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Belfast Corruption 1921-1968 and the Curious Case of Ann Copeland[1]

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The history of Belfast in the mid to late twentieth century is marked by the 'troubles' and the Catholic struggle for civil rights. The descent into retributive violence became the hallmark of a visceral conflict as para-military groups sunk the city into a desperate cycle of violence. It is perhaps less well known that the 'troubles' were preceded by a fierce contest for space and safe havens of residence. This conflict was centred on housing and particularly publicly funded housing managed by Belfast Corporation. The contest for space was fought by the forgotten people of the city: women and men who sought to relocate from front line locations where Protestant and Catholic communities butted-up to one another. From the 1930s until the post war years the contest was fought covertly by means of corruption and sharp practice at elections and also in an endeavour to obtain council houses with people of the 'same persuasion'.
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Introduction

Ireland has two principal historic communities. In very general terms they are characterised by religion: Catholics, who compose the vast majority of the Republic of Ireland and around 30% of the province of Northern Ireland (Ulster); and Protestants who make up the balance of the population of Northern Ireland. More than anywhere else in Western Europe, ethnic division in Ireland has given rise to political instability which has continued since at least the middle of the nineteenth century and which is as far from a lasting solution as it has ever been. More, too, than in almost any other area of Western Europe, the people have a heightened sense of the historical roots of their differences. In Ireland, as in the former Yugoslavia, history can cast a murderous shadow (Fernandez-Armesto 1994).[2]

Whilst there is undoubted merit in this claim it would be a mistake to base our understanding of Belfast and Ulster around an exclusively exceptional characterisation. In Germany's industrial region of the Ruhr, for example, religious enmity was powerful in Duisburg, Essen, Bochum and Dortmund. Protestant children fought with Catholic children and Protestant parents referred to Catholics as 'blacks' and in the small town of Witten a Catholic neighbourhood was called the 'nigger village'. Such animosity was a reaction against Polish immigrants who had come to work in the Ruhr coalfields. In France the silk city of Nimes was, like Belfast, riven with sectarian confrontation. In both cities political allegiance was determined by religion; and patronage always had a sectarian character (McLeod 1981). The same can be said of the cities of Liverpool and Glasgow. Nevertheless, there are distinctive features to Ulster's and Belfast's condition: the nature of the Plantation system from the seventeenth century; the Act of Union of 1801; and Ireland's place in English imperial strategic thinking has meant that in some respects Ulster became an English colony where Scottish Protestant settlers acted as the prime agents of the British imperial state. Moreover, since the

[1] I am grateful to the Editorial Board of *Urbanities* and the Journal's anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. I would also like to thank the archive staff at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland.
[2] The author had published prior to the Good Friday Agreement of 1997.

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Irish Treaty of 1921, Ulster might be understood as a post-colonial society. Our perception of corruption needs to be seen both as a political activity and as a strategy for survival in every-day life. Additionally, it needs to be viewed against this backdrop of colonisation and religion. Nevertheless, the conceptual tools of corruption theory — self rewarding élites, market intersections private and public, lack of accountability, upward social mobility — remain useful to analysis. However, the spatial arrangements of Belfast were conditioned by the collisions of religious and ethnic identity which ultimately determined political allegiance; and by inherited loyalty which became the basis of social organisation. These circumstances took on a marked intensity consequent upon the twin processes of industrialisation and urbanisation.

Belfast's rapid industrialisation in the second half of the nineteenth century was driven first by linen and textiles but later by shipbuilding and engineering. Its population grew from around 50,000 in 1850 to over 350,000 by 1900 (Evans and Jones 1955). Industrialisation also witnessed the arrival of rural migrants, mostly Catholics, from other parts of Ireland. Thus, the Protestant Plantation of Ulster dating from the early seventeenth century became a religiously divided society. However, the industrial middle classes of Belfast took pride in their economic achievements and regarded the rest of Ireland as trapped in an agrarian past. The vibrancy of Belfast's economy was boosted further by the First World War, the shipyards of Harland and Wolff and Workman Clark building cruisers, destroyers and submarine engines. Belfast, Glasgow and Liverpool constituted an integrated economic triangle based on Britain's primacy in the world economy which served to accentuate Belfast's separateness from the rest of rural Ireland. All three cities experienced anti-Catholic rioting against the perceived threat of immigration. Further, with the growth of a Catholic nationalism in Ireland, British political leaders began to regard Ulster's Protestants as 'a potential garrison against Catholic revolt' (Bew 2007: 369). British liberal reform in the later nineteenth century removed the various disadvantages of Catholics and Protestant dissenters which had the effect of cementing Protestant Ulstermen to Britain. Finally, Belfast quickly displayed features of residential segregation between Protestants and Catholics. These divisions became intensified over time and particularly after the riots of 1935 (Hepburn 1990).

