

constitution of the Irish Republic, in Articles 2 and 3, laid claim to the territory of the six northern counties, a refusal to accept the legitimacy of a neighbour's sovereignty unique within the European Economic Community. Historically, relations between the United Kingdom and Ireland had been rocky. As a historicist creed, Irish nationalism had an obsessively informed memory of British perfidy; as an imperial, culturally Protestant identity, Britishness reacted to Irish nationalism with condescending bafflement and an irritatingly self-assured moral superiority. If the 'totality of relations' comprised a cat's cradle, persistent violence in Northern Ireland, both from the remarkably militaristic and ruthless IRA, and the rougher-hewn sectarian rage of loyalism, ensured that there was rarely time and political space for the British government to steady itself sufficiently to slice the Gordian knot.

It is certainly the case that Britain was fundamentally consistent in its promotion of a framework for settling Northern Ireland, at least from 1972. This was made up of three dimensions. An 'east-west' dimension required cooperation between the sovereign governments in Dublin and London. An 'internal dimension' required the reestablishment of devolved government in Northern Ireland, but now on a cross-community rather than 'majoritarian' basis: any government at Stormont would have to draw in representatives of both the main traditions in Northern Ireland. The 'north-south' dimension would recalibrate relations between the two governments on the island of Ireland, so that they cooperated rather than collided. Finally, the entirety of the 'totality of relations' would have to be sorted out as one coherent interlocking deal if any settlement was to stick.

The east-west, internal 'Catholic-Protestant', and north-south axes were always promoted as the framework for a settlement. Britain, moreover, did not waver from its position that Crown sovereignty over Northern Ireland could not be relinquished without the express consent of the majority within Northern Ireland. However, it is worth emphasising that British parameters for a settlement were inherently ambiguous, being algebraic in form with the values of the various categories up for negotiation. East-west relations, for example, might simply involve neighbourly relations between Dublin and London, and an acknowledgement that the government of Ireland has a particular interest in affairs north of the border. They might, however, go much further than this, with the Irish government being seen as special representatives of Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland, and having an automatic right to be consulted as such. The 'internal' axis might amount to a devolved government in Northern Ireland based upon full power-sharing, with mandatory coalition governments yoking together nationalists and

10 'Just another country'? The Irish question in the Thatcher years

Marc Mulholland

In their emblematic song of commercial nihilism, 'Anarchy in the UK' (1977), the Sex Pistols sarcastically reflected on the bathetic fate of that once imperial title, the 'United Kingdom'. The UK was now little more than one acronym among many in a neo-corporate Britain straining under the weight of a proliferation – NEDDY, TUC, CBI, PIB, GLC, etc. Northern Ireland seemed only the most extreme example of a general dissolution, where Parliament and government waned in their effective power of decision and acronym organisations had taken on a life of their own:

Is this the M.P.L.A. or
Is this the U.D.A. or
Is this the I.R.A.
I thought it was the U.K.
Or just another country

For Conservatives, of course, punk was part of the disease. Northern Ireland, however, was in their eyes an extreme manifestation of a general malaise: the decline of parliamentary sovereignty, refusal to defend to the hilt irreducible Britishness, and conciliation of subversion and over-mighty interest groups. Indeed, by the later 1970s, it was close to common sense that Britain had made the situation in Northern Ireland worse by trying too hard to resolve it.

The parameters of British policy

The 'Ulster problem' was by no means straightforward. Within Northern Ireland, a hard division existed between Catholics and Protestants: there was no 'floating vote' on the constitutional question. Relations between the unionist establishment in the north and the nationalist establishment in the south were poor. Unionists denied the legitimacy of all-Ireland national allegiance, despite a 'united Ireland' being the bedrock of Irish nationalist ideology for many decades. The

unionists. It might also conceivably mean (and this was the unionists' preferred interpretation), a government based upon a simple majority of deputies in a Stormont parliament, but with powerful parliamentary committees, some chaired by opposition MPs, with the right to see normally confidential governmental paperwork – a kind of extended Privy Council. The 'north-south' axis was perhaps most algebraic in form: would it simply reflect two governments on one island diplomatically cooperating over affairs of common interest, or was it rather an acknowledgement that a single government of Ireland was the logical end-point, and north-south cooperation thus a preparation for such a consummation? Indeed, the original and defunct 'Council of Ireland' in the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, the act which had established partition, had been explicitly designed to serve as a future all-Ireland government in embryo.

During the Troubles, the British government recognised two principles that, logically speaking, were incompatible. By explicitly stating that the Crown would gladly abandon governance in Northern Ireland if a majority in the province concurred, Britain implicitly conceded that Irish sovereignty had a higher moral claim than British sovereignty. No British government, by contrast, declared itself neutral on the intrinsic moral worth of the Union between England, Wales and Scotland, even if in practice majority support for Scottish secession, should it ever come about, could hardly be denied. Britain effectively conceded that all-Ireland sovereignty was a *right*, even if its exercise was blocked by circumstances, while Crown sovereignty in Northern Ireland was a *duty*, to be gracefully abandoned when circumstances allowed. On the other hand, Britain recognised Northern Ireland as the appropriate unit for the exercise of 'democratic consent'. As the six-county province was an entity designedly carved out to save as much of Ireland from Irish nationalism as was compatible with a safe unionist majority, Britain recognised a unionist-crafted *right* of veto on the exercise of all-Ireland (and indeed United Kingdom) self-determination. Britain undertook responsibility for Northern Ireland as a *duty* to unionism so long as it retained majority support within Northern Ireland.

