

# **Understanding The Northern Ireland Conflict:**

**A Summary And Overview Of  
The Conflict And Its Origins**

David Holloway June 2005

The Community Dialogue  
Critical Issues Series

Volume Three

# The Community Dialogue Critical Issues Series

This series aims to provide fresh thinking, new ideas and accessible overviews of issues that are important to the future of Northern Ireland. The booklets are designed to provoke discussion, critical thinking and informed understanding.

## Community Dialogue

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### Community Dialogue

373 Springfield Road, Belfast, BT12 7DG

**Tel:** 028-90-329995 **Fax:** 028-90-330482

**E-mail:** [admin@communitydialogue.org](mailto:admin@communitydialogue.org) **Web:** [www.communitydialogue.org](http://www.communitydialogue.org)

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## Preface

The 'Troubles' led to Northern Ireland becoming notorious throughout the world. The conflict resulted in over 3,000 deaths and over 30,000 injured. The death total is equivalent in proportionate terms to the killing of 100,000 people in Britain or 500,000 in the United States of America.

Despite its impact on the lives of people living in Northern Ireland many are not clear about what actually happened or why. We also have different versions and understandings of our conflict based on our own experience and political identity. As a consequence, many participants in Community Dialogue events have requested a simple summary overview of the conflict and its origins. This booklet is the result.

### *Acknowledgments*

I would like to thank all those who commented on this booklet at various stages in its development.

**David Holloway**  
**June 2005**

# Understanding The Northern Ireland Conflict: A Summary And Overview Of The Conflict And Its Origins

## Part One: Ireland

### Initial Conquest

In 1066 the Normans conquered England. Just over 100 years later, in 1169, they landed in Ireland. Although they quickly spread across the country, they exerted greatest control over a small area of Ireland around Dublin, which by about 1500 was called the Pale. Anglo-Norman and English settlers arrived sporadically during these centuries. In time many assimilated into local culture but others, especially those in the Pale, continued to look to England for security.

### The Reformation

It was not until the reign of Henry VIII in the 16th century that tighter control began to be established over Ireland through military conquest. Following the Reformation a dispute between Henry and the Pope led to the renunciation of Rome's authority and the declaration of Henry as Supreme Head of the Church of Ireland in 1536. From this point on military conquest and suppression of the Catholic faith went hand in hand<sup>1</sup>. New colonies of settlers were now mainly Protestant.

As the century developed the northern province of Ulster remained independent while Ireland descended into political chaos, famine and war.

### The Plantation Of Ulster

By 1603 rebellion against English rule in Ulster, led by O'Neill (Earl of Tyrone) and O'Donnell (Earl of Tyrconnell) was crushed and Ulster was brought under control. After the sudden departure of the Gaelic leaders in 1607, Irish land was confiscated and given to colonists.

This process, the Plantation, began around 1610<sup>2</sup> and introduced Protestant English and Scottish settlers speaking a different language and representing a

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<sup>1</sup> George Downham, Bishop of Derry between 1616 and 1634 articulated the then view of the Church of Ireland *"If the Pope be antichrist, then those that are found to be resolute Antichristians...ought not to be favoured or spared...for what fellowship can there be between light and darkness?"* (Alcock, A 1994:11)

<sup>2</sup> Land confiscation and colonisation began before and continued after this period but was most systematic around this time. The Catholic Queen Mary established the original plantation of Leix and Offaly in 1556 (Liechty, J 1993: 13).

different culture and religion to that of the native Irish and many of the earlier settlers (Darby, J 1976: 3). Native Irish and Plantation settlers existed in a state of mutual hostility that has, to an extent, continued to the present day.

### **The 1641 Rebellion**

Religious, social and economic tensions between the native Irish and the Plantation settlers became rife culminating in the Rebellion of 1641 which sought freedom of worship for Catholics and guarantees of ownership for Catholic landowners. The Rebellion was complicated by the English Civil War with which it overlapped, with Catholic landowners for the most part backing King Charles II against Parliament. Overall, thousands of Protestants were killed and others were driven from their lands during the rebellion (Kee, R 1980: 44)<sup>3</sup>. In Portadown for example *"a party of some 100 Protestant men, women and children were taken from their homes, robbed and stripped of most of their clothes, were taken together onto the bridge at Portadown. They were then herded or driven over the parapet into the water below where they were drowned or if they could swim, were shot or knocked on the head as they came ashore."* (Kee, R 1980: 42-43)

### **Cromwell**

Cromwell went to Ireland to forestall any hope of Catholics triumphing in Ireland and to remove the potential threat offered by remnants of the English Civil War's Royalist forces based in Ireland. His methods were harsh though typical of the period and included the massacre of the populations of Drogheda and Wexford in 1649. In Wexford alone, at least 2,000 people including 200 women were killed (Kee, R 1980: 48). Cromwell publicly defended his deeds as "godly vengeance for Catholic massacres of Protestants at the beginning of the rising."<sup>4</sup> (Liechty, J 1993: 17)

Catholic memories of 1649 and Protestant memories of 1641 served the same function for their communities, passing from generation to generation a graphic image of the true nature of their enemy and fuelling a mutual fear, hatred, resentment and distrust.