The history of Catholic nationalism is long and turbulent but for Ulster and particularly Belfast the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 represented a pivotal moment. The Treaty granted self-government to Ireland but Ulster remained within the Union but with its own Parliament. From the perspective of high politics, the Treaty has been seen as an elegant expedient concocted by the wizardry of Britain's Prime Minister, Lloyd George — Catholic Ireland became a free state within the Empire and Ulster remained within the Union and with a Protestant majority. The British government made provision in the Treaty to acknowledge the position of the Catholic minority in Ulster and in Belfast in particular. Thus, local government elections were to be conducted using a form of proportional representation. For the Catholics the Treaty lacked legitimacy and when the Northern Ireland Government abolished the proportional representation system in1922 it signified the Protestant majority's intention to deny the political aspirations of the Catholic minority. Within Belfast politics this translated into a self-satisfied complacency on the part of the Protestant majority. The Unionist Party had no interest in reform and sought to consolidate its position still further. It had already reneged on the arrangements

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for proportional representation in local elections in 1922; and in 1929 it went further, introducing legislation to redraw electoral boundaries which particularly affected Londonderry and which the Labour Party of Northern Ireland dubbed a 'corrupt and mischievous scheme' since it amounted to 'barefaced gerrymandering'.[3] When Sir William Turner celebrated his sixth successive year as Lord Mayor of Belfast in 1928 he claimed that the city was 'as well managed as most cities on the other side of the [Irish]Channel, and better than many'.[4] This did not exactly square with the facts but Turner's complacency was indicative of the inertia that would follow during the mayoralty of Sir Crawford McCullagh. It would also mean that the Northern Ireland Government was open to charges of gerrymandering and discrimination against Catholics in every field of public life (Lawrence 1965).

It was in housing that the opportunities for corruption were most apparent. Ulster's record in public sector housing was especially poor. For the whole of the province some 50,000 houses were built between 1919 and 1939 but only 3,839 were built by local authorities. In this sense Belfast was not alone and it was clear that urban authorities had failed conspicuously to tackle housing problems. The reasons for this were complex: first, speculative builders were able to secure exchequer subsidies at the same rate as local authorities.[5] Second, although the housing subsidy had the effect of depressing rent levels Ulster was a low wage economy and rent, as proportion of wages, remained artificially high. Local government's record on planning and slum clearance was also poor and local authorities did not enjoy the same planning powers as those in England and Wales. Belfast itself was also mired in corruption and in 1925 the Northern Ireland Government set-up the Megaw *Inquiry*. Robert Megaw's findings were highly critical of the Corporation asserting negligence and maladministration, poor accounting and the purchase of low-quality building materials. He also concluded that the allocation of contracts had involved collusion between members of the Housing Committee, the City Surveyor and various builders. In conducting the *Inquiry,* he had also faced obstruction, a failure to produce documents, a failure of members to attend interviews; and Megaw also accused the Chairman of the Housing Committee, Sir Crawford McCullagh, of complacency (Budge and O'Leary 1973).

The Second World War, however, was a catalyst for change and the Northern Ireland Government's own survey conducted in 1943 reckoned on a housing stock of 323,000 of which 230,000 needed repairs.[6] It was estimated that 100,000 new houses were also needed. The problems were most acute in Belfast but the Corporation showed little inclination to tackle them. The matter was taken up by Harry Diamond, the member for the Falls Division, who claimed that demand for council houses meant that there were 400 applications a month but the Estates Department was making only 60 allocations per month. Further, the possibility of a boundary extension to make more land available for house building was also blocked by the Unionists. Tommy Henderson, the member for the Shankhill Division, supported Diamond

[3] *Irish Times* 2 April 1929. See also the Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland (1965)
[4] Sir William Turner quoted in *The Times*, 24 January 1928.
[5] *Housing in Northern Ireland* Cmd. 224 (1944).
[6] *Northern Ireland in the Second World War* (1956).

highlighting conditions in the Millfield Division, Upper Library Street, Shankhill Road, Falls Road and Newtonards Road[7] as 'revolting'. He berated the City's Protestants saying:

They go to church on Sunday with a Big Bible and with a bit of Orange and purple ribbon hanging out of it but their Christianity ends when they come out of their churches. They object to any extension of the boundary.[8]

Belfast's inertia on the housing question opened- up the possibility of corruption as a way to get to the top of the housing list. It was also an area where women could play the lead role as their casual employment gave them opportunity to tackle the housing department and its officials. These casual patterns of employment, avoiding employment regulations, encouraged evasion in other spheres (Leonard 1992).

