

**THE IRISH QUESTION  
1886-1998 (FROM CHARLES PARNELL TO THE GOOD FRIDAY  
AGREEMENT)**

**HPHI 6020**

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**ASSESSMENT 2 - ESSAY**

**Q. Why did Northern Ireland fail to establish political stability in the period between 1920 and 1967? Your discussion should address the extent of discrimination against Catholic Community during this period.**

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In this essay I will seek to explore and consider why Northern Ireland failed to establish political stability between the period between 1920 to 1967. Perhaps the remarkable feature of Northern Ireland in this period was its relative stability for much of this period. This stability was shattered by the rise of a new generation of Catholics who were demanding reform and an ending of discrimination.<sup>1</sup> This resulted in the rising of the civil rights movement in the 1960's which exposed the structural inequalities and discrimination of Catholic communities that underpinned the political, power and social structures of the Northern Ireland State since its foundation on the 8th December 1922. The roots of instability can be traced to stretch back to the origins of English and Scottish and subsequently British involvement in Ireland. In this essay I will seek to explore the main issues that contributed to this inherent instability of the Northern Ireland State from the Act of Union in 1801 through the period of the debate on home rule; rise of the Orange Order and sectarianism; establishment of the Northern Ireland parliament; and subsequent political decision making which led to the structural discrimination that underpinned the Northern Irish State.

The roots of the creation of Northern Ireland and its eventual political instability, can be traced back to the seventeenth century settlement of the ancient province of Ulster by Scottish and English Protestant settlers on land previously occupied by "Catholic 'Old

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<sup>1</sup> Gibney, J. A Short History of Ireland. 1500-2000. New Haven and London. 2017. Yale University Press. p. 227.

English' and Irish natives".<sup>2</sup> Over the subsequent centuries religious and national differences remained between Catholic and Protestant communities underpinned by a protestant ascendancy. These differences were underpinned by policies and acts characterised as being sectarian in nature. Sectarianism can be seen to have been a persistent feature in Irish history which left a "long legacy of antagonism rooted in the fusion of politics, religion and economics".<sup>3</sup> It can be argued that it was the emergence and development of radical Presbyterian politics that emerged after the American War of Independence and rebellion of 1798<sup>4</sup> that would go on to influence the sectarian divisions in Ulster and it was this that underpinned and shaped Northern Ireland.<sup>5</sup>

Following a rebellion in 1798, the Irish parliament was abolished in 1801 and Ireland was absorbed into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland as a way of dealing with the "Irish problem". It had been the original intention of the Act of Union<sup>6</sup> for Protestants and Catholics to have equal rights of representation in Parliament but due to objections from George IV this was dropped and only Protestants were allowed to sit as MP's. At the end of the nineteenth century a new fault line developed between nationalists who wanted an Irish parliament and self rule for Ireland and Unionists who wanted to remain an integral part of the United Kingdom. This divide was often characterised on religious difference between Catholics being in support of home rule and protestants in favour of the Union.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth Century there was increasing campaigning and agitation for an Irish Parliament which led to the success of the Irish Parliamentary Party in Parliamentary elections. These calls were supported by the Liberal Party who with IPP support introduced Home rule bills in 1886 and 1893 which were eventually defeated in the House of Lords which had a conservative majority, and who were against home rule. Following the general election of 1910 the Liberal Party led by Asquith secured a majority in Parliament based on the support of the IPP party which was then led by John Redmond. The Parliament Act 1911<sup>8</sup> was then passed which restricted the power of the House of Lords to block legislation from the House of Commons. This precipitated the

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<sup>2</sup> Hennessey, J. *A History of Northern Ireland 1920 - 1996*. London. MacMillan. 1997. p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Ulster University. "Sectarianism in Northern Ireland: A Review. Available at: [https://www.ulster.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/410227/A-Review-Addressing-Sectarianism-in-Northern-Ireland\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/410227/A-Review-Addressing-Sectarianism-in-Northern-Ireland_FINAL.pdf). 2018.

<sup>4</sup> McBride, I.R. *Scripture Politics*. Oxford. Oxford University Press. 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Ulster University.. p.7

<sup>6</sup> UK Parliament. *An Act for the Union of Great Britain and Ireland. (1800)*. Parliament Archives ref. HL/PO/PU/1/1800/39&40G3n241. Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/legislativescrutiny/parliamentandireland/collections/ireland/act-of-union-1800/>. Accessed 17/12/22.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Parliament Act 1911. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo5/1-2/13>.