### **Land Confiscations**

Following Cromwell's military campaign control was consolidated by further land confiscations. In 1641 Catholics still held 59% of Irish land; two decades later, at the close of the Cromwellian period, they were reduced to about 10%.

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<sup>3</sup> While there is general agreement among historians that the numbers of dead lie in the thousands debate continues around exactly how many thousands. Robert Kee (1980: 44) suggests that on balance historians tend to favour a total of 12,000.

<sup>4</sup> A religious viewpoint typical of the period.

## Land Owned By Catholics In Ireland (Liechty, J 1993: 22)

1641 - 59%	- after the Ulster Plantation
1661 - 10%	- after Cromwell
1685 - 22%	- after Catholic King Charles II restored lands
1703 - 14%	- after the Williamite War
1778 - 5%	- after the Penal Laws

### William Of Orange

Charles II lost the English Civil War, but Catholics still sought the English throne. They succeeded when James II became King in 1685. This led to an invitation to William of Orange to assume the English throne. His defeat of James at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 secured both the ascendancy of Protestantism within William's realm and the Plantation's success in Ireland.

### The Penal Laws

The English Crown and Parliament continued to consolidate control over Ireland, ruling through imposed Irish institutions of government and, beginning in 1695, enforcing a series of draconian Penal Laws against Catholics in order to reduce their political and military potential<sup>5</sup>. Although 70% of the population, Catholics were excluded from the political and educational systems, the legal profession and land inheritance (Bartlett, T *et al* 1998:1) as well as facing other restrictions<sup>6</sup>.

From the later 18th century the Penal Laws were gradually relaxed. This derived from declining anti-Catholicism among the English establishment, growing concern at legislative discrimination against Irish Catholics and the changing security situation in the wake of the American War of Independence and the French Revolution.

### The Orange Order

Rural unrest in the 18th century led to the formation of Catholic guerrilla type organisations like the Ribbonmen, Whiteboys and Defenders reacting against rent rises and enclosures. In mid-Ulster growing sectarian strife, largely over competition for land led to rural riots and conflict between the Catholic Defenders and the Protestant Peep O' Day Boys. In 1795 one confrontation, the 'battle of the Diamond' (near Loughgall Co. Armagh) led the victorious Protestant Peep O' Day Boys to found an organisation pledged to mutual protection and support of the Protestant faith, King and constitution. This organisation was the Orange Order.

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<sup>5</sup> Penal Laws were a European commonplace at this time (Liechty, J 1993: 23).

<sup>6</sup> The Irish Penal Laws of 1695 to 1727 were also applied, but in lesser measure, against Presbyterians.



In opposition to a rising tide of Irish nationalism the Orange Order fostered a sense of security and solidarity for Protestants. For Catholics though, it was seen as maintaining Protestant supremacy over Catholics.

### **The United Irishmen**

Ireland had its own Parliament but was effectively controlled by London. Many Irish Protestants were becoming increasingly dissatisfied believing that Ireland was ruled, not for their benefit, but for that of the English establishment. They began to call for greater autonomy and achieved a small measure of this under Grattan's Parliament.

Under Wolfe Tone in 1791, however, some of these united with Catholics to form the Society of United Irishmen, inspired by the America Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789. In addition to parliamentary reform they called for equality between Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter and the removal of the Penal Laws (Bartlett, T *et al* 1998: 34-35). They were particularly strong in the Presbyterian heartlands of Co. Antrim and Co. Down.

Rebellion broke out in 1798 but Catholic and Protestant United Irishmen ultimately failed to find common cause, internal sectarian conflict broke out<sup>7</sup> and the rebels found themselves facing opposition, not only from the regular crown forces but also locally raised militia of both Catholic and Protestant loyalists. The rebellion was rapidly crushed and followed by severe reprisals.

### **The Act Of Union**

In order to secure more direct control of Irish affairs after the rebellion, Britain abolished the Irish government through the 1801 Act of Union and imposed direct rule.

### **The Catholic Emancipation Act**

Nevertheless, anti-Catholic measures continued to be gradually lifted, most notably in response to Daniel O'Connell's 1823 formation of the Catholic Association which campaigned for Catholic emancipation. He succeeded with the passing of the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act, thanks to mass non-violent popular agitation.

The success of the Catholic Association in forming Catholics into a coherent political force more firmly than ever before bound political and religious identity together (Liechty, J 1993: 29). After the Catholic Emancipation Act the pursuit of

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<sup>7</sup>Perhaps the most notorious example being the massacre of Protestants in Wexford by insurgent Catholics (Bartlett, T *et al* 1998: 134).

Irish sovereignty, which had been dominated by Protestants only thirty years before, was now becoming an almost exclusively Catholic enterprise.

At the beginning of the 1840s O'Connell then formed the Repeal Association to campaign for the repeal of the Act of Union but this was overshadowed by the famine.

### **The Famine**

By the mid 19th century most of Ireland's population depended on tenant farming for a living. In 1841 45% of farms were five acres or less making it difficult to grow sufficient crops to feed a family and pay the rent. In addition land improvement was the tenant's responsibility.

