

Britain and Ireland (“The Troubles”)

A contemporary problem rooted in the past... which is why it was so intractable!

History: C12th Anglo-Norman “conquests”; subsequent involvement of Medieval English rulers in Irish affairs: complex – often allies and/ or feudal “overlords” of Irish kings, chieftans, warlords etc in the continual “struggles” between the 4 ancient Irish kingdoms. By Early Modern Period (C15th), English kings made various “claims” to Irish lands (some more legit than others!), but increasingly English (and then “British”) involvement developed as part of wider campaigns/ strategies, notably the religious and dynastic struggles of the period. Ireland often feared as a potential “back door” via which Catholic powers (esp Spain) might attack Protestant England. Tudor and Stuart monarchs all laid claim to Ireland, in varying degrees – for Henry VII & Eliz I essentially a “national security” issue; H VIII – “Imperial Vision”...

James I (VI of Scotland) “**planted**” Ulster with thousands of Scottish & Engl Prots in order to “pacify” & control the most “Gaelic” and Catholic part of Ireland: RC Irish displaced from best farmland – driven to West (poorer land), and replaced by Protestant Anglo-Scots.

Hatred/ resentment/ injustices later compounded over many centuries, esp by C17th British “Revolutionary” Wars (so-called “English Civil War”), esp **Oliver Cromwell**.

Victories of Protestant forces of **William of Orange** (Siege of Derry, & Battle of the Boyne, 1690) over the Catholic army of James II estab total Protestant ascendancy in Ireland, esp the North.

Subsequent abuses/ exploitation of predominantly Catholic/ Gaelic tenant farmers by (often absentee) Protestant landlords compounded problems. Crushing of Irish patriot/ nationalist revolts (eg C18th “United Irishmen”) often brutal; neglect/ incompetence of governing elites in responding to crises like the **potato blight** (1840s) created distinct sense that despite formal incorporation into the United Kingdom (1800-1), “John Bull’s Other Island” was, in truth, no more than “England’s first colony”.

By late C19th the great polit issue of the day was “**Irish Home Rule**” (Parnell et al); on the eve of the Great War (1914-1918) it was coming to a head – real threat of civil war etc. Issue “on hold” until after defeat of Ger (Cath & Prot Irish served loyally in Brit forces thro’out war)... [**Easter Rising**, Dublin, 1916 – glitch – did not augur well for future – aftermath badly mishandled by Brit Govt]...

Irish War of Independence, 1919-21: E DeValera, M Collins et al - IRA/ “Flying Columns”/ guerrilla war - “Black and Tans” (paradigmatic of confusions of this nasty little war) – reaction/ overreaction (eg Cork)...

Stalemate – De Valera tasked Collins to negotiate with Brit Govt – **Anglo-Irish Treaty**, 1921 – est “Irish Free State”, 1922...

But, under provisions of both Anglo-Irish Tr (and the earlier Government of Ireland Act, 1920), the predominantly Protestant 6 counties of the North remained in the UK, as “**Northern Ireland**” (a.k.a., incorrectly, “Ulster”).

“**Partition**” highly divisive – **Civil War** in Ireland (1922-3) – in which M Collins died. Irish Free State forces killed more IRA than the British ever did!

N Ireland a de facto Protestant statelet within the UK – own Parl’t (“Stormont”) containing Hs of Commons (52 members) & Senate (24 members elected by H of C). Protestant domination and power deeply entrenched/ institutionalised; Catholic minority discriminated against in every way – eg jobs, housing, electorally (“gerrymandering”); RUC (“Black Bastards” to RCs), only routinely armed police force in UK (legacy of War of Indep etc), was a Prot militia (esp reservist “B Specials”) in all but name.

By late 1960s a growing **Civil Rights** movement in N I pressuring for justice/ change. Encouraged by reformist initiatives of PM O’Neill (supported/ endorsed by HM Govt of Wilson), by late 1960s an entrenched Protestant “backlash” was almost inevitable – eg Rev “Dr” Ian Paisley (featured in BBC “Panorama”, 1966 – “The New Martin Luther?”) – violent anti-Catholic rhetoric. 1971 – formed “Democratic Unionist Party”; sectarian breakaway from official Unionist Party mirroring his earlier formation/ leadership of an extremist Protestant sect.

Civil Rights Assoc marches – Londonderry/ Derry (mainly RC city) – banned by NI Home Affairs Min William Craig. March went ahead – 5th Oct 1968. RUC broke it up – water cannon, baton charges...

