

Discuss the changes in British policy towards Northern Ireland between 1968 and 1979. What accounts for the shift in policy from March 1972?

Introduction:

In the latter half of the twentieth century, few events took place as widespread, destructive and impactful as the Troubles. What had initially started in 1916 as an uprising against British colonial rule in Ireland was now a decade spanning war of terror, in an attempt to make Northern Ireland ungovernable from London, and seek a unification with the Republic of Ireland to the South. While these actions were in some cases only partially successful, with the peace process resulting in a power sharing agreement between Unionists and Republicans in Northern Ireland, total reunification has not yet happened. In the years between 1968 and 1979, many major events took place throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland, which this piece of research will cover, along with their impacts on the current situation in Northern Ireland and the Republic.

Background:

Irish independence movements had been a huge impact on British politics for centuries by the time that Ireland finally gained independence in 1922. Even in the wake of Irish independence, groups both inside the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland pushed for a united Ireland. Most prominent and most important to this piece of research is the Irish Republican Army, better known as the IRA. There are other groups involved in the process though - such as the Ulster Volunteers, the British government and its representatives in Northern Ireland, and the RUC, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (Taylor, 1998). Some of these are paramilitary groups, some are governmental organisations. But they all play crucial roles in the changing political environment in Northern Ireland, and all are integral to understanding how and why things changed in Northern Ireland in the seventies.

To understand the changing environment in Northern Ireland, we must first understand what the environment is, and how it was reached. The fallout from Irish independence in the 1920's was extreme for the entire nation of Great Britain, and for the newly created Republic of Ireland. When the new state emerged in 1922, ravaged by civil war and internal disputes over the direction that the government should take, the fact that the North of the country, the provinces of Ulster, had chosen to remain with Westminster instead of Dublin hung over the heads of both Irish and British politicians. While it took decades to reach the tension that led to the Troubles, anger and action over the division of the island led to immediate, and deadly, acts of terrorism on the British mainland. The IRA campaign across England throughout the first months of 1939 totalled "61 separate bombing incidents" (Craig, 2010, Pg. 2). When compared with later campaigns, this is the smallest period of IRA agitation, and, as Tony Craig writes in his work *Sabotage!*, "this... was an unmitigated disaster for the IRA" (Craig, 2010, Pg. 9). It however did not go unnoticed in Britain, and provided the impetus for the passing of the Prevention of Violence Act, which has become the forefather of all anti-terrorism laws in the United Kingdom, and the direct predecessor to the act of the same name passed in 1973 (Craig, 2010, Pg. 9).

The campaign itself petered out towards the end of 1939, and violence was mostly postponed throughout the Second World War as there were much more pressing issues - most notably the struggle against Nazism. After the war was over, however, calls for a reunified Ireland became louder and louder. This is clearly visible in the reemergence of the

IRA, and the rise of Sinn Féin as their main political supporters. With the war over and the economic and political situation in the United Kingdom being especially fragile in the decades immediately following it, the time was ripe for a fresh strike at Northern Ireland by the IRA. Their moves around this time are the main cause of the Troubles, with cross border raids, attacks and movements being conducted against British Army and government positions becoming a frequent group of events.

Some of the most successful IRA attacks take place around this time - in 1979, shortly after the rise of Margaret Thatcher to the office of Prime Minister, Lord Louis Mountbatten, a prominent figure in British political and monarchist circles, was killed in an attack on his boat off the coast of County Sligo in the Republic. This, on the same day that the Warrenpoint ambush took place, making it the deadliest day for British forces in Northern Ireland during the entire period of the Troubles (Kennedy, 2020). In the years before huge numbers of British armed service personnel had been killed or wounded in similar attacks, and slow or minimal British government response only exacerbated the problems. It was only with the suspension of the Sunningdale agreement, in the wake of the Ulster Workers Council strike, that real change was on its way.

Why do the changes happen?

The Sunningdale agreement was an understanding between the British government and factions within Northern Ireland to allow for the region to remain a part of the United Kingdom, after the disintegration of governance in the area (Saunders, 2019, Pg. 300). When the agreement fell apart following the Ulster Workers Council strike, the British government was left with no choice but to seize direct control over the region and to govern Northern Ireland directly from Westminster. This of course upset the people of Ulster, who could now not elect their own representatives to govern them, but was seen as a great triumph for the IRA. They had succeeded in wounding the British government enough that it was forced to compromise democratic principles, and rule directly from London. It wasn't until the Good Friday agreement that a normal, local governance was established, and provided the basis for a return to democratic institutions in Northern Ireland (Parliament, 2024).

Until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 then, there was to be direct London rule of Northern Ireland. Escalating violence in the region, between the IRA, the British Army and Unionist militias contributed to the extreme lengths between parliamentary rule in Northern Ireland, damaging attempts to deescalate the situation and restore peace and order to the area. British policy towards the region thus remained the same, despite a change in governance during the time period. The decision to scrap Sunningdale happened under a Conservative government, and up until 1979 the UK was under a Labour government. Thatcher's rise to Prime Minister in 1979 heralded the beginning of eighteen years of consecutive Conservative rule over parliament. Why then, was this policy so bipartisan? Was there no conflict between Labour and Conservative views towards Northern Ireland, and finding a resolution to the conflict in the region? Direct rule was a Tory movement after all, and the cooperation with the Ulster Union Workers Council that would have enabled Northern Ireland to keep its parliament was not forthcoming within the time of the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement.

