

Ch. 1 - The Partition of Ireland and the Emergence of Northern Ireland, 1920-1945

Learning Intentions

In this chapter you will learn about:

- The events that led to the partition of Ireland in 1920
- Divisions between unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland
- The structure of the North's government
- Law and order in Northern Ireland
- The North's economy
- Northern Ireland during World War II

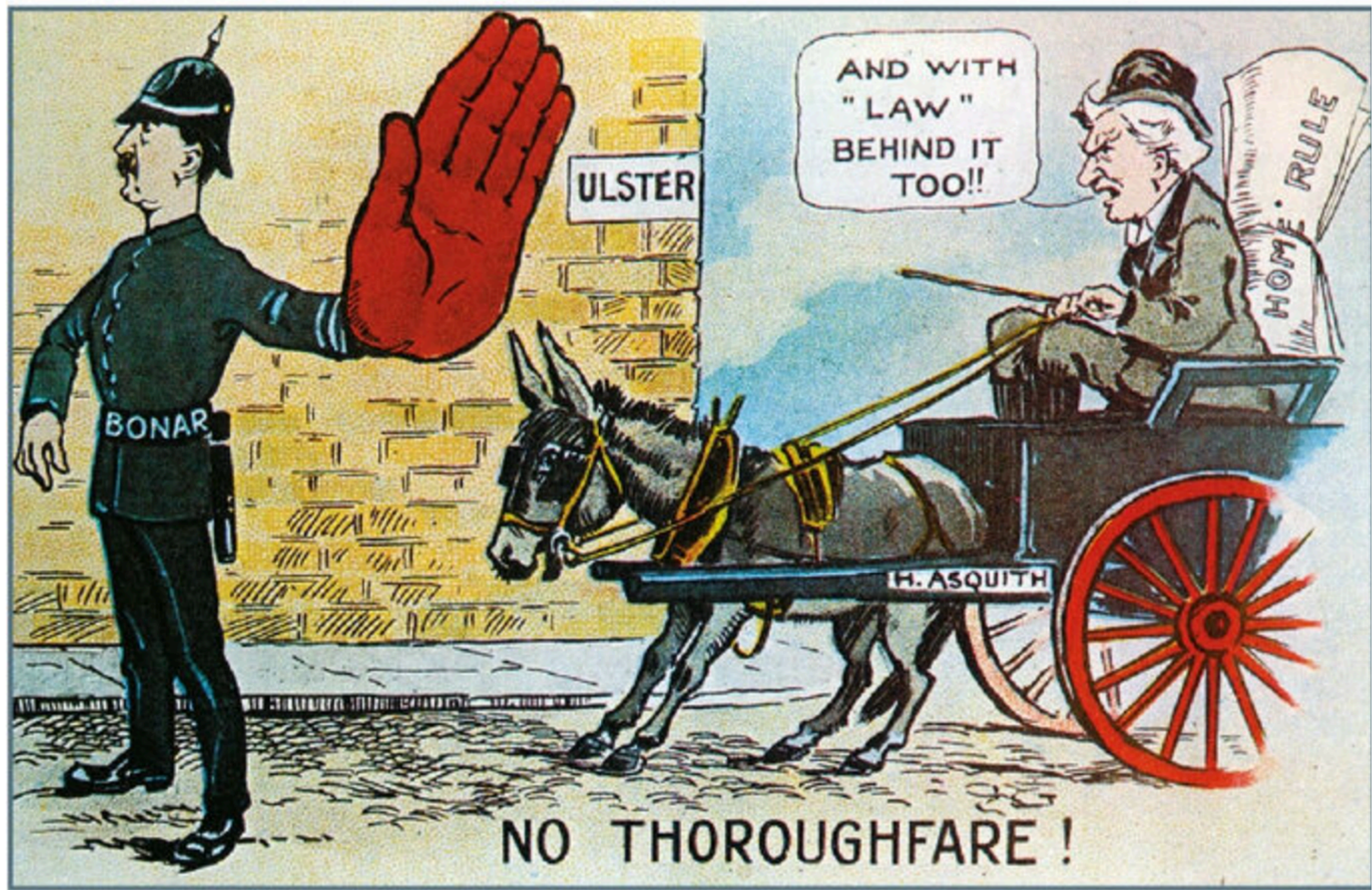
A New State: Northern Ireland

The Partition of Ireland

Under the Act of Union, 1801, Ireland was directly governed by the British parliament in Westminster. This meant that Irish Members of Parliament (MPs) no longer took their seats in a Dublin-based parliament, but instead sat in the House of Commons in London. From the 1870s onwards, Irish **constitutional nationalists** campaigned for a **Home Rule Bill** that would re-establish an Irish parliament, with power to legislate (make laws for internal Irish affairs).

