

THE NORTHERN IRELAND PROBLEM

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March 1985

'But when states are acquired in a province differing in language, in customs, and in institutions, then difficulties arise: and to hold them one must be very fortunate and very assiduous. One of the best, most effective expedients would be for the conqueror to go and live there in person... The other and better expedient is to establish settlements in one or two places which, as it were, fetter the state to you. Settlements do not cost much, and the prince can found them and maintain them at little or no personal expense. He injures only those from whom he takes land and houses to give to the new inhabitants, and these victims form a tiny minority, and can never do any harm since they remain poor and scattered.'

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Table of contents

INTRODUCTION

I HISTORICAL RESUME

II TRIED SOLUTIONS TO THE 'IRISH PROBLEM' UNDER THE FOLLOWING

HEADINGS:

A Partition

B Direct Rule (First Period)

C Sunningdale

D Direct Rule (Second Period)

III MAIN ACTORS AND ASPIRATIONS / THE CURRENT PROBLEM

A Unionists	1	Political
	2	Paramilitary
B N.I.Nationalists	1	Political
	2	Paramilitary
C Republic	1	Political
D British	3	Political
	4	Military

IV IS THERE A SOLUTION ?

CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

Ireland has often been described as Britain's first colony and may well turn out to be her last. Today's Northern Ireland problem is a relic of that colonial past. Political, economic and religious questions are closely interlinked.

Current attitudes and aspirations are still influenced by past events which are vividly remembered and defended today. Part I, therefore, presents those events up to 1920. Part II looks at the solutions proposed by the British to their 'Irish problem' and analyses why they did not work.

Moving to the problem as it is today, Part III reviews the main protagonists in the Northern Ireland arena and their aspirations, while Part IV examines proposed political solutions and their chances of success.

Finally I conclude with my own overall assessment.

I HISTORICAL RESUME

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At the beginning of the 17th century, most of the land in every province of Ireland was owned by Catholics. Following the English Plantations, this proportion had fallen to 14% in 1703. The introduction of the Penal Laws in the 18th century, which ensured the exclusion of Catholics from public life and from ownership of property, further reduced this percentage to a mere 5% by 1778. By this time, Catholic agitation was growing, as Catholics were deprived of their rights and regarded as inferior by the British, and the Society of United Irishmen was created to secure greater Catholic participation in Irish affairs and greater freedom from English control. After the abortive rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798, Westminster passed the Act of Union in 1800 which suppressed the Irish Parliament and subjected Ireland completely to English rule.

During the 19th century there were sporadic attempts by Catholics to free themselves from English control. There was also a development of an Irish 'self-consciousness', of an Irish cultural identity. Towards the end of the century people had begun to demand self-government for Ireland. This was resisted in the North by the Protestants, a dominant majority there, who by 1910 were ready to take up arms against Home Rule, i.e. against a Catholic government for the whole island. In the South a small group of people fighting

for complete independence rebelled in 1916 and declared a Republic. British overreaction to this 'Easter Rising' led to a complete shift in public opinion. Home Rule was no longer enough, people now demanded total independence. This was the beginning of the end of British rule over Ireland, or some of it. In 1920 Westminster passed the Government of Ireland Act which provided for the separation of Northern and Southern Ireland.

Partition was the first of a series of British responses in this century to their 'Irish problem'. Far from solving it, it created what is today known as the Northern Ireland problem.

II TRIED SOLUTIONS TO THE 'IRISH PROBLEM' UNDER

THE FOLLOWING HEADLINES :

A PARTITION

The 1920 Act, which established two home rule parliaments, applied theoretically to both parts of Ireland, but after the War of independence and the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, the South opted out of this arrangement, which therefore applied only to the North of Ireland.