The Corrupt Tradition in Ulster and Belfast

The two salient features of Belfast politics were the visceral conflict between the two religious communities and corruption. The Protestant Unionist élite had used patronage and corruption to preserve its hold over Belfast society. Patronage cemented loyalty between the political élite and the Protestant working class. For example, sanitary officials were 'not always selected for their technical competence, but rather because they held a prominent position in church or chapel and had been able to render eminent service at election times' (Baker 1973: 804). After 1921 the range of corrupt practices was writ large across the province of Ulster. It included gerrymandering — the manipulation of electoral boundaries for party advantage — of which the most flagrant example occurred in Londonderry. The broad arrangements of the Treaty of 1921 secured a Protestant majority in both Parliamentary and local elections.

In Parliamentary elections Londonderry had two seats — Foyle which was Catholic and the City which was Protestant. The Stormont Parliament extended the City boundary eastwards deep into the countryside of Lough Nagh to include Protestant loyalist voters. Additionally, there were allegations that Unionist candidates in elections hired motor vehicles and taxis to take voters to the polls (O'Leary 1962).

Further, the shifts in the political environment after 1945 prompted even more audacious changes that effectively rigged elections in the Unionists' favour. The Westminster House of Commons established completely democratic elections in all areas — parliamentary and local government. In Ulster, however, the Unionist Minister for Home Affairs, Edward Warnock, introduced a measure to consolidate Unionist power. Warnock's measures perpetuated the rateable value business vote; and men and women who had served in the armed forces would immediately go on to the local government electoral register. This would favour the Protestant community. A significant side effect of these arrangements was 'personation' whereby voters sought to vote as many times as possible. This was an activity that involved all religious communities and confirming the adage, 'vote early and vote often'. The Northern Ireland MP, William McCullan, had claimed in 1928 there was 'shameful personation' in Belfast elections. In the General Election in 1951 eight women were charged with personation in the West Belfast

[7] Ann Copeland lived on Newtonards Road.
[8] *Stormont Papers*, 8 October 1952, vol. 36, cc1331-32.

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Constituency. They were mill workers and weavers and when charged, Elizabeth Brennan responded saying, 'there are thousands doing it today as well as me'. The Belfast Chamber of Commerce also complained about personation asserting that Belfast's magistrates were too lenient in their response to the problem. The Chamber maintained it was practised by Unionists and Nationalists alike although not by the Irish Labour Party. The issue of personation consumed considerable debating time in the Northern Ireland House of Commons. For example, Robert Getgood of the Northern Ireland Labour Party and MP for Belfast Old Park division, claimed that 'personation' was a 'shameful' practice and he pointed out that second-hand clothes stores near polling stations were particularly convenient in this respect:

> 'I have seen with my own eyes an old woman going to one of these [second hand stores], taking off her hat, taking out her teeth, and going back again to vote…'[9]

In this hot-house environment politicians from the minority parties, principally the Northern Ireland Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party as well as nationalists and independents vociferously rounded on Warnock with endless challenges concerning the security of ballot boxes; falsification of the electoral register; improper conduct by returning officers; the unreliability of the Royal Ulster Constabulary in transporting ballot boxes from polling stations to the venue for the count[10]. But perhaps the gravest problem was intimidation. For example, Jack Beattie brought to the attention of the House that one of his constituents had received a letter from the Duncairn Orange Lodge asking him to attend a meeting at the Lodge where he was warned about his voting intentions. The envelope containing the invitation bore the symbols of a horse, William of Orange and the skull and cross bones.[11]

The Corporation's housing schemes were of special concern to Megaw since it was thought that many houses had been built using poor quality materials. Additionally, there had been irregularities in the tendering processes and payments to contractors. His final report was highly critical of the Corporation's Housing Committee asserting that its members had acted with 'bias and impropriety in dealing with the investigation'.[12] Moreover, the City Surveyor had misled the committee and had shown favour to a particular timber merchant. Alongside particular instances of corruption the Belfast Corporation also exhibited systemic inefficiencies that it failed to remedy. In 1927, Sir William Turner, the Lord Mayor, forced the Corporation to establish a special Economy Committee to investigate wages and salaries with a view to making savings. However, the fact that the electoral ward committees of the Unionist Party were frequently dominated by municipal employees paralysed the Corporation as it sought to implement savings. The Economy Committee then exhorted the spending committees of the council to come forward with their own savings plans but these came to nought because of Unionist filibustering tactics. The savings plan was still being debated two years on in 1929 when the Corporation commissioned Arthur Collins, Financial Controller of the Audit

[9] *Stormont Papers,* 30, 25 June 1946, cc. 1406-1407.
[10] *Stormont Papers*, 16 October 1945, vol. 29, 1716 -1717.
[11] Jack Beattie MP for Belfast Pottinger, *Stormont Papers*, 16 October 1945, vol. 29, 658-659.
[12] *Stormont Papers*, 31 (1952), 1331-32.

