5 British policies in Northern Ireland 1969—79

How did British governments attempt to deal with the problem of Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1979?

Britain's formal links with southern Ireland had ended in 1949 when, following partition (see the map on page 97), the Irish Free State became the sovereign Republic of Ireland. But one great problem remained: Northern Ireland. Constitutionally, it was part of the UK but its geography obviously made it part of the island of Ireland. This was an anomaly that Irish nationalists found objectionable. They claimed that the 1921 Treaty had deliberately drawn the boundary between north and south so as to leave Northern Ireland with a predominantly Protestant population. In the six counties there were a million Protestants, identified politically as Unionists, to half a million Catholics, identified politically as nationalists or republicans. The Protestants had used their majority to dominate the separate parliament set up in 1921. They had then consolidated their political control by securing rights denied to the Catholic minority.

It was certainly the case that over the decades after partition Protestants came to monopolise the best housing, schools and jobs. The Catholic complaint was that this was a result of the political corruption in Ulster, which allowed Protestant councillors and officials to operate a system of favouritism and patronage. It was also said that constituency and ward boundaries were deliberately adjusted so as to maintain permanent Protestant majorities.

One area where local politicians could not control things was admission to higher education, since this was administered directly from London. By the end of the 1960s, nearly a third of the students at Queen's University, Belfast, came from the Catholic minority. It was from among such students that the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) developed. Founded in 1967, NICRA condemned the gerrymandering of elections in Ulster and demanded the disbanding of the B Specials and a fair distribution of social and financial resources across the whole population. NICRA took as its model the black civil rights movement in the USA.

NICRA's first major public protest occurred in Dungannon in August 1968. In October of the same year a second demonstration, this time in Londonderry, Northern Ireland's most depressed economic area, ended in violence when the RUC baton-charged the marchers to break up what the authorities had declared to be an illegal march. This incident is often taken as marking the beginning of 'the troubles'.

**KEY TERMS**

1921 Treaty The Anglo-Irish agreement that had partitioned the island of Ireland between an independent south Ireland and Northern Ireland (loosely referred to as Ulster), which remained part of the UK.

Gerrymandering Manipulating constituency boundaries.

B Specials A wholly Protestant reserve police force on which the full-time police could call.

Londonderry A disputed place name; republicans call it Derry.

RUC Royal Ulster Constabulary; an almost exclusively Protestant armed police force.
Chapter 3 Years of consensus 1964–79

Figure 3.1 Map of Ireland 1914–22. The 1921 Treaty settlement divided the island of Ireland into the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland (comprising the six counties). Northern Ireland is sometimes loosely referred to as Ulster, although historically Ulster had been made up of nine counties: the six shown plus Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan. The fact that Northern Ireland did not include these last three was highly important since it left the Protestants in a majority in the north.

‘The troubles’

The term ‘troubles’ describes the cycle of violence dating from the 1960s to the 1990s whose main feature was terrorist conflict between the nationalists and the unionists, with British troops sent by London to attempt to preserve the peace. It should be stressed that mainstream nationalists and unionists always condemned the violence. It was the extremist groups within the two movements that resorted to terrorism.

Rival demonstrations showed the depth of Catholic-Protestant sectarian (religious) divide. In 1969, disorder grew as protest and counter-protest invariably resulted in violence. The Reverend Ian Paisley emerged as the leader of unyielding, anti-Catholic unionism that exploited Protestant bitterness. In the
summer of 1969, the season of the traditional Protestant marches in Ulster, the first deaths occurred. Responsible politicians on both sides of the border and in London appealed for calm but both communities, Catholic and Protestant, were liable to be attacked by terrorists from the other side.

**British troops sent to Northern Ireland 1969**

In August 1969 James Callaghan, Labour’s foreign secretary, took the momentous decision to send the British army to Northern Ireland to keep the peace. At first, the troops were welcomed by the Catholic community. Residents cheered and clapped as the soldiers encircled the Catholic Bogside area in Londonderry with protective barbed wire. This happy relationship was not to last. The IRA, which had been dormant, reorganised itself and took the lead in the struggle. However, not only did it resolve to attack unionism and head the Catholic nationalist protest movement, it also targeted the troops in Northern Ireland as representatives of the hated British imperialist government, seen as the root cause of Ireland’s problems.

