

Why did Northern Ireland fail to establish political stability in the period between 1920 – 1967?

Stability – in all its political and economic forms – is founded on certainty and clarity, supported by trust, and enabled by confidence...And Northern Ireland's political stability is under threat.

- Dr Mary C. Murphy¹

From the early 19th century until the 1920s, the British government debated how to handle Irish nationalism and calls for Irish independence. This debate was known as the "Irish question." In 1844, Benjamin Disraeli defined the Irish Question in the House of Commons sitting: '*The State of Ireland*' as:

'A dense population, in extreme distress, inhabit an island where there is an Established Church, which is not their Church, and a territorial aristocracy the richest of whom live in foreign capitals. Thus you have a starving population, an absentee aristocracy, and an alien Church; and in addition the weakest executive in the world. That is the Irish Question.'

— Hansard²

While the majority of the Catholic population in Ireland asked that the British government consider steps that would allow for the fulfilment of Irish National ambitions, the Protestant community in Ireland was a staunch supporter of the union. The act of union in 1801 is a legislative agreement between the parliament of Great Britain and the parliament of Ireland, uniting them as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.³ With these opposing philosophies, the British government was soon faced with growing instability in Ireland as

¹ Murphy, Mary, *Northern Ireland crisis: how the Protocol is threatening political stability*, (2022)

² Hansard, *The State of Ireland*, (House of Commons, 1844), series 3 vol 72 cciv, 1016.

³ Jackson, Alvin, *Ireland 1798 – 1998: Politics and War*, (1999)

the sectarian tension between Protestants and Catholics increased. They started looking for a fresh solution and ultimately decided on the idea of partition. The north eastern counties of Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, and Tyrone made up the state of Northern Ireland when it was established in 1920 in accordance with the provisions of the Government of Ireland Act. Despite the fact that it also had a sizeable Catholic population, this region served as the centre of the Protestant unionist opposition to Irish nationalism. The nationalists were a political movement that promoted Irish nationalism by advocating for the Irish people to be governed as a sovereign nation.⁴ Less than fifty per cent (50%) of Northern Ireland's population was Catholic by 1926, and this religious demography, combined with the difficult conditions of the state's establishment, would leave deep political wounds. When the Anglo-Irish war started, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) was vehemently opposed to both the partition of Ireland into Northern and Southern Ireland and the establishment of a unionist state in the northeast.

After years of strained ties between the colonial power and the Irish people, the rebels made a vain attempt to overthrow the British during the 1916 "Easter rebellion" in Dublin, which was led by Patrick Pearse while they were preoccupied with the First World War. Instead, they failed to attract the support they needed from their fellow Irish men. According to Boyce, following the second Home Rule Bill's defeat in 1893, there was a brief period of calm before the third Home Rule Bill's conflict and tensions took over.⁵ The rebellion resulted from Gladstone's third attempt to introduce the Home Rule Bill in 1913, which was approved by the House of Commons but was temporarily postponed from becoming law because the House of Lords exercised its residual rights under the 1911 Parliament Act to vote against the

⁴ Jackson, Alvin, *Ireland 1798 – 1998: Politics and War*, (1999)

⁵ Boyce, David George, *Nineteenth-Century Ireland: the Search for Stability* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), p. 286

Bill. With the first world war upon them, in 1914, the British Government announced that Home Rule would be introduced after the war to incentivise Southern Ireland to join with them against Germany. Therefore, the appeal by the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) leader, John Redmond, which called for the Irish Volunteers to serve with the British Army, led to the split in the Irish Volunteers. There, were the National Volunteers, who were people who backed and supported Redmond because they thought that by supporting the Allied war effort, they would guarantee the eventual establishment of Home Rule. And the Irish Volunteers. They continued to go by this name as they were the remaining individuals who opposed any participation in the war and carried out the Easter Rising.