Northern Ireland, as the new 'state' was called, had inherited a deeply divided society. Partition had cut off the Catholics in the North from their co-religionists in the South and left them a minority in a state created for Protestant Unionists. So they refused to co-operate with the new institutions and continued to pledge allegiance to the South. Faced with this 'subversive' minority, the Protestant Unionists sought to assure their position by gaining total control over the province. They used discrimination to ensure absolute control over law and order and local government, and favoured Protestants in jobs and housing. This created a sense of alienation and an atmosphere of repression among the Catholic minority.

Northern Ireland needed long-term policies on economic and social matters, but elections were always fought on the

constitutional issue, i.e. the status of Northern Ireland as part of the UK. This issue was bound to rally the Protestants in defence of their state, and to polarise the two communities. Unionist convictions further hardened against the idea of unification after the Second World War when Northern Ireland's standard of living rose above that of the South, due largely to the British Welfare State.

So Northern Ireland remained a one-party Protestant state for half a century. This only began to change in the late 1960s with the Civil Rights period. The demands for civil rights were met by a belated and insufficient response from the Northern Government which, faced with growing Catholic agitation, resorted to the traditional violent response. This, in turn, led to the re-emergence of the IRA, the nationalist paramilitaries. In 1969 British troops had to be sent in to help the local security forces. Conditions so deteriorated by 1972 that the British Government saw no alternative to assuming total control of law and order. This caused the resignation of the Northern Government and led to the next 'solution':

B DIRECT RULE (FIRST PERIOD)

In 1972 the Northern Ireland Parliament at Stormont was dissolved and the province ruled directly from Westminster, under a Temporary /Provisions Act, by a Secretary of State who was a member of the British Cabinet.

Direct rule was meant to be temporary and soon the British Government was putting forward plans for Northern Ireland. The prospects did not seem very good as, despite a tougher and more aggressive security policy, IRA bombings continued, provoking Protestant backlashes. In October 1972 the Government issued a Green Paper endorsing Northern Ireland's status as part of the UK and this was followed in March 1973 by a White Paper which proposed a 78-member Assembly conditional on acceptance of a power-sharing executive. Moderates welcomed these proposals and, despite the opposition of extremists, a new Assembly was elected in June 1973 in which the Unionists won a majority, but had to share power with the minority. An agreement was eventually reached between moderate Unionists, the Catholic Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Alliance Party (a moderate Unionist party which advocated cross-community participation) to form a power-sharing executive. Together they formed a majority within the Assembly, but a significant exclusion was Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party and William Craig's Vanguard Party, who between them had secured 21% of the total and 30% of the Unionist vote.

Final details of the new arrangement were agreed at Sunningdale, which gave its name to the next 'solution':

C SUNNINGDALE

The Sunningdale conference was held in December 1973 and was

attended by representatives from the pro-executive parties in Northern Ireland, and the British and Irish Governments. It established a political framework in which a power-sharing executive could operate, the 'Sunningdale agreement', and in January 1974 the new executive formally took office.

At the conference Brian Faulkner, leader of the Unionist Party and future head of the executive, had objectives to achieve to make power sharing acceptable to the Protestants: recognition by the Republic of Northern Ireland's status; extradition from the Republic of persons wanted for terrorist offences; and support by the SDLP for the security forces. The SDLP, on the contrary, wanted a meaningful all-Ireland body and this was strongly opposed by the Unionists.

Faulkner achieved only one of his objectives, i.e. a qualified recognition by the Republic of Northern Ireland's status, in Paragraph 5 of the agreement. On extradition, nothing definite was agreed. A Joint Law Commission would examine different proposals for dealing with cross-border crimes of violence. And the SDLP had not given their support for the security forces. When the executive took office, opposition was already running strong. Faulkner's only real gain was then questioned in the Republic, when Kevin Boland, a strong republican and former government minister, challenged the right of the Irish Government to recognise Northern Ireland. The High Court found that the recognition formula in the agreement was

not contrary to those articles of the Irish Constitution which claimed 'de jure' jurisdiction over the North. In other words, it was meaningless.

