

‘Just the Same Part of the United Kingdom as Your County Sussex’: the BBC and the Arrival of Television in Northern Ireland in the 1950s

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In his unpublished diaries, the Unionist Prime Minister of Northern Ireland from 1943 to 1963, Lord Brookeborough, recalls a meeting with the Director-General of the BBC, Hugh Greene, and the Controller of BBC Northern Ireland, Robert McCall, in Belfast on 1 June 1961: ‘I told the former [i.e. Greene] that we were not getting a fair deal and perhaps because we objected to some previous programmes the BBC were holding out on us’.¹ Although Greene’s response is not recorded, Brookeborough’s remarks are revealing nonetheless. For just as the Unionist government had, since the partition of Ireland in 1921, stressed the ‘British’ rather than ‘Irish’ credentials of Northern Ireland, so it also wanted the BBC in Northern Ireland to act, and be treated, as a fully British institution. However, given the continuing sensitivities regarding Northern Ireland’s constitutional position, and the territorial claims made upon the North by successive governments in the South of Ireland, the Unionist regime remained anxious about the BBC’s output and concerned that this should conform to its own particular political and cultural outlook. Indeed, some years earlier Brookeborough (then Basil Brooke) was reported to have declared at a meeting of unionists that he ‘would like to have the Northern Ireland station of the BBC operating under the control of the Ulster Government’.² Inevitably, the desire, on the part of unionists, for the BBC in Northern Ireland to be both ‘British’ and under local (unionist) control was destined to become a source of tension. As various commentators have indicated, the willingness of unionism more generally to prioritise identification with ‘Ulster’ over identification with ‘Britain’ often led to departures from ‘British’ norms and political standards (Todd 1987). In the same way, unionist efforts to exercise control over television broadcasting could, as Brookeborough’s remarks suggest, threaten British broadcasting standards and inhibit

the full integration of BBC Northern Ireland into the British broadcasting system.

Tensions between the 'local' and the 'national' were also a feature of the arrival of the BBC's radio service in Northern Ireland in 1924 (just three years after the partition of Ireland and the establishment of separate parliaments on each side of the border). As the first Northern Ireland Director, Gerard Beadle, recalls, regional controllers opposed the centralisation of programme production in London during the 1920s on the grounds that this was 'damaging to the proper reflection of local life and talent' (Beadle 1963: 23; see also Scannell 1993). The coming of television to Northern Ireland in the 1950s, however, raised the issue of Northern Ireland's relationship to 'British' broadcasting in a particularly acute form and led to a series of clashes over technology, funds and programmes. While these conflicts often took the form of arguments over costs and Northern Ireland's entitlement to a 'fair deal', they were also underpinned by fundamental questions regarding the contested political status and cultural character of Northern Ireland and its relationships with both Britain and the rest of Ireland. Thus, while it has become common to stress the role played by television since the onset of the 'troubles' (from 1968 onwards), this article will not only provide an account of a period of Northern Ireland television history that has so far been largely neglected, but also indicate how television was, in fact, implicated in the politics of Northern Ireland from its very inception.

It should, of course, be noted that, although commercial television launched in England in 1955, it did not reach Northern Ireland until 31 October 1959 (when Ulster Television began transmission). For virtually all of the 1950s, television in Northern Ireland was synonymous with the BBC and it is therefore the BBC with which the article is concerned. In particular, it focuses on three major disputes relating to the extension of the television network to Northern Ireland, the provision of resources for local programme production and the 'political' content of programmes about Northern Ireland. In doing so, the article also investigates three significant landmarks in Northern Ireland's television history: the televising of the Coronation in 1953, the launch of the first television programme from Northern Ireland, *Ulster Mirror*, in 1954 and the transmission of the first live programme – an edition of *Press Conference* – from Northern Ireland in 1955.

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*A Part of the Network? A Part of the United Kingdom?
The Televising of the Coronation*

Following the suspension of the television service during the Second World War, the BBC resumed television broadcasts in June 1947. At this stage, reception was confined to the greater London area, and, despite the financial constraints imposed upon the BBC, the extension of television coverage became a priority. However, the speed at which different regions would receive television differed sharply and soon led to complaints concerning priorities (Briggs 1979: 246). There were also grumblings in Northern Ireland and, in September 1949, the former BBC Regional Director for Northern Ireland, George Marshall, wrote a series of articles for a local Belfast paper, demanding that Northern Ireland acquire 'television along with the rest of the United Kingdom' and calling on the British government to take action (*Northern Whig*, 7 September 1949: 6). Such complaints gained momentum two years later when the extension of television to Northern Ireland was put on hold. In 1949, the British government had approved the Corporation's plans to follow the opening of the first provincial relay station at Sutton Coldfield (covering the Midlands) with the immediate construction of three high-power transmitting stations at Holme Moss (covering the North West, Yorkshire and Lincolnshire), Kirk O'Shotts (covering central Scotland) and Wenvoe (covering the South West of England and South Wales). These high-power stations were then to be supplemented by five medium-power transmitters near Aberdeen, Belfast, Newcastle, Plymouth and Southampton.³ In March 1951, however, the Assistant Postmaster General told the House of Commons that, because of the government's increased expenditure on defence, the construction of the medium-power transmitters would be postponed indefinitely (*Northern Whig*, 15 March 1951: 1).