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Commission, to investigate. This time Nationalists wrecked the process claiming that the recommendations would act ‘unfairly against the nationalist minority’ and that they would be ‘a charter for corruption’. The Corporation’s politics were characterised by much rhetorical flourish but more importantly they were marked not only by Unionist and Nationalist intransigence but also by a dysfunctional equilibrium that produced the conditions of inertia and stasis. Thus, in 1941 the Northern Ireland Government appointed John Dunlop, from the Ministry of Home Affairs, to investigate the matter of Belfast Corporation’s administration of the White Abbey sanatorium. Dunlop’s inquiry lasted 34 days. He faced constant resistance from councillors but Dunlop found maladministration in the Treasurer’s Department and that the Tuberculosis Committee had purchased the White Abbey sanatorium at an exorbitant price. Consequently, Dunlop recommended that the Corporation should be relieved of its responsibilities under the powers of the Tuberculosis Prevention Acts and in 1942 the Northern Ireland Government appointed three Commissioners to take charge of the Corporation’s affairs. Dunlop became acting town clerk. The Corporation’s reputation was one of ‘waste, nepotism and inefficiency’. According to Jack Beattie of the Northern Ireland Labour Party who represented Belfast’s Pottinger constituency, the problems at White Abbey had arisen because of ‘the cliques and caucuses’ of the Unionist Party. The matter polarised with nationalist and Labour politicians endeavouring to expose corruption within the Unionist ranks. The Corporation was defended by William Lowry, the Unionist member for the City of Londonderry. His language is instructive:

> ‘There was a Judas among the Twelve Apostles. If there is a coterie of men in the Belfast Corporation who, forgetful of their honour and their duty to those they represent, seek to misbehave themselves for their own profit the entire Corporation should not be judged by its worst members. There are upright, honourable men in the Belfast Corporation who are capable of administering the affairs of the city with distinction to themselves and with benefit to the community. Those men should be given a chance’.[13]

The Dunlop Inquiry into the matter of the White Abbey sanatorium did not, however, confront the issue of corruption and it was left to the Attorney General of Northern Ireland but charges were never made as one of the suspects was out of the country. The issue also revealed the tensions within Unionism and one of the fiercest critics of the Belfast Corporation was John Nixon, an Independent Unionist. Nixon asserted that the Belfast Corporation was ‘corrupt and dangerous’. Nixon, a former policeman and hard-line Unionist, had been dismissed from his position for a political speech made at an Orange Lodge in 1924 and he was also suspected of leading a secret section of the Constabulary, known as the Cromwell Club. He typified the uncompromising views and machismo of the extreme Unionist position; and on one occasion he threatened the Minister of Finance, Major Sinclair, bellowing, ‘I will go out of my way to lash you’.[14]

[13] *Stormont Papers* 26, 1943-44, 247, 11 March 1943.
[14] *Ibid.*

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The case of Ann Copeland

It was against this background that the case of Ann Copeland came to the forefront of the corruption agenda that the Labour Party sought to highlight. What follows is a partial vignette of the life and actions of an unmarried woman in a divided city. She was no doubt devious and plausible but her case exemplifies the ethno-nationalist crisis of a segregated city that would eventually descend into sectarian warfare by the end of the 1960s. So, during the election campaign for the Belfast Corporation in May 1953 Timothy O'Sullivan, an Irish Labour candidate, claimed there was widespread corruption in the allocation of council housing by the Corporation. Housing officials were, according to O'Sullivan, providing fake medical certificates denoting tuberculosis to enable would-be applicants to secure council houses. The presentation of such evidence to the Estates Department met the criterion of acute housing need and made an applicant a priority. Belfast Corporation was so concerned by these claims it asked the Royal Ulster Constabulary to investigate the allegations. The police dragged their feet and there was no report forthcoming or prosecutions in late September 1953. Whether this was deliberate to avoid the possibility of charges against Corporation officials is not known. At a public meeting held in St. Mary's Hall and attended by some 2,000 people, O'Sullivan spoke out again asserting that the bogus medical certificates were 'the most blatant instance of unadulterated corruption in a city in Ireland or in Great Britain.' According to O'Sullivan Corporation Officials were charging up to £40 for such certificates; and there were doctors willing to supply certificates without seeing the applicants. Given that there were some 20,000 people in need of council housing it was a 'well thought out scheme by a ring of racketeers — making good at the expense of rate-payers and at the expense of homeless people'.[15] O'Sullivan's estimated 2,000 houses had been allocated by this means and the racket had made £60,000. This was an exaggeration as the subsequent inquiry only identified twenty people who had paid bribes. Nevertheless, the calls for a public inquiry became intense and the Northern Ireland Government Minister for Health and Local Government, Dame Dehra Parker, acceded in October 1953.