The British government's poor handling of the Easter Rising's aftermath, especially the hasty executions of its leaders like Pearse, increased support for Sinn Féin, an Irish republican movement that was a minor separatist party taken over by the Easter Rising survivors. In an effort to restore some degree of stability in Ireland, the British Government; after the Easter Rising, offered to quickly implement Home Rule with the condition that six of the Ulster counties would be excluded. However, they made two fruitless attempts to enact Home Rule, both of which failed due to Ulster unionists' opposition to its intended implementation for the entire island of Ireland; the first after the Rising, and the second at the end of the Irish Convention of 1917-1918. Some would contend that the end of the war in 1918 made it possible for Sinn Féin to win the majority of the seventy-three (73) Irish seats, twenty-five (25) of which were uncontested in the general election. Furthermore, they established a breakaway government known as Dáil Éireann in January 1919, when twenty-seven (27) Sinn Féin MPs gathered in Dublin and unilaterally proclaimed themselves as an independent parliament of an Irish Republic. This action resulted in the Irish War of Independence.

The political instability of Northern Ireland began following Britain's implementation of the fourth Home Rule Bill which was the Government of Ireland Act in 1920. It was "An Act to

provide for the better government of Ireland.” According to Hennessey, the legislation provided for a Council of Ireland to facilitate the eventual reunion of Ireland with the permission of both Irish Parliaments. As stated in the Government of Ireland Bill's Preamble:

‘Although at the beginning there are to be two Parliaments and two Governments in Ireland, the Act contemplates and affords every facility for union between North and South, and empowers the two Parliaments by mutual agreement and joint action to terminate partition and set up one Parliament and one Government for the whole of Ireland.’⁶

The Walter Long Committee, which was formed in response to the Irish Convention's report, played a significant role in shaping the Government of Ireland Act. In order to formalise the division of Ireland and Ulster into Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland, Long, a fervent unionist, felt free to mould Home Rule in favour of unionism. Northern Ireland's Home Rule Parliament was established in June 1921. At its inauguration in Belfast City Hall, King George V delivered a historic appeal for Anglo-Irish and north-south reconciliation; and this was penned by Prime Minister Lloyd George. It was inevitable that Northern Ireland's Parliament would choose to reject the new Free State under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Evidently, this disagreement led to the Irish Civil War (1922–1923) in the South.

The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 had allowed for the modification of the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State, and nationalists throughout Ireland believed that the promise of this possible revision would sever and destabilise the North. The violence that started in the South and spread to Northern Ireland was seen by Ulster unionists as a sign of what to expect from a united Ireland.⁷ To add, the Nationalists in the north were compelled to

⁶ Hennessey, *A History of Northern Ireland 1920 – 1996* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1997), p. 9 -10.

⁷ Hennessey, *A History of Northern Ireland 1920 – 1996* (1997), p. 11.

acknowledge the continuation of partition and that they would have to cohabit with the unionist government.

Northern Ireland's founding was bloody due to the extensive community violence that occurred at the time. Numerous Catholics were murdered, thousands were fired from their jobs, their homes were demolished, and hundreds of Catholic-owned businesses were destroyed. Edward Carson, a unionist politician and barrister, refuted that the Protestant reason for their part in the communal violence in the North was not focused on anti-Catholicism, but claims it was against 'Sinn Féiners, who are engaged in a conspiracy in Ireland to overthrow the authority of the King and bring about secession from the British Government'.⁸ This notion was particularly prevalent among Ulster Protestants because they believed that if the Sinn Féiners practise any religion at all, it is primarily the Roman Catholic faith, and the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church had never once taken any action to oppose the crimes and killings that the Sinn Féin organisation seems to be committing.⁹ Thus, many Protestants associated Sinn Féiners with the Catholic population of the North, and as a result, those who support the Irish Republican Army (IRA) were also considered Catholics.

On the contrary, nationalists in both the North and the South interpreted the communal violence in Northern Ireland as confirmation of genocide against the Catholic populace. As the violence continued, the Belfast Boycott committee was established by several supporters of Sinn Féin and the IRA, and it petitioned Dail Eireann to punish Belfast by boycotting its banks and goods in retaliation for the 'war of extermination being waged against us'.¹⁰

Unlike many unionists, Jason Devlin made a distinctive analysis of both Sinn Féin and the IRA, and he concluded that the communal violence coming from the Protestant side was

⁸ *Weekly Northern Whig*, 30 Oct. 1920; Hennessey, *A History of Northern Ireland 1920 – 1996* (1997), p. 12.

⁹ House of Commons Debates, vol. 132, col. 1111, 26 Dec. 1920; Hennessey, *A History of Northern Ireland 1920 – 1996* (1997), p. 12.

