

Ervine, David (Walter)

by Patrick Maume

Ervine, David (Walter) (1954–2007), loyalist paramilitary and politician, was born in Chamberlain St., east Belfast, on 21 July 1954, youngest of five children (two girls and three boys) of Walter Ervine, iron turner and shipyard worker, and his wife Elizabeth ('Dolly'). Walter Ervine was in many respects a frustrated man; obliged to leave school early to help support his family, he read voraciously and held discussions with anyone who would listen to him. He served in the Royal Navy and suffered from shell shock which affected his health in later life. He was a member of the Northern Ireland Labour Party, hostile to the Orange order, and at the time of the civil rights movement supported the demonstrators' claim that as British citizens they should enjoy British rights. Dolly Ervine was a more conventional unionist; although neither parent attended church she insisted on subscribing regularly to Megain Memorial Presbyterian Church. Her husband thought her excessively deferential to temporal and religious authorities, including Ian Paisley (b. 1926), whose congregation was located in the area.

Ervine attended Megain Memorial primary school, then went to Orangefield secondary school, well-known for progressive educational practices. Unlike his brother Brian, who passed his 11-plus examination, took a degree in theology at QUB, and became a schoolteacher, songwriter, and playwright, David took no particular interest in academic matters (though he was good at school sports) and left school in June 1968 to work successively in an engineering works, as a storeman, and as a shop assistant. He later recalled his early life as having been bounded by the small area around the Newtownards and Albertbridge Roads near the River Lagan on the western edge of east Belfast. He had no particular hostility to the few Catholics living in the area, but acquired a sense that Catholics in general were dangerous and untrustworthy, and as the Northern Ireland troubles began he increasingly saw his community as under threat. Aged 17, Ervine briefly joined the Orange order; he applied to join the police force but was turned down because of a minor conviction (for buying a stolen bicycle at age 11). On 1 March 1972 he married Jeannette Cunningham (later a Barnardo's project worker); they would have two sons, one born shortly before his arrest in 1974 and one born soon after his release from prison in 1980. Jeannette remained ignorant of his paramilitary activities until his arrest.

Paramilitary and prisoner According to Ervine, he finally decided to join the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in response to the 'bloody Friday' bombings of 21 July 1972; he was influenced by the fact that a teenager called William Irvine from a neighbouring street was killed in the bombings, leading his family and neighbours to believe for some hours that it was David who had died. According to Ervine, he chose to join the UVF rather than the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) because he

saw it as more professional (the UVF was a centralised quasi-military body, the UDA a federation of local vigilantes). He always refused to go into detail about his actions as a member of the UVF (probably for fear of prosecution). It has been suggested, however, that he was part of a bomb-making unit which exploded several no-warning bombs in pubs in catholic areas of Belfast, causing several deaths. This view is supported by the fact that as a prisoner he was classified as 'red-book' (highest security) and when arrested in east Belfast on 1 November 1974 he was able to defuse the bomb he was transporting when ordered to do so by the security forces. In May 1975 he was sentenced to eleven years' imprisonment for possession of explosives with intent to endanger life. (After his death it was claimed that the bomb was intended for a UDA target as part of a loyalist feud.)

In prison Ervine was influenced by Gusto Spence (1933–2011), founder of the UVF and 'camp commandant' in Long Kesh prison. Spence, who had come under the influence of Official IRA prisoners, maintained strict military discipline for the sake of self-respect and tried to goad his subordinates into developing their political outlook. He advocated an expressly socialist form of loyalism, based on the view that upper- and middle-class 'big house' unionists had always exploited working-class loyalists. The latest form of this exploitation, in the eyes of Spence and the 'class of '74' group of inmates who came under his influence and later formed the nucleus of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), was the way in which 'big mouth' unionist politicians such as Paisley stirred up loyalists with apocalyptic rhetoric, then denounced them as criminals and claimed moral superiority. Ervine passed O and A Level examinations in prison and took Open University social science courses. His advocacy of socialism and of a constitutional settlement based on power sharing (in line with Spence's thinking) provoked the hostility of some loyalists.

The PUP After his release on 2 May 1980, Ervine worked as a milkman and later opened a newsagent shop. In 1984 he was recruited to the PUP, a small group linked to the UVF, which at this stage was little more than a support group for the West Belfast councillor Hugh Smyth. After Ervine unsuccessfully contested the May 1985 Belfast corporation elections in the Pottinger ward he was targeted by the IRA and had to give up his shop, move house, and return to the milk round. Participation in the protests against the 1985 Anglo–Irish agreement left him further convinced of the incapacity and hypocrisy of mainstream unionist politicians. He complained that unionists invited a loyalist delegation to their party headquarters, harangued them on the need to hold a one-day protest strike, then publicised the visit as 'proof' that it was the loyalist 'hardmen' who were pushing the unionists into the strike. Ervine maintained that a mindset which saw things as unambiguously either wrong or right, refused to face up to the community's own responsibility for the current state of affairs (including the actions of loyalist paramilitaries), and equated compromise with betrayal had contributed to the plight of the protestant/unionist community.