The *Inquiry* opened on 23 October 1953 and published its Report on 22 January 1954. It sat in public session for a total of twenty-seven days in the County Court House. The Chairman of the *Inquiry*, Bradley McCall, expressed his concerns: was there corruption or misconduct in the allocation of Corporation houses? Was there misconduct of Corporation officials and was there misconduct among members of the medical profession? He pointed out that between December 1950 and May 1951 there had been 23,000 applications for council houses. Further, the housing shortage had been exacerbated by the German air raid of 1941. The shortage was so acute, he said, that people were prepared to 'lie, to bribe and to cheat' so desperate was the situation.[16] The problem of tuberculosis was especially acute. The incidence of tuberculosis in Northern Ireland was the highest in the British Isles, even higher than in the Republic of Ireland. In 1941 the rate was 175 per 100,000 population compared to 120 for Scotland and 110 for

[15] *The Irish Times* 2 May 1953.
[16] Ministry of Health and Local Government: *Inspector's Report on Belfast Corporation Housing Allocations Inquiry*, 9, 6-7.

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England and Wales. Perhaps more telling was the fact that tuberculosis was shrouded in stigma and silence in Irish society generally. That people were prepared to claim to be suffering from the disease was indeed a desperate measure. Further, the Corporation's points scheme was open to manipulation as applicants could also be approved according to their 'suitability' as well as 'availability' of houses. Bradley McCall accepted that the scheme achieved flexibility but it also gave the housing officials considerable 'discretion'. Additionally, War Service between 3 September 1939 and 14 August 1945 was also treated favourably. Given the structure of Irish regiments this favoured members of the Protestant community. Academic corruption theory would categorise this type of corruption as driven by principal-agent dynamics since the principal (Belfast Corporation) sought to ration public goods — council houses — using culturally defined criteria: namely 'suitability' and 'need'. However, the criteria were interpreted and managed by the Corporation agents: officials in the housing department.

This is far too straight forward. Networks of allegiance, reciprocity and financial payment were the essence of this example of corruption. In many respects the Belfast case of corruption might be better explained as an activity of survival in a divided city. But we should look first at the figure regarded at the time as the ring leader — Miss Ann Copeland — aliases Miss Bruce and Miss Nelson. She could not appear in court, according to her counsel, due to illness. Her absence allowed the solicitor acting for the Belfast Corporation to demonize her as a 'sickly influential spider weaving a poisoned web over the City of Belfast'.[17] She was able, apparently, to wield influence on those 'who were caught up within this web' and also convince them that she had 'influence on City Hall'. The barrister acting for the Attorney General of Northern Ireland described Belfast's acute housing shortage; but he was also concerned to bring to the forefront of people's attention the issues surrounding Belfast Corporation's 'stewardship of public money and resources'. He had previously informed the press that the search for the truth 'would be ruthless, relentless and remorseless'.[18] A principal witness, William Harvey, of the Northern Ireland Tuberculosis Society, revealed that none of the successful applicants using the medical certificates had in fact been treated for tuberculosis within the previous three years. In some senses, perhaps, there was nothing extraordinary in that since those who were desperate to obtain a house were prepared to go to extreme lengths to ensure the success of their application. Indeed, it was not unknown for childless applicants to borrow babies and children from neighbours or friends when attending interviews at the Corporation Estates Department.

Copeland's case highlighted the desperation of those in need and the lengths to which they would go to secure a house. Like Glasgow, there was an extreme housing shortage. Belfast's record during this period was abysmal compared with other cities in the United Kingdom. Further, the intensity of sectarian strife produced a complex set of processes whereby Catholics and Protestants alike sought to escape to new districts to be with their own co-religionists and where the prospect of cultural and religious uniformity would prevail. The segregation of Catholics and Protestants in Belfast had been evident since the nineteenth century and although there were mixed areas it was clear by 1911 that fifty-nine per cent of the

[17] *The Irish Times*, 23 January 1954.
[18] *The Irish Times* 4 December 1953.