Andrew Stewart, the Controller of the Northern Ireland region from 1948 to 1952, was quick to respond to the news, writing to the BBC Director General, Sir William Haley, a week later to express his concern that, without a transmitter near Belfast, Northern Ireland would be 'the only region with no share at all in the Television Service'. Alluding to the specific political pressures faced by the BBC in Northern Ireland, he also drew attention to the sense of grievance that the continuing 'exclusion of Northern Ireland from the television chain' would inevitably create within 'Northern Ireland government and other bodies'.⁴ Although Haley took the view that it would be difficult to justify the cost of a station in Northern Ireland when the take-up of licences was likely to be small, the lack of a television service in

Northern Ireland was clearly a matter of some political sensitivity.⁵ As Arthur Aughey (1996: 32-4) observes, Ulster Unionists were particularly preoccupied with the maintenance of political parity with Britain – including, in the post-war period, parity of public provision – in order to demonstrate that Northern Ireland was a legitimate part of the United Kingdom (as well as fully ‘British’). Although television could not be said to constitute the same kind of legal right as unemployment benefits or pensions, there was nonetheless a strong feeling amongst unionists that, if Northern Ireland was truly ‘British’, then it was certainly entitled to ‘British’ television in the same way as every other part of the UK. A TV Action Committee (consisting of representatives of the radio and electrical trades) had been launched to canvas for television to be brought to Northern Ireland and it was, therefore, not surprising that this group quickly gained the support of Unionist politicians at both Stormont and Westminster. Despite some uncertainty as to whether the televising of the event would actually occur, the campaign gained a special sense of urgency due to the imminence of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in June 1953. The chair of the Unionist Parliamentary Party at Westminster, Capt. L. Orr, contacted the Assistant Postmaster General to express his concern that ‘Ulster people’ would be unable to see ‘this great event’ (*Belfast News-Letter*, 23 September 1952: 4), while Colonel W.B. Topping (the Unionist Home Secretary from 1956 to 1959) told a meeting of political supporters that ‘it is not too much to hope ... that Ulstermen and women will have a chance of seeing the Coronation of their Queen’ (*Belfast Telegraph*, 26 September 1952: 1). Brookeborough added his voice to the campaign, expressing dismay at the delay in extending the television network to Northern Ireland and reporting on the representations that his party had made to the British government.⁶

The BBC did, in fact, have plans in place to erect temporary low-power relay stations and, despite some reservations within the Corporation concerning the financial wisdom of the scheme, the Acting Director General, Basil Nicolls, became involved in pressing the British government for permission to proceed.⁷ Partly out of recognition of the significance of the Coronation as a national occasion and partly as a result of the political lobbying to which it had been subject, the British government agreed to relax its previous embargo on the development of television and permitted the BBC to proceed with stations at Pontop Pike (near Newcastle-on-Tyne) and Belfast (at Glencairn) that would be ready in time for the royal event (*Belfast Telegraph*, 22 October 1952: 1). In the case of Belfast, the signal was to be routed through the high-power transmitter at Kirk O’Shotts in Scotland (despite some objec-

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tions in Scotland that this should be used to extend the signal to Aberdeen). Test transmissions took place in April 1953, followed by the official launch of a local service on 1 May, when viewers in Northern Ireland were formally welcomed to the network by an announcer in London. At this stage, only five hundred television licences had been sold in Northern Ireland and people reportedly gathered in front of shop windows to witness the new phenomenon (*Belfast News-Letter*, 2 May 1953: 5). Although this figure had increased to 1,500 by the time of the Coronation, considerably greater numbers – an estimated 20,000 – watched the ceremony, like the rest of the UK, in a combination of private homes and public places (*Belfast News-Letter*, 3 June 1953: 5).

However, while only a small proportion of the Northern Ireland population may have seen the Coronation on television, the fact that television had reached the region by the time of the event was of enormous symbolic significance. As Cardiff and Scannell indicate, television coverage of state ceremonials such as the Coronation has played a key role in promoting national unity through the presentation of ‘national events within a unified context’ (1987: 167). It was therefore a significant coup for unionists that they were able to avoid exclusion from the BBC network and become a part of the ‘national community’ that watched the Coronation on television. This sense of national belonging, and participation in a nationally important event, was further reinforced by the television images themselves. Brookeborough travelled to London to attend the ceremony and was to be seen among the assembled dignitaries.⁸ The presence of the Northern Ireland General (and Brooke family member), Field Marshall Viscount Alanbrooke, behind the throne (in his capacity as Lord High Constable of England) also became a source of pride for those watching the service ‘through Ulster eyes’ (*Belfast News-Letter*, 3 June 1953: 5). Such was the potency of the symbolism of the Coronation for Ulster Unionists that the Queen’s visit to Northern Ireland a month later (in July 1953) also provided much of the material for the programme, *A Governor’s Notebook*, broadcast on the occasion of the eventual opening of a medium-power transmitter at Divis (above Belfast) on 21 July 1955. In his accompanying commentary, the Governor of Northern Ireland, Lord Wakehurst, recalls the ‘impressive’ nature of the Queen’s visit and assures viewers in Britain of the ‘overwhelming affection and loyalty of the people of Northern Ireland’.