¹⁰ Hennessey, *A History of Northern Ireland 1920 – 1996* (1997), p. 14.

driven by prejudice against Catholics for being Catholic. He contended that Catholic shipyard employees and other Catholics:

‘were attacked because they were Sinn Féiners...even so, they had no right to be attacked...every man has a right to his own opinion...This is not a war against crime but against opinion...I say the attack in Belfast was made not because they were Sinn Féiners, but because they were Catholics, and that is why they were attacked.’¹¹

Northern Ireland’s unionist governors, led by the new state’s first prime minister, James Craig, saw themselves as the political and military winners of the early to mid-twentieth-century disputes, and they exhibited little mercy toward the nationalist minority at either point in time; whether it is in this time or later. The nationalists were a segment of Northern society that became permanently isolated, and they were also a tiny minority in the devolved parliament and hence never formed an administration. They were significantly underrepresented in both the highest groups of the public sector and most of the occupations; the police force included.

The House of Commons Act was enacted by the Northern Ireland Parliament as a voting procedure and seat distribution scheme; thus, abolishing Proportional representation.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, proportional representation is defined as an electoral system in which parties gain seats in proportion to the number of votes cast for them.¹² The abolition of proportional representation in the September 1929 local government elections held in Stormont, was a disparate move by the unionist ministers that severely weakened the nationalist representation in parliament. Many socially disadvantaged persons were denied the right to vote due to the preservation of a property requirement for local and

¹¹ Hennessey, *A History of Northern Ireland 1920 – 1996* (1997), p, 14.

¹² The Oxford English Dictionary, 1933.

not parliamentary government franchises. Although both the unionist and nationalist persons living in poverty were impacted, the nationalists suffered immensely. Most of the nationalists who were primarily located in the west of Northern Ireland, held the view that the unionist administration deliberately supported the eastern counties in terms of social advancement and economic investment.

The state of a country's economy is a factor that points to its failure to establish a politically stable government. The economic hardship and welfare reforms implemented by the Northern Ireland administration in October 1932 led to widespread agitation that resulted in rioting in Belfast's streets. This particular protest was notable because it saw Protestant and Catholic protesters temporarily set aside their differences over religion and cooperated. The occurrences were dubbed the outdoor relief riots. Seán Mitchell in his *Struggle or Starve: Working-Class Unity in Belfast's 1932 Outdoor Relief Riots*, is of the theory that class-based politics did exist during this time. The working-class communities needed assistance from the global recession brought on by the Wall Street Crash of 1929, but the Victorian Poor Laws still served as the foundation for any welfare programmes that were in place in Northern Ireland at the time; which Mitchell went on to describe as 'an institutionalised form of class control.'¹³ The streets in front of City Hall on October 3rd, 1932, were packed with a crowd of people, both Catholic and Protestant who were ready to strike throughout Belfast. They all gathered to listen to the speakers who were all of the different political backgrounds, communist, nationalist, unionist, and the Labour Party. Their demands were the same, better welfare and a living wage. Ultimately the relief outdoor riots were put down and the orange card was used by Northern Ireland's Prime Minister Lord Craigavon, in a ruthless way that blamed the IRA for these riots. By 1960 Religious relations in Northern Ireland were described as a 'cold war', with each side profoundly conscious of the

¹³ Mitchell, Seán, *Struggle or Starve: Working-Class Unity in Belfast's 1932 Outdoor Relief Riots* (2017)

wrongness of the other but neither, on the whole ready to carry condemnation to its limit. The nature of Northern Ireland society, both its churches and its schools helped to reproduce communal divisions. Protestants complained that Catholic schoolchildren were being deliberately taught to look at all Protestants as wrong and wicked, and were carefully trained to be anti-British nationalists. Catholics denied that they taught hatred of Protestants and complained that Protestants were taught to hate the Catholic faith and to mistrust Catholics. This continued divide of opinions is still prevalent to this present day.

In the early nineteenth century, the sectarian division, among other factors, was one of the main contributors or obstacles to Northern Ireland gaining political stability. Their opposing philosophies caused instability in the government. These can scene in the communal violence in Belfast, the economic distress of the country and the constant discrimination against the minority groups such as the Catholics by the political authorities. Despite numerous attempts by Great Britain to establish political stability in Ireland the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches failed to come to an agreement on Irish nationalism.

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