The function of Britain's algebraic framework for a settlement was to square the circle. 'Greening' governance within Northern Ireland, and locating it within a balanced articulation of rights, claims and duties between Britain and Ireland, was a down-payment partly redeeming the *right* of Irish sovereignty. This, hopefully, would reconcile Irish nationalism with Britain's *duty* to uphold Northern Ireland's electorate as the constituency with the right to trigger or withhold all-Ireland sovereignty. Essentially, Britain's strategy was persuasive, attempting

to force the contending parties in Northern Ireland to accept *British* realities. As such, the algebraic constancy of Britain's approach was consistent with an exceptionally wide range of approaches to the political actors within Northern Ireland, and indeed Ireland as a whole.

I wish to argue here that Britain's approach to the actors of Northern Ireland veered wildly over the course of the Troubles. This had the effect of stoking up fears and promoting hopes within Northern Ireland in such a manner that the conflict was often aggravated. Britain was so obviously negotiating with the parties to the conflict, wiling before their episodic concentrations of strength and exploiting their episodic weaknesses, and so obviously willing to switch tack, that militancy and obduracy were perfectly understandable responses from both nationalism and unionism to Britain's gyrations. In brief, we can divide up British strategies as follows:

- keeping the conflict at arm's length (1921–68, 1976–c. 1984);
- building the political 'centre' in Northern Ireland (1968–April 1972, August 1972–1974, c. 1984–9);
- bringing in the political 'extremes' in Northern Ireland (July 1972, 1975, 1990s).

British strategy before Thatcher

After partition, Britain pretty much left Northern Ireland, under the devolved Ulster Unionist-run administration at Stormont, to its own devices. As Catholic grievances about discrimination grew in the 1960s, and the moderate Unionist leadership of Captain Terence O'Neill provoked an ultra and Paisleyite dissidence, this became increasingly untenable. From about 1966, the British government leant upon the devolved Unionist government, encouraging it to introduce civil rights reform. This pressure, however, tended to undermine the position of O'Neill as a liberal Unionist Prime Minister. It was too easy for right-wingers within unionism to accuse him of appeasing a hostile Labour government. When the civil rights movement broke out in Northern Ireland in 1968, Harold Wilson's government insisted upon substantive reform. This contributed to the fall of Terence O'Neill in April 1969, and his replacement by the hapless James Chichester-Clark. Following the commitment of the regular army to keep security control from August 1969, London ministers had a great deal of *de facto* control over day-to-day policy in Northern Ireland. However, British ministers were well aware that Ulster's Protestants saw Stormont as 'their' government, and a bulwark against treachery. Particularly as the struggle

with the IRA ramped up, Britain was loathe to stand down the devolved Unionist government, for fear of provoking a unionist backlash. Britain therefore delivered a robust security policy, particularly evident from the election of Edward Heath's UK government in June 1970. By vigorously cracking down on Catholic nationalist insurgency, it was hoped that the relatively moderate Unionist government at Stormont, led from March 1971 by Brian Faulkner, could be shored up against the increasingly restive unionist ultras. Hardnosed repression, however – the Falls Road Curfew in July 1970, internment in August 1971, a distinct willingness to use lethal force particularly evident in early 1972 – all served to win Catholic nationalist support for the IRA.

We might describe British strategy from the mid 1960s to the pro-roguing of Stormont in April 1972 as one of 'shoring up the centre'. The goal was to maintain a moderate Protestant unionist leadership, and to deliver enough civil rights reform to nurture a new and equally moderate Catholic nationalist leadership. This strategy had clearly failed by 1972, as Irish nationalism rejected British pretensions to be a neutral arbiter, and unionist ultras demanded more repression than could be realistically delivered.

When Britain indefinitely suspended Stormont, it seemed temporarily at a loss as to what to do next. For a brief interlude, the Direct Rule administration turned to 'bringing in the extremes'. This involved direct negotiations with the Provisional IRA in July 1972. These quickly broke down, and an embarrassed Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, William Whitelaw, dismissed the episode as nothing more than a means by which Britain had tried to make its determination not to capitulate to violence clear to the IRA. It seems evident, however, that Britain had entertained real hopes that the IRA could be brought into a political process, and there is no reason to believe that Britain would not have offered substantial concessions, not just in terms of the release of prisoners and so on, but also by encouraging open-ended talks, including representatives of militant republicanism, on the status of Northern Ireland.¹

By the late summer of 1972, however, Britain had reverted to 'shoring up the centre'. This involved dismissing republicanism as a political participant, and encouraging moderate unionists and nationalists to hammer out a deal. This resulted in the power-sharing agreement of 1973, negotiated primarily between the moderate nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), and the ancillary Sunningdale Agreement of 1974 that established an all-Ireland Council of Ireland to undertake executive functions as and when delegated them by the parliaments in Ireland.

