

*Ch. 3 - Terence O'Neill
Becomes Prime Minister and the
Coleraine University Controversy,
1963-1967*

Learning Intentions

In this chapter you will learn about:

- Terence O'Neill becoming Prime Minister of Northern Ireland in 1963
- O'Neill's attempts to develop better relations with Northern Ireland's Catholic community
- His meeting with Seán Lemass
- Economic developments in Northern Ireland under O'Neill
- The Coleraine University controversy (Case Study)

A New Era: Terence O'Neill

Terence O'Neill Replaces Brookeborough

- Before becoming Prime Minister, Terence O'Neill had served as Minister for Finance, when he began the transformation of the industrial sector by attracting foreign companies to Northern Ireland. He had been a Unionist MP since 1946, but he often clashed with his party colleagues, which made him an unlikely candidate to replace Brookeborough. O'Neill came from an Antrim land-owning family, was educated in England, and had served in World War II as a captain in the Irish Guards. Due to his privileged background and English education, O'Neill was removed from the attitudes and experiences of his colleagues and the electorate.
- O'Neill's personality was quite withdrawn. He was not a man of the people as Craig and Brookeborough had been. In contrast, the other likely candidate to replace Brookeborough, **Brian Faulkner**, was well liked by many unionists, including rural and working-class supporters. Faulkner, however, had not served during the war; instead he remained working in his father's linen mill. This slightly damaged his reputation because many of his colleagues had served in the military.



Terence O'Neill Replaces Brookeborough

- When Brookeborough resigned in 1963, the Unionist Party nominated O'Neill as his replacement, without taking a vote. This left O'Neill in the position of never truly knowing how much support he had in the party, as it was never tested in a ballot. O'Neill's time as Prime Minister was to be shaped by his efforts to modernise Northern Ireland's economy and develop a better relationship with the Irish Republic, and, most notably, his attempts to reach out to the North's Catholic community. Shortly after becoming Prime Minister, O'Neill announced that his government's role would be to 'literally transform Ulster'.

O'Neill Reaches Out to the Catholic Community

- Unlike many of his contemporaries in the Unionist Party, O'Neill was eager to develop a better relationship between the party and the Catholic community. A new, well-educated Catholic middle class was emerging, not least because of the supports offered by the Welfare State. O'Neill believed that a better understanding between the Unionist government and the Catholic community would offer stability to Northern Ireland and to his own party. As Prime Minister he said that he wanted to *'build bridges between the two traditions within our community'*. To this end, O'Neill became the first Prime Minister to visit Catholic schools and hospitals, and meet members of the Catholic clergy.
- These gestures raised Catholics' expectations. They began to believe that O'Neill might be open to introducing reforms in policies such as housing, employment and gerrymandering. However, time would show that these hopes would not be fulfilled. O'Neill's aims were helped by a general thaw in hostilities between Catholics and Protestants. This was brought about through their greater access to education, particularly at third level, where students from both communities worked together. This helped to create a greater sense of shared community in a generation that had not witnessed the violence that followed the partition of Ireland.