This would not make Ireland completely independent from Britain - under Home Rule, the Westminster parliament would still control the country's external affairs, such as trade and international relations, including issues of war and peace.

The House of Commons passed the Third Home Rule Bill in 1912. The House of Lords delayed its implementation for two years, but Ireland was set to have a Home Rule parliament by 1914. This prospect alarmed Irish **unionists**. Unionists were happy to be governed by Westminster and to be part of the British Empire. They believed that a Home Rule parliament would weaken their link with Britain and damage their position in Irish society.



A contemporary cartoon illustrates the Unionist and Conservative Party roadblock to Home Rule

Unionists

Unionists were largely drawn from Ireland's minority Protestant community. In 1900 approximately 23% of the Irish population was Protestant, while the remaining 77% was Catholic. The Protestant community was strongest in the northeast of Ulster, particularly in Derry, Antrim, Down and Armagh.

Unionists believed that Ireland was better served by British rule. There were a number of specific reasons why they felt that a Dublin-based parliament would damage their position in Ireland.

- **Political:** Before the Act of Union, Protestants had enjoyed a privileged position in Irish political life. However, following the Act the power and influence of the Protestant Ascendancy (wealthy Protestant class) had weakened, especially after Catholic Emancipation, which once again allowed Catholics to vote, and sit as Members of Parliament. Protestants believed that Home Rule would further weaken their political influence in Irish society, especially as the country was 77% Catholic. Many Irish Protestants also held senior positions in the British government and civil service.

Unionists

- **Religious:** As most unionists were Protestants, they believed that the Catholic majority would not respect their religious beliefs and practices. This fear is best summed up in the slogan '*Home Rule is Rome Rule*'. Fear of Catholic intolerance was exacerbated, for example, by the Catholic Church's *Ne Temere* decree of 1907. This decree demanded that Catholics who married Protestants should raise their children as Catholics.
- **Economic:** The northeast of the country was Ireland's only heavily industrialised area. Unionists feared that a Home Rule parliament might interfere with the **free trade** that existed between Ireland and Britain and thus damage the North's economy. They also felt that, as most of Ireland's economy was based on agriculture, a Dublin parliament would understand little about northern industries.
- **Historical and Cultural:** Ireland's Protestant community had its own heritage and culture, which stretched back to the plantations of the 16th and 17th centuries. As colonisers, much of the early unionist heritage was based on British culture and the Protestant faith. While many Protestant settlers did also take on aspects of Irish culture, including the Irish language, there was a fear that the Catholic nationalist majority did not appreciate or respect unionist history and culture - that, indeed, they resented it bitterly.

Nationalists

- Nationalists sought independence from Britain, either through peaceful parliamentary means or physical force. Nationalists were largely members of the Irish Catholic community. However, several notable Protestants were leaders of nationalist movements, including Theobald Wolfe Tone and Charles Stewart Parnell, leaders of the United Irishmen and Home Rule movement, respectively. The growth of the Home Rule movement and the growing involvement of the Catholic Church from the 1880s alienated many Protestants from the nationalist movement.
- From the 1880s there was a growth in cultural nationalism. This saw a revival of traditional Gaelic games and the Irish language, as well as the emergence of a new wave of Anglo-Irish literature that reflected life in Ireland. Following the partition of Ireland in 1920, a minority of nationalists found themselves living in Northern Ireland. Northern Irish nationalists held strongly to their traditional Irish culture and sought the reunification of Ireland. Following partition, the term 'nationalist' became a by-word for Catholic.
- Politically, Northern Irish nationalists sought the reunification of Ireland and removal of British involvement on the island of Ireland. They were largely divided between peaceful constitutional nationalists, who sought reunification through peaceful, parliamentary means, and militant republicans, who wished to achieve reunification through physical force.

Unionist Resistance to Home Rule

- Realising that Home Rule was about to be imposed on them following the passing of the Third Home Rule Bill, unionist resistance became more militant. Under the leadership of the **Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)**, led by **Edward Carson**, they took the following steps:
 - On 28 September 1912 over 470,000 unionist men and women signed the **Ulster Solemn League and Covenant**, which outlined their reasons for opposing Home Rule. The signatories swore that they would resist its implementation by any means necessary.
 - In January 1913 the **Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)** was set up as a paramilitary organisation to physically resist the perceived imposition of Home Rule upon the unionist community.
 - In April 1914 the UVF successfully smuggled 20,000 rifles and 3 million rounds of ammunition into Northern Ireland.
- The actions of Northern Irish unionists alarmed Southern nationalists who, in response, formed their own paramilitary organisation, the **Irish Volunteers**. This surge of militarism on the island made civil war very likely. The British responded by seeking an agreement between unionists and nationalists that would create a peaceful resolution to the crisis.