Sunningdale collapsed in the face of unionist objections that the institutions agreed were a one-way rather towards Irish unity, and a loyalist strike forced the Ulster Unionists to abandon the power-sharing government in May 1974. As the deal was designed to be mutually supportive, the Council of Ireland collapsed as well. The British government (Labour again, since March 1974) reverted to 'bringing in the extremes'. The political wing of the IRA, Sinn Féin, had been legalised in 1974 (as had, briefly, the loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force), and a 'truce' was arranged between British forces and the IRA in 1975. Labour ministers clearly hoped that 'creative' extremists, united if only by a common belief that British sovereignty was incapable of resolving the conflict, would emerge as the political representatives of both nationalist and unionist communities. However, Labour mistook loyalist nostalgia for Stormont as an incipient anti-British 'Ulster nationalism' when in fact Protestant opinion valued the Union far above any particular form of regional governance.² By 1976, Britain had decided that its hyperactive attempts at a settlement had only aggravated the conflict in Northern Ireland, by encouraging nationalists and unionists to hope for the best and prepare for the worst. 'The turmoil in Northern Ireland is due in part to inconsistencies in British policy, which is constantly reversing itself', the loyalist leader Andy Tyrie told an interviewer in 1981.³

Thatcher and Northern Ireland

Such ideas had significant currency in Conservative circles. Tom Utley, the talented and influential Tory journalist with a particular interest in the Irish question, insisted in 1974: 'what is essential to defeating a revolution ... is the will to victory.... [H]ad Britain concentrated single-mindedly on producing that despair in the IRA, the battle for Ulster would now be over.'⁴ Enoch Powell, a Unionist MP for South Down since October 1974, argued that the aspirations of the nationalist minority had to be broken because it was not possible for the same territory to belong to two nations: there had to be a total victory for the unionist majority. The British government, he argued, should treat Northern Ireland exactly like the rest of the UK, a policy known as 'integration'. He denounced 'false compromise between incompatible political objectives which has always been the prelude to chaos in Ulster'⁵ and urged that the only way the war would come to an end was when one side realised that it could not win.⁶ Margaret Thatcher was temperamentally a unionist of the Powell stripe. She shared his desire for military victory, and even for integration. When a Northern Ireland constituency Conservative Association was established in Northern Ireland in 1990,

she wrote to it in support, expressing her determination to 'maintain the Union'.⁷

As the new Conservative leader, Thatcher appointed Airey Neave as Shadow spokesman on Northern Ireland. Neave, a former war hero, was close to Thatcher, having been national organiser of Thatcher's successful bid to become party leader. He echoed Utey and Powell in accusing the Labour government of causing deep fear among law-abiding people and democratic politicians in Northern Ireland by studied ambiguity over its constitutional intentions. He pledged his party's commitment to retaining Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom, and to maintaining troops there. In 1977, Neave welcomed the visit to the province by the Queen as paving the way to a settlement based on a strengthened Union, and in 1978, he announced that the Conservative Party had formally buried its support for a devolved power-sharing administration in Northern Ireland, where parties from both unionist and nationalist traditions would be required to govern together, as no longer 'practical politics'.⁸

Neave was assassinated by the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) on 31 March 1979. Thatcher was understandably shocked.⁹ She did not, however, cleave to his policies once in office. The new Conservative government abandoned the notion of 'integration'. Most importantly, the Irish government had made clear its unalterable opposition to abandonment of power-sharing devolution with an 'Irish dimension'. As Secretary of State Jim Prior admitted, integration would not destroy Irish nationalist aspirations, and 'it would have scuppered any hope of co-operation with Dublin'.¹⁰ And while Ian Paisley, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, was impressed by Thatcher's talk of militarily defeating the IRA,¹¹ it was evident to government ministers that the IRA, following its cellular reorganisation, was more difficult than ever to utterly defeat, even if it could be contained.¹²

James Prior attempted to initiate momentum towards an 'internal settlement' by promoting 'Rolling Devolution'. The idea was that a locally elected assembly would reach agreement on how devolved powers should be exercised, not in one fell swoop but by stages. John Hume of the moderate SDLP attacked the assembly as a 'subterfuge', without power-sharing as of right but as a favour granted by unionists, and entirely ignoring the all-Irish dimension. Unionists, for their part, were quite clear that power-sharing, never mind an 'Irish dimension', was not a price worth paying for devolution.¹³

More important was the development of links between the two sovereign governments. Charles Haughey, who became Taoiseach in late 1979, first met with Thatcher in May 1980. He found her impressive – a

tough leader' – but was left unsure of her intentions.¹⁴ On 8 December 1980, in the first ever meeting of its kind, the prime ministers, foreign ministers and finance ministers of Britain and Ireland met, largely cutting out the Northern Ireland Office.¹⁵ It was, Paul Arthur notes, 'the most powerful British cabinet presence in Ireland since partition'.¹⁶ Here it was agreed to establish Anglo-Irish 'studies' to examine 'possible new institutional structures, citizenship rights, security matters, economic co-operation and measures to encourage mutual understanding'. Ulster Unionists blamed the malign influence of the Foreign Office and Lord Carrington. Enoch Powell, incidentally, led the way in such conspiracy theorising, believing the Anglo-Irish initiative to be driven by a Foreign Office/American plot to achieve a united Ireland within NATO.¹⁷

When Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands on 2 April 1982, the unionists felt that their mistrust of the Foreign Office had been vindicated. Ireland at first voted for EEC trade sanctions against Argentina. On 4 May 1982, however, the Dublin government said it was 'appalled' by Britain's sinking of the Argentine warship *Admiral Belgrano* and in May Ireland joined Italy in opposing renewal of EEC trade sanctions against Argentina.¹⁸ In June 1982, breaking with custom, there were no formal talks between Britain and Ireland at the European summit conference in Brussels. When Thatcher met the Republic's new premier, Garrett FitzGerald, during the EEC Heads of Government meeting on 21 March 1983, it was the first such meeting for almost sixteen months.