In reality, of course, ‘the people of Northern Ireland’ did not constitute the harmonious community, nor share the sense of loyalty to the British Crown, that such descriptions suggested. The majority of the Catholic population in Northern Ireland did not identify themselves

as members of the British 'nation' and by and large boycotted the Coronation festivities (Loughlin 1995; McIntosh 2002). There were also fears amongst unionists that the IRA might seek to disrupt the celebrations and, in spite of the extensive security measures in place, Brookeborough recorded his anxieties concerning 'possible outrages' during the Queen's tour.⁹ Given the way in which it became linked to the coronation, it was therefore inevitable that the introduction of television to Northern Ireland should have been controversial. Indeed, such was the association of television with the impending celebrations, that the Glencairn transmitter was placed under police guard from the start of construction in case it became an IRA target (*Belfast News-Letter*, 2 June 1953: 5). While nationalists in the North did not oppose television in principle, they were less than enthusiastic about its arrival in Northern Ireland and were understandably suspicious of the role it was going to play. Television was perceived as something of a distraction from the social and economic problems facing the six counties and, given the BBC's custody of it, destined to reinforce a 'British' rather than 'Irish' political and cultural outlook.¹⁰ Thus, when Brookeborough expressed his disappointment at the delay in TV's arrival to the Northern Ireland House of Commons, the nationalist MP Joseph Connellan took the opportunity to ask if he did not realise that 'there are more people concerned with the unemployment problem than with television'.¹¹ When the building of the transmitter was announced later the same month, the nationalist *Irish News* (based in Belfast) adopted a similar stance, suggesting that television would become a modern equivalent of 'bread and circuses':

'Ulster' intends to be gay with the aid of television and ratepayers' money instead of concentrating ... on ways of lifting itself out of the unenviable position of being industrially the black spot of these islands. (23 October 1952: 2)

Prior to the Coronation, the same paper was also critical of the BBC's 'anglicising influence' and subsequently attacked the Queen's Coronation broadcast for defending a version of 'the British way of life' – 'respect for the rights of minorities and the inspiration of a broad tolerance in thought' – so at odds with the political realities of Northern Ireland (*Irish News*, 26 May 1953: 2; 3 June 1953: 2).¹² In this respect, the success of unionists in employing television to bolster their 'British' credentials could only prove a source of disappointment to northern nationalists who had no wish for local broadcasting to be so strongly identified with unionism. Indeed, the sense that television was not primarily for the benefit of the nationalist population was reinforced

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by the slow spread of the television signal to the north-west. Thus, while the Divis transmitter put television in reach of 82 per cent of the Northern Ireland population in 1955, it was not until two years later that the television service was extended to Derry (Londonderry), Northern Ireland's second city, with a majority Catholic population (*Radio Times*, 15 July 1955: 3).

'Northern Ireland in its True Light': Ulster Mirror

The expansion of the BBC's television service around the United Kingdom was soon followed by demands from the regions to produce their own television programmes, rather than simply receive them from London. This was also so of Northern Ireland where the opening of a transmitter in Belfast quickly led to the expectation that Northern Ireland would be in a position to broadcast its own programmes across the network. The achievement of this, however, was even more difficult than was the case in the other regions, given the lack of facilities (and resources) to feed 'live' programmes into the network. This meant that the earliest programmes about Northern Ireland were shot on film as one-offs and then edited in, and transmitted from, London rather than from Belfast. This was certainly so of the programme commissioned to accompany the opening of the low-power transmitter at Glencairn, *Pattern of Ulster* (tx. 26 May 1953), the first programme about Northern Ireland to be shown on the network. Such was the significance of this for Northern Ireland that the broadcast acquired something of the status of a semi-official occasion. The programme was introduced by the NI Prime Minister, Brookeborough, who suggested how television had forged 'another link' between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom'.¹³ Members of the Northern Ireland government joined the BBC management at the BBC in Belfast to watch the programme, while Brookeborough himself went to the BBC in London where he was provided with viewing facilities (*Belfast Telegraph*, 27 May 1953: 9; *Diaries*, 26 May 1953).

The actual programme was designed to provide a portrait of life in Northern Ireland and showed a range of 'ordinary people' – a farmer, a shipyard worker, a policeman, a postman – engaged in everyday activities. However, it was also heavily establishment in tone, featuring newsreel footage of the Queen Mother and Princess Margaret during their visit to Northern Ireland in 1951 as well as footage of the Northern Ireland Governor, Lord Wakehurst.¹⁴ The producer of the programme, John Elliot, was fully conscious of the constraints that 'Coronations and Station Openings' had imposed upon him and, in

line with a directive concerning 'Broadcasts relating to Eire and Northern Ireland', took advice from the BBC in Northern Ireland on 'the sort of representation' that was appropriate.¹⁵ As a result, he considered his script to be both 'pompous and superficial' but nonetheless "'safe" for the BBC whose political position in Ulster seems to be every bit as difficult as one would expect'.¹⁶ The 'official', celebratory tone of the programme also ensured that it was well-received by Northern Ireland unionists who were pleased by the 'positive' image of the area that it created. The Head of Programmes at BBCNI, Henry McMullan, reported to Elliot how much the programme had been 'appreciated by different organisation engaged in "boosting Ulster"' and that, following the programme's transmission, there had been 'a number of requests from the Government, Tourist Board, and so on to buy copies in 16mm size'.¹⁷ The Acting Controller of BBCNI, Cyril Conner, also felt that the programme demonstrated the 'tremendously important field of possible publicity for Northern Ireland' that television provided and this idea of using television to promote a positive image of the region continued to inform the thinking of both broadcasters and unionist politicians.¹⁸