Home Rule Crisis of 1912-14. At the heart of the Home Rule Crisis were fundamental questions of identity. Nationalists believed that Ireland was a homeland<sup>9</sup> and had a distinct national identity, while Unionists viewed Home Rule as a threat to their sense of Britishness.

The opposition of Unionists to Home rule had become increasingly organised following the previous Home Rule Bills of 1886 and 1893 and as Townsend states elicited a “storm of resistance....even before the Bill appeared”.<sup>10</sup> Unionism was the political philosophy that most of Ireland’s Protestants supported and can be seen to crystallise as a response to increasing agitation for Home Rule.<sup>11</sup> There was a distinct difference between the more numerous Unionists in Ulster who made up the majority of the Ulster population than the rest of Ireland where Unionists were spread throughout the country.<sup>12</sup> The 1911 census of Ireland recorded that Ulster had a population of 1,581,969 with Protestants making up 890,880 of the Ulster population. In the rest of Ireland in a population of 2,808,553, Protestants accounted for only 256,699 individuals<sup>13</sup>.

Sir Edward Carson leader of the Irish Unionist Party led the campaign against home rule along with James Craig who would eventually become Northern Ireland first Prime Minister. Carson and Craig were both members of the Orange Order which had been formed in 1795. The Orange Order celebrated the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 as “the point where religious and civil liberty was guaranteed under the British Constitution”.<sup>14</sup> Unionists had a number of fears: that an Irish parliament would “preside over a confessional Catholic state”; threat to their identity as British; and would lead to the establishment of an Irish Republic. Unionists saw the British Isles representing their political sense of statehood and not that of Ireland.<sup>15</sup> Carson upheld that Unionists had a right to fight to preserve their membership of the British nation. In April 1913 The Ulster Volunteer Force was founded whose aim was to defend the Union by force if needed. In response Irish nationalists also armed and founded a separate nationalist militia. These joint actions threatened civil war in Ireland.. With tensions rising the government of Ireland Act 1914 was eventually passed at the start of the First World War which offered Home Rule but its implementation was suspended until the end of

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<sup>9</sup> Bowman, J. *De Valera and the Ulster Question 1917-1973*. Oxford Clarendon Press. 1982. p.11-12.

<sup>10</sup> Townsend, C. *Ireland in the 20th Century*. London. Oxford University Press. 1999. p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Gibney, J. p.187.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> National Archives of Ireland. *Census of Ireland 1911*. Available at: <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/>. Accessed 17/12/22.

<sup>14</sup> Hennessey, T. p.2.

<sup>15</sup> Hennessey, T. ‘Ulster Unionist territorial and national identities 1886-1893: province, island, kingdom and Empire’. *Irish Political Studies*, Vol 8. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07907189308406506>. 1993.

the war but never came into effect due to subsequent developments in Ireland.<sup>16</sup> The Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 fundamentally changed the mood of Nationalist opinion and for Unionist opinion, the war confirmed fears of “nationalist disloyalty”.<sup>17</sup>

In the subsequent general election in 1918, Redmond’s IPP party was wiped out by the rise of Sinn Fein winning 73 of 105 seats which marked the collapse of the Home rule cause.<sup>18</sup> Sinn Fein had campaigned on the basis that they would not take their seats and set up an Irish assembly “The Dail” and declared Ireland independent in January 1919.<sup>19</sup> Separately as the “Dail” met, the Irish Republican Army, whose origins lay in the old Irish Volunteer movement, killed two RIC officers while escorting gelatine to a quarry. These two events mark the start of a republican armed campaign of guerilla warfare and Sinn Fein conducting what Gibney describes as a “guerrilla government”<sup>20</sup> between 1919 and 1921.

In the subsequent search for a resolution of the crisis Walter Long a former Irish Unionist Party leader, headed a committee to look for solutions. He proposed a nine-county Ulster parliament alongside a twenty-three county Parliament for the south in Dublin.<sup>21</sup> This was rejected by Unionists. Craig made it clear that the purpose of Northern Ireland was to act as a guarantee of “Protestant Power.”<sup>22</sup> Both Craig and Carson asserted that the new state needed to be economically and politically viable. It needed to have a guaranteed Unionist majority and have a defensible border<sup>23</sup> and settled on a six county solution.