This diplomatic stand-off came in the aftermath of the hunger strikes in Northern Ireland. Special category status for convicted prisoners – in effect the same regime as allowed unconvicted internees – had been conceded by Secretary of State William Whitelaw in June 1972. When, in November 1975, a later Secretary of State, Merlyn Rees, announced that the special category status of prisoners in Northern Ireland was to cease, he explained that it had engendered illusions in the prisoners that they had political status and were entitled to favoured treatment and future amnesty. 'Criminalisation' was problematic, however, as prisoners suspected of politically motivated ('scheduled') sentences were tried by special 'Diplock' courts, with no jury, and indeed there was ample evidence of confessions being beaten out of suspects. Andy Tyrrie, commander of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), summed it up: 'It's nice to be tough, but it would be better to be tough about issues other than this. There are special courts and special legislation, so why can't there be special prisoners?'¹⁹ A republican hunger strike to the death began on 1 March 1981, when Bobby Sands (26) refused food. The strike resolved into a cruel war of nerves. The British government

hinted that substantial concessions would be made after the prisoners ceased their fast, but refused to specify them. In 1991, Sean McKenna, a former prison protester, who had left the IRA after having watched the ten hunger-strikers die in 1981, claimed the IRA leadership in the prison had been 'as intransigent as the Brits'.²⁰

For Norman Tebbit, Thatcher's defiance of the hunger-strikers was of a piece with her refusal to heed the Cassandra-like warnings of Tory wets during the aggravated recession of the early 1980s: 'it was becoming clear that she was a Prime Minister unlike any since Churchill'.²¹ Thatcher had become a personalised hate figure for the IRA during the hunger strikes.²² On 12 October 1984, the IRA bombed the Grand Hotel in Brighton, England, in an attempt to murder Margaret Thatcher and senior members of the government staying there during the Conservative Party Conference.

The real significance of the strike was to undermine the pretensions of 'normalisation' (and the concomitant 'criminalisation'), and to thrust 'smash H-Block' candidates, then Sinn Féin itself, into electoral politics. In the 1982 elections to the newly established Northern Ireland Assembly, Sinn Féin candidates got 64,191 first-preference votes. Many observers saw the results as disastrous, giving credibility to Sinn Féin and the provisionals' 'armed struggle'. Speaking privately to Conservative MPs, James Prior expressed his fear that the whole of Ireland could become another Cuba in the event of a Sinn Féin takeover in the north, and he stressed his pessimism about the SDLP's chances of stopping Sinn Féin's electoral advance.²³ Indeed, even the Ulster Unionist Party explicitly decided to go easy on the SDLP in an attempt to shore it up. Should Sinn Féin overhaul the SDLP, said James Molyneux of the Ulster Unionist Party, it would herald the start of Northern Ireland's 'ultimate nightmare'.²⁴

The SDLP's problem was that its moderation appeared to win no favour from the British government, which refused steadfastly to upset the unionist majority. It was vital that it be seen to have a forward strategy if the rise of Sinn Féin was to be stymied. On 11 March 1983, therefore, the Republic's government announced its decision to press ahead with plans for an all-Ireland forum of Irish political parties to discuss the 'national question', along lines suggested by the SDLP. On 2 May 1984, after eleven months of deliberations, the New Ireland Forum came out in favour of unity by consent with guarantees for the protection of both unionist and nationalist identities, but two other options – a federal island and joint sovereignty over Northern Ireland – were also on the table. The real gravamen of the document, however, was on the need to institutionally represent an Irish nationalist identity that, *pace* the integrationists, was not ephemeral:

For nationalists, a central aim has been the survival and development of an Irish identity, an objective that continues in Northern Ireland today as nationalists seek effective recognition of their Irish identity and pursue their rights and aspirations through political means.²⁵

Addressing a press conference after an Anglo-Irish summit on 19 November 1984, with Fitzgerald sitting horrified at her side, Thatcher with contemptuous off-handedness ruled out the three options proposed by the New Ireland Forum report. The unionist parties reacted with glee. Unionists were optimistic that Thatcher, influenced by her pro-unionist PPS, Ian Gow, would not challenge their core interests.²⁶ In fact, as early as 1983, Thatcher was aware that an agreement between the British and Irish governments was 'probable rather than possible', as a Northern Ireland minister remembered.²⁷

Towards Anglo-Irish rapprochement

Charles Powell, a senior civil service aide to Thatcher, recalled that for the Prime Minister, 'security was paramount ... it was security first, second and third'.²⁸ This was evident in her enthusiasm for a joint-security zone, allowing Crown forces to pursue IRA suspects across the border. However, it seems clear that it was Garrett Fitzgerald and his team who really drove the inter-governmental negotiations. They offered all manner of security cooperation in return for 'Joint Authority' of Northern Ireland by ministers of Britain and Ireland. It is hard to believe that this was really the Irish government's goal. To be sure, 'Joint Authority' had to be the minimum starting point for their negotiators, as otherwise they would have been accused of simply ignoring the agreed nationalist agenda of the New Ireland Forum. However, Joint Authority promised power with a terrifying amount of responsibility. A four-million-strong Irish state simply could not look upon a material engagement in the conflict in Northern Ireland, on their own island, with anything like the *noblesse oblige* of Britain's fifty-five million across the Irish Sea. Should the conflict escalate, loyalism had a proven ability to wreak carnage in southern Irish cities, and the IRA could actually subvert the state. It is prudent to assume that by offering the resources of the Irish state to anti-insurgency efforts north of the border in return for Joint Authority (and massive reform of Northern Ireland's security and judicial system), the Irish were making an offer they knew would be refused, allowing them to fall back on the in fact far more attractive proposition of a right of consultation with minimum strings attached.