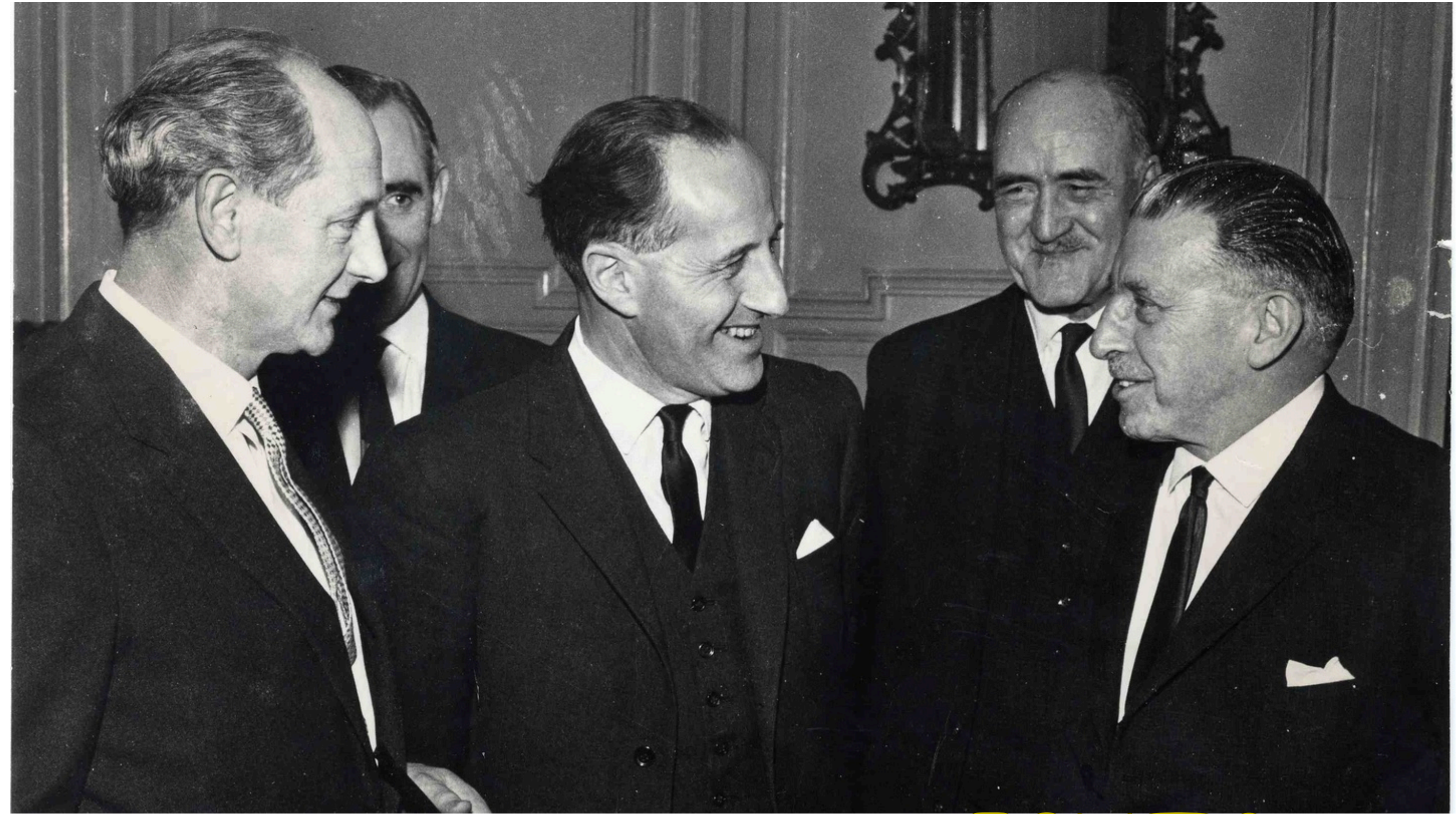
Ecumenism

- One of the external factors that led to greater tolerance between Catholics and Protestants was the growth of ecumenism. The Protestant faiths were at this time trying to find common ground with other Christian churches. Following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Catholic Church also sought to foster a better relationship with other Christians. O'Neill openly promoted ecumenism. He acknowledged the Catholic community's beliefs and customs when he ordered that flags over Stormont be flown at half-mast following the death of Pope John XXIII in 1964.

O'Neill Meets Lemass

- In 1959 Seán Lemass became Taoiseach in the Republic. His main focus was to develop the Irish economy, but he also sought to find a better relationship with Northern Ireland. While Brookeborough was Prime Minister little progress was made, but when O'Neill came to power he was evidently more open to reaching an understanding with the government in the South. Lemass sought to arrange a meeting between the two.
- O'Neill, for his part, was impressed with Lemass's successful handling of the Irish economy, something which he hoped to achieve in the North, too. He insisted that, before open talks took place, the Irish government would have to recognise Northern Ireland as a separate political State. However, the Irish government did not give such a commitment, and instead the talks between O'Neill and Lemass focused on practical matters such as trade, rather than the political status of Northern Ireland.

O'Neill Meets Lemass



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

O'Neill Meets Lemass

- Lemass and O'Neill met in Belfast on 14 January 1965. This was the first ever meeting between a Northern Irish Prime Minister and a Taoiseach. When word of the meeting became public knowledge, the unionist community was suspicious, though the talks were welcomed by the population of the Republic as well as the North's nationalist community. The two leaders met again, this time in Dublin, on 9 February. Their meetings cleared the way for both governments to open talks on areas of common interest such as trade, agriculture and transport.
- O'Neill's early efforts to create a more inclusive society in the North and improve relations with the South led to a brief period of political and social calm in Northern Ireland. The Nationalist Party, which had abstained from Stormont over the previous years, chose, with Lemass's encouragement, to return to the parliament and take their seats on the opposition benches. Religious leaders also welcomed O'Neill's efforts to reconcile Catholic and Protestant communities. However, O'Neill's successes at winning over Catholics and nationalists were largely cosmetic. There were no meaningful reforms introduced to end discrimination. In fact, O'Neill continued the West of the Bann Policy by attracting foreign companies to areas east of the Bann.