Edward Carson addresses an anti-Home Rule rally

Unionist Resistance to Home Rule

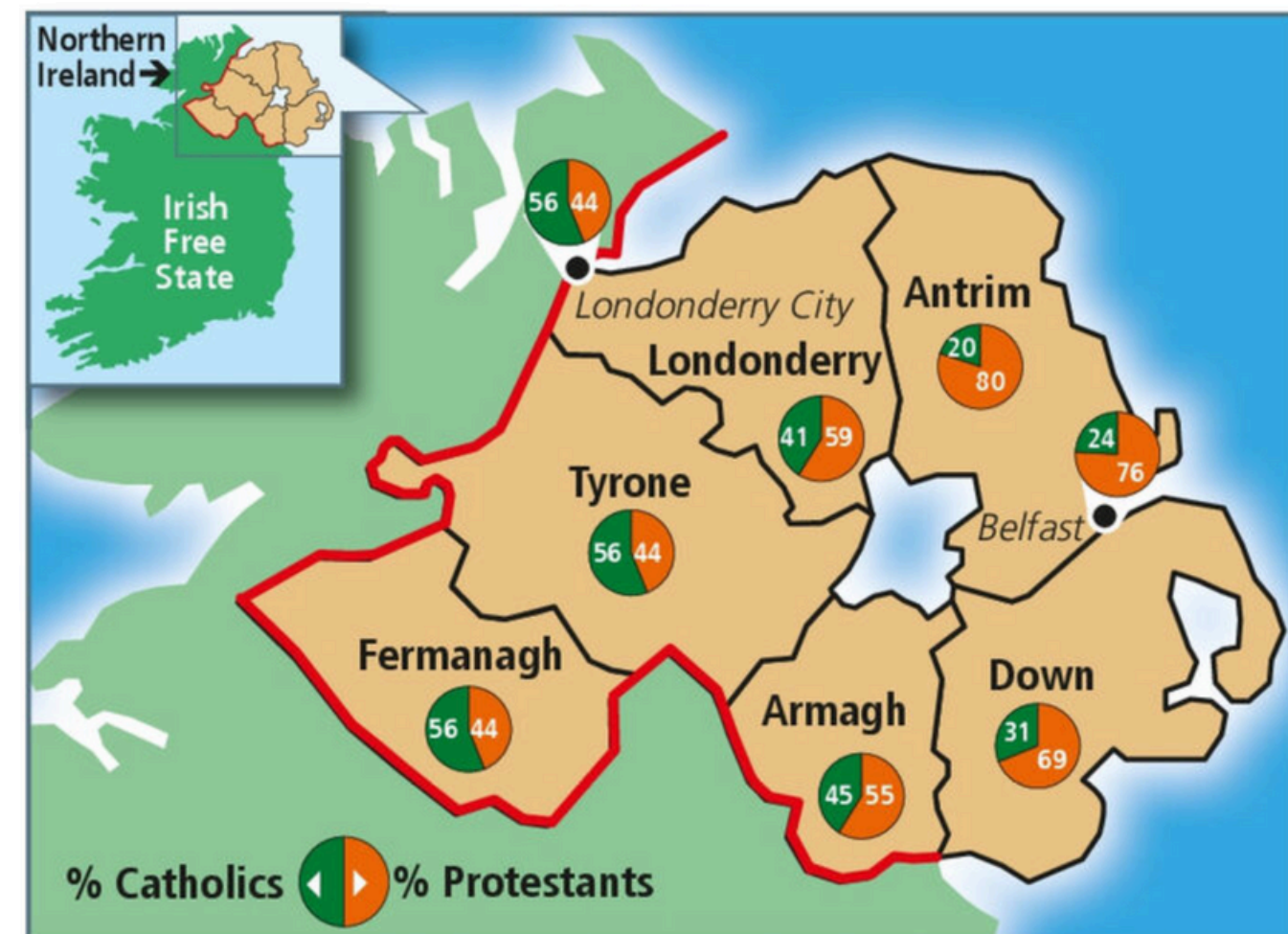
- In the talks that followed, Carson was adamant that the unionist-dominated areas of Ulster must be left out of any Home Rule settlement. He demanded that the counties of Derry, Down, Armagh, Antrim, Fermanagh and Tyrone would remain fully under Westminster control. Carson believed that his proposal, which partitioned the country, would be unacceptable to nationalists, and that they would drop their demand for Home Rule rather than see the country divided. Partition was indeed unacceptable to Irish nationalists, and the leader of the Home Rule Party, John Redmond, rejected it. However, in August 1914 **World War I** broke out before any solution to the political future of Ireland was actually agreed.
- By the end of the war, the political situation in Ireland had changed. The constitutional nationalist Home Rule movement had been completely superseded in the 1918 election by the republican Sinn Féin Party. Sinn Féin and the Volunteers - soon to become the **Irish Republican Army (IRA)** - had grown dramatically in the months following the 1916 Rising. The Rising, and especially the executions of the rebel leaders, had led to a groundswell of support for Sinn Féin's goal of an Irish republic, completely independent from Britain. In the December 1918 general election, Sinn Féin secured 73 of the 105 Irish seats in Westminster. The Home Rule Party won just six seats leading to the party's collapse as a political force. In January 1919 Sinn Féin set up the First Dáil Éireann, a revolutionary parliament, to realise their goal of an Irish republic. The War of Independence (1919-1921) quickly followed.