Garret Fitzgerald's first achievement, according to Geoffrey Howe, was to convince Thatcher that the rise of Sinn Féin was a threat to stability in Ireland, both north and south.²⁹ Sinn Féin's rise indubitably

reflected Catholic 'alienation' from the institutions of state. Thatcher, however, thought that talk of alienation smacked of Marxism, and disliked it proportionately. When Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Douglas Hurd dutifully denied that Catholic alienation existed, John Hume riposted that he would invite Hurd to visit him at his home in the Catholic Bogside of Derry to discuss the matter, only that it would require 'an army of tanks to bring him here'.³⁰ In November 1984, the strongly anti-republican Catholic Bishop of Down and Connor, Cahal Daly, insisted that he lived in the middle of 'Catholic alienation' and it was not confined to people who voted Sinn Féin.³¹

For the Irish government, the aim was to lessen Catholic alienation by reforming the institutions of governance in Northern Ireland so that the Catholic community there could accept its legitimacy without denying their Irish nationalism. FitzGerald explained his government's thinking to the British thus:

The [Catholic] minority [in Northern Ireland] wanted to live in their own country in peace. Just as [Thatcher] was proud of being English, they took pride in their Irish identity and felt themselves cut off by an arbitrary act from the rest of the nationalist majority in Ireland. They could not express their identity, not being allowed even to fly the flag of their own nation in their own country ... A way must be found to enable them to identify with the system of government.³²

Thatcher clearly found difficult to accept at an emotional level the idea that Irish nationalists could never be brought to accept the democratic legitimacy of British sovereignty. She was obsessed with the idea of solving the problem by somehow creating a purely British enclave state in Ireland. Douglas Hurd said:

I do not know how many times she began a conversation with me by saying that the answer might be to redraw the border so as to be rid of areas which were substantially Nationalist, and retain a loyal and impregnable Unionist province. Repeatedly I had to tell her ... [t]here was no tidy dividing line. The intertwining of the communities was hopelessly complex.³³

Thatcher was unwilling to engage with the unattractive reality that Irish nationalists were inassimilable to British sovereignty. Though quite well-read on Irish history, she found it impossible to synthesise an overall analysis, presumably because to do so would have meant over-throwing cherished assumptions. The head of the Northern Ireland civil service at the time, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, found Thatcher to be 'inconsistent to the brink of schizophrenia', veering from sentimental unionism to disdain for actually existing Ulster unionism.³⁴ Robin Ramsay, a former PPS to the Secretary of State for Northern

Ireland, recalled an awkward encounter with her at a formal dinner in 1983:

To my astonishment, she suddenly turned on me and imperiously demanded to know what 'your lot', meaning the Ulster Unionists really wanted ... [S]he thumped the table and said in exasperation, 'I can't get any sense out of the leadership. They just keep mumbling the old slogans. And the others run rings around them.'³⁵

Here was the frustration of a political leader exasperated at her inability to intellectually rebut Irish nationalist claims. During the negotiations, Thatcher admired FitzGerald for his intellectual skill and clearly superior knowledge of the issues at stake. By the time she came to write her autobiography out of office, this admiration had curdled into a rather churlish resentment.³⁶

Thatcher's lack of a clear line on the Irish question had a positive side. James Molyneux, who as Ulster Unionist leader had no great cause to speak well of the Prime Minister, contrasted Thatcher favourably with Edward Heath, because she was willing to seek out expert opinion.³⁷ 'It took a gigantic struggle by many far-sighted-people to persuade her', Geoffrey Howe wrote, but while 'her head was persuaded, her heart was not'.³⁸

Thatcher, therefore, was not the real policy-maker on the British side. Sir Robert Armstrong, head of the British civil service, laid the groundwork with Dermot McNally, secretary to the Irish Cabinet. Armstrong was politically supported by Douglas Hurd and Chris Patten, both close to the Foreign Office headed by Geoffrey Howe.³⁹ A *Times* article from December 1985 said of Armstrong, Howe and Hurd, that they worked easily together and had 'a similar world view and similar personalities. None of them has any enthusiasm for the Union.'⁴⁰ The Northern Ireland Office civil service, on the other hand, were almost entirely excluded from negotiations.⁴¹ Indeed, the Conservative elite in general were kept out of the loop. When the draft Anglo-Irish Agreement was finally presented to Cabinet, it was as a fait accompli.⁴² All those who still inclined to the view that constitutional initiatives only tended to provoke unionists and tempt nationalists to seek more were ignored.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement

On 15 November 1985, the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed by Margaret Thatcher and Garret FitzGerald at Hillsborough Castle, County Down. Thatcher cut an impressive figure. FitzGerald was carefully spoken, but nowhere near as 'authoritative and clear spoken' as his

counterpart, an Irish minister admitted: 'Thatcher is undoubtedly the sharpest thing out, she looked very well (how can she be 60!), quite feminine, but totally in control and totally on the ball.'⁴³ This belied the Irish negotiating triumph, however. Substantively, the Agreement obliged Britain to consult Dublin on affairs pertaining to nationalist interests within Northern Ireland.⁴⁴ An Inter-Governmental Conference was set up, to be serviced by a full-time secretariat of British and Irish civil servants based in Belfast. The Agreement stated that:

the Conference shall be a framework within which the Irish Government may, where the interests of the minority community are significantly or especially affected, put forward views on proposals for major legislation and on major policy issues, which are within the purview of the Northern Ireland Departments and which remain the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.⁴⁵

So long as there was no devolved government in Northern Ireland, *all* legislation and policy issues were the responsibility of the Secretary of State, and so fair game for Irish consultation.