There was no compensation for improvements, which remained owned by the landowner, neither there was security of tenure. When combined with rapid population growth<sup>8</sup>, the subdivision of tenants' holdings and reliance on a single subsistence crop, potatoes, disaster was waiting to happen. Blight struck the potato crop over successive years between 1845 and 1849. Over one million people died and two million emigrated<sup>9</sup>, many to America<sup>10</sup>.

### **Land Reform**

Ultimately the efforts of Charles Stewart Parnell, in combination with those of Michael Davitt's Land League<sup>11</sup>, to pressure the British Government on land reform were successful. In a series of land reform acts, ownership was transferred from landlords to small farmers<sup>12</sup>.

### **The Growth Of Ulster Unionism**

As the political situation deteriorated, however, calls for land reform were increasingly replaced by calls for Home Rule. In 1858 the Irish Republican Brotherhood formed to push for independence mounting a violent but failed campaign in 1867. Political initiatives under Parnell had more success culminating in the first Home Rule Bill in 1886.

Ulster Unionism grew as a coherent force in response to the threat of Home Rule, beginning with the first Home Rule Bill and most notably with the formation of the Ulster Unionist Council in 1905. In 1911, Unionist leader Edward Carson

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<sup>8</sup> The population of Ireland had risen from about five million in 1801 to about eight million in 1841.

<sup>9</sup> The population fell from over eight million in 1841 to four and a half million by 1911.

<sup>10</sup> Henceforth Irish-America would play a significant role in Irish political life.

<sup>11</sup> The Land League was formed in 1879.

<sup>12</sup> Land Reform Acts were passed by the British Parliament in 1870 and 1881.

announced to an enthusiastic crowd of over 50,000 Ulster Protestants that he would lead them into self-government should Home Rule become law.

In 1912 the third Home Rule Bill was introduced leading to massive protests in Ulster when 218,206 men signed the Ulster Covenant and 228,991 women signed the Ulster Women's Declaration.

Convinced that Home Rule would be disastrous for Protestant civil and religious liberty the signatories pledged to defend their citizenship using all means necessary to defeat the third Home Rule Bill. In 1913 the Ulster Volunteer Force was formed to resist Home Rule. Shortly afterwards Nationalists formed the Irish (later National) Volunteers to ensure Home Rule. The passing of the third Home Rule Bill was in fact immanent but for the interruption of World War One.

### **World War One**

With the outbreak of World War One British Secretary for War Lord Kitchener wanted the Ulster Volunteer Force to enlist in the British army. To ensure this the third Home Rule Bill was postponed until after the war. Accordingly the Ulster Volunteer Force was encouraged by the Ulster Unionist leader Lord Carson to enlist in the British Army's newly formed 36th (Ulster) Division.

The Irish leader John Redmond believed that Irish support for Britain in World War One would guarantee the passing of the third Home Rule Bill upon its conclusion. Towards this end he pledged the Irish Volunteers, now named National Volunteers, to war service with the British Army. Of the 180,000 National Volunteers, however, around 13,000 seceded taking with them the name of Irish Volunteers.

### **The War Of Independence**

A succession of movements had struggled to overthrow the Union by Parliamentary<sup>13</sup> and violent<sup>14</sup> means without success. In 1916, while the Ulster Volunteer Force and the National Volunteers were fighting in the British Army against Germany, a new uprising was being organised under the auspices of the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

The core of their force was the rump of Irish Volunteers who had splintered from the National Volunteers. This was augmented by James Connelly's Irish Citizen Army and the tiny Hibernian Rifles<sup>15</sup> (Bowyer Bell, J 1990: 4-5).

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<sup>13</sup> For example the Repeal Association in the 1840s.

<sup>14</sup> For example the Irish Republican Brotherhood's uprising of 1867.

<sup>15</sup> The Hibernian Rifles were financed by the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

At noon on Monday the 24th of April 1916 they took over the General Post Office in Dublin as part of the Easter Rising and declared an Irish Republic. The uprising failed, but the execution of its leaders created a wave of sympathy leading to a triumph for Sinn Fein in the 1918 British General Election over the Irish Parliamentary Party. They formed a provisional government under the leadership of Eamon deValera and issued a Declaration of Independence.

The Irish Volunteers became the Irish Republican Army and under the leadership of Michael Collins began a full-blown War of Independence. Ultimately violent conflict was replaced by negotiation. The British Government introduced the Government of Ireland Bill in 1920 providing for Home Rule parliaments to be set up in both Southern and Northern Ireland. In December 1921 a negotiated treaty conferred dominion status on an Irish Free State comprising the twenty-six southern counties<sup>16</sup>. Critically this was not the Irish Republic that the Irish Republican Army had fought for.

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<sup>16</sup> Dominion status made the Irish Free State a self-governing territory within the British Commonwealth. Members of the Irish parliament were still required to swear an oath of loyalty to the King as head of the commonwealth. The Irish Free State became a Republic in 1949 and left the Commonwealth. The British Government responded with the Government of Ireland Act, which stated that Northern Ireland would not be separated from the United Kingdom without the consent of the Northern Ireland parliament.

