

Chapter 8: Peace in Sight, 1985-1994

Introduction

Between **1985 and 1994**, Northern Ireland moved closer to a peaceful resolution of the Troubles. The **Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985)** gave the Irish government a consultative role in Northern Irish affairs, which angered unionists. Meanwhile, the rise of Sinn Féin as a political force and the **Hume-Adams talks** attempted to create a political pathway for republicans. This period also saw the **Downing Street Declaration (1993)** and a historic **IRA ceasefire (1994)**, setting the stage for the Good Friday Agreement (1998).

1. The Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985)

Background

- Following the failure of the **New Ireland Forum (1983-1984)**, the Irish government, led by **Garret FitzGerald**, sought an agreement with Britain to ensure nationalist representation in Northern Ireland.
- US President **Ronald Reagan** pressured British PM **Margaret Thatcher** to negotiate, fearing increased IRA support.
- Thatcher and FitzGerald reached an agreement, signed at **Hillsborough Castle on 15 November 1985**.

Terms of the Anglo-Irish Agreement

- An **Intergovernmental Conference** was established, allowing Irish officials to consult on Northern Irish affairs.
- The British government accepted that **Irish reunification could occur if the majority in Northern Ireland supported it**.
- Article 1 reaffirmed that **Northern Ireland would remain part of the UK unless a majority voted otherwise**.
- The Irish government would have a say in **political, security, and cross-border matters**.

Reactions

- **Nationalists welcomed the agreement** as recognition of the "Irish dimension."
- **Republicans (IRA, Sinn Féin) rejected it**, as it did not guarantee reunification.
- **Unionists fiercely opposed it**, believing it gave the Irish government undue influence.
 - The "**Ulster Says No**" campaign led by **Ian Paisley** and **James Molyneaux** gathered **100,000 protesters in Belfast**.
 - All **15 Unionist MPs resigned** their Westminster seats in protest.
 - The **Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF)** declared agreement supporters "**legitimate targets**."

- Despite unionist resistance, the agreement strengthened cooperation between Britain and Ireland, helping to build trust for future negotiations.

2. The Rise of Sinn Féin and Loyalist Paramilitary Responses

Sinn Féin and the "Ballot Box and Armalite" Strategy

- Sinn Féin, under Gerry Adams, pursued a dual strategy of armed struggle and political engagement.
- Won 59 seats in local elections (1985), making gains on the SDLP.
- Ended abstention from the Dáil (1986), allowing Sinn Féin to contest elections in the Republic.
- Began secret talks with the British government (1987).

Loyalist Paramilitary Violence

- Loyalist groups, including the UDA and UVF, increased attacks on Catholics and nationalists.
- The UDA's "Common Sense" document (1987) proposed power-sharing but maintained unionist dominance.
- The UFF assassinated nationalist leaders, hoping to derail talks.
- The UVF and UDA bombed Dublin and Monaghan in 1987, killing 11 people.

3. The Hume-Adams Talks (1988-1993)

Background

- SDLP leader John Hume began private talks with Sinn Féin (1988).
- Hume sought to convince the IRA to end its armed campaign and pursue peaceful politics.
- Talks were controversial; unionists saw them as legitimising terrorism.
- The Irish government (under Charles Haughey and later Albert Reynolds) supported the talks.

Outcome of Hume-Adams Talks

- Led to Sinn Féin issuing "Towards a Strategy for Peace" (1992), proposing a peaceful route to Irish unity.
- Helped convince the British and Irish governments to include Sinn Féin in peace talks if the IRA ceased violence.

4. The Downing Street Declaration (1993)

Negotiations

- Taoiseach Albert Reynolds and British PM John Major sought to build on the Hume-Adams talks.
- Issued the Downing Street Declaration on 15 December 1993, stating:
 - Britain had "no selfish or strategic interest" in Northern Ireland.
 - A united Ireland could only happen with the majority consent of Northern Ireland.
 - Nationalists had a legitimate right to pursue unity, but only through peaceful means.
 - All parties rejecting violence could participate in future peace talks.

Impact

- Nationalists welcomed it, seeing it as a step towards peace.
- Sinn Féin hesitated, fearing it would undermine IRA goals.
- The IRA initially rejected it, but Adams and Martin McGuinness lobbied for an IRA ceasefire.
- Loyalists were suspicious, but some saw it as an opportunity for political progress.

5. The IRA Ceasefire (August 1994)

Why Did the IRA Agree to a Ceasefire?

- Pressure from Sinn Féin, who wanted political legitimacy.
- Increased British-Irish cooperation made continued violence riskier.
- US President Bill Clinton granted Adams a visa (1994), showing international interest in peace.
- The IRA was militarily strong but politically isolated.

The Ceasefire Announcement

- **31 August 1994:** IRA declared a "complete cessation of military operations."
- **13 October 1994:** Loyalist paramilitaries (UDA, UVF) also announced a ceasefire.
- Marked the beginning of formal multi-party talks, leading to the Good Friday Agreement (1998).

6. Northern Ireland's Economy in the 1980s and Early 1990s

Economic Challenges

- Lack of foreign investment due to the Troubles.
- High unemployment (17% in 1986), with Catholics disproportionately affected.
- Mass emigration to Britain and the US.

- **Government subsidies kept industries afloat**, but Northern Ireland remained economically weak.

Efforts to Stabilise the Economy

- The British government **nationalised key industries** (e.g., Harland & Wolff shipyards).
- Agriculture remained strong, accounting for **8% of employment**.
- **By 1990, 25% of all jobs were government-supported.**

Conclusion

- The **Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985)** marked a turning point in British-Irish cooperation, though it sparked intense unionist opposition.
- The rise of Sinn Féin and increased loyalist violence shaped political developments.
- The Hume-Adams talks paved the way for future peace agreements.
- The **Downing Street Declaration (1993)** reassured both unionists and nationalists.
- The **IRA ceasefire (1994)** set the stage for formal peace negotiations.
- Economic struggles continued, reinforcing the need for a "peace dividend."

Key Terms

- **Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985):** Gave Ireland a consultative role in Northern Ireland.
- **"Ulster Says No":** Unionist opposition slogan to the agreement.
- **Ballot Box and Armalite Strategy:** Sinn Féin's dual approach of politics and armed struggle.
- **Hume-Adams Talks (1988-1993):** Negotiations between the SDLP and Sinn Féin for peace.
- **Downing Street Declaration (1993):** Set the conditions for a peaceful settlement.
- **IRA Ceasefire (1994):** First major step towards ending the Troubles.