Indeed, given the enthusiasm that *Pattern of Ulster* had aroused, one of the first tasks of the new Regional Controller (1953-6), Richard Marriott, was to persuade the BBC in London to fund the production of programmes in Northern Ireland on a regular basis. Two months after the temporary transmitter had opened (and on his second day in office), Marriott wrote to George Barnes, the Director of Television Broadcasting, to suggest the creation of a Northern Ireland Television Film Unit that would 'provide regular programmes on film for Northern Ireland only' as well as occasional items of interest for the network.¹⁹ Barnes, however, was unsympathetic to the idea, arguing that the establishment of a film unit was 'financially impracticable' and that the BBC could not afford to broadcast regional and national television programmes simultaneously in the manner of radio.²⁰ However, given that this left the BBC in Northern Ireland entirely unable to cover local events, Marriott continued to press the matter. Once again, political considerations appear to have played a role in encouraging a change of policy.

As had been the case with Northern Ireland's exclusion from the network, the lack of television production facilities in Northern Ireland soon led to political pressures on the BBC to treat Northern Ireland in the same way as the rest of the UK and to provide the region with a 'fair share' of television coverage. Unionist politicians were also concerned that a lack of local programmes might lead to the Republic of Ireland

obtaining more television coverage than Northern Ireland with the result that the distinctions between the two parts of the island would become blurred for British viewers. It was undoubtedly political sensitivities such as these that led Marriott to complain to Barnes that, on a day that the television newsreel might have covered the Ulster Grand Prix, it showed footage of the Kerry Fair (in the South of Ireland) instead.²¹ Although Barnes replied that 'the number of stories from Eire in the last eighteen months' had been 'very few indeed' and that he had 'reproved the News people for their tactlessness', he nonetheless conceded that this was a 'problem' that he had suspected might arise.²² It was, however, a 'problem' that was destined to recur and, the following year, the BBC Director General, Ian Jacob, reported to the Board of Governors that he had received a letter of protest from Brookeborough concerning no less than three incidents, on both television and radio, that the Unionist Prime Minister regarded as having caused 'caused offence'.²³ These included the transmission, on St Patrick's Day, of a travel film, set exclusively in the South of Ireland, *Ireland – Land of Welcome* (1954), that had already been denounced in the Northern Ireland House of Commons as a 'flagrant piece of advertising for the tourist industry of Southern Ireland'.²⁴ George Barnes once again conceded that the film's transmission had been a mistake given the lack of consultation with the Controller of BBCNI and the 'inflammatory' political situation prevailing within Northern Ireland.²⁵ The underlying issue, however, remained unresolved and, when the BBC broadcast another Irish film, *The Promise of Barty O'Brien* (1951), the following month, Brookeborough was once again moved to complain.²⁶ Although Jacob felt that the film (which had already been shown on television) did not deserve to be banned, he nonetheless apologised for the timing of the programme's transmission and promised to take steps to prevent the repetition of such incidents.

Given the political problems to which the shortage of Northern Ireland programmes led, and the prospect of an increase in NI viewers following the opening of the medium-power transmitter at Divis, Barnes eventually came round to supporting the idea of a local film unit which, he argued, would compensate Northern Ireland for the Mobile Control Rooms other regions were due to receive.²⁷ Although the BBC Board of Management approved the plan, it took considerable time to agree the mechanics of how the unit would operate. Due to the absence of post-production facilities in Northern Ireland, it was decided that, following filming in Northern Ireland, processing, editing and dubbing would take place in London (where some members of the film unit would be permanently based). The unit's main responsibility would be

to produce a fifteen-minute magazine programme, broadcast once a fortnight in Northern Ireland and (as a result of the use of the transmitter at Kirk O'Shotts) in Scotland as well. Harry Govan, a Scotsman with a background in TV newsreel production, became the programme's producer and the first edition of *Ulster Mirror* – 'the first magazine of its kind to be broadcast from any Region of the BBC' – was eventually transmitted on 26 November 1954 (*Radio Times*, NI Edition, 19 November 1954: 3).

In his discussion of writing for television in the 1950s, Arthur Swinson (1955: 78) distinguishes three kinds of television documentary: the dramatized documentary, the actuality documentary and the magazine documentary. The magazine programme, he suggests, was the least 'serious' of these, avoiding political and sociological depth and concentrating on 'the sights and sounds of life ... curious places and interesting people' (ibid.: 99). However, although *Ulster Mirror* conformed to a 'magazine' format in providing a mix of stories about Ulster 'life', it also incorporated elements of the television newsreel in its coverage of items of topical interest. The items it selected, however, rarely consisted of political news but concentrated instead on reports from around the region on developments in local industry and agriculture, improvements in Northern Ireland's economic and social infrastructure, and sporting events. The first programme, for example, included items on the resurfacing of Belfast streets, the reconstruction of the harbour at Portavogie and potato picking in Coleraine. However, while the programme may have avoided coverage of overtly political events, its selection and treatment of subjects were nonetheless implicitly political in character and supportive of a unionist outlook. Hence, the first programme concluded with highly deferential coverage of the Unionist Prime Minister and his wife, Lady Brookeborough, prior to their departure for Australia and New Zealand. Subsequent editions reported on their arrival in Australia and their return, some months later, to Northern Ireland. The initial programme also began with a shot (repeated in all subsequent episodes) of the processional avenue leading to the Parliament Building at Stormont (viewed through opening gates). Built in 1932 to reinforce the grandeur of the Northern Ireland political regime (Loughlin 1999), the Stormont building had become an icon of Unionist rule in Northern Ireland, and its use in the programme necessarily aligned it with the status quo. It is therefore not surprising that the programme should have quickly won the admiration of unionist politicians who pressed for it to be shown to 'people across the water' in order to 'let them see Northern Ireland in its true light'.²⁸ As a result, it was something of a coup for both the BBC and the