## Part Two: Northern Ireland

### The Creation Of Northern Ireland

The Protestant north, fearing becoming a minority in an independent Irish Catholic state, was preparing to resist Home Rule since the 1880s. In 1921 Unionism succeeded in excluding six of the nine counties of Ulster from Home Rule arrangements. The new Northern Ireland six county administration was the largest area that could comfortably be held with a pro-Union majority<sup>17</sup>. It was given its own government with devolved powers but the British Government retained ultimate authority.

This had not been a first preference for Unionists in Northern Ireland many of whom saw it as a compromise diluting their position within the Union. Many Nationalists, however, felt isolated and vulnerable within this new Protestant majority state.

### The Creation Of The Irish Free State

A year later a twenty-six county Irish Free State came into being. The long-standing division between Catholic and Protestant communities had now taken constitutional form. Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State created a new conjunction of majority community with political power. Politics in Northern Ireland under the devolved administration would continue to be dominated by the constitutional question.

### Civil War

The partition of Ireland led to civil war in the Free State between those accepting the settlement and those believing that it was a betrayal. The pro-treaty group, which would become Fine Gael, won. Sinn Fein, their opponents, eventually split, the majority following de Valera into official opposition and becoming Fianna Fail. The rump remained as Sinn Fein, committed to achieving Irish unification militarily and boycotting the Dail<sup>18</sup> because of its oath of allegiance to the British Crown.

Towards this end the Irish Republican Army mounted a series of campaigns in the 1920s, 1940s and 1950s despite being declared illegal by the Irish Free State in 1936<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Catholics formed about one third of the population through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>18</sup> The Irish Parliament.

<sup>19</sup> Several Republicans were executed during World War Two by de Valera who became Taoiseach in 1932.

## **Northern Ireland Between The Wars**

The Nationalist population of Northern Ireland boycotted the new state. The twelve anti-partition Members of Parliament elected in the 1921 elections refused to take their seats and twenty-one Nationalist controlled local authorities out of sixty-eight refused to acknowledge the Government and pledged allegiance to Dublin. Sectarian violence escalated as rival mobs of Catholics and Protestants attacked each other.

Between June 1920 and June 1922 428 people were killed and 1,766 were wounded. 8,750 Catholics were driven from their employment and 23,000 were driven from their homes (Buckland, P 1981: 46-50). Violence declined as internment against Nationalists was introduced and the Irish Republican Army became occupied by the civil war and its aftermath in the Irish Free State.

To counter ongoing Irish Republican Army campaigns, emergency legislation was introduced, enforced by an almost exclusively Protestant police force. Government electoral boundaries were manipulated to maintain a Protestant majority. Council housing allocation was used to maintain political control. Only those loyal to the State were employed in public positions<sup>20</sup>. The two communities grew further apart, segregation increased and mixed marriages were few and isolated. The two communities pursued separate cultures and maintained opposed political aspirations. Their children were educated separately, taught different histories and played different sports.

From the State's inception Nationalists felt like second-class citizens within a state they could not and would not identify with. Unionists feared the Nationalist desire for Irish unification. While Nationalists did not initially seek to involve themselves in the functions of the State, Unionists did little to win their allegiance or encourage their inclusion and the State actively discriminated against them. This two-fold process of exclusion and refusal to participate combined with State discrimination copper fastened an apartheid mentality between Protestants and Catholics.

## **The Irish Free State And The 1937 Constitution**

In 1932 Fianna Fail came to power under de Valera with a vision of a Gaelic, Catholic Ireland and an anti Northern Ireland stance. An economic tariff was imposed against British goods and the 1937 Constitution claimed the island of Ireland as the national territory<sup>21</sup>. Unionists viewed this as encouragement for the

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<sup>20</sup> 90% of workers in public bodies were Protestant (Alcock, A 1994: 43).

<sup>21</sup> Article 2 claimed '*the national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland*' but article 3 limited the application of its laws to the Free State '*pending the reintegration of the national territory*'.

Irish Republican Army's campaigns.

The Constitution also reflected and recognised the special role of the Church within the State<sup>22</sup>. In recognition of this the Northern Ireland Prime Minister Sir James Craig said; "in the South they boasted of a Catholic state...all I boast of is that we are a Protestant parliament and a Protestant state" (Alcock, A 1994: 51).

Under Catholic Church marriage rules, the 1908 papal 'Ne Temere' decree was now rigidly enforced meaning that children of mixed marriages had to be brought up as Catholic. The 1926 Census showed Protestant numbers in the South had declined by a third since 1911 to 7.4% (Alcock, A 1994: 47-48). This was partly due to losses in World War One, a lower birth rate, and to emigration and fatalities during the conflict surrounding the State's formation. But developments under de Valera, not least the rigid enforcement of 'Ne Temere', made it more difficult to be Protestant in the Irish Free State and their decline continued.

### **Reinforcing Partition**

In the years after World War Two the economy of Northern Ireland flourished, the Irish Republican Army's border campaign of 1956-1962 was called off due to lack of support and the Nationalist Party became the official opposition in Stormont.