Faulkner, and with him the executive, was in a precarious position and the British failed to back him. In February 1974, a general election was called in the UK, which gave anti-Sunningdale candidates the opportunity to win 11 out of the 12 Northern Ireland seats at Westminster. Faulkner had lost his legitimacy, and the executive was virtually dead. It collapsed during a strike organised in May 1974 by the Ulster Workers' Council.

Direct rule was re-imposed and is still in force today.

D DIRECT RULE (SECOND PERIOD)

'The majority had rejected Sunningdale because it conceded too much. The minority, however, could accept nothing less.' (1)

Once more, Northern Ireland was ruled directly from Westminster. The British Government continued its attempts at finding a political solution. A Constitutional Convention was elected in 1975 to put forward proposals for Northern Ireland's future, but the Unionists, a majority in the Convention, proposed

instead of power-sharing a return to the Stormont system of majority rule, and this was not accepted by the British. Today there is a 78-member Assembly whose powers are limited to scrutinising legislation. More powers can be transferred to the Assembly if 70% of its members agree. This has not been possible so far, as the SDLP and Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, refuse to take up their seats.

In 1976 the British Government changed its security policy. Up to then, members of paramilitary groups had 'special category'¹ status, akin to that of a prisoner of war. This was abolished in March 1976 and this led to a Republican protest - the 'Blankets' and 'dirty protest'¹ - and to the Hunger strikes of 1980-81. A new system of prison sentencing had also been introduced in 1976 which used 'no-jury' courts and stressed the importance of confessions. This led to some abuse as the confessions were obtained mainly during interrogations by the police.

Today's situation in Northern Ireland is very much the same as it was in 1920. There is still a Protestant majority and a Catholic minority as far apart as they were then. The chance of solving this problem revolves around the main protagonists and their conflicting aspirations, and it is to those that we now turn.

Northern politics has a number of unusual features: the opposition is not between right and left, but between Unionist and Nationalist; two sovereign countries are involved; and finally there are paramilitary groups whose presence contributes much to the present deadlock.

A UNIONISTS

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1 Political

Characterised by a siege mentality, the Protestant Unionists of various denominations were united under the umbrella of the Ulster Unionist Party, the one and only ruling party of the Stormont regime. This unity broke up in the late 1960s during the relatively liberal regime of PM Terence O'Neill and many splinter parties were founded. Among them, Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party and William Craig's Vanguard played an important part in the coalition against Sunningdale. For the first time too a Unionist party, the Alliance Party, tried to break through the division of the two communities. It was a moderate party which supported power-sharing, but unfortunately it did not attract many followers.

Today two Unionist parties effectively share the Protestant vote in Northern Ireland: the Official Unionist Party (the post-Sunningdale name of the UUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party. The

OUP has retained the traditional Unionist policy, but even so it has lost some of its influence to the DUP which emerged as a political force in Northern Ireland in the late 1970s. The DUP's extremism and vehement anti-Catholicism attracted many hardcore Unionists, especially at times when the two communities were polarised around the Hunger strikes. In the 1979 European elections the DUP leader, Ian Paisley, won 30% of first-preference votes in Northern Ireland.

On the whole the OUP and DUP's policies do not differ-much. Both reject power-sharing with the minority as being a 'platform for unification'. They would prefer a return to the old Stormont system of majority rule, and are today demanding some sort of devolved government for Northern Ireland.

2 Paramilitary

The deadlock and polarisation in Northern Ireland is also due to the presence of paramilitary activity. Loyalist paramilitary groups had emerged in the early 1970s in defence of the Protestant population against IRA attacks, and in defence of the Union with Britain. They were responsible for sectarian assassination of Catholics and can be condemned for the same use of violence.as the IRA.

The biggest Loyalist organisation is the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) which brought together local defence associations.

It fought mainly during the Civil Rights period, and also played an important part in the 1974 strike. In the late 1970s the UDA attempted to play down its military image and to fight on the political scene, but with no great success.

The Protestant paramilitaries are still at war with the IRA. and respond periodically to IRA violence.