Key Concepts: Ecumenism

- **Ecumenism** seeks to promote unity between Christian faiths through cooperation and understanding. Steps towards uniting Protestant faiths were taken in the early part of the 20th century, and following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Catholic Church began a process of dialogue with the Orthodox Church and the Protestant churches. Ecumenism is opposed by those who refuse to compromise on doctrinal issues (beliefs).

Exam Question

- From your study of Northern Ireland, 1949-1993, what did you learn about ecumenism? (2019) HL

Economic Development

- Despite O'Neill's rhetoric regarding Protestant-Catholic reconciliation, his main focus was on maintaining the Unionist Party's political dominance in Northern Ireland. The party's losses to the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) had been one of the main reasons for Brookeborough's resignation. When O'Neill became Prime Minister he sought to regain support for his party by improving the North's economy. His goal was to strengthen the economy and weaken the growing popularity of the NILP.
- Having seen the success economic planning was having in the South, O'Neill commissioned a number of committees to recommend ways of expanding the North's economy. The Brookeborough government had set up the **Hall Committee** in 1961 to make recommendations on economic development. However, the committee could only recommend that the North's unemployed should emigrate to Britain to seek employment and that the government should establish an economic advisory council to make further recommendations for economic growth. When O'Neill took over, he established a number of new committees to explore ways of promoting the economy.
- In 1962 Sir Robert Matthew had published a report entitled the Belfast Regional Survey and Plan. It recommended that industrial development could be expanded beyond the Belfast region by creating a new city that would combine the towns of Lurgan and Portadown. This resulted in the eventual creation of the brand-new city of Craigavon, named after the North's first Prime Minister, in 1965. However, the new city was left unfinished and failed to incorporate Lurgan and Portadown. The development of Craigavon was a planned response to the lack of urban centres for the North's growing population.

Economic Development

- Of more significance was a report carried out by **Professor Thomas Wilson** called Economic Development in Northern Ireland. Wilson's report was published in 1965. To encourage *'the development of industries that offer the prospect of sustained growth'*, the report made a number of specific recommendations:
 - Create 30,000 jobs in manufacturing and a further 30,000 in the service industries. • Invest £450 million in developing areas beyond Belfast by constructing industrial estates and infrastructure to attract foreign companies.
 - Use investment grants and tax allowances to attract foreign firms to Northern Ireland. • Build new motorways to facilitate transport
 - Build 12,000 houses a year up to 1970, creating 5,000 jobs in the construction industry.
 - Develop Derry, Antrim-Ballymena, Larne and Bangor-Newtonards. All of these areas, with the exception of Derry, were largely Protestant.
- Wilson's report recommended that a total of £900 million should be invested in economic development. Half of this money was to come from government. The report also made a further recommendation, that a **second university** should be constructed to improve third-level education in Northern Ireland. A number of Wilson's recommendations proved very successful, but the decision on where to locate the North's second university turned out to be very controversial.



Craigavon was planned as a new town, following the model of developments in Britain