In negotiation with Nationalists Lloyd George made it clear that any solution that was outside of the British Commonwealth would not be acceptable<sup>24</sup>. The Anglo- Irish Treaty was signed in December 1921. This established the Irish Free State as a dominion within the empire and an opt out clause for the north. This precipitated a split in the independence movement on the issue of remaining within the British Commonwealth and not being a republic and led to civil war. Collins famously stated the treaty offered “*not the ultimate freedom that all nations desire... but the freedom in achieve it.*”<sup>25</sup> On the 6th of December 1922 the Irish Free State came into being with the six counties of Northern Ireland quickly exercising its right to opt out.

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<sup>16</sup> Uk Government of Ireland Act 1914 briefing note available at:<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/>

<sup>17</sup> Hennessey, T. p.4.

<sup>18</sup> Gibney, J. p.194.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p.196.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.197.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p.5

<sup>22</sup> Townsend, C.. p.179

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Lee, J. *Ireland. 1912-1985. Politics and Society*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 1989.

<sup>25</sup> Collins, M quoted in Gibney, J. p. 200-201.

Therefore the Northern Ireland state can be seen to be established to ensure a continued Unionist dominance and can be seen to define itself;

*“by its Protestantism against Catholicism and by its Britishness against Irishness; Protestantism and Britishness were its core values and they had been established as symbols of Ulster centuries before. This also meant, however, that anti-Catholicism and anti-Irishness continued as central defining tenets of the new state”.*<sup>26</sup>

Craig when Lord Craigavon stated “I have always said, I am an Orangeman first and a politician afterwards. I boast we are a Protestant parliament and a Protestant state.”<sup>27</sup> These attitudes and underlying values formed the basis for Unionist rule and led to Catholics being treated as “second class citizens”<sup>28</sup> in areas of elections, housing, employment and other ways. Anti-Catholicism could be seen to shape Northern Ireland society and its behaviours , ideas and social structure.<sup>29</sup>

In local government Unionists went on to develop strategies of dominance.<sup>30</sup> Proportional representation was changed in 1929 for a first past the post system and allowed for council boundaries to be redrawn. A property based franchise was restored. This meant that wards with a nationalist majority could be redrawn in order that it took a huge nationalist majority in order to win a seat. This used up Nationalist votes while Unionist areas only needed a slight majority in order to get elected.<sup>31</sup> William Miller, Unionist MP for Fermanagh and Tyrone commented in 1923;

*“ When the government of Northern Ireland decided to do away with proportional representation the chance that they've been waiting for for so long arrived and they took advantage of it.... they divided the country in the way they fought best”.*<sup>32</sup>

Although not universal it allowed for continued Unionist dominance over councils where the local population was predominantly Catholic. In 1966 Londonderry had a predominantly Catholic population accounting for 66 percent of the population with Protestants accounting for 34 percent and was divided into three wards: South Ward; North Ward and Waterside Ward. Out of 20 county council seats nationalist councillors

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<sup>26</sup> Brewer, J and Higgins G. *Anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland. The Mote and the Beam*. London. Palgrave McMillan. Available online at: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/sectarian/brewer.htm>. 1998.

<sup>27</sup> Gibney, J. and Brewer, J and Higgins G.

<sup>28</sup> Gibney, J. p.226

<sup>29</sup> Brewer, J and Higgins, G.

<sup>30</sup> Townsend, C. p. 190.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Coogan, T, P. *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*. Dublin. Arrow Books. 2003. p. 305.

made up just 40 percent of councillors with 8 councillors and Unionist councillors accounting for 60 percent of seats with 12 councillors.<sup>33</sup> The South Ward contained 11,185 voters of which 10,047 were Catholic and 1,138 were protestant and returned 8 Nationalist Councillors. The North Ward contained 6,476 voters of which 2,540 were Catholic and 3,946 were Protestant and returned 8 Unionist Councillors. The Waterside Ward contained 5,549 voters and of which 1,852 were Catholic and 3,697 were Protestant.<sup>34</sup> All of the Nationalist councillors were elected in the South Ward and none were elected in the other two wards.

In relation to housing, prior to the 1950's there was little public housing and few allegations of discrimination in relation to housing.<sup>35</sup> This changed after 1945 after large scale investment in public housing. In 1961 public rented housing accounted for 21 per cent of housing and by 1971 this had increased to 35 per cent. As public housing increased so did complaints.<sup>36</sup> The Cameron Commission which was instigated after rioting in October 1968 concluded that there were many examples of councils withholding planning permission when a project could lead to an electoral disadvantage.<sup>37</sup> The Commission also concluded that overall numbers of allocated housing corresponded roughly to the proportions of Catholics and Protestants, the main criteria being to maintain the current political position.<sup>38</sup> In the South Ward of Londonderry housing was almost exclusively given to Catholics.<sup>39</sup> Housing allocation was used in conjunction with council boundary revisions that ensured that Catholic voters were predominantly located in certain wards which ensured an unionist majority.