In 1985 the PUP produced a document entitled *Sharing responsibilities*, advocating a settlement based on power-sharing by consent (run by heads of committees

with a unionist chair and nationalist deputy chair), and accepting cross-border cooperation provided this was transparent and open. Updated versions of the document (notably one produced in 1997) formed the basis of PUP negotiating strategy throughout the subsequent Northern Ireland peace process. Ervine and his associates recognised that the existence of talks between John Hume of the SDLP and Sinn Féin suggested that the republican movement was starting to consider ending its military campaign as a possible negotiating tool, and that loyalists needed to encourage this development and consider how to respond to it.

From the late 1980s Ervine played a significant role in expanding the PUP by recruiting ex-prisoners and community activists, and in creating a 'kitchen cabinet' that advised the UVF leadership on political matters and worked to coordinate political and military responses with the more fissiparous UDA. He is also alleged to have been on the UVF's 'brigade staff' and to have held the post of provost marshal (responsible for maintaining discipline) in east Belfast (1988–91). The UVF later claimed to have combined its political strategy with deliberate escalation of the military campaign, placing greater emphasis on targeting republicans and on influencing the Irish government by displaying a capability to attack south of the border. In interviews for a 2002 biography, Ervine and his associates suggested that he had not been involved in the military side of this strategy; a posthumously published interview with a researcher for Boston College's 'troubles archive' is slightly more ambiguous on this point. Whatever his exact role, however, his paramilitary links played a vital role in selling his strategy to the rank and file. He influenced the decision to call a temporary loyalist ceasefire in 1991 as proof that the loyalists could respond to the changing political situation and were able to maintain discipline over their own activists.

The peace process Ervine was also delegated by the PUP to visit the Republic, establish links with community groups and other potential mediators, and develop a wider awareness of the southern political situation. This resulted in the opening of a channel to the Irish government from summer 1993 via Ervine, Chris Hudson (a trade-union activist involved in peace groups whom Ervine first met at a conference called by communist and republican groups in Dublin), and Fergus Finlay, special adviser to Labour party leader and tánaiste, Dick Spring. This channel allowed the Irish government to get a sense of loyalist feelings and intentions (often a better sense than that possessed by the British) and to reassure some of their anxieties – a process which culminated in a secret (and politically risky) meeting between Taoiseach Albert Reynolds and Ervine and Spence in a Dublin hotel around the time of the 19 October 1994 loyalist ceasefire.

Ervine later stated that the loyalists' political advisers would have liked to call a ceasefire before the IRA called theirs (31 August 1994) but that this was precluded by a wave of republican attacks on loyalist targets over the summer, including the assassination of the leading UDA political spokesman, Ray Smallwoods (qv); Ervine was in the area and attended to the dying Smallwoods immediately after

the shooting. He later stated his belief that the IRA had wished to decapitate the loyalists politically and to provoke them into continuing their campaign irrespective of the IRA's actions, which would have led to loyalists being isolated and crushed. In an attempt to reassure loyalist opinion, Ervine helped to organise demonstrations celebrating the IRA ceasefire as an 'unconditional surrender' to 'the loyalist people of Northern Ireland'.

Ervine co-drafted the statement read by Spence at the announcement of the loyalist ceasefire, and subsequently participated in exploratory talks with British government representatives. From this period he attracted widespread public attention as a forthright and articulate spokesman for the loyalist viewpoint, and a counterweight to the pessimistic view of the process being advanced by the Democratic Unionist and UK Unionist parties. He was allowed to enter the United States to address various fora, and spoke at a British Labour party conference meeting on the peace process.