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population were living in segregated streets. The process of segregation intensified after 1920 and it was dramatically manifested by the Shankill-Falls divide which revealed the interface between two working class areas — the Shankill which was Protestant and the Falls area which was Catholic. It had become a frontier environment where the two communities had begun to 'stockade' against their enemies. The process whereby segregation evolved accelerated after the riots of 1935. 'Bombing, shooting, fire-raising, intimidation created a city almost overwhelmed by on-the-street manifestations of ethnonational struggle' (Boal 2002: 689). By 1969, two-thirds of the population lived in entirely segregated areas and by 1972 this had increased to more than three-quarters. The Corporation's housing administration was based upon priority needs — overcrowding, number of children and health requirements. Gaining 'points' could see an applicant rise-up the waiting list and gain a house more quickly than simply waiting one's turn. Ann Copeland had set herself up as someone who could influence city hall. The Q.C. acting for the Attorney General asserted that there were at least 27 prospective tenants who had found their way to Ann Copeland and that 19 of them had paid her between £30 and £36 to secure a medical certificate and an interview at the Estates Department. Copeland was assisted by her niece, Sarah Madden, who acted as a go-between for prospective tenants and Copeland. Timothy O'Sullivan had conducted some of his own investigations and arranged for Leo Presley to visit Copeland in January 1953 when she claimed to have influence in the Estates Department. It does not seem that there was any particular pattern of religious affiliation from whom Copeland was prepared to take money. Sometimes there were payments in kind such as sweets, cigarettes and gloves. The network, with Copeland at its centre, was complex with applicants coming from both Catholic and Protestant communities. Apart from Copeland and Madden there were two other women — Mary Valente and Meta Donnan — who took bribes and passed the money to Copeland. Additionally, Madden (Copeland's niece) and her husband also had a role in introducing applicants to the network. The ramifications of the case were significant. It transpired that there were also three doctors involved: Dr J. H. D. Mahoney, Dr Harvey F. Jackson and Dr Domingo Emanuel. They would later be disciplined by the General Medical Council. The Council admonished Dr Jackson stating that his actions constituted a 'serious breach of trust [that] Parliament had confided in the medical profession'.[19] Nevertheless, he was treated leniently and given a 'year's grace' to demonstrate good behaviour.[20] Further, Robert Young, a housing official in the Estates Department of the Belfast Corporation spent six days in the witness box but no charges were brought against him even though the Chairman stated that Young's answers to questions were sometimes 'unsatisfactory'.[21] Eventually, the Belfast Corporation Estates and Market Committee resolved to evict nineteen tenants who had obtained houses through the assistance of Copeland.[22] Subsequently, the Corporation issued an eviction order against Copeland, in November 1954. Her solicitor claimed that the Corporation's action was vindictive and that it was exceeding its

[19] *Irish Times* 6 February 1954.
[20] *Belfast Newsletter*, 27 November 1954.
[21] *Inspector's Report,* 47, 24.
[22] *The Times* 22 June 1954.

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powers: 'I say it is acting unreasonably and has taken into account extraneous matters which ought not to have been taken into account which are irrelevant and alien to its statutory powers'.[23] She was not in rent arrears and was, herself, suffering from tuberculosis. The Corporation fought back and an official asserted that she was evicted because of 'certain findings in the Housing Inquiry'. Nevertheless, she was evicted on 20 June 1955. Bailiffs arrived and removed her belongings into the street. She sat on a chair in the side entrance 'sobbing' and watched by neighbours and other residents. She was then removed to the City Welfare Hospital.[24] Meta Donnan who according to witnesses had taken bribes went unpunished. She was a member of the Pottinger Women's Unionist Association and her husband was a member of an Orange Lodge. She was jeered outside the courthouse and whilst she gave evidence in the witness box. The Chairman, Bradley McCall concluded that although 'uneducated' she was 'shrewd' and 'intelligent' and involved in 'genuine philanthropic activity' and never charged. On the other hand, he opined that Sarah Madden was a 'foolish and unhappy woman'; and Mary Valente 'was so stupid as to be incapable of appreciating the gravity of the allegations against her'.[25] Neither was charged. Ann Copeland, he said: 'I have no doubt that she is the victim of chronic ill health and that her circumstances generally are pitiable'. He is certain, however, beyond all reasonable doubt, that she did take money and convinced those who paid her that she could influence officials at City Hall. It is not clear how long Ann Copeland remained in the hospital. However, in October 1960 she was charged with obtaining money by false pretences. She was found guilty and bound over.[26]