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Unionist government when it was agreed that the programme should be scheduled for network transmission following the opening of the new transmitter at Divis in April 1955. The erection of the transmitter was, in fact, featured in the first UK edition of the programme (tx. 28 April 1955), along with items on linen and fishing and scenes from the Irish Cup final in Belfast.

'A Bad Effect on All Viewers': Press Conference and Highlight

Given the way in which programmes such as *Pattern of Ulster* and *Ulster Mirror* largely reinforced a unionist world-view, Cathcart (1984: 174) suggests that the 'Unionist government and the unionist majority did not envisage that the new medium would have anything other than a positive, promotional role'. This, however, was only a part of the story. Although, as previously noted, the Unionist government would have liked greater control of local broadcasting, it was nonetheless apprehensive of the Beveridge Committee's recommendations for the devolution of broadcasting (in 1949) on the grounds that this might provide their political opponents with a greater say over the content of broadcasting. Thus, when the British government's White Paper on Broadcasting (1949: 6-7) proposed the establishment of 'national' Broadcasting Councils in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, this was opposed by the NI Cabinet on the grounds that the Unionist government might be unable to exercise effective control over appointments to a Council that was explicitly intended to be 'representative and independent'.²⁹ Moreover, because local programming was so minimal, there were constant anxieties concerning the flow of television images from London and the impact that these might have, both locally and in Britain. This led, as already noted, to careful scrutiny of the programmes entering Northern Ireland over the television network and to regular complaints to the BBC management should these not prove to be to the NI government's liking. The tension between what the unionists wanted television to show and what programme-makers in London believed to be suitable for broadcast was also demonstrated by the NI Prime Minister's own television appearance – live across the network – in 1955. This was, in fact, the first live broadcast from Northern Ireland and was made possible by the despatch of a mobile Outside Broadcasting Unit from England. The original idea had been that there should be a Northern Ireland edition of the panel show, *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*, but this proved impracticable and an edition of the mainly political interview programme, *Press Conference*, was chosen instead. Although the BBC in Northern Ireland proposed a

discussion of political devolution involving the Northern Ireland Governor, Lord Wakehurst, it was subsequently agreed that the NI Prime Minister himself should participate.³⁰ Even before he became Prime Minister, Brookeborough had been a keen advocate of publicity for Northern Ireland and, as PM, chaired the Cabinet Publicity Committee. He was therefore quick to appreciate the value of television as a vehicle of both good and bad publicity for the Unionist cause and was happy to appear on television when the opportunity arose.³¹ In the case of *Pattern of Ulster*, however, he had been recorded on film and spoke in his official capacity as NI Prime Minister. In *Ulster Mirror*, the filming had been silent and the narrator simply quoted from the PM's speeches while Brookeborough himself was shown relaxing at home or engaging in official duties. His appearance on *Press Conference* (tx. 17 November 1955), therefore, was not only the first occasion on which he was actually interviewed on television but also interviewed live. Although, as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, he was accorded the due civilities, unlike *Ulster Mirror*, he was also treated as a politician who could be held accountable for the policies of the government which he led. Thus, while the programme involved a rehearsal, and took place in the Prime Minister's own room in Stormont, the circumstances of transmission meant that Brookeborough's capacity to stage manage the event was necessarily restricted.

The programme was presented by Francis Williams and the interviewers consisted of Henry Fairlie of the *Spectator*, William Hardcastle of the *Daily Mail* and the local journalist John ('Jack') Sayers of the *Belfast Telegraph* (who was already a regular contributor to BBC radio broadcasts). Although the interview was conducted under amicable conditions, the questions were often quite searching and covered a number of politically sensitive topics: the consequences of partition; the activities of the IRA in England and Ireland; the role of the overwhelmingly Protestant auxiliary police force, the B Specials; the absence of conscription in Northern Ireland; the lack of political opposition in Stormont and the Unionist domination of local councils in predominantly nationalist areas (such as the city of Derry). Although Brookeborough was provided with the opportunity, at the end of the programme, to speak directly to 'viewers in England, Scotland and Wales', it was evident that the programme did not provide the propaganda boost that unionists had expected. Brookeborough himself felt that the programme was 'unbalanced' and had dwelt too much on the 'political' and not enough on 'the life of Ulster'.³² This sentiment was echoed in the unionist *Belfast Telegraph* (18 November 1955: 5) which complained that almost 'the whole half-hour was taken up with

questions about partition, the IRA, “gerrymandering” and the absence of conscription’, and that it was only in ‘a brief winding-up that Lord Brookeborough had a chance to talk to cross-Channel viewers about the more positive side of Northern Ireland life’.³³ The programme also provided ammunition to the government’s opponents and the nationalist *Irish News* (18 November 1955: 1) took advantage of the occasion to run a front-page headline declaring ‘Brookeborough under fire on television’. The programme also attracted some press attention in Britain where one critic felt that Brookeborough may have come across as ‘impressively photogenic’ but nevertheless gave off the impression that ‘he secretly regarded the Southern Irish as not absolutely dissimilar from Fuzzy-wuzzys’ (Maurice Richardson in the *Observer*, quoted in the *Belfast Telegraph*, 21 November 1955: 4).³⁴