When the IRA abandoned its ceasefire and exploded a large bomb at Canary Wharf in London on 9 January 1996, Ervine made strenuous and initially successful public and private efforts to persuade loyalists that retaliation would be counter-productive; but graffiti appeared in Belfast stating 'David Ervine doesn't speak for the men on the ground' and the volatile Portadown UVF leader Billy Wright (qv), who had initially complained that Ervine had not moved fast enough on the 1994 ceasefire, emerged as a focus for discontent. During the protests surrounding the attempted blocking of an Orange march at Drumcree near Portadown (in which Wright took a leading role) Ervine was jeered and pelted when he warned a crowd that such demonstrations would damage the public image of unionism in general and loyalism in particular. Wright and a number of his associates were subsequently expelled from the UVF and formed the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF). Ervine and other loyalist spokesmen emphasised the involvement of Wright and his allies in drug-dealing and racketeering and privately suggested Wright was being used by state forces to destabilise loyalism as an independent political force; Wright and other hardliners suggested Ervine was a creature of the Northern Ireland Office groomed to put a smiling face on a sell-out. Wright grossly overestimated his potential support, and was arrested for intimidation in January 1997 and murdered in prison in December. Nevertheless, the continuing annual riots and demonstrations associated with the Drumcree parade, combined with internecine violence between the UVF and LVF and sectarian killings by dissident loyalists, cast a shadow over Ervine's attempts to present loyalism as politically respectable.

On 30 May 1996 the PUP secured 3.47% of votes cast and seventh place in the election for the Northern Ireland Forum, which would conduct further negotiations. The party had an impressive performance in the greater Belfast area (Ervine stood in East Belfast, where the party won 9.9%) and although it did not win any directly elected seats it secured two 'top-up' members (Ervine and Hugh Smyth) as one of the ten largest parties. Ervine's ability to tap electoral support to an extent hitherto unseen by loyalist-linked candidates was later displayed in the general election of

1 May 1997 when he came third in the South Belfast constituency with 14.4% of votes cast. In the subsequent local elections of 19 May he was one of three PUP councillors elected to Belfast corporation. Ervine held this corporation seat for the rest of his life, winning re-election in 2001 and 2005.

After the DUP and UKUP walked out of the talks claiming that too many concessions were being made to Sinn Féin, the loyalist parties became highly influential in the negotiations leading to the 1998 Belfast agreement. The former US Senator George Mitchell, who played a prominent mediating role in the talks, thought Ervine the most impressive of the unionist representatives. The loyalist parties, with Ervine as their most prominent spokesman, adopted a generally constructive attitude to the negotiations and blunted the ability of the DUP to use the hardliners as a threat and to present the agreement as a sell-out. But not all loyalist supporters were happy with this role, and many voted for anti-agreement parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly election of 25 June 1998, quenching hopes that the loyalist parties might make a significant breakthrough at the expense of the DUP. The PUP, which had spoken of gaining half a dozen seats, only secured two (Ervine in East Belfast and Billy Hutchinson in North Belfast); the weaker UDA-affiliated Ulster Democratic Party failed to secure any seats and soon disbanded; 28 anti-agreement unionists (20 DUP, 5 UKUP, 3 independent) were returned, as against 30 pro-agreement (28 UUP – some of whom were doubtful – and 2 PUP).

Post-agreement loyalist politics Ervine remained a prominent spokesman for pro-agreement unionism and was regarded as one of the more effective performers in the Assembly, but his failure to make a wider political breakthrough was emphasised in the 10 June 1999 Northern Ireland European elections. He won only 3.3% of first-preference votes while Ian Paisley topped the poll with 28.4% but Ervine claimed a minor victory by outpolling the second anti-agreement unionist candidate, Robert McCartney of the UKUP (2.98%). In the 2001 UK general election, Ervine stood in East Belfast, winning 10% of votes cast but failing to unseat DUP deputy leader Peter Robinson. Meanwhile, continued feuding between the UVF and elements of the UDA which Ervine attributed to the desire of certain loyalist elements to provide political cover for their own criminal activities, contributed to the continuing decline of political loyalism. In the 2001 local elections the PUP was reduced to three councillors (all in Belfast). In 2002 Ervine succeeded Hugh Smyth as PUP leader, and after the loss of Billy Hutchinson's assembly (2003) and Belfast corporation (2005) seats, the PUP was effectively reduced to a support vehicle for Ervine.

Ervine remained enmeshed in the associational life of east Belfast as a lifelong fan of the east Belfast soccer club Glentoran, chairman of the Raven Social Club run by the Royal and Ancient Order of Buffaloes, a vice-president of the Albertbridge Accordion Band, a member of the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union, and of the Amalgamation of Somme Associations. He continued to participate in talks, and as loyalist feuds were contained took a leading role in a 'roadshow' process (2004–6) intended to convey the thinking of the UVF leadership to its

rank and file and to prepare the latter for the final stand-down of the paramilitary organisation. Like other former loyalist and republican paramilitaries, Ervine also visited other areas of conflict (including Bosnia, Kosovo, Sri Lanka, and Gaza) to advise on the lessons of the Northern Irish peace process, and supported the work with Australian aborigines of the Edmund Rice Centre in Sydney. The continuing strain he experienced was intensified by a personal bereavement in 2006.