Subsequent general breakdown of law and order/ inability of increasingly desperate RUC to contain situ.... Protestant counter marches (Orangemen, Apprentice Boys etc)... attacks on Catholic homes.... escalating threats.... real fear of S Irish intervention... led to British Army deployment, Aug 1969 (Home Sec Jim Callaghan) to restore order/ relieve RUC/ protect Catholics from Prot mob (“Aid to the Civil Power”).

Subsequent key events and dates

1. Oct 1969 – B Specials disbanded; by early 1970 local govt reforms (ending gerrymandering; discrim in council housing allocation etc) imposed by Brit Govt... Predictable Prot extremist reactions! Violence escalated...
2. Jan 1970 – Ian Paisley elected to Westminster Parl’t
3. Dec 1969 – IRA split – “Officials” (older vets/ politicised/ often L wing), and “Provisionals” (younger firebrands/ wanted to “fight the Brits”) – often at loggerheads during subsequent decades. (IRA had very little real support in Catholic communities at this time – “I Ran Away!”)
4. Moderate RCs tend to support SDLP - Idrs Gerry Fitt & John Hume.

5. Aug 1971 – Internment intro'd to deal with escalating violence... probably inflamed Catholic opinion, esp against the Stormont Govt of Brian Faulkner.
6. 30 Jan 1972 – “Bloody Sunday” – Bogside, (London)Derry. Turning point – radicalised many young Catholics. Fantastic recruiter for “Provos” – able to present themselves as “defenders of the Catholic/ Nationalist community”.
7. 1972 – increasing polarisation/ violence... PM (1970-74) Ed Heath suspended Stormont & imposed Direct Westminster Rule under NI Secretary W Whitelaw. PIRA increasingly active...
8. Sunningdale Agreement, Dec 1973 – seemed hopeful – intro'd concept of “power sharing” – NI, UK Govt, & Eire (now with UK in EEC); “Council of Ireland” to be estab; Prot rights/ interests protected.
9. Attempts to intro a reformed, more representative Executive (Govt) chosen via PR based election (single transferrable vote), March 1973 - Feb 1974, failed in face of extremist Unionist obduracy, and a general strike thro'out the Province. Faulkner resigned/ Executive collapsed, May 1974.
10. Brit G Elec Feb 1974: hung Parl/ Heath conceded to Wilson; eventually a weak Labour Govt estab'd, but in this context Brit Govts for the rest of the 1970s were often beholden to the “Unionist interest” at Westminster in order to retain power.

Labour Govt ,1974-79, did, however, take a “hard line”, esp against paramilitaries. **Roy Mason** as NI Sec put huge pressure on PIRA – intell/ covert ops (FRU/ 14 Coy; electronic surveillance & countermeasures; informers, “dirty tricks” etc), and the RUC became a v effective counter-terrorist force.

Prevention of Terrorism Act, Diplock Courts etc seemed very draconian to some... but, they worked! Indeed, by 1975-6, PIRA was “on its knees” – closest to actual defeat it ever came; finding it hard to sustain recruiting etc. Rethink of strategy/ tactics – new generation (G Adams, M McG et al to the forefront) now i/c, and planning “to play the long game”, refining and “professionalising” what had already been going on.

The “New Look” PIRA became very effective at playing this “game”.

“Cellular” reorg mid 1970s – response to Security Forces’ (SF) success in penetrating/ disrupting IRA units.

“Long War” strategy – “war of the flea”- maintain pressure/ inflict losses & costs – propaganda/ fund raising, esp in USA. Political pressure maintained by Sinn Fein.

“ Sleeper cells” in UK and Europe.

“A bomb in the City is worth 100 in Belfast”.

Regular “mainland” bombing campaigns incl'd the Birmingham, Guildford, & Woolwich pub bombings; bombing of the Para Regt officers’ mess, Aldershot (retaliation for “Bloody Sunday” – killed an Irish cleaning lady and a Catholic priest!),

and almost routine attacks/ attempted attacks on rail, tube, prominent retailers (eg Harrods), and British military personnel and their families.

Prominent Britons/ "Establishment" figures targeted/ murdered – eg Ross McWhirter (1975), Airey Neave (1979), Gen Sir S Pringle (1981), Lord L Mountbatten (1979), plus Brighton Bombing, 12th Oct 1984 – "near miss" for British Cabinet! Ian Gow (1990).

"Dirty War" in Britain's backyard/ part of the UK.

Over 30,000 security forces involved at height of "The Troubles" – very expensive – arguably also very corrupting: SF "dirty tricks" incl'd "Op Clockwork Orange" (cf Colin Wallace et al), and there was almost certainly some collusion between elements of SF and Protestant paramilitaries.