In this respect, the programme provides a good illustration of the clash between the official view of Northern Ireland that Unionists sought to project and the alternative political perspective that they tried to discount. In his concluding remarks, Brookeborough more or less ignored the preceding discussion, and its references to partition and the position of the Catholic minority, by differentiating Northern Ireland from the traditional stereotypes of the ‘Irish’ and characterising the six counties as exclusively Protestant and British:

I’d like you, especially viewers across the water, to forget the sort of music-hall idea about an Irishman. You won’t find an Irishman, or an Ulsterman, walking about in a semi-tailed coat and a battered top hat and a shillelagh – I’ve never seen one in my life. You won’t see the pig sitting in the drawing room ... You will find a hardy, grand, self-reliant, individualistic race ... We’ve got the greatest industries – shipbuilding, the biggest shipyard in the world, and our linen industry is famous ... You will see some of the finest farming in the United Kingdom ... You will find the most modern methods. You will find in their houses not pigs, but you will find the latest type of cooker, the Aga, refrigerators, probably a television set ... You will find that here in this small community you’ve got people just like yourselves, with tremendous loyalty to the Crown and a devotion to all things that are British.

In many respects, it is this view of Northern Ireland that the *Ulster Mirror* series may also be seen to have been upholding. It too sought to highlight the modernity of ‘Ulster’, drawing attention to the successes of Northern Ireland industry and agriculture and reporting on developments (such as new housing, new schools and new hospitals) that demonstrated the social and economic advances that Northern Ireland was making (and, by implication, the North’s economic superiority over the South). It also recorded various forms of official ceremony

(the opening of the Northern Ireland Parliament), the activities of the Northern Ireland Governor and his wife and royal visits (by the Queen, the Duchess of Gloucester and Lord Mountbatten) that reinforced the actuality of the union between Northern Ireland and Britain. It is therefore significant that the *Ulster Mirror* team should have filmed parts of *Press Conference* for use in its own programme (broadcast shortly afterwards on 28 November). However, while this edition includes the whole of Brookeborough's concluding speech, it completely ignores all the political arguments that had preceded it. If unionists felt that the *Press Conference* interview had concentrated on 'politics' at the expense of 'Ulster life', then it could be said that the *Ulster Mirror* series accomplished the reverse, focusing on selected aspects of life in 'Ulster' but studiously avoiding the political issues dividing the community. This included the omission of any reference to the Westminster elections of May 1955 when 23.5 per cent of the local electorate voted for Sinn Féin and two Sinn Féin candidates, who were in prison at the time, were elected to the British parliament (Rose 1971: 96).

There was, however, a price to be paid for this. Although the *Ulster Mirror* series succeeded in gaining network transmission in April 1955, it soon became apparent that its emphasis upon positive publicity for Northern Ireland, and lack of genuine news, constituted less than compulsive viewing for viewers in Britain, particularly following the launch of Independent Television (ITV) in September 1955. Despite complaints from BBCNI that the programme was in danger of becoming an 'afterthought', the series was rescheduled from its early evening slot to later in the evening. At the end of the year, the programme was restricted to quarterly rather than fortnightly transmissions and then cancelled after only two editions on the grounds that it had become uneconomic. Ironically, the demise of local NI programming destined for a network audience occurred at a time when events in Northern Ireland were set to command the increased attention of people in Britain. However, given the character of these events, it is also unlikely that *Ulster Mirror* would have been in a position to cover them.

In December 1956, the IRA launched 'Operation Harvest' aimed primarily at RUC barracks in the border counties (but including amongst its early targets a BBC radio transmitter in Londonderry). Given the news of the raids, the Television Talks Department in London decided to include an interview with the southern Irish journalist Harry Craig in its early evening topical programme, *Highlight* (tx. 14 December 1956). Although Craig agreed that the use of force by the IRA would not end partition, he rejected the idea that the IRA were 'potential delinquents' and reminded the interviewer that, for many in