B N.I. NATIONALISTS

1 Political

During the years of Partition there was hardly any serious opposition at Stormont and the Catholic Nationalists favoured abstentionism. The Civil Rights period saw the emergence of a new party which was ready to work within the Northern political framework and take up the role of opposition party. The Social Democratic and Labour Party, as it was called, believed that Catholics could hope for justice through political action. It soon became the main advocate for sustained Catholic political action and the main representative of the minority. As such, it took part in Sunningdale where, for the first time, the minority was represented in government.

While agreeing to co-operate and work within the political system, the SDLP opposes Partition and advocates an Irish dimension to any proposed solution in Northern Ireland, i.e. a meaningful

involvement of the Republic in Northern affairs. This antagonises the Unionists and prevents further discussions between the Northern parties. By refusing to leave aside the idea of a powerful Council of Ireland, the SDLP contributes in its way to the political deadlock.

The SDLP's position as main representative of the minority is now being challenged by Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA. Sinn Fein has gained more influence in recent years and its leader, Gerry Adams, was elected MP for W.Belfast in 1983. In the 1982 Assembly elections Sinn Fein won 5 out of the 78 seats with more than 10% of first-preference votes and, like the SDLP, refuses to take them up. Although a political party, Sinn Fein's policy and objectives are effectively those of the IRA.

2 Paramilitary

Since Partition, the IRA claimed to be the heir to traditional Republicanism, and up to the late 1960s, it had launched sporadic bombing campaigns in the North to destroy the Northern state. Each time the full mobilisation of the security apparatus was necessary to defeat it. This was generally followed by periods of quiescence, only for the IRA to re-emerge at a more propitious moment. And so it did during the Civil Rights agitation. At that time the organisation had split between the Officials, who favoured participation in politics, and the Provisionals, who supported the

continual armed struggle. The Officials never gained much influence in Northern Ireland, and were further weakened by the breakaway of the Irish National Socialist Party and its military wing, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), a more extremist paramilitary group.

The Provisionals are the most important faction of the IRA in Northern Ireland. Their declared aim is to force Britain out of Northern Ireland and to establish a 32-county Socialist Republic in Ireland. Responsible for much of the violence in the last 16 years in the North, they have directed their attacks essentially at the security forces, and later extended them to Britain. From 1976 onwards they used more sophisticated and specialised weapons which were generally targeted at prominent political or military figures, guaranteeing maximum publicity for their actions.

The Provisional IRA is partly financed by funds raised in America and partly by crimes, such as bank robberies and protection rackets.

C REPUBLIC .

1 Political

'The way that the Northern Ireland problem looks from Dublin is as an unresolved legacy of the long, tangled and complex

relationship between these islands.' (2) The Northern Ireland problem of today is a simple reversal of the problem between Britain and Ireland at the end of the 19th century, when a majority wanted independence from British rule and a minority wanted to remain under that rule. One cannot deny that there is an Irish dimension to Northern Ireland for a minority there still looks towards the Republic.

The relationship between the two parts of Ireland rapidly deteriorated after Partition. The South gradually detached itself from Britain, adopting a written Constitution in 1937 and declaring a Republic in 1949. The Republic was seen by the Protestant Unionists as a homogeneous Roman Catholic state. It was clear to them that the Republic had not abandoned the idea of unification, because its Constitution claimed 'de jure' jurisdiction over the whole island, thereby denying Northern Ireland's status as part of the UK. The state of 'cold war' between Northern Ireland and the Republic improved somewhat in the 1960s when there was some co-operation on economic matters and contact between members of the Stormont and the Republic's Governments. The Republic made a further gesture at Sunningdale by apparently recognising Northern Ireland's status, though this proved meaningless in the event. From then onwards, the Republic gave more weight to the need for Unionist consent in any change of Northern Ireland's status and rather than trying to coerce the Unionists into unification, attempted to persuade them that it would be to their advantage.