Industrial estates were created to attract foreign companies

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

*Case Study: The Coleraine
University Controversy*

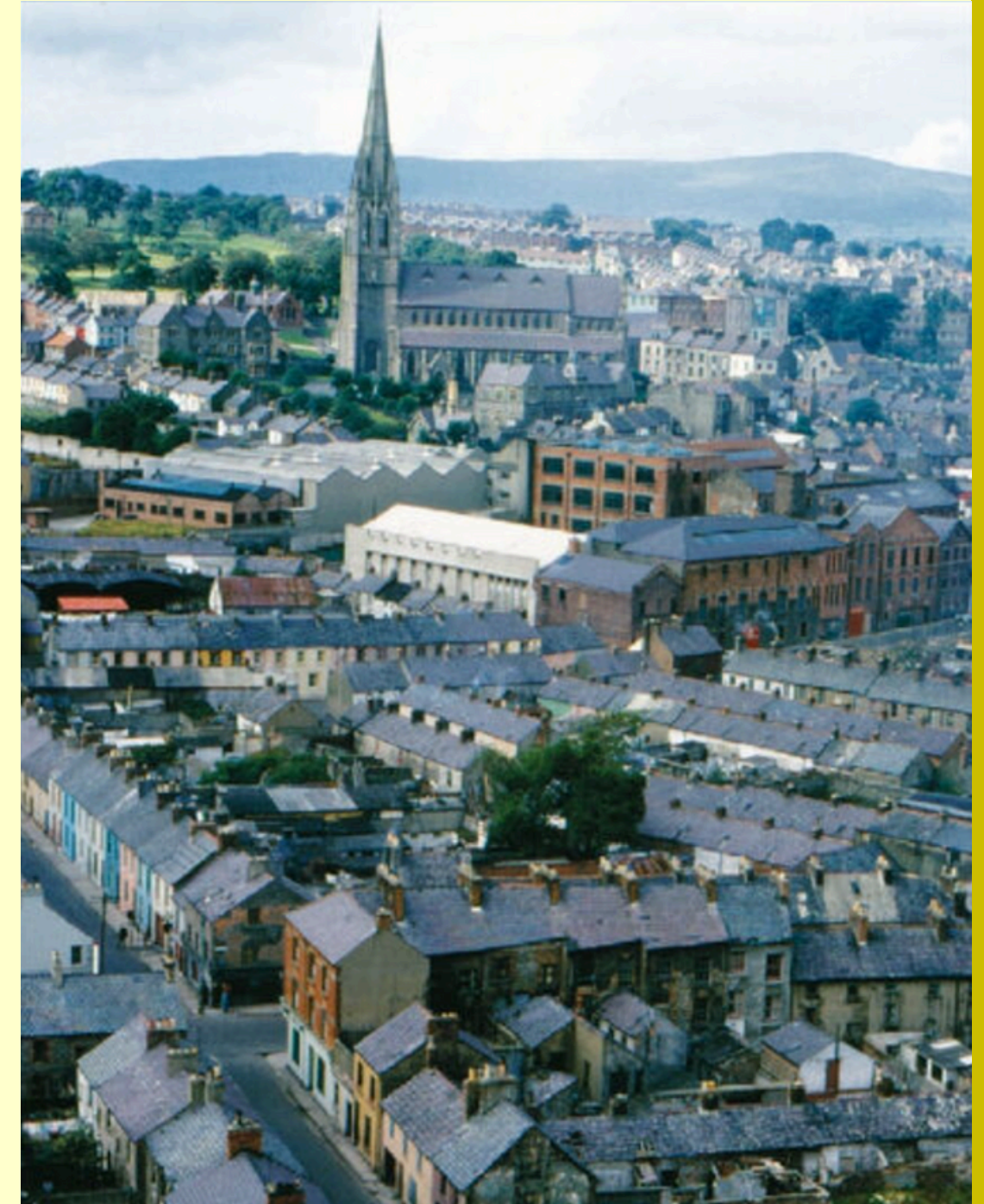
The Need for a Second University

- **Queen's College, Belfast**, was Northern Ireland's only university. There was another third-level institution, Magee College in Derry, but this did not offer full degree courses. Instead, students studied for two years in Magee College and then completed their degrees in Belfast or Trinity College, Dublin.
- The Wilson Report, published in 1965, highlighted the fact that there was an increased demand for third-level education, and that a second university would help to develop a well-educated workforce, which would in turn help attract foreign businesses to the North.
- The growth of third-level education was a live issue in the 1960s. In 1963 the British government had published the Robbins Report, which recommended the expansion of universities. The **Robbins Report** did not cover Northern Ireland, so the Northern Irish government appointed an eight-man committee, headed by **Sir John Lockwood**, to investigate potential sites for a second university. It is important to note that Lockwood was not asked to actually recommend a site for the university in his final report. Of the eight members, four were English and none were Catholic.



Where to locate the New University?

- While Lockwood was investigating the merits of establishing a second university, **Derry city** was seen as the prime location for it. Derry had the second largest population in Northern Ireland and was already home to Magee College. As early as 1960, Derry's unionist and nationalist MPS, Edward Jones and Eddie McAteer, had agreed that their city was the obvious choice.
- The majority of Derry's population was Catholic, and if the government agreed to base a new university in the city, it was felt that this would go a long way to fulfilling Prime Minister Terence O'Neill's call for Protestant- Catholic reconciliation. A new university in Derry would provide jobs through construction work and the university itself. There were other areas that emerged as possible locations for a new university. The newly created Craigavon, which was still under development, along with Armagh and **Coleraine**, were also seen as likely candidates.