Thousands joined the UVF to offer militant resistance to Home Rule

The Government of Ireland Act, 1920

- In an attempt to end the hostilities in Ireland, British Prime Minister **David Lloyd George** proposed what he called 'Home Rule all round'. By this he meant that the British government would create two Home Rule parliaments in Ireland, one in Belfast to govern the nine Ulster counties, and the other in Dublin to govern the other 23 counties. The Unionist Party was reluctant to accept this proposal: they had originally campaigned against Home Rule in its Northern Ireland's six Ulster counties, showing the religious breakdown across the new State in 1921 entirety. However, Carson realised that, if Northern Ireland had its own parliament, then unionists would at least remain outside the control of a Dublin parliament. The Unionist Party rejected the idea of a nine-county solution, because this would include a large number of Catholics, giving Protestants only a small majority in the new Northern Ireland. Instead, they proposed leaving out the Catholic-dominated counties of Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan, and establishing a six-county state.



Northern Ireland's six Ulster counties, showing the religious breakdown across the new State in 1921

The Government of Ireland Act, 1920

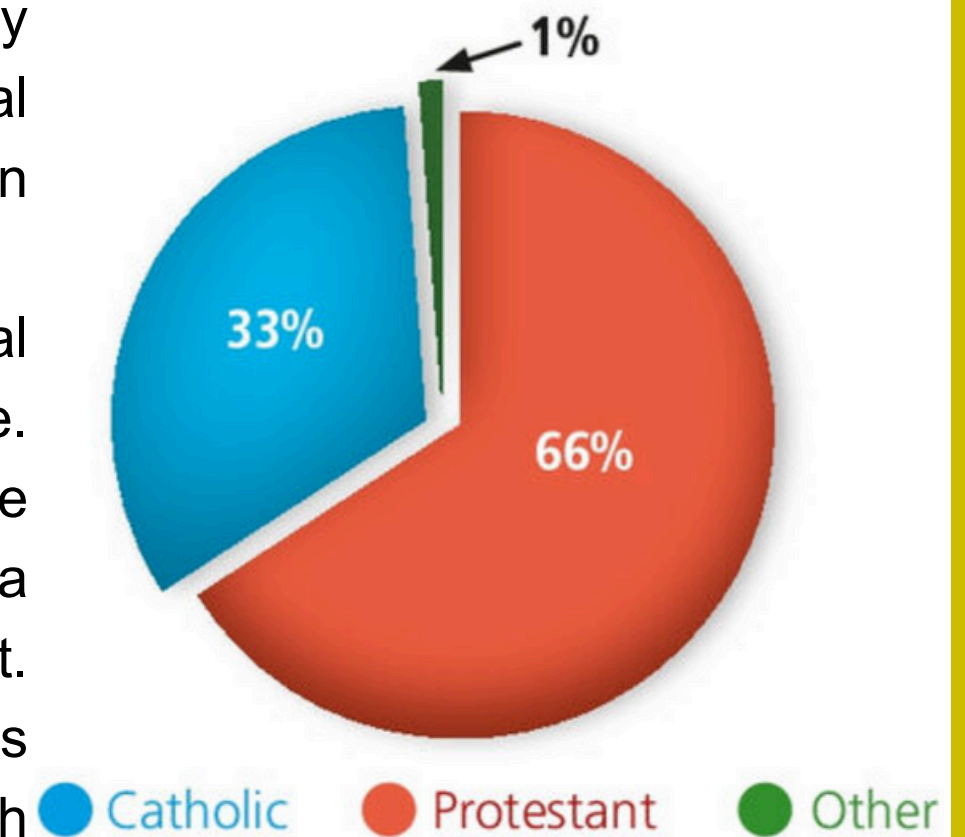
- The **Government of Ireland Act, 1920**, established two Home Rule parliaments in Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party accepted the Act, and the Northern Irish parliament subsequently opened on 7 June 1921. Sinn Féin, however, rejected any Home Rule parliament, and the War of Independence continued until a truce was declared in July 1921. Following the truce, negotiations took place between delegates from Sinn Féin and the British government, which resulted in the **Anglo-Irish Treaty**, signed in December 1921. This created the Irish Free State. By now the Unionist government was in power in Belfast, which meant that when it came to negotiations with the new government in Dublin, they were in a strong position. In particular, they could not be forced to unite with the rest of Ireland without their consent. Under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, a **boundary commission** was to finally decide the border
- between the Free State and Northern Ireland. The South expected that the commission would take the Northern nationalist community's wishes into consideration, but when the Boundary Commission finally issued its report in 1925, it only recommended the transfer of less than 2% of the North's nationalist population to the Free State and just 3% of territory. Realising that the report would disappoint many nationalists, it was eventually suppressed at the Free State government's request, and the border remained as it had been under the Government of Ireland Act.