The two major parties in the Republic, which have regularly alternated in government over the last three, decades, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, have broadly the same policy towards Northern Ireland. The main difference between them goes back to the Treaty of 1921. Those who were in favour formed Fine Gael, and those against it later founded Fianna Fail. This explains why Fianna Fail's stand on unification is more adamant than Fine Gael's. Fianna Fail's attitude led to a deterioration in the relations between Britain and the Republic after the summit meeting between the two PMs, Mrs Thatcher and Charles Haughey of Fianna Fail.

Fine Gael, in government today, relies on a policy of co-operation and persuasion. For the first time, in the New Ireland Forum which represents the National political parties in the island of Ireland, the political parties in the Republic collectively acknowledged the different tradition and aspirations of the Unionists and, though they still see unification as the most desirable solution, they would accept in the interim some other solution which would redress the alienation of the Catholic population in Northern Ireland.

D BRITISH

1 Political

'Anglo-Irish relations were analogous to the story of the leaking roof. When storms made attention imperative, the

climate was against anything more than temporary repairs; when the weather cleared the problem could be forgotten.' (3)

This attitude, often described as 'crisis management', remained in Britain's dealings with Northern Ireland after 1920. Though Westminster retained final responsibility for Northern Ireland's affairs, it was only when violence broke out on a wide scale and in front of television cameras that Britain eventually took over control of law and order. She then made various attempts at finding a political solution, but these have failed so far.

The basic position of the British Government is that no change will occur in Northern Ireland's status without the consent of the majority, and that any 'solution has to command widespread acceptance across the Northern community', i.e. include the Catholic minority. Nevertheless the British have so far refused to accept the evidence of alienation from the present institutional framework among the Catholic community.

Though Direct rule was introduced as a temporary measure, there is no sign that the British intend to put an end to it. The British Government still seems to consider it safer to maintain the status quo than to take any meaningful initiative, because any move towards an acceptance of the minority's rights is seen by the Unionists as a threat and would be resisted.

After a number of 'imposed solutions', the British are now looking to the Northern parties themselves to agree on the next step, but this seems an unlikely prospect at the moment.

2 Military

In the absence of political progress, the emphasis rests on a military solution. But the intensification of military operations would be counterproductive. At the moment the Catholics, for the most part, do not identify with the security forces. The police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, is overwhelmingly Protestant and seen as sectarian. Equally, the Ulster Defence Regiment - the new part-time force under army command created in April 1970 to replace the discredited B-Specials - is resented by the Catholic minority. Both forces are identified with the Unionist Establishment, and they reinforce the sense of alienation among the minority.

The British army was sent into Northern Ireland to maintain law and order. While initially welcomed by some Catholics, it was soon regarded as partisan after it was involved in several violent incidents - such as 'Bloody Sunday' in Derry, 30 January 1972 - and it is the subject of continuing controversy over the use of plastic and rubber bullets which have resulted in deaths and serious injuries.

The Northern security forces concentrate their efforts on defeating the IRA, and, thus their operations bear more heavily on Catholics and Catholic areas. This, in turn, creates more support for the IRA among the minority. However, the withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland is not possible. Many fear it would lead to a bloodbath. Some attempts have been made, though, in this direction through 'Ulsterization', i.e. putting the local security personnel into the front line.

IV IS THERE A SOLUTION ?

Having presented the main protagonists and their aspirations, we now examine the possible solutions to the Northern Ireland problem. Three possible solutions have been suggested by the New Ireland Forum and these models are designed to express the pre-conditions which the parties present in the Forum feel are necessary to any solutions, i.e. equal recognition of the two traditions in Northern Ireland, guarantee of civil and religious liberties, identification of both sides of the community with the institutions, etc.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, solution would be the unification of Northern Ireland and the Republic. This has always been rejected by the Protestant Unionists, and they are not likely to change their stance. They want to remain British, and to keep this union which brings them many advantages. Besides, they fear being left a minority in a predominantly Catholic state. On the other hand, unification is what the Catholic Nationalists have been fighting for since Partition. Their attitude, however, is not as pronounced as before. Many of them would now agree to the present status of Northern Ireland if they had a share in government and if their rights were safeguarded. In the Republic, unification is considered the best possible solution, but it is not as strongly advocated as in the first half of the century. Unification would involve many changes in the Republic, and would put an impossible

strain on the Republic's finances. As for the British, it can be said that unification would, in theory, rid them once and for all of their 'Irish problem'. In practice however, the British are committed to the principle of consent which gives the Unionists a veto on unification.