The Lockwood Findings

- Lockwood's committee visited Queen's University in Belfast and agreed that it would not be possible to expand the university. The committee also visited Derry.
- In assessing Derry as a possible site, the Lockwood Committee found that Magee College was not suitable to be promoted to university status as it lacked adequate staff and the building was in need of extensive renovation and modernisation.
- Other reasons for rejecting Derry as a potential site for the second university were:
 - Derry lacked the housing needed to provide accommodation for a student population.
 - Space for new buildings would have to be found.
 - Derry Council did not provide any site for the construction of a new university.
 - Derry was a site of sectarian tensions.
- The committee then looked at other potential locations and published its findings in February 1965.
- Lockwood's report, Higher Education in Northern Ireland, made the following recommendations:
 - Northern Ireland needed a second university.
 - Coleraine was the preferred site for the new university.
 - Should a third university be required in the future, it should be built in Armagh.
 - Magee College in Derry should be closed.

The Lockwood Findings

- Minutes from a government meeting that discussed the findings of the Lockwood Report stated that:
- *As to location, the Committee had sought an area of reasonable tranquillity, with a sufficient surrounding population, with local authorities willing to help (e.g. by making a gift of a site) and with existing accommodation available for students and others. Using these criteria, they had selected Coleraine.*
- The **Lockwood Report** recommended Coleraine as the location for a university, despite only being asked to examine the need for a second university.
- In explaining the decision to recommend Coleraine the following reasons were given:
 - Coleraine's local council had offered a site for the construction of a university for free.
 - The nearby seaside towns of Portrush and Portstewart had plenty of holiday accommodation that would serve as housing for the student population.
 - As a predominantly Protestant area, Coleraine was free of sectarian violence. • With a population of just 13,000 the town was a prime site for development.
- The fact that Derry wasn't chosen, when many saw it as the obvious location, was a huge blow to the city's Catholic population. The report was seen as another example of the government's West of the Bann Policy. This disappointment and frustration was made worse because O'Neill had raised Catholics' hopes.

