resistance, Craig reported to the deputation that his government was now prepared to proceed with an amendment to the Act.⁹⁷ The following day, Corkey, Quinn and Smyth, in a jointly-signed letter to the *Belfast Telegraph*, called for all demonstrations scheduled to take place against the Act forthwith to be cancelled.⁹⁸ An amending bill was speedily processed through the different stages of approval to receive the Royal Assent, which was granted on 13 March 1925.

The Act had three main provisions. On the appointment of teachers it conceded that “The school management committee of transferred and provided schools might advise the regional education committee, if the education authority so desire.” The second alteration was the deletion of the proviso in Section 26 prohibiting the local education authorities from providing religious instruction. Thirdly, Section 66(3) which forbade the education authority’s taking cognizance of a teacher’s religion in appointments was repealed. Buckland has pointed out that, although short, the new Bill was very timely, “because it got the government over the immediate worry of facing a well-orchestrated Protestant opposition during

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Presbyterian Historical Society, Belfast, quoted in Chancellor Quinn’s unpublished autobiography, *Behind The Scenes*.

⁹³ PRONI, CAB 9D/1/4, Craig to Londonderry, 4.30pm, 6.3.25.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, Londonderry to Craig, 7.15pm, 6.3.25.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, Craig to Londonderry, 6.3.25.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, Londonderry to Craig, 6.3.25.

⁹⁷ PRONI, D3099/5/8, Ministry of Education (NI) Memorandum, 6 March 1925.

⁹⁸ PRONI, D3099/5/9, *Belfast Telegraph*, 7 March 1925.

the [1925] election.”⁹⁹ The amendments also helped restore confidence in Unionist unity which had been so fragmented at the very time a Boundary Commission was engaged in the business of determining the geographic border between Northern and Southern Ireland. “The secret of the United Education Committee’s success was that it chose a nodal moment in Ulster political life in which to enlarge its campaign to include Orange leaders and Unionist politicians [...] Sir James Craig realised that a show of strength before the boundary report was published would improve the government’s position.”¹⁰⁰ According to Buckland, “The clerical-Orange agitation, therefore, threatened to destroy Craig’s hopes of presenting a united front to the London and Dublin governments.”¹⁰¹

The *modus vivendi* arrived at in March 1925 would prove however to be short-lived. In the following month, when the ministry of education was asked by the United Education Committee of the Protestant Churches to approve the insertion of two conditions in the deeds of transfer of former voluntary schools, the ministry withheld consent. “These conditions were, firstly, that religious instruction should be given by the teaching staff on a programme approved by the persons or body transferring the school, and, secondly, that if someone religiously offensive to the transferring body was appointed as a teacher, the transferors should have the right to resume control of the school.”¹⁰² The ministry refused on the grounds that to do so would be illegal on account of Section 5 of the Government of Ireland Act, 1920. Craig then wrote his minister of education asking him to change the ministry’s decision¹⁰³ but Londonderry refused: “Regret I cannot agree to your suggestion after very careful consideration. Consider it contravenes principle of no compulsion. I believe best course is to do nothing and let General Assembly do as they please.”¹⁰⁴ Five days later, Sir Joseph Davison of the Orange Order wrote with concern to Lord Londonderry to say that the ministry’s reply to the Churches was “very unsatisfactory and very disappointing.”¹⁰⁵ A meeting was subsequently held at Parliament Buildings, 14 May 1925, at which Craig and Londonderry were both present, along with Corkey, Quinn and Smyth of the United Education Committee of the Protestant Churches. However, even though they reminded the prime minister and Lord Londonderry that two eminent King’s Counsels had earlier ruled that the ministry of education’s stand on the deeds of transfer “was contrary to the true construction of the Act of 1920,”¹⁰⁶ Craig and Londonderry refused to change the ministry’s original decision.¹⁰⁷ They believed that the Government of Ireland Act, 1920, would have to be amended first. The difficulty here, however, was that “the Parliament of

⁹⁹ Patrick Buckland, *The Factory of Grievances*, 1973, p. 254.

¹⁰⁰ D. H. Akenson, *Education and Enmity*, 1973, p. 81.

¹⁰¹ P. Buckland, *The Factory of Grievances*, 1979, p. 253.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁰³ PRONI, D3099/5/8, Craig to Londonderry.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Londonderry to Craig, 6 May 1925.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Davison to Londonderry, 11 May 1925.

