

Chapter 7: Stalemate and the Search for Peace, 1974-1984

Introduction

Between 1974 and 1984, Northern Ireland remained locked in political stalemate, with **Direct Rule** continuing from Westminster and **no progress towards a political solution**. The British government attempted to shift security responsibilities to **local forces (Ulsterisation)**, while **loyalist and republican paramilitary activity escalated**. The period saw the **hunger strikes**, the increasing role of **Sinn Féin in politics**, and attempts at Anglo-Irish cooperation through the **New Ireland Forum**.

1. The Ulster Constitutional Convention (1975-1976)

Background

- The British Labour government under **Harold Wilson** sought to restore a devolved government.
- **The Northern Ireland Constitution Report (1974)** recommended the establishment of a **consultative body**.
- The **Ulster Constitutional Convention (UCC)** was created in 1975 to explore political solutions.

Election Results (May 1975)

| Party | Vote Share (%) | Seats Won |
|-----------------------------|----------------|-----------|
| UUP (UUUC) | 25.4% | 19 |
| SDLP | 23.7% | 17 |
| DUP (UUUC) | 14.8% | 12 |
| Vanguard (UUUC) | 12.7% | 14 |
| Alliance | 9.8% | 8 |
| UPNI | 7.7% | 5 |
| NILP | 1.4% | 1 |
| Independent Loyalist (UUUC) | 0.9% | 1 |
| Independent Unionist | 0.6% | 1 |

Why Did the Convention Fail?

- **Unionists (UUUC)** opposed power-sharing and won a majority.
- **SDLP** supported power-sharing, creating a deadlock.
- The **British government** rejected the unionist proposal for a return to Stormont.
- **Convention dissolved in May 1976**, and Direct Rule remained.

2. The Escalation of Violence and 'Ulsterisation'

Republican Violence

- The **IRA** targeted the **British Army** and economic sites.

- Expanded its bombing campaign to Britain:
 - **Birmingham Pub Bombings (1974):** 21 killed, 200 wounded.
 - **Guildford Pub Bombings (1974):** 5 killed, 65 wounded.
 - **Warrenpoint Ambush (1979):** 18 British soldiers killed in the deadliest attack on the British Army.
 - **Mountbatten Assassination (1979):** Lord Mountbatten killed in Mullaghmore, Co. Sligo.
- The IRA's "Long War" strategy (1976) aimed at exhausting the British government.

British Response: Ulsterisation

- Shifted security responsibility from British troops to local forces.
- Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) and RUC took a more active role.
- Reduced British Army casualties but increased RUC and UDR deaths.
- Loyalist paramilitaries (UDA, UVF) escalated attacks on Catholics.

3. The Hunger Strikes (1980-1981)

Background

- IRA prisoners lost 'Special Category Status' in 1976, meaning they were treated as ordinary criminals.
- Republican prisoners launched blanket protests (1976) and dirty protests (1978).
- First hunger strike (1980) lasted 53 days but ended without victory.

The 1981 Hunger Strike

- Led by Bobby Sands, the second hunger strike began in March 1981.
- Prisoners demanded political status.
- Sands was elected MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone (April 1981) while on strike.
- Sands died on 5 May 1981, followed by 9 other strikers.

Impact of the Hunger Strikes

- Strengthened republican propaganda, portraying the British government as inhumane.
- Over 100,000 attended Sands' funeral.
- IRA gained sympathy, increasing recruitment.
- Sinn Féin adopted a 'ballot box and Armalite' strategy, combining elections and armed struggle.
- Margaret Thatcher became a hate figure for republicans.

4. The Rise of Sinn Féin as a Political Force

Gerry Adams and the Politicisation of Republicanism

- Sinn Féin vice-president Gerry Adams (1978) argued for increased political engagement.

- **1981 General Election:** Two hunger strikers, including Ciarán Doherty, won seats in Dáil Éireann.
- Sinn Féin contested the 1982 Northern Ireland Assembly election, winning 10% of the vote.
- Began to challenge the SDLP as the main nationalist party.

5. The New Ireland Forum (1983-1984)

Background

- Launched by Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald to discuss peaceful solutions.
- Included Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Labour, and the SDLP.
- Unionist parties and Sinn Féin refused to participate.

Forum Report (1984) Proposals

1. **Unitary State:** A 32-county united Ireland.
2. **Federal/Confederal State:** Northern and Southern governments linked under a new structure.
3. **Joint Authority:** British and Irish governments co-govern Northern Ireland.

British Response: Thatcher's 'Out, Out, Out' Speech

- Margaret Thatcher dismissed all three proposals.
- Stated Northern Ireland would remain in the UK as long as the majority wished.
- Disappointed nationalists but showed Britain's commitment to the unionist majority.

Conclusion

- Efforts to restore devolved government failed due to unionist opposition.
- The IRA's campaign continued, expanding into Britain.
- The Hunger Strikes radicalised nationalism and increased Sinn Féin's political strength.
- The New Ireland Forum failed, but laid groundwork for later Anglo-Irish cooperation.
- Thatcher's hardline approach prevented progress but did not end the conflict.

Key Terms

- **Ulsterisation (1976):** Shift of security responsibility to local forces.
- **The Long War:** IRA's strategy of sustained violence to wear down Britain.
- **Blanket Protest (1976):** IRA prisoners refused prison uniforms.
- **Hunger Strikes (1980-1981):** IRA prisoners protested for political status.
- **New Ireland Forum (1983):** Irish government initiative for political solutions.
- **"Out, Out, Out" Speech (1984):** Thatcher rejected Irish proposals for Northern Ireland.