

Ch. 1 - Northern Ireland, 1949-63

Learning Intentions

In this chapter you will learn about:

- Religious and political divisions in Northern Ireland
- The economy of Northern Ireland
- The introduction of the welfare state and its impact
- The IRA and the Border Campaign

5.1 CASE STUDY THE EUCHARISTIC CONGRESS,
Northern Ireland After World War II
1932

Northern Ireland Comes of Age

In April 1949, with the declaration of a Republic, the Irish Free State left the British Commonwealth and severed all connections with the King of England. However, this development did not weaken the connection between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. It actually strengthened the union between the two.

In response to the decision of the Irish Government in Dublin to leave the British Commonwealth, the Labour Government in London, under Prime Minister Clement Attlee, gave a guarantee to the unionists in Northern Ireland. The British Government passed the Ireland Act (1949), which stated that Northern Ireland would remain part of the United Kingdom unless the Parliament in Belfast voted against the Union. As the unionists had a huge majority, this was extremely unlikely to occur. However, despite their strong position in Northern Ireland, unionists never felt secure and free from internal and external threats to their rule.

A Divided Society

Since 1921, the six counties of Northern Ireland had been ruled by the Unionist Party. Under the Government of Ireland Act (1920), passed by the Westminster Parliament, partition was introduced into Ireland. The six counties of Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom. The Imperial Parliament in London retained control over war and peace, foreign affairs and taxation. The Home Rule-style Parliament in Belfast was responsible for the day-to-day running of the state and controlled areas such as law and order, education, health and local government. The Northern Ireland Parliament consisted of a Senate and a House of Commons. Out of the 52 MPs in the House of Commons, unionists usually accounted for at least 40. Because unionists made up two-thirds of the population, they always controlled the government. From the foundation of the state of Northern Ireland in 1921, the nationalist minority was deeply resentful and longed for a united Ireland. As most unionists were Protestants and most nationalists were Catholics, religious and political divisions went hand in hand. To protect Northern Ireland and to secure its place within the United Kingdom, the Unionist Government took some controversial steps, including the following:

- The Special Powers Act, which gave extensive emergency powers to the government, including internment without trial.
- The establishment of the B-Specials, part-time policemen who assisted the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC).
- The abolition of proportional representation (PR) in elections.

A Divided Society

These official measures were deeply resented by nationalists. They complained that the Special Powers Act and the B-Specials were always used against them. Proportional representation (PR) had been introduced by the British Government because it was fairer to minorities than the British straight vote or 'first past the post' system.

In addition to official measures, nationalists also complained of widespread discrimination in the areas of jobs and housing. The Northern Ireland Civil Service, local government bodies and private employers tended to favour Protestants over Catholics when allocating jobs and council housing. These issues were to fester and poison relations between Protestants and Catholics for decades, until violence erupted during the 1960s.

From Depression to Prosperity

During the 1920s and 1930s, Northern Ireland suffered from serious economic depression. Under the rule of its first Prime Minister, Sir James Craig (Lord Craigavon from 1927), stability and law and order were established. However, Craig made no real effort to win over the Catholic nationalist minority. On one occasion he boasted that Northern Ireland was a 'Protestant state for a Protestant people'. During his time as Prime Minister, healthcare, housing and social welfare were at a very low standard. Because of serious unemployment, over 50,000 people emigrated from Northern Ireland between 1926 and 1937.

During the 1930s there were riots in Belfast because of poverty and unemployment. In 1938, the average income of people in Northern Ireland stood at 56 per cent of the level in Great Britain. However, following the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, this situation was to change dramatically.

From Depression to Prosperity

Whereas the Irish Free State under Éamon de Valera remained neutral during World War II, Northern Ireland took a full part in the war as part of the United Kingdom. The economy of the northern state was geared to meet the needs of the British war effort. Farmers increased food production and got good prices on the British market. The Harland and Wolff shipyard went into full production, as did aircraft, engineering and textile factories. Unemployment declined sharply, from around 25 per cent during the 1930s to around 5 per cent by the end of the war in 1945. Wages also rose during the war, leading to increased prosperity among ordinary people.

The people of Belfast suffered severely when the city was bombed in 1941. It has been estimated that around 1,100 people were killed, over 56,000 houses were destroyed or damaged and over £20 million worth of damage was done to property. This suffering, together with the overall contribution of the people of Northern Ireland to the British war effort, strengthened the bond between the state and the rest of the United Kingdom. At the end of the war in May 1945 the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, paid tribute to the people of Northern Ireland when he declared that without the use of its ports, Great Britain would have had to invade the Irish Free State.