### **Four factors seemed to reinforce partition:**

1. The Irish Free State took no part in World War Two but the North played a substantial role<sup>23</sup>.
2. British aid to Northern Ireland led to the post war development of a welfare state. This helped shield Catholic and Protestant alike from the worst effects of poverty and unemployment in a way that the post war Irish Republic was unable to do.
3. The decline of the Protestant population in the South justified Unionist fears that 'Home Rule meant Rome Rule', suggesting that there was no future for Protestants in a Catholic dominated state.
4. The 1937 Irish Constitution reinforced Unionist fears that the Irish Free State was a threat to Northern Ireland's territorial integrity.

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<sup>22</sup> Similarly the special role of the Protestant faith was reflected in the United Kingdom, not least in the stipulation that the monarch must be Protestant.

<sup>23</sup> Although many citizens of the Irish Free State privately enlisted in the British army.

## **The Civil Rights Movement**

The Northern Catholic population continued to feel politically disenfranchised and actively oppressed and experienced poor housing and increasingly high unemployment. But until the 1960s internal opposition to the State was weak.

Post World War Two social change, however, led to an emergent Catholic middle class whose awareness of civil rights issues in the United States of America resulted in the 1967 formation of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association. This was a non-sectarian organisation concerned with social and legal reform through non-violent means. Their call was for civil rights within the State rather than the traditional Nationalist or Republican call for Irish unification.

## **The Need For Reform**

The need for reform was clear. Local councils allocated houses largely on the basis of political allegiance rather than need. Catholics were greatly underrepresented on Unionist local councils, in the judiciary and public corporations. Most large businesses were Protestant owned and gave preference to Protestant workers<sup>24</sup>. This contributed significantly to Catholic unemployment and was exacerbated by the policy of investing in economic development east of the river Bann, while much of the Catholic community lived west of the river Bann.

Gerrymandering of ward boundaries ensured Unionist control in Nationalist majority areas. The property vote in local government elections denied a vote to lodgers, subtenants and servants of rateable premises, categories disproportionately represented by Catholics<sup>25</sup>. In 1968 941,785 people could vote in the Stormont elections but only 694,483 had local government votes (Kingsley, P 1998: 41-42).

The 1922 Special Powers Act was repressive, giving the State the right to take any steps to preserve law and order including searches without warrant, arrest on suspicion and internment without trial. These powers were mainly used against the Nationalist population by a predominantly Protestant police force<sup>26</sup>.

In all the contradictory claims for and against discrimination in Northern Ireland John Whyte (1991: 167) discerned “a bunching towards the centre” among researchers of the issue. Joseph Liechty (1993: 43) noted that after exaggeration and mitigating circumstances have been acknowledged and taken into account,

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<sup>24</sup> Discrimination in housing and job allocation was also practiced in the minority of Nationalist controlled councils (Alcock, A 1994: 45).

<sup>25</sup> The Property Vote directly discriminated against the poor irrespective of religion.

<sup>26</sup> In 1969 89% of the police force was Protestant.



there remained undeniable evidence of deliberate and consistent Unionist discrimination against Catholics in employment, housing, education and in relationship to the security forces.

### **The Troubles Begin**

In 1968 the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association commenced protest marches under a 'one man one vote' banner and clashes with the police began. In response Prime Minister Terence O' Neill proposed an Ombudsman and a points system for housing allocation, and an end to Special Powers and the property vote. But it was too late. The situation was spiralling out of control. His reforms did not go far enough for Nationalists and went too far for Unionists who were suspicious that the civil rights campaign was just a cover for an assault upon the State.

Loyalists launched organised attacks on a three-day civil rights march from Derry/Londonderry to Belfast and the marchers received no protection from the police. Nationalist rioting began in Belfast and the Battle of the Bogside started in Derry/Londonderry. The Northern Ireland Government was unable to contain the increasing sectarian conflict. As a consequence Britain sent troops in 1969 to restore order. While initially welcomed as protectors by the Catholic population their use of military methods in response to Irish Republican Army attacks and to quell civil disorder rapidly soured the relationship. The presence of these troops, and a desire to protect Catholic communities from attack by elements within neighbouring Protestant communities, prompted a revived Irish Republican Army campaign that was mirrored by increasingly active Loyalist paramilitaries.

In 1969-1970 the Provisional Irish Republican Army split from the left-leaning republican movement, which had been moving towards political campaigning on social issues. A cycle of sectarian murder exploded throughout the Province while the ethnic cleansing of Catholic and Protestant areas led to 21,500 people being driven from their homes. At the time this was the largest forced population movement in Western Europe since World War Two.

In 1971 the British Government imposed internment of suspected terrorists without trial. While this was intended for suspects of all factions in practice most of those interned were Catholic. Strategically this was a disaster for the government because its oppressive and unjust application generated a wave of support across the Catholic community for the Provisional Irish Republican Army serving to swell their ranks. In January 1972, fourteen demonstrators at a civil rights rally in Derry/Londonderry were killed by the British Army, further alienating the Nationalist population.