This Agreement was, in many ways, a quite extraordinary British confession of inadequacy. Britain gave up trying to speak for a subset of UK citizens, asking instead the Irish government to act as 'advocates for the Nationalist community'.⁴⁶ This was a striking deferral by Britain to a 'foreign government', but, as Tom Wilson, a writer sympathetic to the unionist case, admitted: 'to the Catholic minority in Ulster, the Republic is not a foreign state'.⁴⁷

Thatcher was primarily concerned with winning security cooperation from the Republic of Ireland; at any rate she chose to emphasise this in her memoirs.⁴⁸ One might be somewhat sceptical about this. The Agreement was vague on cross-border security cooperation, and purely permissive. It did not of itself materially diminish the IRA's military capacity, and by 1988 Britain had turned to harsher repression on its own behalf. A broadcast ban was introduced on 'direct statements' by representatives or in support of paramilitary organisations.⁴⁹ (In September 1990, this led to the bizarre ruling that a historical Ulster Television Schools' series could not include the voices of the former president of the Republic, Eamon de Valera, or of the former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sean MacBride). On top of this the security forces adopted a demonstrably harder line. By 1992, thirty-seven IRA volunteers had been shot dead by the SAS and undercover units, thirty-one since an intensification of covert operations in 1983, compared to nine by regular army units.⁵⁰ All this was very much in defiance of advice proffered by the Irish side of the Inter-Governmental Conference.

The greatest source of angst for the British was extradition. But while the Irish government did amend the 1965 Extradition Act to remove the exemption for 'politically motivated suspects', it also increased the requirements for evidence in warrants issued by the British Attorney General. Thatcher complained that Britain was being treated as a 'least favoured nation', and British-Irish relations nose-dived.⁵¹ In the first year of the legislation, five people were extradited, but thirty-two warrants returned. Despite months of deliberation, officials of the two governments had failed to produce an agreed report on extradition before the end of Thatcher's term.

Thatcher also later evinced surprise at unionist hostility to the Anglo-Irish Agreement: 'it was worse than anyone had predicted to me'.⁵² This is hard to credit, as the Agreement was in fact very well trailed. As early as 28 July 1985 the Orange Order had angrily warned of a Protestant backlash that would make the 1974 Ulster Workers' Council strike look like 'a Sunday picnic'.⁵³ By September 1985, Official Unionist deputy leader Harold McCusker was publicly arguing that unionists had the right to resist British government betrayal, if necessary by force of arms.⁵⁴ In November 1985, 'Ulster Clubs' involving unionist politicians and loyalist paramilitaries were established to resist any Anglo-Irish deal.

Ian Gow, a junior minister close to Thatcher, would certainly have predicted unionist fireworks. He resigned from the government in protest at the accord.⁵⁵ Unionist protest against the signed Agreement included the petitioning of courts and the Queen, elected representatives boycotting ministers, local councils refusing to conduct normal business, and even default on taxes and rates.⁵⁶ A 'day of action' was held on 3 March 1986, during which there was widespread rioting. This, however, exposed the limits of loyalism, for unlike 1974 there was no locally responsible power-sharing administration to bring down, and burning out RUC officers was unlikely to endear the unionist cause to a British audience. On 20 November 1989, Ulster Unionist leader Molyneux admitted that he had considered resignation when he and Paisley were 'railroaded' into supporting the day of action. Thatcher had effectively broken the British prime-ministerial mould by successfully confronting and facing down the unionists.⁵⁷

The Agreement can be seen as an attempt to bolster the middle ground against the 'extremes'. The rise of Sinn Féin had made bolstering the SDLP as a centre alternative to Sinn Féin a government priority. The government was openly delighted that the Unionists lost the Newry and Armagh seat at Westminster to the SDLP in December 1985, and by a swing of 5 per cent of the nationalist vote away from Sinn Féin to

the SDLP. However, the Anglo-Irish Agreement was also calculated to reinforce the unionist centre, by coercively forcing it into serious negotiations for power-sharing with nationalists as the only alternative to direct Irish government involvement.⁵⁸ The Agreement had made clear that if unionists could agree devolution with nationalists – which meant paying the price of power-sharing and an Irish dimension – they could roll back the Irish government's right of consultation on Northern Ireland affairs.⁵⁹ Unionists, naturally, were outraged at the blackmail implied. 'The paradox of the Anglo-Irish Agreement', Harvey Cox observes, 'was that for several years it appeared to have become in itself the most immediate obstacle to the achievement of its own proclaimed purpose.'⁶⁰

As unionists protested, the Inter-Governmental Conference and its secretariat functioned. A youthful Irish government diplomat later wrote:

