

Chapter 3: O'Neill's Early Years, 1963-1967

Introduction

In **1963**, Terence O'Neill became **Prime Minister of Northern Ireland**, replacing Lord Brookeborough. Unlike his predecessor, O'Neill aimed to **modernise Northern Ireland's economy** and **improve relations between unionists and nationalists**. He promoted economic investment, sought closer ties with the Republic of Ireland, and became the **first Northern Ireland leader to meet an Irish Taoiseach**. However, despite these efforts, **sectarian discrimination persisted**, and nationalists saw few meaningful reforms. O'Neill's tenure also became overshadowed by the **Coleraine University Controversy**, which deepened Catholic mistrust of the unionist government.

1. O'Neill's Appointment as Prime Minister

Unionist Leadership Struggles

- O'Neill had been **Minister of Finance** before becoming Prime Minister.
- His rival for the position, **Brian Faulkner**, was more popular among working-class unionists.
- O'Neill's **English education and privileged background** distanced him from ordinary voters.
- He was **appointed without a party vote**, leaving his support within the **Unionist Party uncertain**.

2. O'Neill's Attempts at Reconciliation

'Building Bridges' with Catholics

- O'Neill promoted "**ecumenism**", seeking better Protestant-Catholic relations.
- **First PM to visit Catholic schools and hospitals.**
- **Met Catholic Church leaders**, including Cardinal Conway.
- Raised Catholic expectations that reforms in **housing, employment, and voting rights** would follow - but these expectations were **not met**.

Improving Relations with the Republic of Ireland

- **Seán Lemass (Taoiseach)** sought a better relationship with Northern Ireland.
- O'Neill and Lemass met in **Belfast on 14 January 1965**, the first-ever meeting between a Taoiseach and Northern Irish PM.
- A **second meeting** took place in Dublin on **9 February 1965**.
- The meetings focused on **economic cooperation** rather than Northern Ireland's status.
- Nationalists **welcomed the meetings**, but unionists **viewed them with suspicion**.

3. Economic Modernisation Under O'Neill

Industrial Investment and Development

- O'Neill aimed to revive Northern Ireland's declining industries and attract foreign investment.
- The Wilson Report (1965) recommended:
 - 30,000 new manufacturing jobs and 30,000 service industry jobs.
 - £450 million investment in industrial estates and infrastructure.
 - Tax allowances and investment grants for companies.
 - New motorways and the construction of 12,000 houses per year.
 - Development of industrial centres in Antrim, Ballymena, Larne, and Bangor (mostly Protestant areas).
- Craigavon (1965) was planned as a new city to balance industrial growth, but it failed to develop fully.

Economic Limitations

- Unemployment remained high, especially among Catholics.
- The West of the Bann Policy continued, favouring Protestant areas for investment.
- The Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) gained support, especially from working-class Protestants, pressuring O'Neill to focus on economic growth.

4. The Coleraine University Controversy

Background to the University Issue

- Queen's University Belfast (QUB) was the only university in Northern Ireland.
- Magee College in Derry did not offer full degrees, leading to demand for a second university.
- The Wilson Report (1965) recommended a new university to expand third-level education.

The Lockwood Report (1965)

- The Lockwood Committee was formed to assess locations for a second university.
- Derry was the expected choice, as it was the second-largest city and already had Magee College.
- However, the committee recommended Coleraine instead, citing:
 - Coleraine's Protestant majority and lack of sectarian tensions.
 - Availability of housing in Portrush and Portstewart.
 - Free land offered by Coleraine Council.
 - Derry's lack of suitable infrastructure.

Nationalist Reaction

- The decision was seen as **sectarian discrimination**, reinforcing the **West of the Bann Policy**.
- **John Hume and the University for Derry Action Committee (UDAC)** led protests against the decision.
- **18 February 1965**: A motorcade of **2,000 vehicles** travelled from Derry to Stormont to protest.
- **25,000 people** gathered at Stormont, but O'Neill refused to reconsider.
- The **Unionist Party** was accused of **secretly blocking Derry's university** to limit Catholic influence.
- O'Neill met with unnamed Derry unionists ("The Faceless Men"), who allegedly advised against Derry due to its Catholic population.
- **Robert Nixon**, a Unionist MP, exposed the secret meeting and was expelled from the party.

Consequences of the Coleraine Controversy

- Further alienated Catholics from the government.
- Strengthened nationalist political activism.
- John Hume's involvement in the protests led to his rise as a nationalist leader.
- The **civil rights movement** gained momentum, as nationalists saw the government's refusal to invest in Derry as symbolic of broader discrimination.

5. The Political Impact of O'Neill's Leadership

1965 General Election Results

- The **Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)** won two extra seats.
- The **NILP** lost two seats, showing O'Neill's success in appealing to middle-class Protestants and Catholics.
- However, deep divisions remained within the UUP over O'Neill's outreach to nationalists.

O'Neill's Political Challenges

- Many unionists distrusted his approach to Catholics and the Republic of Ireland.
- The **Nationalist Party** returned to Stormont for the first time in years, encouraged by O'Neill's rhetoric.
- No actual legal reforms were introduced, leading to **Catholic disappointment**.
- **Hardline unionists** like **Ian Paisley** began publicly criticising O'Neill's policies.

Conclusion

- O'Neill tried to modernise Northern Ireland economically and improve Catholic-Protestant relations, but with limited success.

- His meetings with **Lemass** and visits to **Catholic institutions** raised hopes but **led to no major reforms**.
- The **Coleraine University decision** further alienated Catholics, increasing **nationalist resentment**.
- **Unionist support for O'Neill** was **fragile**, with criticism from both **hardliners and nationalists**.
- His leadership laid the groundwork for **the Civil Rights Movement (1967)**, as Catholics grew frustrated with continued discrimination.

Key Terms

- **Ecumenism:** Movement promoting unity between Christian faiths.
- **Wilson Report (1965):** Economic plan to develop Northern Ireland's industry.
- **Lockwood Report (1965):** Recommended Coleraine over Derry for the second university.
- **University for Derry Action Committee (UDAC):** Group campaigning for a university in Derry.
- **The Faceless Men:** Secret group of Derry unionists who allegedly influenced O'Neill's decision.
- **West of the Bann Policy:** Economic bias favouring Protestant areas east of the River Bann.
- **Ian Paisley:** Hardline unionist critic of O'Neill's policies.