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Ireland, 'the North of Ireland is an occupied territory, with foreign troops'. While the interview provoked little reaction in Britain, the programme caused consternation amongst unionists in Northern Ireland and led to a stream of complaints, including one on behalf of the NI Prime Minister demanding 'a disclaimer or an apology'.³⁵ This led the BBC to broadcast an announcement later that evening stating that there had been 'no intention whatsoever' of 'condoning' the IRA's violent activities. The Deputy Director of Television Broadcasting, Cecil McGivern, was also asked to investigate the matter and concluded that the subject had been 'much too important, inflammatory and political' to have been included in the *Highlight* programme.³⁶ Brookeborough himself was offered a 'right to reply' and flew to London to take part in an edition of *Panorama* (tx. 17 December 1956) presented by Richard Dimbleby. In comparison to *Press Conference* the previous year, this proved to be an incredibly 'soft' interview in which the Prime Minister was encouraged to say more or less what he wanted and there was no attempt to press him on the circumstances in Northern Ireland that continued to fuel paramilitary activity (with Dimbleby simply content to ask Brookeborough, 'Now what is this IRA?').³⁷ As a result, there was general satisfaction with the Prime Minister's performance amongst the unionist press and his political supporters in Northern Ireland (*Belfast Telegraph*, 18 December 1956: 5). However, the reporting of the IRA's activities in London continued to prove a matter of concern for the NI government, and when the BBC broadcast a short newsreel, *Ulster Alert*, the following month it was felt that it 'gave the impression that Ulster is an armed camp' and that this was bound to have 'a bad effect on all viewers', especially in Britain.³⁸ In this case, the programme was entirely sympathetic to the activities of police and troops. However, the very suggestion of social division and conflict in Northern Ireland could be perceived as damaging by the NI government given its efforts to cultivate an image of 'Ulster' as just a 'normal' part of Britain. In his interview with Dimbleby, Brookeborough had declared that 'Northern Ireland was 'just the same part of the United Kingdom as your County Sussex or Devon or Yorkshire or any County in Scotland or Wales'. However, the problem for unionists was that this sense of attachment to Britain was rarely reciprocated by the British themselves and, at the time of his *Panorama* broadcast, Brookeborough records his frustrated attempts to get the British Home Secretary 'to declare that N.I. is like the U.K. and to defend it'.³⁹ Just as unionist politicians felt that they could not always rely on British politicians in London to treat Northern Ireland in the same way as other parts of the UK, so they were also reluctant to trust the *British Broadcasting Corporation* in London to

represent the region in the way that they wished. Thus, it was not long before there was a further outbreak of hostilities over Alan Whicker's report on Northern Ireland for the *Tonight* programme in January 1959 which unionists felt drew undue attention to unemployment and religious divisions (Cathcart 1984: 190-3, Hill 2006: 155).

Conclusion

Anxious that Northern Ireland should not be left behind or excluded from the extension of television across the United Kingdom, Northern Irish unionists were keen to bring television to 'Ulster'. The Coronation of 1953 provided a symbolic focus for these efforts and unionists were particularly pleased that television enabled them to share the event with the rest of the British 'nation'. There was also considerable satisfaction that the first programmes about Northern Ireland (*Pattern of Ulster, About Britain, Ulster Mirror*) effectively projected the unionist version of Northern Ireland to the rest of the United Kingdom. However, it also became apparent that television could not always be relied upon to provide the straightforward means of endorsement and promotion that the unionists desired. As the experience of *Press Conference* indicated, television could also open up Northern Ireland to an outside gaze and expose the realities of a politically-divided society. It was undoubtedly the transmission of 'negative' messages about Northern Ireland across the UK network (rather than simply the local airwaves) that caused unionists the greatest anxiety. However, as the 1960s proceeded (and the modes of television coverage changed), it became increasingly difficult for the unionist establishment to exercise control over the production and circulation of television images of Northern Ireland, particularly in the face of mounting evidence of social and political conflict. As this article indicates, however, the tension between the wish of unionists to exploit television for their own political benefit and the capacity of network television to expose Northern Ireland's political faultlines was a feature of television in Northern Ireland from practically the beginning.

Notes

Thanks to Trish Hayes at the BBC Written Archives Centre (BBCWAC) and staff at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). Thanks also to Martin McLoone for discussions on the subject.

1. Lord Brookeborough, *Diaries 1956-63*, PRONI D/3004/D/45.
2. 'Monthly Report: Northern Ireland Region', April 1946, BBCWAC R34/748/3.
3. 'Proposals to Extend the Television Service', 31 August 1949, BBCWAC T16/230/1.