The full institutional impact of the Anglo-Irish Agreement has never been highlighted or documented. With good reason. Seeing how mad the Unionists were at its symbolism, they would go crazy altogether if they knew its full practical detail. In one sense, this is a pity, because it would give the lie to those who said that the Agreement was ineffective. How could it be? The Agreement gave the Irish Government a consultative role in all aspects of Northern Irish life ... [I]n the absence of a settlement or assembly, the agreement *was* the political system.⁶¹

It seems certain that the Irish side did succeed in promoting reforms, though for diplomatic reasons this was never admitted. In 1987, the Flags and Emblems Act, which had come close to criminalising the display of the Irish tricolour, was repealed. New public order legislation required seven days' notice for processions, including 'traditional', i.e. loyalist, marches, and the RUC was given wider grounds to impose conditions on such events. An independent Police Complaints Commission for Northern Ireland was established. In March 1990, the Irish minister of foreign affairs, Brian Lenihan, felt able to say that as a result of the Inter-Governmental Conference the RUC was now 'established as a professional police force holding the balance'.⁶² The Fair Employment Act, which came into effect in 1990, imposed a new legal duty on firms to monitor the religious composition of their workforces, and this quite rapidly showed a lessening of Catholic disadvantage in the job market.

For all Thatcher's later insistence that she had negotiated for security cooperation, it is clear that she signed a political agreement, as she recognised when addressing an American audience in 1992. She described the Anglo-Irish Agreement as a mechanism to allow the two governments to 'consult together on new items of policy'. Her hope had been

that 'the Nationalist community, Republican community, in Northern Ireland might perhaps have more confidence and, on that basis, agree with the Republic of Ireland that Northern Ireland should stay with the United Kingdom as long as that were the wish of her people'.⁶³ Nonetheless, the Anglo-Irish Agreement was not popularly accepted as a settlement in itself. By January 1990 only 41 per cent of Catholics and 8 per cent of Protestants supported the Agreement. Of Catholics, 62 per cent thought it had made no difference to the political situation.⁶⁴ Catholic disaffection owed much to the promotion of the Anglo-Irish Agreement as an instrument designed to marginalise, rather than accommodate, Irish republicanism.

The conflict continues

The marsh breeding political violence had not been drained, however. In March 1988, three unarmed IRA members were shot dead by the SAS in Gibraltar. Back in Northern Ireland, their funeral was attacked by the loyalist, Michael Stone, who killed three men. Then, at the funeral of Stone's victims, two British soldiers in plain clothes were set upon by the crowd, then captured and shot dead by the IRA. Brian Mawhinney, a junior minister in the Direct Rule administration, recalled his fear that 'Northern Ireland was *very* close to the edge of serious and bloody breakdown then'.⁶⁵ One outcome was a deliberate channelling of funds to deprived Catholic areas, on the understanding that heavily unionist workplaces such as the shipyards had long been subsidised, and that it was time to even up the balance.⁶⁶ For political reasons, therefore, Northern Ireland was 'largely immune' to the hegemony of economic Thatcherism.⁶⁷ The 'Making Belfast Work' programme was organised in partnership with the Catholic clergy, hitherto rather sidelined by the government, but now favoured as an alternative to Sinn Féin-influenced community leaders.⁶⁸ This was the beginning of 'grantocracy', whereby the British state funded nationalist civil society on the ground. It was a key part of the 1990s peace process that, for the first time, republicans were included in this largesse.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement had played a role in preparing for a new phase, wherein, once again, Britain would concentrate less on 'building the centre' than on 'bringing in the extremes'. The Secretary of State, Peter Brooke, insisted in November 1990 that Britain had no economic or strategic interest in the Union, repeated that it would accept unification by consent, and announced that republicanism could take its place alongside other parties in Northern Ireland if it gave up violence. The government was tentatively moving towards a position of effectively

facilitating Sinn Féin's electoral success in return for its moving away from and ultimately abandoning the armed struggle. Thatcher was never convinced by this strategy.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, she mostly left politics to those on the ground: Brooke felt that he received more loyal support from Thatcher than he did from her successor, John Major.⁷⁰

On 24 June 1990, in an interview in the *Sunday Tribune*, Gerry Adams said he had 'a major problem' with the IRA causing deaths of 'non-combatants'. Combatants, however, clearly included Thatcher's circle. On 30 July 1990, Ian Gow was murdered by an IRA bomb attached to his car because he was a 'close personal associate' of Thatcher. There was little surprise at Thatcher's determination, when she visited the security forces in Fermanagh shortly before her resignation: 'We must never, never give in to terrorism – never.' Indeed, in February 1990, in an interview with the *Irish News*, Martin McGuinness had admitted that it was the republican movement's military strategy to 'outlast Margaret Thatcher'.⁷¹ On 22 November 1990, Thatcher announced her resignation as Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister. The 'peace process', predicated once more on 'bringing in the extremes', by legitimising Irish republicanism in so far as it abandoned militarism, began its lengthy working out.