¹⁰⁶ Presbyterian Historical Society, Corkey Papers, Counsels’ Opinion, 6 May 1925.

¹⁰⁷ PRONI, D3099/5/8, Minutes of Meeting, 14 May 1925.

Northern Ireland could not itself alter or amend the act of 1920" because it was an Imperial measure, as Craig was at some pains to emphasise to Sir W. G. Turner, mayor of Belfast, on 22 May 1925.¹⁰⁸ Craig was very much aware of the emergence of renewed threat to his own and the government's authority. He also knew how determined Lord Londonderry was to protect the teachers. In addition, he did not wish to upset the Protestants any further. Worried, therefore, by the very thought of "a recrudescence of the unfair agitation" by the Protestant clergy, he wrote Londonderry suggesting that if the government were "to play for time in a conciliatory manner," the impending crisis could be averted.¹⁰⁹ He further suggested that the ministry should offer to accept the transfer of schools on short leases, adding that this would prove a "safe line to adopt" because it "obviated bumping up against Clause 5 of the Government of Ireland Act 1920."¹¹⁰ Forever the political strategist, Craig knew that a settlement had to be reached and reached as quickly as possible. But would Lord Londonderry agree to his suggestion?

In truth, Londonderry was quite annoyed by Craig's proposal and bluntly told him so in a letter of 5 June 1925, stating that he would resign rather than see the government give into the Churches a second time.¹¹¹ He did not wish it to be thought that he was questioning the prime minister's ability "in controlling difficult situations" yet he was fearful that legislation along the lines required "might involve the government in disaster."¹¹² Once more he insisted that the teachers must not be compelled to give religious instruction, which point he reiterated in a press statement on the following day, stating that any attempt made to compel teachers to give Bible instruction could "receive no support from the Government."¹¹³ Shortly after, he wrote the new Presbyterian moderator to say that the main source of difficulty between them was "the question of compelling or not compelling teachers to give religious instruction."¹¹⁴ There was more, however, to Protestant resistance than this. Protestant managers were at this time also deeply concerned to ensure their representation on the new regional education committees, arguing that this was a necessary precondition for the transfer of their schools. Such guarantee was not secured until new legislation in 1930, the result of yet further agitation and conflict between the ministry of education and the Protestant Churches. This, however, would necessitate the writing of another paper. By 1930 a new minister of education had assumed office, Lord Londonderry having resigned on 26 January, 1926. He wrote as follows in his letter of resignation: "My Dear Prime Minister [...] I feel that the time has arrived when I may reasonably ask you to permit me to retire from the Government of Northern Ireland [...] I feel [...] you will agree with me that in my position as a large employer of labour in Durham, it is my duty

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, Craig to Turner, 22 May 1925.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, Craig to Londonderry, 29 May 1925.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5 June 1925.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, Statement to the Press, 5 June 1925.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Londonderry to Hazlett, 8 June 1925.

to devote my time and energy at this crisis in the coal industry to endeavouring to find a solution of a problem, the importance of which cannot be exaggerated.”¹¹⁵ It would not, of course, have been appropriate to refer to the frustrations he had experienced during four years of office.

In reply, Craig expressed regret at Londonderry’s departure, “Although no longer a friend and colleague in office, we shall still have you as a friend living in our midst.”¹¹⁶ In private Craig expressed relief at Londonderry’s departure, Lady Craig writing in her diary on the day of his resignation: “J[ames] C[raig] was sorry in a way, but in some ways he said it was a relief, as he [Londonderry] was very difficult, constantly taking offence at nothing, and having to be humoured all the time.”¹¹⁷ However, Lord Londonderry most certainly should be remembered for the vision he held of education in Northern Ireland and for the tenacity and utter fairness with which he sought to implement his educational reforms. His efforts to support the teachers is noteworthy. The system of education in Northern Ireland is today a predominantly segregated system, although there is an increasing number of integrated schools attended by children from Protestant, Catholic and other backgrounds. It would have been Lord Londonderry’s hope in 1923, given the disturbed atmosphere pervading the new state at that time, that his reforms would lay the foundations of a system of education more in keeping with the latter than with the former. Denominational forces being so powerful, this was not to be.



¹¹⁵ Quoted in St John Ervine, *Craigavon: Ulsterman* (London: Allen and Unwin), p. 509.

¹¹⁶ PRONI, D3099/5/8, Craig to Londonderry, 12 January 1926.

¹¹⁷ PRONI, Carson Papers, D1415/B/38, 8 January 1926.