In 1972 as the conflict continued to escalate the Northern Ireland Government was suspended and direct rule from Britain imposed. This was intended to be a temporary arrangement whilst a new system of governance, generally acceptable to the whole population, was agreed. In practice direct rule has now lasted for over thirty years, excepting brief interludes of devolved power sharing in 1974 and following the Belfast Agreement.

### **Sunningdale**

In 1973 the Sunningdale Agreement led to devolution including power sharing and possibilities for a North-South dimension but faced considerable opposition. On the one hand it was challenged in the Dublin High Court on the grounds that it allowed for no change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland until the majority of its people desired it<sup>27</sup>. On the other hand anti-Sunningdale Unionist candidates won a sweeping victory in the 1974 Westminster General Election. Ultimately a general strike by the Ulster Workers Council brought the Province to a standstill and collapsed the power-sharing Executive. Direct rule was imposed again.

### **The Ulsterisation Of The Conflict**

In 1975 a Constitutional Convention of political parties failed to agree. Disillusioned by the experience of attempting to agree power-sharing structures, and because it wanted to reduce the number of British soldiers being killed, the British Government changed its strategy. It began to address the problem less as a political issue and more as a law and order problem. The Special Category status of paramilitary prisoners was revoked in 1975. This meant the loss of certain privileges that distinguished them from other prisoners. The security of Northern Ireland was 'Ulsterised' with primary responsibility for security passing from the British army to the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Ulster Defence Regiment. At the same time it was hoped that attempts to raise the living standards of Catholics would reduce support for the Provisional Irish Republican Army.

Ultimately these policies had the opposite effect to that intended. The removal of Special Category Status led to protests by Republican prisoners culminating in a Hunger Strike in 1981 and the subsequent death by starvation of ten prisoners. This won increased sympathy for the armed struggle throughout the Catholic community.

In addition, the election of hunger striker Bobby Sands as a Member of Parliament played a pivotal role in Sinn Fein's development of their 'armalite and ballot box' strategy.

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<sup>27</sup> It was argued that this was against the Irish Republic's Constitution.

## **More Failed Initiatives**

In 1977 and 1980 attempts by the British Government to set up devolved institutions failed. Between 1982 and 1984 a gradual return of power to elected representatives through Rolling Devolution also failed.

While many of Northern Ireland's discriminating institutions had been reformed since 1972, deep structural inequalities remained; Catholics still had higher unemployment and the areas in which they were concentrated remained underdeveloped.

## **The Anglo-Irish Agreement**

In 1985 the British and Irish Governments signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Anglo-Irish Agreement reassured the majority that there would be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without their assent and guaranteed respect for the minority community's traditions and aspirations plus fair treatment under the law. The most dramatic element, however, was official recognition for the first time of the interest of the Irish Government in the position of the Northern Nationalist community and the acceptance of the Irish Government as a conduit for the views of that community. In addition it moved Government analysis of the conflict from a colonial perspective to one of the 'double minority problem'<sup>28</sup>.

Supporters of the Anglo-Irish Agreement claim that it facilitated a number of progressive measures including the establishment of an independent Commission of Police Complaints, the Fair Employment Act and repeal of the Flags and Emblems Act.

Unionist parties, who had not been consulted on the Anglo-Irish Agreement, were unanimous in their condemnation of it arguing that it was wrong to give a foreign government a say in the affairs of Northern Ireland. It was viewed by them as a step towards Irish unification and over 250,000 people protested at its signing. Many Protestants began to feel increasingly alienated from the British State believing they had been betrayed. While the Anglo-Irish Agreement stated that Irish unification would only occur when a majority wanted it many Unionists felt that the Catholic population would eventually become a majority that would elect for unification.

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<sup>28</sup> The Double Minority Analysis: Irish Nationalists live as a minority within Northern Ireland while British Unionists remain a minority on the island of Ireland. While Nationalists had suffered marginalisation within Northern Ireland, Unionists fear that they would suffer marginalisation within a united Ireland. Nationalists have found it difficult to achieve a lasting accommodation that recognises their Irish identity while Unionists have found it difficult to achieve lasting accommodation securing their British identity.

In addition, some Unionists viewed the new fair employment legislation not as providing equality of opportunity but as positive discrimination in favour of Catholics.

While Nationalists broadly approved of the Anglo-Irish Agreement some argued that Republicans saw it as a threat to their power base in the Nationalist community because many Catholics now felt better enfranchised through the Irish Government's watching brief.

Others, however, saw a positive message for Republicans. Offering a limited role in Northern Ireland's affairs to the Irish Government gave a signal that the British Government was open to recognising the rights of Nationalists and to Irish unification through persuasion.

This was reinforced in 1992 when Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Brooke stated that the British Government had no strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland.

## Part Three: Agreement?

### **The Adams-Hume Talks**

In the late 1980s Social Democratic and Labour Party leader John Hume commenced a dialogue with Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams. The process aimed to bring Sinn Fein into the constitutional arena following a renunciation of Provisional Irish Republican Army violence.