- 55 As is explicitly stated in the 1988 *Claim of Right*.
 - 56 This was something that Scottish Tories came to believe themselves, particularly the perception that they were anti-Scottish: see *The Scotsman*, 10 September 1987.
 - 57 Government reaction to the Convention's claims is covered in A. Brown and J. Parry (eds.), *The Scottish Government Yearbook 1990* (Edinburgh: Paul Harris, 1991), pp. 24–40.
 - 58 See Wright, *The People Say Yes*: the notion of popular sovereignty harked back to a ruling in the 1950s by Lord Cooper that parliamentary sovereignty was not a constitutional idea recognised in Scots law.
 - 59 McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*, pp. 104–27, 149–75.
 - 60 As was indicated in the Scottish Conservative Conferences in 1989 and 1990. The appointment of John Redwood in 1993 and Michael Forsyth in 1995, both dedicated Thatcherites, as Welsh and Scottish Secretaries respectively, increased the perception of a continuing Thatcherite revolution, despite John Major's succession.
 - 61 *The Scotsman*, 2 February 1989, covering the delivery of a 300,000-strong petition against the Poll Tax to Downing Street.
 - 62 See the evidence of annual opinion poll surveys in the *Scottish Government Yearbook* (Edinburgh: Paul Harris, 1988–94).
 - 63 For a more positive interpretation of the role of civil society, see L. Paterson and R. Wyn Jones, 'Does Civil Society Drive Constitutional Change?', in Taylor and Thomson, *Scotland and Wales*, pp. 169–99, and 'Why Didn't Scots Vote Tory', *BBC Scotland Investigates*, broadcast 9 May 2010.
 - 64 M. Fry, 'Scotland Alone', *Prospect*, 16 December 2006.
 - 65 See, for example, Michael Forsyth's gesture of returning the Stone of Destiny taken by Edward I, and John Major's decision to hold the 1992 European summit in Edinburgh.
- 10 'JUST ANOTHER COUNTRY'? THE IRISH QUESTION
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- 1 See M. Mulholland, 'Irish Republican Politics and Violence before the Peace Process', *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 14 (2007), 403–4.
 - 2 'The historical significance of devolution was to hold Ulster for the Union': A. Aughey, *Under Siege: Ulster Unionism and the Anglo-Irish Agreement* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1989), p. 103.
 - 3 P. O'Malley, *The Uncivil Wars: Ireland Today* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1983), p. 331.
 - 4 T. E. Urtley, *Lessons of Ulster* (London: Dent, 1975), p. 147.
 - 5 S. Heffer, *Like the Roman: The Life of Enoch Powell* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), p. 762.
 - 6 *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 September 1974.
 - 7 *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 May 1990.
 - 8 *Belfast Telegraph*, 13 August 1977, 8 April 1978.
 - 9 M. Dillon, *The Dirty War* (London: Hutchinson, 1988), p. 287.

- 10 J. Prior, *A Balance of Power* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), p. 194.
- 11 E. Moloney and A. Pollak, *Paisley* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1986), p. 339.
- 12 Humphrey Atkins, quoted in E. Moloney, *The Secret History of the IRA* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), p. 171.
- 13 E. P. Kaufmann, *The Orange Order: A Contemporary Northern Irish History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 121.
- 14 B. Arnold, *What Kind of Country? Modern Irish Politics, 1968–1983* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), pp. 147–8.
- 15 C. O'Leary, S. Elliott and R. A. Wilford, *The Northern Ireland Assembly, 1982–1986: A Constitutional Experiment* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1988), p. 47.
- 16 P. Arthur, 'Anglo-Irish Relations and Constitutional Policy', in P. Mitchell and R. Wilford (eds.), *Politics in Northern Ireland* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), p. 248.
- 17 See, for example, Heffer, *Like the Romans*, p. 831. Oddly, an Irish minister involved in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 was later to claim that the US government had tried to link support for the Agreement to banning Acroflot from Shannon airport! *Irish Times*, 25–29 August, 1989; P. Keatinge, 'Ireland's Foreign Relations in 1989', *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 3 (1990), 155.
- 18 P. Arthur, *Special Relationships: Britain, Ireland and the Northern Ireland Problem* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2000), pp. 209–11.
- 19 T. Collins, *The Centre Cannot Hold: Britain's Failure in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Bookworks Ireland, 1983), p. 144.
- 20 *Irish News*, 12 August 1991.
- 21 N. Tebbit, *Upwardly Mobile* [1988] (London: Futura edn, 1989), p. 228.
- 22 G. McGladdery, *The Provisional IRA in England: The Bombing Campaign, 1973–1997* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), pp. 128–9.
- 23 *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 November 1984.
- 24 *Belfast Telegraph*, 21 April 1984.
- 25 *The New Ireland Forum* (Dublin: Stationary Office, 1984), paragraph 4.6.
- 26 G. Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party: Protest, Pragmatism and Pessimism* (Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 233–4.
- 27 R. Needham, *Battling for Peace: Northern Ireland's Longest-Serving British Minister* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1998), p. 80.
- 28 E. Mallie and D. McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001), p. 45.
- 29 G. Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 415.
- 30 R. Smith, *Garret: The Enigma* (Dublin: Aterlow, 1985), p. 422.
- 31 *Irish News*, 26 November 1984.
- 32 G. FitzGerald, *All in a Life: An Autobiography* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1991), p. 516.
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- 39 Hurd, *Memoirs*, p. 336; M. Stuart, 'Douglas Hurd: Foreign Secretary, 1989–95', in K. Theakston (ed.), *British Foreign Secretaries Since 1974* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 198.
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- 45 Anglo-Irish Agreement (available at CAIN Web Service, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/aia/aia.doc.htm>), Article 5 (c).
- 46 M. Cunningham, *British Government Policy in Northern Ireland, 1969–2000* (Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 50.
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