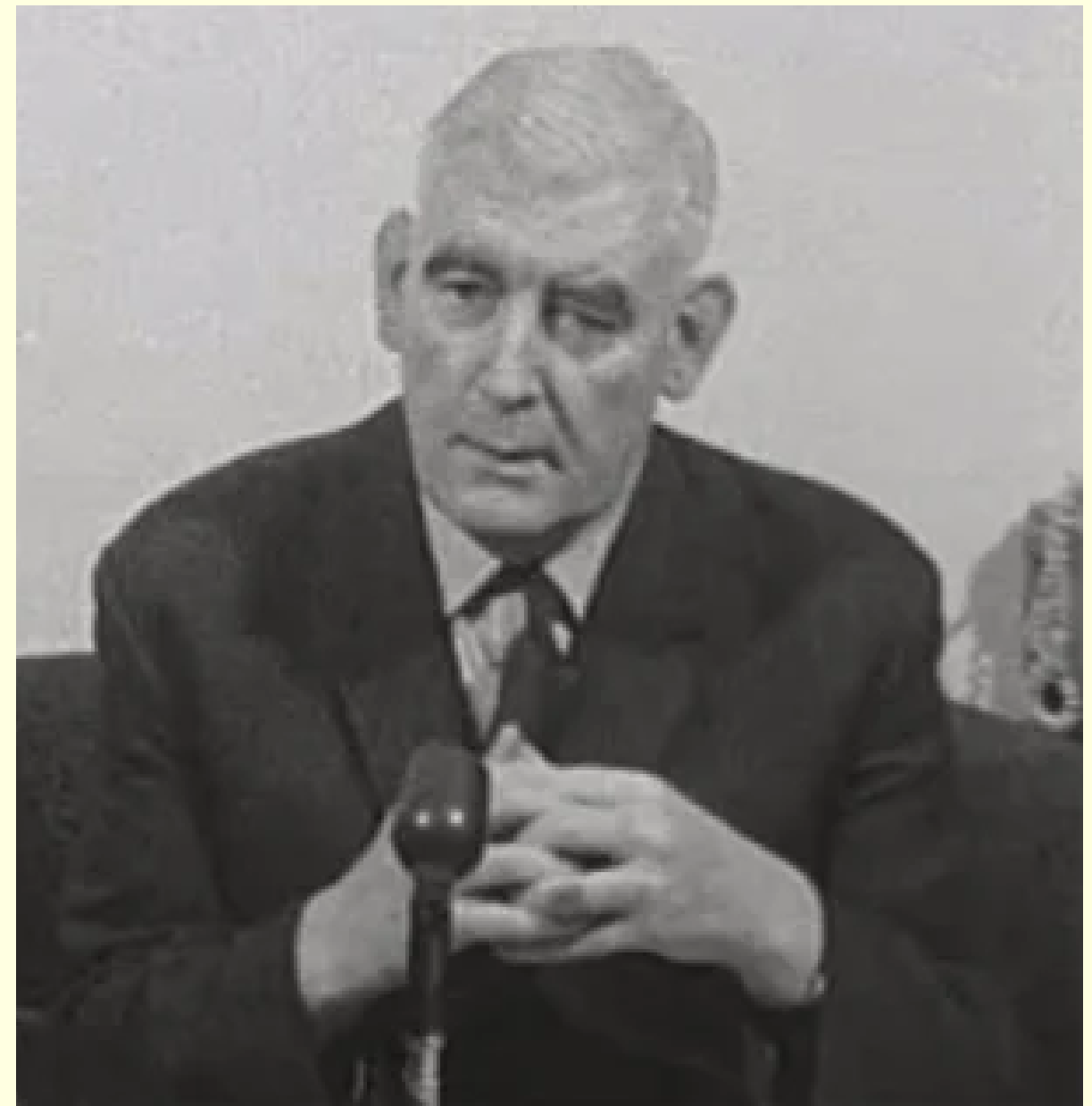


Nationalist Anger

- The Lockwood Report's recommendations had been leaked in late 1964, so most people knew what the final report would bring. The news came as a bitter blow to the citizens of Derry. In January 1965, even before the Lockwood Report was launched officially, across community group, University for Derry Action Committee (UDAC), was formed. It was headed by John Hume, a Catholic schoolteacher at St Columb's in Derry, and drew members from across the Protestant and Catholic communities.
- On 8 February 1965, the Action Committee held a public meeting at Derry's Guildhall in front of a crowd of 1,500 people. The Unionist Party Mayor of Londonderry, **Albert Anderson**, gave a speech highlighting the merits of siting the new university in Derry. He was followed by the leader of the Nationalist Party, **Eddie McAteer**. Both politicians emphasised how this shared goal had helped to bring Catholics and Protestants together, and that if Derry was chosen there was potential to develop even better relations between the city's two communities. There was also the fact that a new university would help the city's economy and create much-needed employment.
- The Lockwood Report's publication on 10 February was met with protest from Derry's Catholic population, supported by many Liberal Unionists. The following day, the University for Derry Action Committee met with O'Neill and **Herbert Kirk**, the Minister of Education, to express their concerns. They pointed out that Lockwood had not been asked to recommend a site for the university to begin with, and complained about there being no Catholic on his committee. John Hume stressed that, by not giving the university to Derry, O'Neill was missing an opportunity to build unity across the religious divide.

Mini Bio: Eddie McAteer

- Eddie McAteer was the leader of the Nationalist Party from 1964-1969. He was a founder of the Anti- partition League and was also a prominent campaigner for a university for Derry. He lost his seat in Stormont to John Hume in 1969.



Protest at Stormont

- On 18 February, a motorcade of some 2,000 vehicles travelled from Derry to Stormont to protest at the university decision. Once the 25,000 protestors had gathered outside Stormont, Albert Anderson addressed the crowd, and was again followed by Eddie McAteer. Meanwhile, people in Derry who could not attend the demonstration were encouraged to observe a two-minute silence as a sign of protest. Derry was hoping to put pressure on the government to reconsider the location of the university. However, the issue was soon to threaten the very stability of O'Neill's government as divisions emerged within the Unionist Party.



O'Neill Meets the Faceless Men

- The day after the protest outside Stormont, O'Neill held a secret meeting with leading unionist figures from Derry. The names of the men he met were not recorded. It is believed that they encouraged him to maintain Magee College, but not to allow the university to be built in Derry because they feared it would lead to an influx of Catholic students and workers and thus weaken the Unionist Party's gerrymandered control of the city. Because they were never named, the unionists involved were referred to as **the faceless men**. While a number of politicians suspected that this secret meeting had taken place, it was only decades later that proof of the meeting was discovered when government records were released.