Key Terms

- **Constitutional nationalism:** Constitutional nationalists demanded freedom from Britain and believed that the best way to achieve this was through peaceful, parliamentary means. Groups associated with this form of nationalism included the Home Rule movement and the Nationalist Party.
- **Physical force nationalism:** Physical force nationalists demanded complete independence from Britain and believed in using violence to achieve their goals. The IRA is the most well-known physical force nationalist organisation.
- **Unionism:** Unionists wished to maintain the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and argued that Ireland was best served by retaining its links with Britain. Many unionists believed that Ireland's economy and society would be greatly damaged if it sought self-government. The Ulster Unionist Party and the militant Ulster Volunteer Force were two key elements of the unionist movement.
- **Loyalism:** This is the allegiance people have to a specific government or monarch, particularly in times of conflict. Loyalist groups in the North gave their allegiance to the British monarchy, firmly believing that Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom. These included political and paramilitary groups such as the Ulster Vanguard and Ulster Volunteer Force respectively.

The New State

- Northern Ireland's six counties had a population of approximately 1,250,000. 66% were Protestant and 33% Catholic. The two communities were not evenly spread throughout the North; many areas were dominated by one group or the other.
- Both communities had rich heritages, which helped create their sense of identity. The majority of Protestants were unionists, while the majority of Catholics were nationalists. The political and religious differences between the two communities created a deep mistrust between them.
- The Protestant community felt surrounded by people who had no respect for their cultural heritage or values, either in Northern Ireland or, more especially, on the island as a whole. Many unionists felt that nationalist domination threatened their way of life. This fear was made very real, for example, by the IRA's assassination of Sir Henry Wilson in June 1922. Wilson, a retired British general, had been acting as a security adviser to the new Unionist government. Furthermore, following the local council elections in 1920, many nationalist-controlled councils in the North had pledged their allegiance to the Dáil in Dublin rather than the British government in the early 1920s. As a result of such developments, a **siege mentality** developed among unionists, who feared losing the gains they had made since winning their own parliament. They were unwilling to listen to the concerns of the North's nationalist minority.



The New State

- The minority in the North, the nationalist community, felt isolated. They had been separated from the rest of Ireland, faced being governed by a unionist-dominated parliament, and suffered violence and intimidation as the new State came into being. In reprisal for IRA attacks in the North and against members of the RIC in the South, loyalist groups rioted and attacked Catholics in Belfast and elsewhere. Between 1920 and 1922, they drove 10,000 Catholics out of their jobs and 20,000 from their homes. Some 500 Catholic businesses were destroyed. Over 300 Catholics were killed. The intimidation of the nationalist community made many Catholics believe that they were not welcome in Northern Ireland.
- The new Northern State was a fragmented society from the outset, with two communities that were deeply divided and reluctant to work together.



Northern street scene in the early 1920s



Catholics from Belfast arrive in Dublin, fleeing the violence in Northern Ireland in the early 1920s

Politics in Northern Ireland

- The Northern Ireland parliament was officially opened on 7 June 1921 in Belfast City Hall. The parliament later moved to the **Stormont Estate**. The Unionist Party's **James Craig** was elected Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister. Craig stated, *'All I boast of is that we are a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant State'*.
- The election for the new parliament had taken place in May 1921. The Unionist Party won a comfortable majority. Twelve nationalist MPs were elected to the Unionist Party's 40.
- The two nationalist parties, **Sinn Féin** and the **Nationalist Party**, had common bonds, but different approaches to the circumstances they faced.



Politics in Northern Ireland

- Sinn Féin, which was republican and associated with the IRA, sought the reunification of Ireland. They were strongly supported in the border areas, where the nationalist community was largest. Sinn Féin was the dominant party in the South, having won 124 seats out of 128 in the 1921 general election. Sinn Féin's Northern Ireland MPs refused to take their seats at Stormont in protest at the partition of the country.
- The Nationalist Party was made up of former Home Rulers, who wished to end partition through peaceful parliamentary means. However, while their leader **Joseph Devlin** continued to take his seat in Westminster, the party refused to recognise the Stormont parliament and did not take their seats until 1924. The Nationalist Party had little success after taking their seats in Stormont and tended not to attend parliament on a regular basis.
- The absence of nationalist representation meant that the Northern parliament was entirely Unionist. Under the terms of the Government of Ireland Act, it was made up of a **House of Commons** and a **Senate**.