**Internment, August 1971**

The continuing violent disruptions convinced Edward Heath’s government that the situation could be contained only by internment: arresting suspected troublemakers and holding them without trial. The aim was to remove the violent men from their communities and so reduce sectarian tensions. It had the opposite effect. Internment had the following results:

- increased tension in Northern Ireland
- a feeling among Catholics that they were being persecuted
- strained relations between the Irish government in Dublin and London
- the breaking of the cross-party understanding in the House of Commons over Northern Ireland, since many Labour MPs opposed internment and called for British troops to be withdrawn.

**Bloody Sunday, January 1972**

How little internment had improved matters became evident in 1972 when a prohibited civil rights march in Londonderry ended in carnage with fourteen demonstrators being shot and killed by British troops. The exact details of what happened and who was responsible remain disputed to this day. Over the years, there have been a number of official inquiries but none of their findings has been acceptable to republican sympathisers who want the British army to be condemned outright. The first inquiry, conducted by Lord Widgery, concluded that it was ‘the shots that had been fired at the soldiers before they started the firing that led to the casualties’. This was seen by republicans as an attempt to whitewash the British army and condone its actions: ‘Instead of justice we got Widgery.’ The publication of the Widgery Report in May 1972 may be said to have made the situation worse:
• It further convinced the Catholic population that the British government was hostile.
• It increased tensions between the London and Dublin governments.
• The gap between the IRA and the non-violent Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) widened.
• The gap between the moderate Official Unionist Party and the DUP led by Ian Paisley widened.

Before the Report appeared, Heath's government had taken the step of suspending the unionist-dominated Stormont Parliament and imposing direct rule of Northern Ireland from London. A year later, in an effort to produce a workable governing arrangement, Willie Whitelaw, Heath's Northern Ireland secretary, managed to persuade the rival parties to consider co-operating in a power-sharing experiment. In the Sunningdale Agreement of December 1973, backed by the London and Dublin governments, the SDLP, led by Gerry Fitt, and the Official Unionists, led by Brian Faulkner, agreed to form an executive which would govern Northern Ireland on behalf of both the Catholic and Protestant communities.

It was the first time since 1921 that Catholics had been offered a share in government, and for that very reason it frightened the majority of unionists. The general situation deteriorated; violence continued on the streets, usually involving the IRA and loyalist groups, with frequent IRA attacks on the police and army. The province became a highly dangerous place. Catholics continued to feel aggrieved over:
• unemployment, which always affected them the most
• the continued presence of the British army
• the slow progress in gaining their civil rights
• the way the law seemed tilted against them, as in the Diplock Courts.

The Protestant community felt no less aggrieved. They feared that such moves as the Sunningdale Agreement between London and Dublin were a cover for a sell-out of unionist Ireland. Such fears led to the creation of the Ulster Defence Force, drawn from loyalist extremists, the mirror image of the Provisional IRA.

Labour and Northern Ireland 1974–9

It was Harold Wilson's burden to be in power during one of the worst periods of the Ulster story. In May 1974, only three months after he had taken office, the province was paralysed by a massive fifteen-day strike organised by the pro-Paisley Ulster Workers' Council (UWC) in protest against the Sunningdale Agreement. Merlyn Rees, the Northern Ireland secretary, tried to take a tough line, refusing to negotiate with the UWC. Wilson backed him, referring in a television interview to the unionists as 'spongers'. It was no surprise when even the moderate unionist Brian Faulkner, who had signed the Sunningdale

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**KEY TERMS**

**DUP** Democratic Unionist Party, which had broken away from the Official Unionist Party in 1971.

**Stormont** The building which housed the Northern Ireland Parliament.

**Loyalist** Anti-republican, pro-unionist.

**Diplock Courts** Set up in 1972 to hear cases without a jury, the aim being to avoid the problem of jury members' being intimidated.
Agreement for his party, declared that it was no longer workable and resigned from the executive. Power sharing seemed dead in the water.