All paramilitaries (Republican & Loyalist) became deeply involved in organised crime (eg drugs, prostitution, numbers rackets, protectioneering, illegal taxis), initially to finance their activities, but by the 1980s many paramilitary leaders were little better than "crimelords" whose shared interests in controlling their "manors", and the lucrative "trade" therein, overrode other concerns!

In truth, PIRA and UDA & other Loyalist paramilitaries often "did business" with each other – money talks! Areas of cities (esp Belfast) were carved up into "territories" as part of "turf war" negotiations between criminal bosses – not unlike the Mafia in parts of the USA.

Also, UK Govt "agents" often talked with terrorists, and in the mid-1970s delegations from the IRA made secret visits to London for talks with Govt reps – officially denied until very recently.

Alongside all this, "The Troubles" provided excellent opportunities for psychopaths to indulge their "interests" – eg "The Shankill Butchers" (Loyalist gang who kidnapped, tortured, and murdered dozens – possibly hundreds - of Catholics during the 1970s-80s); IRA "removal men" (who tortured/ interrogated, then murdered, and got rid of the body of, Capt R Nairac); soldiers like the 2-3 members of 1 Para who went on a killing spree on "Bloody Sunday"; Michael Stone, deranged gunman who attacked IRA funerals.

Controversy re alleged "shoot to kill" policy of SF (esp after Gibraltar shootings, 1988, and the Loughall Police Station Ambush, where the SAS killed many seasoned IRA terrorists). Denied by Govt, but others thought otherwise (Stalker Inquiry). Also, British interrogation techniques (no worse, in truth, than what was done to Brit Special Forces candidates in training) condemned by human rights orgs and Euro Court.

Thatcher & NI: Hard line – no negotiation. Airey Neave (murdered by INLA, 1979) – close personal friend of MT. Killing of Mountbatten, and also 18 soldiers at Warrenpoint, 1979, hardened her attitude.

Terrorist prisoners in HMP Maze were refused “political status” – went “on the blanket”/ hunger strike – death of some, incl Bobby Sands.

Hunger strikes – propaganda boost to PIRA/ Sinn Fein, and helped Sinn Fein to garner political support from growing numbers of the Catholic Nationalist community, esp in “border areas (eg S Armagh), and West Belfast and Derry. Thatcher’s response – “deny terrorists the oxygen of publicity”.

MT was, however, pragmatic: met Irish PM (Taoiseach) Dr Garret Fitzgerald, and thereby started, albeit tentatively, a process that would one day result in a “peace Settlement”, and “power sharing” in N Ireland. **The Anglo-Irish Agreement, Aug 1985** was the first step on that road...

A combination of various factors eventually brought about peace in N Ireland:

1. Demographic changes – Catholic “nationalists” would one day outnumber the Prot Loyalists, and most moderate Prots recognised the need to deal with that reality.
2. Ireland’s membership of the EEC/ E Community/ Union, and emergence of the “Celtic Tiger” resulted in huge changes in the Republic – social, economic, demographic, cultural etc.. Old attitudes were harder to sustain/ there was less hatred, fear, suspicion.
3. Internet – influence/ impact/ implications...(from 1993 when www first became active)
4. Leadership of many – John Major, Tony Blair, Albert Reynolds, and even – eventually, the likes of Gerry Adams, Ian Paisley & Co. David Trimble (Unionist) & John Hume (SDLP) were hugely important – Nobel Prize.
5. End of Cold War – N Ireland no longer seen by Soviet Bloc as a thorn in side of an “imperialist” enemy to be manipulated for their own ends.
6. USA – American intervention and backing was essential – Bill Clinton, Senator Mitchell etc
7. 9/11 – World Trade Center attacks etc – “global war on terror” – changed American perceptions re terror.
8. Growing prosperity; age of leaders (!!) – guerilla leaders of the “armed struggle” age too! General tiredness/ desire for change... peace/ security.

Key stages – “the struggle”

- ***Internment, Aug 1971***
- ***Bloody Sunday, Jan 1972***
- ***B’ham bombs, 1 Nov 1974***
- ***Prevention of Terrorism Act, Nov 1974***

- ***Bobby Sands died – May 1981***
- ***Brighton Bomb, Oct 1984***
- ***Anglo-Irish Agreement, Aug 1985***
- ***Enniskillen Massacre, Nov 1987***
- ***Gibraltar shootings, March 1988***
- ***Downing St Declaration, Dec 1993***
- ***Ceasefire, Aug 1994***
- ***Mitchell Report, Jan 1996***
- ***Good Friday Agreement, April 1998***
- ***St Andrews Agreement, Oct 2006***
- ***The Northern Ireland Executive formed, May 2007***