Results of the 1921 General Election

Party	May 1921
Ulster Unionist Party	40
Sinn Féin	6
Nationalist Party	6
Belfast Labour Party	0
Independents	00
Total	52

Politics in Northern Ireland

- The **House of Commons** had 52 MPS, elected by proportional representation.
- The **Commons** elected the **Prime Minister**, who then appointed his cabinet.
- The **Senate** had 26 members. The Commons elected 24, and the remaining two seats were filled by the Lord Mayor of Belfast and the Mayor of Londonderry.
- The Northern Irish government had the power to legislate for internal affairs such as transport, education, welfare and agriculture, and had some limited authority over taxation. The British government retained control of currency, trade, defence, and taxation. The Westminster parliament was also the only body that could alter the Constitution of Northern Ireland.
- Due to the significant influence the British government held over Northern Ireland, 12 Northern Irish MPs continued to represent the province in the Westminster parliament. However, by 1923 a custom had emerged whereby issues concerning Northern Ireland were not raised in the House of Commons. This effectively meant that the Stormont government was fully responsible for the administration of Northern Ireland without oversight from Westminster, which ultimately left the Unionist governments to run Northern Ireland as they saw fit.



King George V opens the Northern Ireland parliament, June 1921

Adapted from *The Making of Ireland (Third Editions)* by Paul Twomey, educate.ie

 @MsDoorley

Law and Order

- Five hundred and fifty-seven people were killed in the sectarian fighting of 1920-1922, 303 of them Catholic, 254 Protestant. In response, Craig's government brought in strict measures to restore law and order, including a **Special Powers Act** in April 1922, which introduced internment (imprisonment) without trial, and the death penalty for anyone caught with a weapon. However, these measures were used almost exclusively against nationalists.
- The unionists saw nationalists as an enemy within their community, seeking to undermine Northern Ireland's very existence. The government set up special constables to contain nationalist activity.
- The most notable of these were the **B-Specials**, who served as a part-time police force to assist the work of the **Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC)**. Many B-Specials were members of the UVF, who were hated by the Catholic population. Along with the RUC and the Specials, the Northern Irish government could call on the British Army in times of serious violence.
- By the end of 1922 the violence in the North had come to a halt. The security measures taken by the government had proved effective. Despite the end of serious hostilities, the suspicion and fear that existed between the two communities continued. Violence and riots would flare up in the decades that followed, particularly in response to the poor state of the North's economy and the unequal treatment Catholics received in employment.