That no change in policy takes place within the next several years is indicative of the fact that the British governmental establishment was willing to accept the new status quo in Northern Ireland, as it suited their needs. Funding troops to remain on station permanently in Northern Ireland, at least for as long as the matter was escalating, was a weight on the British governmental budget that the nation could ill afford during a financial crisis. Saunders writes in his book *Yes to Europe* "all this fed into a wider atmosphere of domestic crisis, which was both economic and political in character" (Saunders, 2019, Pg. 19). This agreement between parties, though unofficial, displays the clear alignment of parliamentary policy in dealing with Northern Ireland and its seemingly endless stream of issues that had been plaguing the region since the independence of the Republic in the mid-Twentieth Century.

Impact of the Changes:

Removing control over the region from the Northern Irish constituencies and placing control directly into the hands of Westminster and the armed forces on the ground, set the stage for the worst of the Troubles to come. In 1979, three major events rocked Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom as a whole - the assassinations of Lord Louis Mountbatten and Airey Neave, and the Warrenpoint Ambush, two of which happened on the same day, and marked a serious increase in the competence and capabilities of the IRA. Neave was killed in the heart of British Imperial control, within spitting distance of the Houses of Parliament, right in the centre of London. Mountbatten was blown up in a similar way aboard his boat off the coast of County Sligo, Republic of Ireland, and the Warrenpoint Ambush took place along the border with Northern Ireland and the Republic. Escalating violence of this kind, some in reciprocation for other acts of violence, such as the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry, only saw the situation deteriorate at greater pace.

Finding a resolution to the crisis in Northern Ireland dominated global politics for much of the second half of the Twentieth Century. US President Bill Clinton, alongside other US politicians and other global leaders, were at the forefront of negotiating peace in Northern Ireland, which would inevitably lead back to a power-sharing agreement much like that of Sunningdale. The decision to hold off on reinstituting self rule in Northern Ireland, through the four administrations that we have examined so far, became mostly a choice out of pragmatism, as we have seen. It was simply cheaper, and easier, than running the region as it had been before the outbreak of renewed conflict and the strike by the Ulster Union Workers Council. The failures of the Conservative Party to address the concerns of the Northern Irish Unionists led directly to the creation of the Democratic Unionist Party, which has remained one of the dominant forces in Northern Irish and British politics since the end of the Troubles.

Crushing Sunningdale was a major boost to IRA morale and image when, during the years after, the brutal bombings and attacks on British and Northern Irish civilian and military infrastructure alike encouraged the British government to move its plans forward more expeditiously. Reform in the Police-Military coordination saw a greater increase in anti-IRA activities than ever before, and encouraged greater cooperation between both forces, which had previously been at odds with each other (Taylor, 1998, Pg. 255). Streamlining the organisations under the command of the Prime Minister and directly to Number 10 in Downing Street enabled the government to respond promptly when crises emerged.

Conclusion:

This piece has attempted to examine one of the most complex and controversial periods in British and Northern Irish history. The Troubles is, rightly so, a very emotive issue, and has remained that since the eventual end in 1998, with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Peace in Northern Ireland was an extensive process, and was not the aim of this piece in its scope. It would, however, be impossible to discuss the changes that took place in the 1960's and 70's without discussing the eventual change that would result from it. The collapse of the Sunningdale agreement and the failure to rebuild any sort of representative governance in Northern Ireland following its destruction exacerbated the tensions in the region and allowed for the continued chaos that had plagued the region since the end of the Second World War.

As we have seen, the lack of representative rule from Stormont and implementation of direct rule from Westminster enabled the IRA to damage and upend efforts in Northern Ireland to resolve and calm the situation down to a level where normal governance could be resumed. This was compounded by the continued successful attacks by the IRA on both civilian and military targets within the region, and the assassinations of both Airey Neave and Lord Mountbatten showed that nobody, regardless of political significance, was safe from IRA attacks. The Warrenpoint Ambush devastated British military intelligence and its supposed grip on the situation to the point that reform within the chain of command, which had been unheard of up until the point that two significant IRA targets were hit on the same day was unheard of, was necessary in the eyes of the political elite operating from London. The changes that the collapse of Sunningdale, and its consequences, encouraged shaped the face of the British government's response to the situation in Northern Ireland for the entire rest of the Troubles and was a significant period not just in regional history but in British history as a whole. After all, the Good Friday Agreement laid the groundwork for the modern post-Brexit EU Settlement, and was a foundational pillar in securing devolution in Northern Ireland, and a basis for the same process in Wales and Scotland.

Sunningdale itself was the basis for the devolved government that now runs Northern Ireland, with the Stormont power-sharing deal between Unionists and Republicans based on the principles that Sunningdale laid out. The failure of Sunningdale at the hands of the Ulster Workers Union Council doomed the peace process in Northern Ireland for decades, and let the groundwork for the continuation of the Troubles continue to solidify until the point that escalation and destruction could no longer lead to tangible results for either side.

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