

Napier, Oliver

by Patrick Maume

Napier, Oliver (1935–2011), politician, was born on 11 July 1935 in Downpatrick, Co. Down, the eldest son of James Napier, a catholic solicitor, and his wife Sheila (née Bready); he had two brothers and a sister. Oliver attended St Malachy's College, Belfast, and then studied law at QUB, graduating LLB (1959). He joined his father's legal practice, Napier and Sons, where he specialised in insolvency. On 6 April 1961 he married Brieghe Barnes; they had five daughters and four sons (his daughter Brigid later joined the family practice). In the early 1960s Napier served as a governor of Vernon College, an independent boys' school near Armagh. As early as 1966 he advocated religiously integrated education as the only way of overcoming Northern Ireland's communal divisions.

Napier was an executive member of the Ulster Liberal Party (1962–9) led by Albert McElroy (qv), but grew dissatisfied with its policy of contesting elections without a corresponding focus on organisation. He also decided that the Liberals were merely splitting the moderate vote, and advocated creating the nucleus of a new party to unite moderates from all sides in a broader political realignment. Napier joined a group of like-minded Liberals in forming (early 1969) the New Ulster Movement (though not all NUM members favoured creating a political party). He served on the NUM executive and was joint treasurer. In February 1970 he publicly complained that People's Democracy and other revolutionary groups using the civil-rights name were combining with loyalist extremists to accelerate the province's decline into massive sectarian violence, and that the only solution was to build trust among the people of Northern Ireland. This was to be Napier's central message for the remainder of his political career.

On 21 April 1970 Napier co-founded the Alliance Party with Bob Cooper (qv) and other NUM members, as well as former moderate Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) supporters of Terence O'Neill (qv). Napier stated clearly that Alliance was a pro-union party, and called on catholics conscious of the economic benefits of the union to make themselves known; he maintained that catholics and protestants shared a distinct Northern Irish identity derived from many sources, and that they were British citizens while being culturally Irish. He declared that no self-respecting catholic could join the UUP because of its Orange connections, and called for the dissolution of Belfast Corporation on the grounds that it was a 'chamber of horrors' whose economic mismanagement of the city had helped to create the conditions for violence (*Jr. Times*, 29 January 1971). Napier and Cooper co-chaired Alliance's political committee (from July 1970), and in October Napier was elected vice-chairman of the party (with Basil Glass (qv) as chairman). After three MPs defected to Alliance in February 1972, the reformist unionist Phelim O'Neill (qv) became party leader. The party's first years were marked by contacts with other moderate

unionists hoping to participate in a political realignment should the UUP disintegrate, and by hopes that Alliance might become Northern Ireland's major party in such a realignment.

Around the time of Alliance's formation, Napier refused an invitation to join the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) on its foundation, and the future SDLP leader John Hume turned down Napier's invitation to join Alliance. Relations between Napier and the SDLP were frequently stormy; Napier accused the SDLP of being non-sectarian in theory but sectarian in practice, while the SDLP accused Napier of purveying 'respectable unionism for middle-class catholics' (Seamus Mallon, *Ir. Times*, 2 September 1974). Meanwhile, Revd Ian Paisley (1926–2014) accused Napier of 'treachery to the union ... subservience to the republican creed of the Roman catholic church to which he belongs' (*Ir. Times*, 18 April 1977).

In 1971 Napier vehemently opposed the introduction of internment without trial. He regularly criticised both legal abuses by state agents and violence against the security forces, acted as defending solicitor to numerous individuals accused of rioting, and repeatedly complained that sectarian murders by loyalists attracted much less attention than republican crimes. At the same time, he called on the government of the Republic to abandon its constitutional claim to Northern Ireland and to introduce extradition for political offenders. Napier, though a fluent speaker of Irish (he had a gift for languages and was particularly proficient in Spanish) and a believing catholic, also called on the Republic to abandon the idea that only the Gaelic tradition was truly Irish and to remove legislation (such as the bans on contraception and divorce) that marked it out as a catholic confessional state. These were to be staple themes throughout Napier's career; in the early 1980s he was highly critical of the attempts of Charles Haughey (qv) to reach an Anglo–Irish settlement through direct contact with Westminster over the heads of the Northern Ireland population, and he actively supported the 'constitutional crusade' of Garret FitzGerald.