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4. 'Television Development', Memo from CNI to DG, 20 March 1951, BBCWAC T16/222/1.
5. Letter from DG to CNI, 27 March 1951, BBCWAC T16/222/1.
6. Parliament of Northern Ireland, *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, House of Commons, 1 October 1952, vol. xxxvi, col. 1263.
7. Minutes of the meeting of the Board of Governors, 4 September 1952, BBCWAC R1/20/1.
8. He also recorded a message of homage to the Queen for the radio, broadcast the same evening, in which he proclaimed that 'Ulster men and women' were 'first and last ... loyal' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 3 June 1953: 6).
9. *Diaries 1956-63*, 3 July 1953.
10. As the autobiography of John Boyd, who joined the BBC in Northern Ireland as a talks producer in 1946, indicates, the ethos of the BBC in Belfast at this time was 'definitely non-Irish'. This was partly because the staff at BBCNI 'contained only a few Catholics, of whom none held senior posts, and none were producers' (1990: 74).
11. *Parliamentary Debates*, 1 October 1952, vol. xxxvi, col. 1263.
12. On the eve of the Coronation, the paper also ran a report of a protest meeting in Belfast at which a local councillor declared that the 'glamour and pomp of the Westminster celebrations' could not hide 'the injustices, the sectarianism and discrimination done ... in the name of the Queen' (*Irish News*, 2 June 1953: 3).
13. 'Prime Minister's Television Introduction to BBC Northern Ireland Film', BBCWAC T6/223.
14. As the programme does not appear to have survived, information on the programme's contents has been derived from the script outline held at the BBC's Written Archives Centre and from contemporary press reports. Given the overwhelmingly Protestant character of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and the suspicion of Northern Ireland Catholics towards it, the focus on a police recruit inevitably reinforced the programme's pro-unionist outlook.
15. Since the Second World War, there had been an agreement with the BBC in London (enshrined in various directives) that programmes dealing with Northern Ireland (and the rest of Ireland) should be referred to BBCNI. Although this directive was not always observed, it did give local BBC personnel considerable influence over material emanating from outside of Northern Ireland and helped, as here, to exclude material that might be deemed objectionable by unionists.
16. Memo from Elliot to C.P. Tel, 23 March 1953, BBCWAC T6/223.
17. Memo from HNIP to Elliot, 29 May 1953, BBCWAC T6/223.
18. 'Newsletter for the information of members of the BBC Northern Ireland Advisory Council', 24 March 1953, BBCWAC N12/7/1.
19. Letter from Marriott to George Barnes, DTelB, 28 July 1953, BBCWAC, T16/222/1.
20. Memo, DTelB to CNI, 4 August 1953, BBCWAC T16/222/1.
21. Memo, CNI to DTelB, 25 August 1953, BBCWAC T16/222/1.
22. Memo, DTelB to CNI, 4 September 1953, T16/222/1. Given that Marriott, in the same memo, also objected to proposed newsreel coverage of the Old Lammis Fair in Ballycastle (a predominantly Catholic town) as 'not something we would have ... recommended', his remarks also suggest how he was not just concerned to restrict coverage of events in the South but also events in the North which might be regarded as possessing connotations of 'Irish' or 'nationalist' culture.
23. Minutes of the Board of Governors, 1 April 1954, BBCWAC R1/22/1.
24. *Parliamentary Debates*, 18 March 1954, vol. xxxviii, col. 1429. Since partition, St

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- Patrick, and the celebration of St Patrick's Day, had become increasingly associated with Irish nationalism and Catholicism. As a result, controversies surrounding the radio broadcasting of 'Irish' material on St Patrick's Day stretched back to as early as 1926 (Cathcart 1984: 32-5). The complaints about the southern bias of *Ireland – Land of Welcome* in 1954 led to the transmission, the following year, of a ten-minute film on 'the Ulster scene'. However, this was not regarded as much of an improvement by the local unionist press which complained that the programme offered only 'a very perfunctory tribute' and, thus, reinforced the case for more local productions (*Belfast Telegraph*, 17 March 1955: 4).
25. Memo from DTelB to Cecil Madden, Assistant to CPTel, 30 March 1954, BBC WAC T16/85/1.
 26. Letter from Brookeborough to Jacob, 13 April 1954, BBCWAC T16/85/1.
 27. 'Television Development in Northern Ireland', 20 October 1953, BBCWAC T16/222/1.
 28. Unionist MP Nathaniel Minford, *Parliamentary Debates*, 9 March 1955, vol xxxiv, col 691.
 29. Minutes of NI Cabinet, 22 May 1952, PRONI CAB4/875/5.
 30. Memo from AHTTel to HTTel, 22 September 1955, BBCWAC T32/1543/1.
 31. Unionists were, however, much slower than their British counterparts to agree to election broadcasts on television due to the airtime that these would give to their political opponents.
 32. *Diaries 1953-55*, PRONI D/3004/D/44.
 33. Given that it had been the policy of the BBC in Northern Ireland to avoid reference to partition until as recently as 1948, the open discussion of such issues across the television network must have been particularly unexpected. The newspaper was, however, much happier with the live broadcasts from Northern Ireland that followed. These included an edition of *Come Dancing* from the Plaza Ballroom in Belfast and a contribution to *Saturday Night Out* featuring the RUC that the paper felt could only add to 'the prestige of the Province – and the Force' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 21 November 1955: 3).
 34. A BBC Audience Research report on the programme also suggests that, while Brookeborough created a 'good impression' amongst most viewers, some of his answers were regarded as evasive (12 December 1955, BBCWAC T32/1543/1).
 35. Memo from Duty Officer to DG, 14 December 1956, BBCWAC T16/85/2. A similar controversy occurred in April 1959 when the actress Siobhan McKenna referred to the IRA as 'young idealists' in a television interview with Ed Murrow (Cathcart 1984: 193-5).
 36. Memo from McGivern to HTTel, 18 December 1956, BBCWAC T16/85/2.
 37. The increasing identification of Dimbleby as the 'voice of the nation' may have helped to reinforce a general acceptance of a unionist outlook in his broadcasting. The edition of his radio programme, *Down Your Way* (tx. 7 March 1948) from the city of Derry/Londonderry was accused by the nationalist press of being 'a mere glorification of the Protestant cause' and even the staunchly unionist Controller of Northern Ireland, George Marshall, felt it had overdone 'the Orange Drum theme' (Monthly Report: Northern Ireland, April 1948, BBCWAC R34/748/3). Similarly, the Northern Ireland edition of the television series, *About Britain* (tx. 30 July 1954), which Dimbleby presented, deliberately avoided discussion of 'religion and politics' with the result that it differed little in character from the Unionist government's own promotional films (Hill 2006: 152-3).
 38. Report of Information Officer, London, to Cabinet Publicity Committee, January

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1957, PRONI CAB9F/123/56.

39. *Diaries 1956-63*, 17 December 1956, PRONI D/3004/D/45.

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