RUC officers conducting a security check

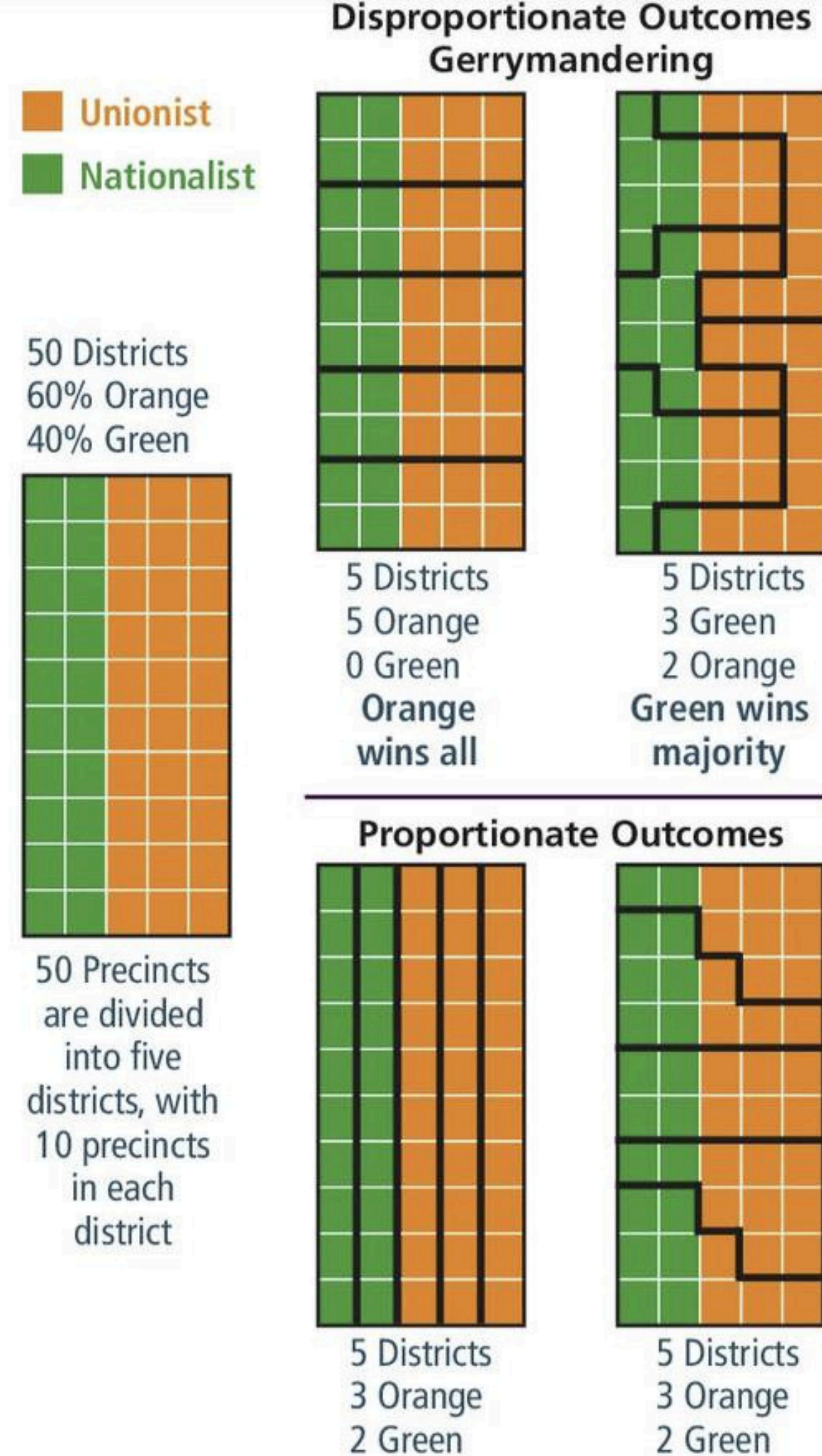


A company of B-Specials

Voting and Representation

- Under the terms of the Government of Ireland Act, Northern Ireland was to hold its elections using **proportional representation (PR)** voting. PR voting gives the electorate a chance to vote for a list of candidates in order of choice. This system spreads the vote evenly, and political parties and candidates are represented in proportion to their support among the electorate. PR helps smaller political groups and minorities to have a say in the democratic process.
- Protestants made up two-thirds of the population of Northern Ireland and Catholics the remaining one-third. PR voting helped the nationalist Catholic minority to hold a reasonable proportion of the 52 seats in the Northern Irish parliament; for example, following the 1921 election, nationalists held 23% of seats. However, when nationalists began to gain some successes in local and general elections, the government abolished PR voting and replaced it with the **first past the post** system in 1929.

Adapted from The Making of Ireland (Third Editions) by Paul Twomey, educate.ie



Voting and Representation

- The first past the post system benefits larger parties. Unlike PR voting, first past the post voting does not redistribute votes among candidates in a constituency; instead one candidate is elected by a majority vote. In Northern Ireland this meant that elections became a straight fight between unionists and nationalists, and with Protestants making up 66% of the population, it was almost a foregone conclusion that the Unionist Party would always win.
- This proved to be the case: the Unionist Party remained in government for a full 50 years, from 1922 until 1972, when the British government dissolved the Northern Irish parliament. The electoral system helped create a one-party state, to an extent that was simply not found elsewhere in Europe, with the exception of the USSR and fascist Spain.
- By the 1950s, in most cases opposition parties did not bother to put up candidates in constituencies where the results were a foregone conclusion. Politics became stale, with little or no discussion of policies and little likelihood of reform. The abolition of PR voting was a real blow to the nationalist community. The Unionist government further weakened the nationalist vote through **gerrymandering**.

Key Concept: Gerrymandering

- **Gerrymandering** is the process whereby constituencies (voting districts) are deliberately redrawn to maximise the votes for a particular party. This allows parties with minority support to often win more seats than majority candidates. This is achieved by ensuring that candidates who enjoy majority support in the area need large numbers of votes to be elected, while minority candidates can be elected with a small majority.
- One of the best-known examples of gerrymandering in Northern Ireland was in Derry city, where in the 1934 election, 9,961 nationalists elected eight councillors, while 7,444 unionists were able to elect 12 councillors. The system of gerrymandering constituencies was maintained by refusing to allow Catholics build or rent properties outside their designated constituencies. This ensured that the unionists kept political control in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Economy, 1921-1945

- The end of World War I brought a decline in world trade, which greatly impacted on the North's traditional industries of shipbuilding, engineering works and textile manufacturing. Unemployment soared during the 1920s and 1930s as factory owners cut staff. By the mid-1930s unemployment was as high as 30%.
- Catholic and Protestant workers came together in protest. They were unable to find work, and in many cases found it difficult to receive welfare. In response to the lack of employment, unionist ministers proposed that when jobs were available, they should be given to Protestants first. In 1932 the Unionist MP, **Basil Brooke**, advised employers, '*wherever possible employ Protestant lads and lassies*'. The Catholic minority took this as further evidence that the government discriminated against them.
- The onset of World War II brought a revival of the North's old industries as the British government made preparations for war. The shipyards' and textile factories' order books were again filled. The North produced merchant and naval ships, uniforms, tents and other military items. New industries, such as Short's aircraft factory, built bombers and fighter planes for the war effort. As the North's industries prospered, unemployment dropped quickly to less than 5%.
- The agricultural sector benefited also. Efforts had been made to specialise in the production of pigs and poultry during the interwar years, 1919-1939, and as soon as war broke out demand from Britain increased, because of the food shortages caused by German attacks on the British merchant fleet.
- The war also provided work for those who wished to join the armed forces. Though conscription was not introduced in the North, between 1939 and 1945 some 38,000 men volunteered to serve in the British armed forces.



