

# Chapter 6: Direct Rule and the Sunningdale Agreement, 1972-1974

## Introduction

After the suspension of Stormont in March 1972, British Prime Minister **Edward Heath** introduced **Direct Rule**, placing **William Whitelaw** as the first **Secretary of State for Northern Ireland**. This marked the end of unionist political dominance, leading to **increased violence from both republicans and loyalists**. The British government attempted to find a long-term political solution, leading to the **Sunningdale Agreement (1973)**. However, unionist opposition and the **Ulster Workers' Council (UWC) Strike (1974)** led to its collapse.

## 1. The Introduction of Direct Rule (March 1972)

### Why Was Stormont Suspended?

- **Escalating violence:** The British government believed the Northern Irish government could no longer control the situation.
- **Internment (1971) failed**, leading to increased nationalist hostility.
- **Bloody Sunday (30 January 1972)** caused nationalist outrage and increased IRA recruitment.
- **British government lost faith in Brian Faulkner's leadership** after he refused to phase out internment.
- **28 March 1972:** Stormont was suspended, and Direct Rule was introduced.

### William Whitelaw as Secretary of State

- Took over the roles of **Prime Minister, Home Affairs, and Justice**.
- Hoped to win nationalist trust and reduce sectarian tensions.
- Planned to **phase out internment** and explore power-sharing.

### Unionist Reaction

- **Brian Faulkner and William Craig (Ulster Vanguard Party)** led a 100,000-strong rally against Direct Rule.
- Some unionists feared Direct Rule meant Irish unity.
- **Loyalist paramilitary groups, including the UDA and UVF, intensified their attacks.**

## 2. The Escalation of Violence (1972-1973)

### Republican Activity

- **IRA intensified attacks on British soldiers and economic targets.**
- Used **no-go areas** in Belfast and Derry as bases for operations.
- **Secret talks between the IRA and the British government (June 1972)** ended in failure.

- **Bloody Friday (21 July 1972):** The Provisional IRA detonated **23 bombs in Belfast**, killing 9 people and injuring over 130.
- The British government responded with **Operation Motorman (31 July 1972):**
  - **22,000 British troops launched raids** in nationalist areas.
  - **No-go areas dismantled**, weakening the IRA's operational base.
  - **15-year-old Daniel Hegarty killed**, worsening relations with Catholics.

### *Loyalist Violence*

- Loyalist paramilitaries, including the UDA and UVF, killed over 200 Catholics in 18 months.
- Allegations of collusion between the British Army and loyalist groups emerged.
- The UVF carried out the Dublin and Monaghan bombings (1974), killing 33 civilians.

### *3. The White Paper and the Border Poll (March 1973)*

#### *The White Paper: Northern Ireland Constitutional Proposals (March 1973)*

- Outlined a **power-sharing government** where unionists and nationalists would govern together.
- Introduced **proportional representation (PR)** in elections.
- Proposed a **Council of Ireland**, giving the Republic of Ireland a say in Northern Irish affairs.

#### *Unionist Reaction*

- **Moderate unionists**, led by Brian Faulkner, supported the plan.
- **Hardline unionists** (Ian Paisley's DUP and William Craig's Vanguard Party) opposed power-sharing.

#### *Border Poll (8 March 1973)*

- First referendum on Northern Ireland's constitutional status.
- **99% voted to remain in the UK**, but nationalists **boycotted the poll**.
- **Over 400,000 Catholics did not vote**, making the result meaningless.

### *4. The Sunningdale Agreement (December 1973)*

#### *Negotiations and Agreement*

- Talks held between the **British and Irish governments**, along with Northern Irish political parties.
- **Brian Faulkner (UUP), Gerry Fitt (SDLP), and Oliver Napier (Alliance Party)** agreed to power-sharing.
- The Irish government agreed there would be no change in Northern Ireland's status without majority consent.

- **The Council of Ireland:**
  - A Council of Ministers (7 from the North, 7 from the Republic).
  - A Consultative Assembly (30 MPs from the North, 30 from the Republic).
  - Aimed to promote cooperation in tourism, transport, and agriculture.

### *Unionist Opposition*

- Hardline unionists rejected the Council of Ireland, fearing it was a step toward Irish unity.
- The **Ulster Army Council (UAC)** formed, uniting loyalist opposition.
- The **UVF** and **UDA** carried out bombings in Northern Ireland and Britain to destabilise the agreement.

## *5. The Ulster Workers' Council (UWC) Strike (May 1974) and the Collapse of Sunningdale*

### *Why Did the Strike Begin?*

- The UWC, a loyalist trade union group, opposed power-sharing.
- Unionists won **11 out of 12 seats** in the **February 1974 general election**, showing overwhelming opposition to Sunningdale.
- UWC declared they would bring Northern Ireland to a standstill if the Council of Ireland went ahead.

### *The Strike (15-28 May 1974)*

- Protestant workers **walked out of key industries**.
- The **UDA blocked roads and ports**, causing fuel and electricity shortages.
- The British government **refused to act against the strikers**, fearing civil war.
- The **UVF bombed Dublin and Monaghan (17 May 1974)**, killing 33 civilians.

### *The Collapse of the Agreement (28 May 1974)*

- **Brian Faulkner resigned**, and the power-sharing government collapsed.
- The UWC ended the strike, having **successfully brought down Sunningdale**.
- Westminster resumed direct rule, and Northern Ireland remained without a government until 1998.

### *Conclusion*

- **Direct Rule (1972)** marked the end of unionist political control.
- **IRA violence (Bloody Friday, Claudy Bombing)** increased tension.
- The British Army's response (**Operation Motorman**) weakened nationalist trust in the government.
- Sunningdale introduced power-sharing, but unionist opposition prevented success.
- The UWC strike collapsed the government, showing the power of hardline unionists.

- **Future agreements, including the Good Friday Agreement (1998), were influenced by Sunningdale.**

### *Key Terms*

- **Direct Rule (1972):** Northern Ireland governed directly by Westminster.
- **Operation Motorman (1972):** British military offensive against nationalist no-go areas.
- **Provisional IRA:** Republican paramilitary group engaged in armed struggle.
- **Loyalist Paramilitaries:** Groups like the UDA and UVF targeting Catholics.
- **White Paper (1973):** Proposed power-sharing government and Council of Ireland.
- **Sunningdale Agreement (1973):** Attempt at power-sharing between unionists and nationalists.
- **Ulster Workers' Council (UWC) Strike (1974):** Loyalist strike that collapsed Sunningdale.