

ALDERMAN HUGH SMYTH

Chairman, Progressive Unionist Party

Background:

Born in the Shankill in 1939, he was educated locally before taking up a job as a sheet-metal worker. He was first elected to Belfast City Council (Shankill Ward) in a bye-election in 1972, and was reelected on local government reorganisation in 1973. He was elected to the NI Assembly in 1973 coming third in the poll for which he stood as an independent unionist member of the W.Belfast Loyalist Coalition (which included John Laird and Miss Jean Coulter). Closely connected with the UVF, he became a member of the Ulster Loyalist Front in March 1974, the UVF's first political wing. He was a founder member of the Volunteer Political Party (VPP) in June 1974 - the UVF's second attempt to go political. On the VPP's eclipse, he became a member of the Loyalist Prisoners' and Detainees' Welfare Committee, which was closely associated with the UVF. He was elected to the NI Constitutional Convention in 1975 on an independent unionist ticket since he was refused the support of the UUUC; he came last in the poll. The official report of the Convention records him as declaring:

"I have never tried to hide my feelings for the UVF.  
I am a member of the welfare section of it".

He declared himself to be a spokesman for the UVF at a Laneside meeting on 3 October (one day before the UVF's proscription) at which he handed over a document signed by the so-called Adjutant of the UVF's Brigade Staff which asked that "Cllr Hugh Smyth, Independent Unionist member for W.Belfast be recognised by the Northern Ireland Office as intermediary between the UVF and the NIO". In October 1975 he requested a meeting with the Secretary of State to discuss security as the leader of the "Independent Unionist Party", and was eventually seen when all leaders of political parties were seen in connection with the Convention. He has subsequently always been refused Ministerial meetings except in his capacity as a city councillor. In the May 1977 local government elections, he scraped in for Belfast area E (which covers his home area of Ballygomartin) on the last count. He has been an active participant in the Save the Shankill campaign. Married (Ellen).

Personality and Political Views:

Generally regarded as an honest working class Loyalist and a good constituency man, he is closely in touch with the Loyalist community on the Shankill.

Although his links with the UVF have always been acknowledged (and indeed his name is publicly associated with them), he has nevertheless generally been regarded as having a moderating influence on the UVF's military tendencies (though such influence as he has was certainly not effective in 1975). The degree of his active involvement in the UVF leadership has never been assessed but if anything was considered to have been in charge of

their political wing (in much the same relationship as between the Republican Clubs and OIRA). Principal concerns have been on unemployment and the welfare of Loyalist paramilitary prisoners. Trusted locally for his Save the Shankill work and for his, albeit misguided, understanding of political and constitutional matters. He spoke out in 1978 against the siting of De Lorean in Twinbrook, arguing that it should have been located on the Falls/Shankill peace-line to encourage the break-down of sectarian barriers. He runs an advice centre at 214-216 Shankill Road (UVF Headquarters).

The Progressive Unionist Group (once the Independent Unionist Group) is a small Loyalist group with strong UVF connections. Their proposals for a democratic devolved administration for NI within the UK are moderate and relatively sensible, envisaging an assembly elected by PR with 10 committees to cover the broad range of governmental functions. But the proposals which were first published in 1978 attracted no popular support or interest outside the Shankill, and there should be no doubt about their fundamentally Loyalist outlook. Prominent members are David Overend, John Irvine and Jim McDonald, who with Hugh Smyth toured Canada in November 1979 - Smyth and McDonald were refused visas, however, to the USA, though Irvine and Overend saw State Department Officials. They formed themselves into a 'party' in early 1980 and refused an offer to join with Kilfiddler's infant UPUP. It has been rumoured that they may be drawing close to the RC-WP in policy terms, although whether they will ever ally themselves to the 'Stickies' is another matter.