Another possible solution is a federation or confederation. Both parts of Ireland would keep some autonomy within an all-Ireland framework. The Unionists oppose this solution as giving too much power to the Republic and as being the first step towards unification. On the other hand, the SDLP will not support any solution that does not give a full decision-making role to the Republic.

Joint-authority, i.e. equal responsibility for Britain and the Republic in the governing of Northern Ireland, has also been considered. There again, the Unionists reject such a solution which means an involvement of the Republic in their affairs.

The New Ulster Political Research Group has proposed the idea of an Independent Ulster. This UDA-backed group argues that any solution proposed by London would be rejected by the minority, and any proposed by Dublin would be rejected by the majority. Their answer is independence. But the Catholics will never accept a state under UDA control, and moreover, an independent Ulster would not be viable.

The best solution, as far as the Unionists are concerned, is a return to majority rule, i.e. the Stormont system. This, of course, does not appeal to the Catholic minority.

Indeed, before any political solution can be implemented, certain changes have to be made in Northern Ireland. These pre-conditions would involve the changing of the political and legal institutions that do not reflect the Northern community at present as the minority does not identify with them. The judicial and prison systems need to be reformed, and it is imperative that jury-courts be reintroduced.

A devolved administration, in which both sides of the community would be represented, would be the only solution, if any, with a chance of success in the long run. This was the basis on which the Sunningdale power-sharing executive worked for five months. Despite its failure, a solution on these lines, with less emphasis on the all-Ireland aspect, is the only one which includes the necessary pre-conditions and stands any chance of widespread acceptance among the Northern community.

CONCLUSION

The situation in Northern Ireland is in deadlock and has been effectively so since the Civil Rights period. The violence has cost over 2,000 lives and security puts a great financial burden on both the Irish and British Governments. Violence polarises the community, deepening divisions and suspicions. Putting an end to violence becomes therefore a primary objective, but this cannot be achieved unless some political framework acceptable to both sides of the community is found.

To achieve this, the British and Irish Governments have to reassess their views. As the Irish ambassador to Britain, Noel Dorr, said recently: 'We (Irish) tend a little too much to go back into history and you (British) tend here a little too much to simply look at the present situation and call for realism in regard to it.' Mutual concessions by the Northern Ireland political parties are also long overdue, if they seriously want a return to peace. But this does not seem likely yet as their aspirations lie so far apart.

The New Ireland Forum was a genuine attempt by the Nationalist parties, North and South of Ireland, to analyse the situation and provide a basis for further discussions towards a solution. But the publicity it was given concentrated on the three proposed solutions, and therefore aroused once again Unionist fears. These fears were soon calmed down by Mrs Thatcher who heatedly ruled out the models

suggested by the Forum report. However, she later seemed at least to endorse the pre-conditions set out in it.

I must admit that the present situation in Northern Ireland is deeply depressing, and my conclusion is vividly expressed by the following quotation from Professor Richard Rose:

'Many talk about a solution to Ulster's political problem, but few are prepared to say what the problem is. The reason is simple. The problem is that there is no solution.'⁽⁴⁾

Footnotes:

1. The Troubles. The Background to the Question of Northern Ireland, Futura Publications, 1980, p.174.
2. DORR, Noel, Irish Ambassador to Britain, Speech to the House of Commons, The Irish Times, 26 January 1985.
3. O'FARRELL, Patrick. Quoted in Th3 Troubles, the Background to the Question of Northern Ireland, . Futura Publications, 1980, p.196.
4. ROSE Richard. Northern Ireland - A Time of Choice, MacMillan Washington & London, 1976, p.139.

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