Yet, despite the deep divisions in the province, Wilson did not despair of finding a solution. A Northern Ireland Act was introduced in 1974 which created a Constitutional Convention, a way of reintroducing the power-sharing principle. The first elections to the Convention in 1975 saw a 66 per cent turnout, a sign that the majority of the population were still willing to follow a peaceful, political path. However, when the 83 Convention members met they soon adopted their partisan positions. The Ulster Unionists presented a resolution prepared by Ian Paisley, declaring that they did not accept the right of republicans to take part ‘in any future cabinet in Northern Ireland’.

In the face of such inflexibility there was little the SDLP could do. When the resolution was passed by a majority of three, the Convention lost any real meaning and the British government’s formal dissolution of it in 1976, after barely a year in existence, was a recognition of what had already happened. In an attempt to maintain its hard-line policy towards terrorism, the government withdrew the ‘special status category’ for prisoners serving sentences in Northern Ireland for terrorist acts. In future they would be treated not as political prisoners but as common criminals.

Wilson and his successor, James Callaghan, continued to talk of finding a settlement but there were a number of factors that made this unrealistic:

- Since the IRA was the major culprit in the outrages and assassinations that occurred, including murders on mainland Britain, it was difficult to make political concessions to the legitimate nationalists without appearing to be giving in to terrorism. Indeed, in the face of a series of lethal IRA attacks in Britain in 1974, including the Birmingham pub bombings, the government introduced a Prevention of Terrorism Act in 1974.
- There were suggestions that, since the Labour majority was so small in the Commons throughout the 1974–9 period, the government could not afford to antagonise the Ulster Unionists, whose support might be needed in critical Westminster votes.
- The presence on the Labour backbenches of a number of MPs who openly supported the republican cause in Northern Ireland and the ‘troops out’ campaign compromised and inhibited the government.

**KEY TERMS**

**Birmingham pub bombings**
On 21 November 1974, in separate explosions in two public houses in Birmingham’s city centre, 21 people were killed and 180 seriously injured.

**Prevention of Terrorism Act** Gave the police and authorities considerably extended powers of search and arrest.
Chapter 3  Years of consensus 1964–79

Summary diagram: British policies in Northern Ireland 1969–79

The issue
- The 1921 Treaty had left the six counties of Northern Ireland with a predominantly Protestant population
- There were one million Protestants to half a million Catholics
- Protestants had used their majority to dominate the separate Parliament set up in 1921
- Protestants had consolidated their political control by securing rights denied to the Catholic minority
- Catholic Irish nationalists resolved to gain equal rights
- Role of the London and Dublin governments

Nationalists/Republicans
- SDLP
- IRA
- INLA
- Sinn Féin

The sides

Unionists/Loyalists
- Official Unionists
- DUP
- UVF

Key stages in the struggle for a settlement
- British troops sent to Northern Ireland, August 1969
- Internment introduced, August 1971
- Bloody Sunday, January 1972
- Birmingham pub bombings, 1 November 1974
- Prevention of Terrorism Act, November 1974

6 Social developments

What were the main social developments in the period?

The 1960s are regarded as a special period in British history. Often referred to popularly as the ‘swinging sixties’, they marked years of significant change in British social attitudes and behaviour. Some of these changes pre-dated the 1960s and many of the effects made their impact after the 1960s, but enough occurred in the decade to justify its being regarded as an especially formative and influential time. A point to emphasise is that the changes were intimately bound up with the scientific advances of the age.

Technology and science

The twenty years following the end of the Second World War saw remarkable advances in science and technology. These were not exclusive to Britain; indeed, many were initiated elsewhere, but they contributed notably to the development of British society, particularly in the areas of work and leisure. A selective list of the major technological advances indicates the scale.