Discrimination of employment was institutionalised from the inception of the state particularly in relation to public sector employment. An underlying belief that nationalists were disloyal and a desire to protect the state from being penetrated by "disloyalists" can be seen in the requirement for public employees to take an oath to the state. Unionists saw the oath as an essential test of a person's loyalty while this was resented by nationalists.<sup>40</sup> This can be seen as a siege mentality<sup>41</sup> and led to public appointments; the police, judiciary, government and public services being dominated by

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Hennessey, J. p.129.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p.129

<sup>37</sup> Lord Cameron. *Disturbances in Northern Ireland. Report by the Commission appointed by the Governor of Northern Ireland.* (1969). Belfast. HMSO. Available at:<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/hmso/cameron.htm#chap1>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Lord Cameron

<sup>40</sup> Gibney, J. p.63

<sup>41</sup> Ibid . p.64.

Protestants.<sup>42</sup> All through the period up to the 60's a pattern developed where Protestant employers favoured Protestant workers. Protestants dominated the professions and highest paid occupations and the managerial positions within companies. Catholics predominated in the lower skilled and lowest paid occupations. In looking at patterns of unemployment Catholics although Catholics made up a third of the workforce they always made up the majority of the unemployed. In emigration statistics Catholics were also over represented.<sup>43</sup>

The political stability of Northern Ireland was also undermined by the continuation of a siege mentality by Unionists and "insecurity was built into the very foundations of the Northern Irish state." which was being assailed by perceived external and internal threats<sup>44</sup>. It is perhaps against this background that helped to reinforce discriminatory and sectarian policies by Unionist politicians and governments in order to ensure continued Unionist domination. This sense of a threat mentality of Unionists was also reinforced by a continuation of the armed struggle by a small minority of republicans of the Irish Republican Army which "heightened the defensiveness" of Unionism.<sup>45</sup> In the IRA campaign operation harvest started in 1956 involved 600 incidents. These spanned minor public order offences to murder, and resulted in the death of six policemen and 12 IRA Volunteers.<sup>46</sup> The change of the Free States Constitution in Dec 1937 removing the monarchy from constitutional provisions relating to the Free States internal affairs<sup>47</sup> and asserting that "the national territory consists of the whole of Ireland" added to concerns of a "latent menace of Southern irredentism"<sup>48</sup> and also a fear of British betrayal.<sup>49</sup>

In conclusion, for most of the period after its foundation the history of Northern Ireland could be described as being stable and uneventful. However the policies of the new state had been shaped by the legacy of past antagonisms and an inherent insecurity of threats from within, the alien other<sup>50</sup> and outside, and it was these insecurities that shaped the policies of the new state. The threat was always there. The new state was created as a means to avert a civil war in Ireland and provide a solution to the "Irish Problem" The society shaped by the new Northern Ireland state was unequal, divided,

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<sup>42</sup> Coogan. P.

<sup>43</sup> Townsend, C. . p.193.

<sup>44</sup> Brewer, J and Higgins, G.

<sup>45</sup> Jackson, A. p. 358

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Daly, P. *Creating Ireland. The Words and Events that Shaped Us*. Dublin. Hachette Books. 2008. p. 73.

<sup>48</sup> Fitzpatrick, D. *The Two Irelands. 1912-1939*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.1998. p. 142.

<sup>49</sup> Townsend, C. p.189.

<sup>50</sup> Bowyer Bell, J.. *The Irish Troubles. A Generation of Violence. 1967-1992*. Dublin. Gill and McMillan. 1993. p. 24

and discriminatory<sup>51</sup> and was unable to develop and escape from its insecurities. Catholic Nationalists therefore found themselves in a cycle that excluded them from an Irish state and led them to be excluded from the institutions of the Northern Ireland state.<sup>52</sup> It was this which laid at the heart of the political instability that can be seen to engulf the Northern Ireland state in the 60's and then went on to define the troubles of the following decades. It is hard to disagree with Jackson that the history of Northern Ireland in this period "reads like a compressed version of the story of Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Townsend, C. p.191.

<sup>52</sup> Townsend, C. p.191.

<sup>53</sup> Jackson p.358-359

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