This was followed by the 1991-92 Brooke-Mayhew Phased talks, which sought to involve Northern Ireland parties in discussions, with the Irish Government involved at a later stage<sup>29</sup>.

### **The Joint Declaration**

In 1993 the two Governments signed a formal declaration of principles on Northern Ireland, the Downing Street Joint Declaration. In it the British Government said:

*"It is for the people of the island of Ireland...by agreement between the two parts...to exercise their right of self determination..."*

In it the Irish Government said:

*"It would be wrong to attempt to impose a united Ireland in the absence of the freely given consent of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland."*

The Declaration also introduced the possibility of Sinn Fein joining talks for the first time if there was a cease-fire before hand.

### **The Cessation/Cease-fire**

On the 12th of August 1994 the Provisional Irish Republican Army announced a complete cessation of its armed struggle. On the 13th of October 1994 the Combined Loyalist Military Command announced a ceasefire. Meetings between Sinn Fein and the British Government began. Following talks with the main political parties the Framework For The Future document was drawn up by the two Governments in 1995. The decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, however, became an obstacle that a weak British Government dependant upon Unionist support could not overcome. This led to the end of the Provisional Irish Republican Army cease-fire on the 9th of February 1996 and the commencement of a new bombing campaign.

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<sup>29</sup> Although Sinn Fein was excluded.

In 1997 a new British Government was elected strong enough not to need Unionist support. New talks began following the announcement by the Provisional Irish Republican Army of a further cessation in July 1997. The multi-party negotiations culminated with the signing of the Belfast Agreement on the 10th of April 1998. Through joint referenda on the 25th of June 1998 the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland gave their support for the Belfast Agreement<sup>30</sup>.

### **The Belfast Agreement: The Beginnings Of An Inclusive Settlement**

The Belfast Agreement is a remarkable achievement but does not provide a final solution; rather it sets out a framework for an ongoing transformation of conflict through a peaceful political process, the outcomes of which are unclear. In the forward to the document participants acknowledge their diverse and equally legitimate aspirations but commit themselves to partnership, equality and mutual respect, and reaffirm their absolute commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful means of resolving differences.

The Agreement is divided into three strands representing the three key aspects of the historic relationship that caused conflict.

### **The Government Of Northern Ireland: Strand One Of The Agreement**

Strand One sought to protect Nationalists and Unionists from political domination by each other through the establishment of a power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly of 108 elected members. In order to make a decision the Assembly had to have the support of a majority of both Nationalist and Unionist members<sup>31</sup>. These arrangements aimed to avoid the traditional politics of majority rule, which were unacceptable to the Nationalist minority.

By securing the principle of consent regarding any future change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, Strand One also aimed to reassure Unionists that a united Ireland would not be forced on an unwilling majority.

In addition both Nationalists and Unionists were protected from discrimination and both cultural traditions were promised equal respect no matter which of them found themselves in the minority at any point in the future.

While most Unionists were now comfortable with the idea of power sharing with Nationalists, sharing power with Sinn Fein without complete Provisional Irish Republican Army decommissioning remained an obstacle. Even with

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<sup>30</sup> Yes votes: 71% - Northern Ireland 94% - Republic of Ireland

<sup>31</sup> 40% of each and 60% overall.

decommissioning, many Unionists felt that there was a contradiction in allowing a party into Government whose ultimate goal was to end the Northern Ireland State.

On the other hand it had been difficult for Republicans to accept the idea of internal power sharing, as this could be perceived as adding legitimacy to the idea of a Northern Ireland state existing at all. While the conflict had been about removing the State, Republicans justified participation in it as a transitional arrangement on the road to Irish unification.

### **North-South Relationships: Strand Two Of The Agreement**

Strand Two provided recognition of the Irish identity of Northern Ireland Nationalists through a North-South Ministerial Council, which comprised members of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Dail. This, together with further North-South institutions, was set up to deal with issues of common concern like tourism and agriculture. Many Unionists feared that cross border institutions were a step towards Irish unification. These structures, however, were important to Nationalists because increased cooperation with the Republic of Ireland offered them a greater sense of security against the fear of Unionist domination.

### **British-Irish Structures: Strand Three Of The Agreement**

Strand Three provided recognition of the British identity of Unionists through a British-Irish Council. The Council was set up with representatives from the British and Irish Governments and devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales together with representatives of the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. It aimed to promote harmonious and mutually beneficial development. This was meant to ease Unionist fears of a diminishment of their place within the Union. It also represented the possibility of a whole new set of relationships between British and Irish people.

### **Other Areas Of Agreement**

1. Articles Two and Three of the Irish Constitution would be amended to define the nation of Ireland as its people rather than the territory in which they live.
2. Irish and British constitutional law would reflect the principle of consent; there would be no change in Northern Ireland's constitutional status without the consent of the majority of its people.
3. Northern Ireland law would incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights.