While Ervine remained immensely popular with the general public as a peacemaker, some commentators complained that he was morally compromised by his links to the UVF, which continued to carry out vigilante attacks and other criminal activities, and that his justification of their slowness to disarm and disband provided tacit moral 'cover' for republicans on the same issues. The campaigner Raymond McCord, whose son was killed by North Belfast UVF members later revealed to have been linked to the security forces, engaged in several verbal confrontations with Ervine and denounced him after his death as a front-man for much more sinister figures. Ervine dismissed such criticisms (especially from unionist politicians) as middle-class squeamishness and self-righteousness.

Ervine's paramilitary links caused renewed controversy in March 2006 when he concluded a pact with Ulster Unionist Party leader Reg Empey whereby Ervine would join the UUP Assembly group while remaining a PUP member; if successful this would have given the UUP an extra seat on the Northern Ireland Executive at the expense of Sinn Féin. This move provoked widespread criticism among UUP members who felt it compromised their party's criticism of paramilitarism, and did not achieve the desired result since it was decided on procedural grounds that Ervine could not be reclassified as part of the UUP delegation. Nevertheless, as the DUP and Sinn Féin concluded the St Andrews agreement in late 2006 and moved towards sharing power (after new assembly elections, eventually held in May 2007) it was suggested in some quarters that Ervine might be a compromise candidate for assembly speaker.

Death and legacy Shortly after returning home from a football match on the night of 6–7 January 2007, Ervine suffered a massive heart attack, stroke, and brain haemorrhage, leading to his death in the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, on 8 January 2007. He received a wide range of tributes from across the political spectrum in Northern Ireland, the Republic, Britain, and elsewhere, paying tribute to his role in the peace process and as a spokesman for working-class protestants; thousands of messages were received from ordinary people hailing him as a peacemaker. Although Ervine was an atheist who told church representatives in private meetings that he considered the churches morally guilty for dividing the community – 'a plague on all your houses' – a preacher at his funeral (held at the East Belfast Methodist City Mission, followed by cremation at Roselawn cemetery) declared that he had been worthy of 'a prophet's robe'. Thousands attended the funeral, with large areas of east Belfast shutting down; the presence of the Sinn Féin

leader Gerry Adams was regarded as symbolising the end of the Northern Ireland conflict.

In 2004 Ervine was interviewed for the Boston College Northern Ireland Troubles Archive, subject to a confidentiality pledge which lapsed at his death; in 2010 an edited selection of this interview material and of similar testimony from the prominent IRA activist Brendan Hughes was published as *Voices from the grave* and also formed the basis of a documentary of the same title on Ervine and Hughes by RTÉ. His death deprived political loyalism of its most effective spokesman and in hindsight can be seen as marking the beginning of the end for the PUP. In the May 2011 Assembly elections Ervine's brother Brian (now PUP party leader) was defeated and in local elections the PUP returned only two councillors. The party's long-term failure to create a significant political base for itself should not, however, obscure its significance in the Northern Ireland peace process; Ervine's political intelligence, articulation of an unionist case in terms more broadly marketable than those of its traditional spokesmen, and credibility with the loyalist hardmen was crucial to that role. His brother Brian summed up his career as that of 'a man who was not afraid to climb out of the trenches and play ball with the other side, even if what he played was not necessarily football'.

Jonathan Stevenson, *'We wrecked the place': contemplating an end to the Northern Ireland troubles* (1996); Sydney Elliott and W. D. Flackes, *Northern Ireland: a political directory 1968–1999* (1999); Henry Sinnerton, *David Ervine: uncharted waters* (2002); *Belfast Telegraph*, 27 Apr. 2005; 22 June 2006; 8–13, 15–17, 19–20 Jan. 2007; *Belfast Newsletter*, 8, 9 Jan. 2007; *Ir. Times*, 8–13, 19–20 Jan. 2007; *Guardian*, 8 Jan. 2007; *Times*, 9 Jan. 2007; *Andersonstown News*, 13 Jan. 2007; *Sunday Independent*, 14, 21, 28 Jan. 2007; Jim Cusack and Henry McDonald, *UVF: the endgame* (2008 ed.); Raymond McCord, *Justice for Raymond* (2008); Henry McDonald, *Gunsmoke and mirrors: how Sinn Féin dressed up defeat as victory* (2008); Jonathan Powell, *Great hatred, little room: making peace in Northern Ireland* (2008); Graham Spencer, *The state of loyalism in Northern Ireland* (2008); Ed Moloney, *Voices from the grave: two men's war in Northern Ireland* (2010); Bill Rolston, *Children of the revolution: the lives of sons and daughters of activists in Northern Ireland* (Derry, 2011)