Napier contested the 1973 Northern Ireland Assembly elections in the predominantly protestant Belfast East constituency (where he lived in a suburban area), while Cooper (a protestant) stood in predominantly catholic Belfast West. This assertion of non-sectarian politics was successful in that both were elected, with Napier becoming party leader. Although not an outstanding public speaker, he was well organised (regularly sending advance texts of his speeches to the press), shone in question-and-answer discussions, and had a gift for the memorable and often stinging phrase. He participated in the negotiations leading to the Sunningdale agreement, and from January to May 1974 served as minister for law reform in the power-sharing Northern Ireland executive, headed by Brian Faulkner (qv). (Alliance held two other, non-cabinet positions.) His department immediately began preparing an extensive range of legislation; several measures – including bills on workers'

compensation and on regulating solicitors – were due for imminent introduction when the executive was brought down by the Ulster Workers' Council strike.

Although Napier had initially been highly suspicious of Faulkner's involvement at Sunningdale, even stating at one point that Faulkner's appointment as head of an executive would be seen as a return to the old regime, he came to accept Faulkner's sincerity and worked closely with him. Several participants in the Sunningdale negotiations thought that Alliance defended the unionist position more vigorously than the Faulkner UUPers did. Napier repeatedly called for the Council of Ireland advocated by the SDLP to be confined to economic matters of common concern rather than a more expansive constitutional role. His experience of the NI executive convinced him that the 'malign scenario' predicted by Conor Cruise O'Brien (qv) – British withdrawal, followed by sectarian civil war, massive ethnic cleansing, and the destabilisation of the whole island – was a real possibility unless the political vacuum could be filled by a devolution settlement. This underlay his enthusiasm for the political talks and devolution schemes propounded by successive secretaries of state, his insistence that the RUC must be supported as the only barrier between the province and chaos, and his support for the abolition of political status for paramilitary prisoners. Hence, in the years after the fall of the NI executive it was often said that the SDLP was becoming more green and Alliance more orange, with the latter's vote increasingly centred on middle-class areas in the east of the province.

In neither of the two 1974 Westminster elections did Napier contest Belfast East, in the (unsuccessful) hope of assisting pro-Faulkner unionists to hold the seat. He served in the NI Constitutional Convention (1975–6), which unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate renewed power-sharing. The electoral implosion in the years 1974–7 of the Faulkner unionists (Unionist Party of Northern Ireland), and of the Northern Ireland Labour Party, left Alliance, with its active and well-organised middle-class membership, as Northern Ireland's dominant party of the centre.

Napier's political activities put him at considerable physical risk; more than one attempt was made on his life. In January 1974 his holiday home in south Down was burned down by republicans, and in 1977 the Napier family home in east Belfast was wrecked by a loyalist mob because of Napier's opposition to the unsuccessful United Unionist Action Council strike fomented by Paisley. Napier's commitment to canvassing in working-class housing estates also led to his being physically assaulted on more than one occasion.

Napier was a member of Belfast City Council (1977–89). His electoral highpoint came at the 1979 Westminster general election. Alliance entertained hopes of taking Belfast East because the unionist vote was divided between the sitting UUP MP William Craig and the young DUP activist Peter Robinson. In the event, Robinson took the seat from Craig by 64 votes, with Napier third (with 15,066 votes, 928 behind Robinson). Napier then contested the first direct elections to

the European Parliament (7 June 1979), but won less than half the vote total that Alliance had gained throughout the province at the Westminster election. Although this was ascribed to his personal limitations at the time, Alliance did not exceed his percentage vote in a European contest until 2014.

In 1980 Napier supported the cross-party talks undertaken by the NI secretary, Humphrey Atkins (qv), and in 1982 was elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly set up under Secretary of State James Prior (1927–2016). Napier worked closely with the DUP to make the assembly work (the UUP, with stronger integrationist tendencies than the DUP, was less enthusiastic); he was partly driven by fear that the growing electoral strength of Sinn Féin might preclude a future devolved settlement. He again declared that Alliance would not support an executive unless it gave adequate representation to the minority, but was critical of the SDLP for refusing to take their seats, and denounced the New Ireland Forum (held in Dublin (1983–4) to work out a common approach between the SDLP and the three main parties in the Republic) for excluding unionists and implying a settlement could be imposed on the Northern Ireland majority. Having suffered minor health problems in the early 1980s, Napier stepped down as Alliance leader in September 1984, partly because he thought new blood was needed and partly because he had been offered a responsible legal position. He remained active in the party, increasingly in a back-room capacity.

Napier was knighted in the August 1985 queen's birthday honours list. On retirement, he became a governor of the province's first integrated school, Lagan College in Belfast. He opposed the 1985 Anglo–Irish agreement on the grounds that the unionist community should have been consulted. He contested Belfast East for the last time in the by-election of 23 January 1986 (all unionist MPs had resigned their seats and stood for re-election on a joint ticket in protest against the agreement), and saw his vote fall by over a quarter. Chairman of the Standing Advisory Committee on Human Rights (1988–94), he was the Alliance candidate in the 1995 Down North by-election, coming third behind the integrationist unionist Robert McCartney and the UUP's Alan McFarland. (By this time he was living in Hollywood, north Down.) He was elected to the Northern Ireland Forum as Alliance representative for Down North (1996–8) and, during negotiation of the 1998 Belfast agreement, warned British Prime Minister Tony Blair that if the UUP leader David Trimble was pressurised into accepting too many concessions he might share the fate of Brian Faulkner.