4. A Human Rights Commission would review law and governmental practices.
5. A joint North-South Commission would review rights in each jurisdiction.
6. Victims of the conflict would be provided with support.
7. The British Government would support minority culture and language.
8. All parties committed themselves to do all in their power to bring about the total disarmament of paramilitary organisations within two years of the Belfast Agreement's approval.
9. The number and role of the Armed Forces would be reduced.
10. Emergency Powers legislation would be repealed.
11. An independent commission would review policing and make recommendations to ensure that it enjoyed cross community support.
12. An independent commission would review the Criminal Justice System and make recommendations for a more democratic, just and accountable system.
13. Prisoners of paramilitary organisations on cease-fire would be released early.

### **A Commentary On The Belfast Agreement**

The Belfast Agreement, famously referred to by Seamus Mallon as "Sunningdale for slow learners", is inherently ambiguous. Because of the complexity of the conflict and the diametrically opposed ideologies involved, agreement was always going to be difficult. But the wording of the Agreement allowed each party to find key elements of its needs represented. It offered something for everyone while remaining open to interpretation. It was this that allowed disparate groups to sign up and say to their supporters "we got this and they had to give up that".

Initial support for the Agreement may have indicated that an increasing number of people in Northern Ireland wanted to achieve an accommodation of their national differences. But others undoubtedly believed their politicians when they reassured them that the Agreement was a stepping-stone to their respective first preferences.

As the implications of the Agreement sank in dissatisfaction with it, particularly among Unionists, grew. Many Unionists perceived the Belfast Agreement as



actively eroding their British identity and their sense of security. They felt that the constitutional issue had not been copper fastened because the consent principle allowed for a united Ireland should those in favour become the majority. Nationalists on the other hand had to accept less than full Irish unification. Both communities felt that they were the ones bearing the brunt of concessions implicit within the Agreement and failed to recognise the perceived loss of the other community.

The Belfast Agreement succeeded in greatly reducing political violence within Northern Ireland. It also provided Northern Ireland with a legal framework, albeit flawed, designed to achieve political accommodation between mutually antagonistic communities. At the time of writing argument continues over its interpretation and implementation to the point that progress continually stalls. It is likely that the constitutional issue will continue to generate tension for the foreseeable future and that unfulfilled aspirations, inherent tensions and uncertainty will remain.

## Appendix: Time Line

- 1169 Anglo Normans invade Ireland
- 1536 Declaration of Henry VIII as Supreme Head of the Church in Ireland
- 1594 Nine years war begins
- 1601 Defeat of native Irish forces under O'Neill and O'Donnell at Kinsale
- 1607 Flight of the Earls
- 1610 Plantation of Ulster commences
- 1641 Rebellion
- 1649 Cromwell arrives in Ireland, Drogheda and Wexford massacres
- 1689 Siege of Derry
- 1690 Battle of the Boyne
- 1695 First Penal Laws
- 1798 United Irishmen's Rebellion
- 1795 Orange Order formed
- 1801 Act of Union
- 1803 Rebellion of Robert Emmet
- 1823 Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Association formed
- 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act
- 1840 Daniel O'Connell's Repeal Association formed
- 1845 Famine begins
- 1867 Irish Republican Brotherhood uprising fails
- 1869 All religious denominations given equal status
- 1879 Michael Davitt founds Land League
- 1886 First Home Rule Bill
- 1893 Second Home Rule Bill
- 1905 Ulster Unionist Council and Sinn Fein formed
- 1912 Third Home Rule Bill, Ulster Covenant, Ulster Women's Declaration
- 1913 Ulster Volunteer Force and Irish Volunteers formed
- 1916 Easter Rising
- 1919 War of Independence begins
- 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, Northern Ireland formed
- 1922 Irish Free State formed, Irish Civil War starts  
Northern Ireland Special Powers Act
- 1932 Fianna Fail comes to power in the Irish Free State
- 1936 Irish Free State declares Irish Republican Army illegal
- 1937 Irish Constitution claims Northern Ireland
- 1940 Second Irish Republican Army Border Campaign begins
- 1949 Irish Free State becomes a Republic and leaves the Commonwealth
- 1956 Third Irish Republican Army Border Campaign begins  
Internment introduced North and South

- 1962 Third Irish Republican Army Border Campaign ends
- 1965 Lemass-O'Neill talks
- 1967 Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association formed
- 1969 British troops arrive
- 1970 Provisional/Official Irish Republican Army split, B Specials abolished  
Ulster Defence Regiment and Social Democratic and Labour Party  
formed
- 1971 Internment, Democratic Unionist Party formed
- 1972 Bloody Sunday, Stormont dissolved
- 1973 Sunningdale Agreement
- 1974 Ulster Workers Council
- 1975 Constitutional Convention fails, Special Category Status revoked
- 1977 Attempt to set up devolved institutions fails
- 1980 Attempt to set up devolved institutions fails  
Hunger Strikes begin
- 1982 Elections to Northern Ireland Assembly
- 1984 Rolling Devolution fails
- 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement
- 1988 Hume-Adams talks begin
- 1991 Brooke-Mayhew talks
- 1993 Downing Street Joint Declaration
- 1994 Provisional Irish Republican Army cessation  
Combined Loyalist Military Command ceasefire
- 1995 Framework Document
- 1998 Belfast Agreement, Referendum, elections to Northern Ireland Assembly

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