Conclusions

So what processes were at work that determined the timing of the corruption case involving Ann Copeland? Between 1935 and 1969 Belfast society experienced a fluctuating intensity of sectarian conflict. In 1935 unemployment in Belfast was exceptionally high and tensions had been escalating since 1931, the year of foundation of the Ulster Protestant League (UPL). In 1935 the focus of trouble was in the Dock Ward, a densely populated area of terraced streets populated by millworkers, dock labourers and carters. Protestants and Catholics were still intermixed in this district although there was considerable micro-level segregation. There had already been a sectarian murder in 1933 but the visit of the Duke of Gloucester on the occasion of George V's Silver Jubilee presaged an intense phase of Protestant triumphalism as Orange men marched on the Dock area on 13 July 1935. By the end of the night, four people had been shot dead and nineteen injured. Subsequently fifty-six Catholic houses were burnt out in six streets in the Dock area in what amounted to a *pogrom*. There followed evictions and lootings and on three nights (15, 17 and 18 July) 430 Catholic houses were attacked and in all 2,241were evicted. Of the rioters arrested and charged 41 were Catholic and 125 were Protestant. The charges ranged from murder, arson, assault, riotous behaviour, breach-of-the -peace, possession

[23]*Northern Whig* 27 November 1954.
[24] *Northern Whig,* 21 June 1955.
[25] *Inspector's Report,* 29, 13.
[26] *Irish Times,* 5 October 1960 and 16 December 1960.

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of firearms, larceny and breaking and entering. The majority were semi-skilled workers and round about a half had previous convictions (Hepburn 1990).

Following the riots, Belfast became temporarily peaceful and indeed there was relative calm. The German air raids may even have created temporary social solidarity (Barton 1997). Indeed, press reporting suggests that the years 1941-45 saw a decline in attention to matters of violence: murder, assault, rioting and arson. However, after 1945 press reports suggest that the incidence of these types of violence began to rise again suggesting a return to sectarian hostility. The riots had amounted to what we might now call ethnic cleansing and after the riots there had undoubtedly been a process of ethnic-religious sorting as families sought to escape to safe areas (Shirlow 2000). Further the house building programme, such as it was, quickened this process which later would make Ann Copeland's schemes a credible solution to avoid a return to the horrors of 1935, suggesting that the labyrinth of psychological fear reverberated within both communities. Those who paid bribes and many who attended the *Inquiry's* public hearings were seeking to escape from mixed areas or frontier areas.[27] Indeed, of those who paid money to Ann Copeland a good number were seeking to escape from frontier areas. In all, 82 witnesses gave evidence. Excluding those with a professional interest — doctors, medics from the University or radiography service, magistrates and policemen — 73 (52. 9%) had addresses in West Belfast along the front line, and 21 (29%) had addresses in East Belfast although not necessarily along frontline locations. Between the riots of 1935 through the War years to the early 1950s it would appear from press reports that murder, assault, riot and suicide had begun to fall after the German air raid of 1941; but with the exception of suicide the other reports of murder and assault had begun to rise again between 1951 and 1955. Moreover, the attendance of the public at the Hearings suggests a widespread interest or even anxiety on the part of Belfast's citizens, both Catholics and Protestants. Ann Copeland's scheme was then an opportunist crime or just one example of the desperate struggle of life on the streets of a divided city?

Importantly, we should consider the demonization of Ann Copeland herself. In all probability she was of Protestant background. She lived on Upper Newtonards Road which was on the frontier of East-West Belfast. Her absence from the hearing enabled wholesale vilification of her character. Indeed, she had assumed a particular notoriety; so much so, that even after she was discharged from hospital, she became the object of anger and even assault. Admittedly, she continued to persist with her claims to influence officials in the Estates' Department. For example, in December 1961 she was assaulted by Victor Webster as she came out of a telephone box. He was arrested and charged and the doctor who examined Copeland said that she had suffered severe bruising to her arms and throat and was also badly shaken. Webster was fined and bound over. He told the court, 'How this woman's mind works I do not know'.[28] Further, that she helped Catholics obtain council houses attracted harsh treatment from the Protestant political establishment of the city. Her case revealed that the politics of patriarchy were also at work. She had in effect broken ranks and she was removed to the Belfast city hospital suffering from tuberculosis. Her lawyer argued that the Corporation's treatment of her

[27] See Boal and Livingstone (1984) and Boal (1999, 2008). See also Calme and Charlesworth (2009).
[28] *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 May 1961.