In his later years Napier suffered from cancer, but his mind remained sharp. Although Alliance moved to some extent away from his favoured policies (e.g., stating that it was no longer pro-union in principle, but that a majority should decide the issue), he continued to attend party events as an elder statesman, and expressed satisfaction when Alliance candidate Naomi Long defeated Robinson in Belfast East in the 2010 Westminster election. Napier died in hospital in Belfast on 2 July 2011. Tributes spoke of him as an essentially private man, happiest

in his garden, who had come into public life from a sense of service, and whose contribution to a Northern Ireland settlement must be measured by the ideas he and his party circulated and urged at negotiations as much as by their formal electoral record. Napier and his party have attracted less analytical attention than the darker reaches of fundamentalism and paramilitarism, but this should not occlude their importance, or the courage required.

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*Ir. Times*, 26 Feb. 1962; 10 Jan. 1966; 6 Feb., 22 Apr., 17 Sept., 26 Oct. 1970; 29 Jan., 12 Feb., 29 Mar., 11, 21, 26 May, 16 June, 12 Aug., 7, 9, 11, 15, 23, 30 Sept., 7, 15, 19, 21, 29 Oct., 24 Nov., 14 Dec. 1971; 13, 15 Jan., 19 Feb., 27, 30 Mar., 23, 27 May, 28 June, 28 July, 24 Aug., 5, 22 Sept., 5, 27 Oct., 12 Dec. 1972; 3, 16, 17, 31 Jan., 7, 26 Mar., 12 Apr., 8, 24 May, 2, 18, 26 June, 2, 4, 20 July, 22, 30 Aug., 14, 21, 25 Sept., 8 Nov., 4, 11, 13, 15, 28, 29, 31 Dec. 1973; 1, 3, 8, 19, 31 Jan., 1, 16, 27, 28 Feb., 14, 27, 30 Mar., 1, 2, 27, 29 Apr., 1, 7, 28 May, 3, 7, 10, 14, 15, 20 June, 11, 18, 19, 23, 24, 26 July, 9, 12, 16, 24, 28 Aug., 2, 9, 10, 14, 19, 26 Sept., 4, 8, 25 Oct., 2, 6, 12, 14, 16 Nov., 14 Dec. 1974; 6, 13 Jan., 6, 14, 18, 19, 24, 28 Feb., 21, 27 Mar., 8, 17 Apr., 3, 14 May, 7, 25, 28 Aug., 19, 23 Sept., 1, 3 Oct., 15, 30 Dec. 1975; 21, 25, 26 Feb., 3 Mar., 6 Apr., 3, 24 May, 30 July, 10, 25, 30 Aug., 14 Oct., 5 Nov., 13 Dec. 1976; 18 Apr., 26 May, 20, 22, 24 June, 21, 26, 28 Sept., 8 Nov. 1977; 11 Jan., 10, 11 Apr., 2 Aug. 1978; 10, 24 Feb., 29 Mar., 3, 23 May, 12, 16 June, 26 July, 7 Aug., 11 Sept., 27 Nov. 1979; 31 Mar., 20 June, 16 Sept., 17 Dec. 1980; 26 Mar., 11, 13 Apr., 6 May, 1 July, 24 Sept., 19, 29 Oct., 7 Nov., 14 Dec. 1981; 3 Mar., 6, 26, 30 Apr., 6, 8, 15 Oct. 1982; 28 Feb., 25, 29 Mar., 12 Apr., 1, 24 Oct. 1983; 15 Feb., 5 Apr., 5 May, 25 Sept. 1984; 17 Sept. 1995; 7 July 2011; *Ir. News*, 25 June, 8 Aug. 1979; 4, 5, 6 July 2011; Sydney Elliott and W. D. Flackes, *Northern Ireland: a political directory 1968–1999* (1999); *Belfast Telegraph*, 4, 5 July 2011; *Newsletter* (Belfast), 4, 6, 11 July 2011; *Times*, 7 July 2011; Michael Kerr, *The destructors: the story of Northern Ireland's lost peace process* (2011); Alf McCreary, *Behind the headlines: an autobiography: fifty years in journalism* (2013); Brian Eggins, *History and hope: the Alliance party of Northern Ireland* (2015)