Government Response

- Following O'Neill's meeting with 'the faceless men', there was a three-day debate in Stormont on the Lockwood Report's proposals. A vote was held on whether to accept or reject its recommendations. There was a fear that such a vote could cause division in the Unionist Party, and O'Neill warned that any member who voted against it would be ejected from the party. O'Neill had turned the vote into a vote of confidence in his leadership. In March 1965 the vote was passed by 27 to 19. A number of Unionist MPs abstained, and one voted against. Those who voted in favour of the Lockwood Report included a number of Unionist MPs who had previously been in favour of establishing the university in Derry.
- The matter appeared to have ended at this point as far as the government was concerned, but in May the Unionist MP for North Down, **Robert Nixon**, alleged that O'Neill had met with high-ranking unionists from Derry, whom he described as '*nameless, faceless men*'. He went on to say that these men had strongly opposed the building of a university in Derry and had advised O'Neill to reject any such proposal. Nixon's allegations were supported by the Nationalist Party MP **Patrick Gormley**.
- Questions were also raised about the government's influence over the Lockwood Report. Lockwood himself was quick to deny claims that he had been influenced by the government, but it emerged years later that he had met with government representatives, though no minutes were kept to show what advice they had given him.

A Rational Decision or a Missed Opportunity?

- *Even before the publication of the Lockwood Report, the committee justified their recommendation that Coleraine be chosen as the site for the second university on the following grounds:*
 1. *It was an attractive area, which would not only appeal to university staff but could provide houses almost right away.*
 2. *It had the immediate advantage of ample residential accommodation in the nearby towns of Portstewart and Portrush.*
 3. *It was thought that there would be no difficulty about a site.*
 4. *The area was thought to be suitable for marine biology and for agriculture.*
 5. *It was far enough from Belfast to ensure complete separation from Queen's.*
 6. *It was an area which had some scope for industrial expansion.*
 7. *It had a sufficiently large concentration of population.*
- **Extract from the minutes of the second meeting of an inter-departmental working party on higher education, June 1964)**
- The fact that there was a large Protestant population in Coleraine, and that it was largely free of the sectarian tensions that beset Derry, would also have been factors in the decision to locate the new university there. Despite these reasons, many nationalists, and a number of unionists, saw the failure to locate the university in Derry as a missed opportunity.

A Rational Decision or a Missed Opportunity?

- **Geoffrey Copcutt**, an Englishman employed as the chief designer of the new city of Craigavon, stated that, Londonderry is the obvious choice to expand as the centre for higher education outside Belfast. It could prove the most promising way of unifying the present populations and integrating future immigrant communities." (Northern Ireland: The Plain Truth, 1969) Copcutt later resigned arguing that Craigavon should be abandoned in favour of developing Derry. He also reported that he was frustrated by the Unionist government's refusal to develop areas west of the Bann.
- In later years, John Hume recalled that the Coleraine University controversy led to a political awakening in the Catholic community as they realised that the Unionist government was not prepared to allow the development of Catholic strongholds in Northern Ireland.
- *The university decision electrified the people on the nationalist side, and I think was really the spark that ignited the civil rights movement, though I suppose nobody could have articulated it in those terms then. And when the university went to Coleraine, the chance of orderly change in Northern Ireland probably disappeared. It became clear to me certainly that change could only be affected by positive political action.* (Derry: Countdown to Disaster by Frank Curran)
- The issue of locating Northern Ireland's second university remained controversial for years to come. For the nationalist community it showed that O'Neill, despite his rhetoric, did not treat Catholic areas in the same way as areas where Protestants were dominant. One positive development of the controversy was that it demonstrated that there were unionists, including several unionist politicians, who were willing to join with Catholics on certain issues.