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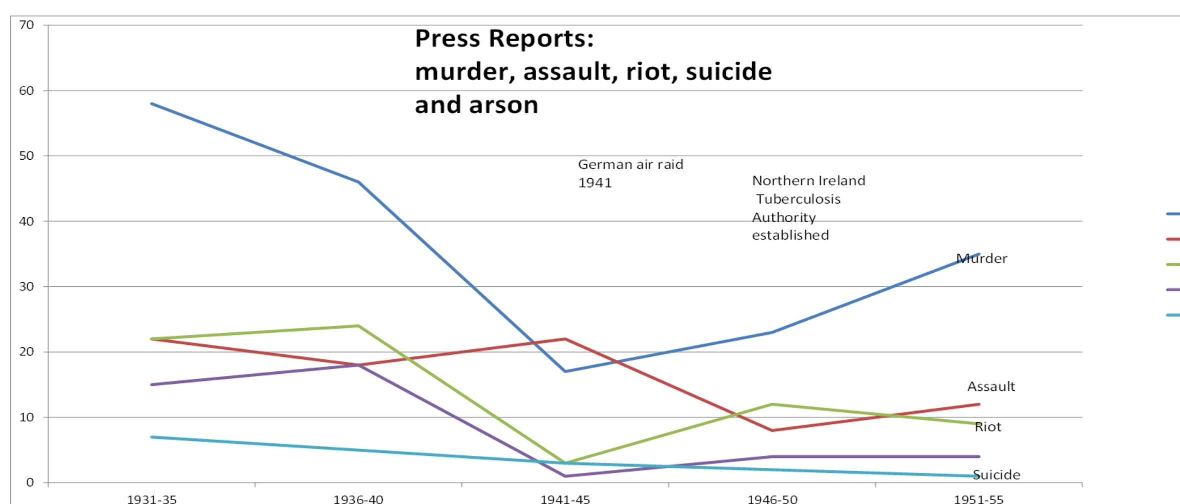
was extreme. Significantly, none of the Corporation's officials in the Estates Department were charged with any offence despite the poor history of local government in Belfast in that respect.

Belfast is not alone as a divided city and others — Nicosia, Mostar, Beirut and Jerusalem — readily come to mind. In these types of environments, corruption needs to be examined around issues of division, front-line lived experience and survival strategies for every-day-life. Ann Copeland's activities were located roughly mid-way between the riots of 1935 and the onset of 'The Troubles' in 1968-69. In terms of communal violence, the War years were relatively quiescent but the newspaper reports for Belfast showed that concerns about violence — murder, assault, riot, suicide — had begun to rise again around 1946-50 after the longer run decline since 1935. The need to escape to a safe area in such a divided city was an imperative exacerbated by institutional failure. At the same time the process of politicizing ethnicity and religion went in fits and starts according to particular events — celebrations of the Battle of the Boyne, George V's Jubilee, the end of World War II — as they provided punctuation marks on a journey toward a state of mutual incompatibility between the two communities. Further, such a journey drew energy, resources and attention away from the deeper crises of institutionalised discrimination. The multiplication of pressures — rioting, war, health crises, homelessness and overcrowding — together with the conditions of political deadlock which had the effect of blocking-off legitimate avenues of redress. This, induced strategies of survival, principally clustering by religion and ethnicity. The housing and estates department almost certainly countenanced this trend. Both communities came to regard themselves as beleaguered and under siege. Confidence in public justice and governance withered and thus working the system to secure survival was a legitimate tactic in the politics of everyday life. Moreover, the dialectic between conflict and uniformity which has been an enduring theme of Irish life — North and South, protestant and catholic — surely alerts the corruption theorists as it brings a new dimension to the standard political science discourses which can go beyond straightforward patronage and favouritism.



Appendix

The graph above is intended to be indicative of the tensions that prevailed in Belfast suggesting that tensions as marked by the press reportage of murder, assault, riot and suicide were at a

significant high around 1935-36 but then began to fall steadily down to 1946, as the process of sectarian sorting and spatial relocation progressed, before climbing again. This crude tension perception index uses electronic newspapers to measure the frequency of particular words — murder, assault, riot and suicide — and sum the number of hits for each word or category. The sums are then translated into index numbers and then shown in graphical form.[29] The newspapers used were the *Northern Whig* and the *Belfast Telegraph* accessed via the British Newspaper Archive.

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[29] Here, reference is to Durkheim (1897), Jones (2013) and Glaeser and Goldin (2006).

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