A ropeworks factory in Belfast

Adapted from *The Making of Ireland (Third Editions)* by Paul Twomey, educate.ie

The North's Contribution to World War II

- The Northern government gave its full support to the British war effort, unlike the South, which remained neutral. In 1940, **Craig, then known as Lord Craigavon**, vowed: *'We are King's men and we shall be with you to the end.'* The North's nationalist community, however, saw the conflict as Britain's war, and many refused to support the war effort. The IRA attempted to carry out a number of attacks in Northern Ireland and even developed links with the Nazis in the hope of 'liberating' Northern Ireland, but they were quickly suppressed, and an agreement was reached with de Valera's government that the South would intern IRA suspects if they were caught crossing the border.
- Despite some nationalist resistance, Northern Ireland contributed greatly to the war effort. Not only did it produce ships, vehicles, weapons, ammunition and textiles, it also served as a training ground for American and British troops in their preparations for the D-Day landings, and its ports were vital bases for the British, Canadian and American fleets, helping them to patrol the Atlantic. The North's involvement in the war did come at a cost. Belfast was poorly defended during the war, largely because of the Unionist government's lack of foresight, despite warnings from the British government that Belfast was a likely target. Following the fall of France in 1940, Northern Ireland came within range of German bombers and Belfast was bombed on several occasions in 1941, with significant loss of life and severe damage to the fabric of the city. In all, over 1,000 people were killed, 56,000 houses were destroyed and £20 million of damage was done during the Belfast Blitz.

The North's Contribution to World War II

- Northern Ireland's involvement in World War II helped to shape the identity of its people as they experienced what it was like to be part of a community at war. It also drew the people of the North closer to Britain through this shared experience; it distinguished North from South, as the South remained neutral during the conflict.
- Not least because of Northern Ireland's support during World War II, the British government became more committed to maintaining the Union. The most explicit example of this was their willingness to subsidise the post-war **Welfare State** in Northern Ireland. This would introduce significant social reforms for the North's population.



A propaganda poster from the war years

Recap

You should now be able to:

- Describe how Northern Ireland came into being and recognise the tensions that existed between its nationalist and unionist communities
- Evaluate the steps the Unionist Party took to restore law and order and consolidate its control of the State
- Appreciate how the Unionist Party's measures marginalised the nationalist community and increased sectarian tensions
- Recognise the impact World War II had on Northern Ireland's declining economy
- Discuss the reasons why the North suffered a large number of civilian casualties as a result of German air raids
- Discuss how the North's involvement in the war did much to shape the young State's identity

Questions: Revision

1. What was Home Rule and why did unionists oppose it?
2. How did Ulster unionists react to the Third Home Rule Bill?
3. What was the significance of the Government of Ireland Act, 1920?
4. What was the Boundary Commission and was it successful?
5. What impact did partition have on the North's nationalist community?
6. Outline the differences between constitutional and physical force nationalism?
7. What powers were granted to the Northern Irish parliament under the Government of Ireland Act?
8. How did the nationalist parties respond to the creation of the Stormont parliament?
9. Briefly describe how the change from PR voting to first past the post voting negatively impacted politics in Northern Ireland.
10. What is gerrymandering?
11. What was the Special Powers Act?
12. Who were the B-Specials?
13. Briefly explain why Northern Ireland's economy declined during the inter-war years.
14. How did World War II benefit the North's economy?
15. What contribution did Northern Ireland make to the war effort?

Higher Level Questions

1. Why were unionists determined to keep the link with Britain and what steps did they take to ensure it would remain?
2. From what you have studied so far, what steps did the Ulster Unionist Party take to establish itself in power?
3. How did cultural identity contribute to political divisions in Northern Ireland?
4. What led to the Government of Ireland Act 1920, and what impact did it have on unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland?

Ordinary Level Questions

1. Write a paragraph on one of the following:
 - a. Unionist opposition to Home Rule
 - b. The Government of Ireland Act, 1920
 - c. Northern Ireland's economy, 1920-1945
 - d. Northern Ireland's involvement in World War II.
2. Why did nationalists feel threatened in Northern Ireland?
3. Why did the North's unionist community develop a siege mentality?