Exam Questions

- What was the Coleraine University controversy and in what ways did it contribute to tensions in Northern Ireland? (2019) HL
- Why did the establishment of a university at Coleraine provoke controversy? (2019) OL
- For what reasons was Coleraine, and not Derry, chosen as a site for a new university in Northern Ireland? (2016 and 2018) OL

Assessing O'Neill's Early Years

- When Craig was Prime Minister he spoke of a 'Protestant State for a Protestant people', and he, and later Brookeborough, did little to create a more inclusive society by winning over Catholics. O'Neill, on the other hand, spoke of the need to develop links with Northern Irish Catholics. Evidence of his efforts can be seen in his willingness to visit Catholic schools and hospitals and his meetings with Lemass, much to the anger of staunch unionists.
- On economic matters, the Wilson Report was highly influential, setting out key recommendations for industrial developments. This led to the creation of about 35,000 new jobs, though these gains were offset by the continuing decline of the older industries, so that the net gain to employment was only 5,000. Unemployment levels remained high, but even so Northern Ireland's economy did improve under O'Neill.
- The success of O'Neill's leadership can be seen in the results of the 1965 general election. The Ulster Unionist Party gained two seats, while its new rival, the NILP, lost two. O'Neill's support had even grown to include middle-class Catholics, who supported his economic policies along with his attempts at reconciliation.

Assessing O'Neill's Early Years

- However, the Coleraine University controversy was a failure in O'Neill's leadership. While Coleraine was arguably the better site, O'Neill mismanaged the fallout from Derry's Catholic population. To Catholics it once again appeared to show that the Unionist Party was not prepared to invest in nationalist areas for fear it would strengthen the Catholic community. O'Neill's failure to deliver on Catholics' expectations alienated the nationalist minority, while his willingness to talk with the nationalists angered many unionists. The continued discrimination against Catholics at the hands of the Unionist government eventually led to the emergence of the **Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association** in 1967.

Recap

You should now be able to:

- List the steps taken by Terence O'Neill to try to improve relations between unionists and nationalists
Assess what O'Neill's efforts did to reduce political tensions
- Appreciate O'Neill's efforts to develop Northern Ireland's economy
- Outline how the development of the Welfare State furthered sectarian divisions
- Explain why economic and social development spurred the need for a second university, but the selection of Coleraine as the site proved highly controversial

Questions: Revision

1. Following the resignation of Lord Brookeborough as Prime Minister in 1963, who were the two most likely candidates to replace him?
2. Why did Terence O'Neill wish to improve relations between Catholics and the Unionist government?
3. What is ecumenism and what impact did it have on Northern Ireland?
4. Why was the meeting between O'Neill and Seán Lemass significant? Give reasons for your answer.
5. Why was the city of Craigavon created?
6. What were the most important recommendations of the Wilson Report?
7. Why was there a need for a second university in Northern Ireland?
8. What were the key recommendations of the report Higher Education in Northern Ireland?
9. Why did many people believe that Derry was an appropriate site for the new university?
10. What was the University for Derry Action Committee?
11. Who were 'the faceless men'?
12. What were the reasons given for choosing Coleraine as the site for the new university?
13. Briefly, what was the outcome of the 1965 general election?

Higher Level Questions

1. What attempts did Terence O'Neill make to reconcile Catholics with the Unionist Party's governance of Northern Ireland, and were those attempts successful? Give reasons for your answer.
2. During the period 1963-1967, what were Terence O'Neill's successes and failures as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland?
3. Why was the decision taken to build a second university in Northern Ireland and why did it prove controversial?
4. What was the impact of choosing Coleraine as the site of Northern Ireland's second university?

Ordinary Level Questions

1. In this extract from the Irish Press, the impact of the University for Derry Campaign is discussed. Read it and answer the questions that follow.

The university issue had for Derry one very important side-effect - it presented possibly the first real cause for unity of thought and action in a city long sectionalised by politics and religion. Suddenly the differences nourished by centuries of indifference to each other's point of view seemed unimportant - the hopes of the city had been dashed by a decision which seemed to the citizens to be beyond comprehension. The dividing lines became blurred as the University for Derry campaign gathered momentum, drawing into its vortex men who for years had taken sharp and at times bitter opposing views.

- a. What issue had an important side-effect?
- b. What had sectionalised the city?
- c. According to the document, what was beyond the citizens' comprehension?
- d. Who became drawn into the vortex of the University for Derry campaign?
- e. Why was the decision not to choose Derry as the site of Northern Ireland's second university controversial?

Ordinary Level Questions

2. Write a short paragraph on one of the following:
 - Terence O'Neill's management of the economy
 - Ecumenism
 - O'Neill's efforts to improve relations with Catholics
 - The Lockwood Report.
3. What was the impact of choosing Coleraine as the site of Northern Ireland's second university?
4. Why did the nationalist community believe that Derry city was a suitable site for Northern Ireland's second university?