In July 1945, Churchill was overwhelmingly defeated in a general election and his government was replaced by a Labour government under Prime Minister Clement Attlee. The measures introduced by this government were to have a profound impact on the people of Northern Ireland in the decades ahead.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did the British Government pass the Ireland Act (1949) and what was its significance?
2. Who controlled the government of Northern Ireland after 1921?
3. How did the nationalist minority view the state of Northern Ireland?
4. What steps were taken by the Unionist Government to consolidate its position of control?
5. What economic issues did Ireland face in the 1920s and 1930s?
6. What were the priorities of Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister, Sir James Craig?
7. What impact did World War II have on the economy of Northern Ireland?

The Welfare State

One of the main promises of the new Labour Government in Great Britain was to introduce a welfare state. In the future, healthcare, social welfare and education would be radically changed to create a more equal society. In return for increased taxation, the state provided free healthcare, higher old-age and disability pensions and better educational challenges did Northern opportunities for all sections of the population.

The leaders of the Unionist Party in Northern Ireland did not welcome the introduction of a welfare state. They were opposed to radical social change and were closely linked to the Conservative Party in Westminster. However, they were bound to implement the welfare state policies of the government in London. In doing so, they obtained highly favourable measures for the people of Northern Ireland. The task of implementing the welfare state in Northern Ireland lay with the government of Sir Basil Brooke (later Lord Brookeborough), who became Prime Minister in 1943.

Under an agreement reached in 1946 between the governments in Belfast and London, Northern Ireland was to enjoy the same level of social services as the rest of the United Kingdom. In return for increased funding from the British Government, the Government of Northern Ireland accepted greater control by the British Treasury in London. The additional funding was used to bring about significant improvements in healthcare, social welfare and education.

A Transformation in Healthcare

Healthcare in Northern Ireland had not advanced significantly since the state was founded in 1921. By the 1940s, healthcare in the province lagged behind the provisions in the rest of the United Kingdom. While the better-off sections of society could afford to pay for private healthcare, poorer people had to depend on an under-funded and inadequate public healthcare system. This situation was radically changed in 1948 when a National Health Service (NHS) was set up in Northern Ireland. Almost identical to the system enacted in Great Britain in the same year, it introduced a free medical service that was open to all. People could attend a doctor of their choice and all healthcare, including medicines, would be free.

Sustained efforts were made to tackle the devastating disease of tuberculosis (TB), which was responsible for almost half the deaths in the 15-25 age group during the 1940s. This problem was so serious in Northern Ireland that a Tuberculosis Authority was established in 1941. An effective screening programme and the use of new drugs helped to radically reduce the death rate from tuberculosis, and by 1954 it had come down to the same level as in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Because Northern Ireland's health service had been totally inadequate in the past, the impact of the new NHS was more dramatic in Northern Ireland than in England, Scotland or Wales.

Improvements in Social Welfare and Housing

Along with the improvements in healthcare, there was a complete transformation in social welfare. Under the welfare state, a new system of National Insurance was introduced. All workers paid regular contributions into a social insurance fund. In return, they received payments from the state after retirement or when unemployed. The sick, the elderly and the widowed received vastly improved levels of payment.

Advances also took place in the provision of public housing. Before World War II the standard of housing for poorer sections of society was particularly low. This situation was clearly seen during the Blitz in Belfast in 1941, when there was a high level of death, injury and destruction among the closely packed, poor-quality terraced houses in the city. In 1945, the Minister for Health and Local Government, William Grant, set up the Northern Ireland Housing Trust, which had the power to borrow money from the government in order to build houses.

Between 1945 and 1963, around 113,000 new houses were built. Although the Housing Trust was fair in its allocation of houses, the same could not be said of the local authorities. Many of these, under unionist control, favoured fellow unionists and Protestants in the allocation of council housing. This was to be a source of much tension between unionists and nationalists in the years ahead.

Reform in Education

As in the case of health and social welfare, educational reforms introduced in Great Britain were also implemented in Northern Ireland. Under the Education Act (1947), major changes were introduced at all levels, from primary to university. At the end of primary education, pupils sat for an examination known as the 11-Plus. The most able 20 per cent attended grammar schools, which followed a strictly academic curriculum. The other 80 per cent attended intermediate or secondary schools, which followed a more technical programme. The vast majority of pupils did not pay fees and there was a huge increase in state grants for all types of schools. As a result of these reforms, the numbers attending second-level schools in Northern Ireland doubled between 1947 and 1952.

As in the rest of the United Kingdom, third-level education became accessible to greater numbers of students. Grants were available to enable less well-off students to attend university. Despite the improvements introduced by the 1947 Education Act, the changes met with strong opposition from sections of both the Catholic and Protestant communities. Catholic bishops complained that their schools still received lower grants than the largely Protestant state system. They also believed that the state was gaining too much control over education. Many Protestants were alarmed by the provisions in the Education Act that diminished the role of religious instruction in state schools. Their anger was directed at the Education Minister, Colonel Hall-Thompson. Although he successfully introduced the education reforms, he resigned in 1949 when the Prime Minister, Lord Brookeborough, failed to support his plans concerning pensions for Catholic teachers.

Reform in Education

Although introduced in controversial circumstances, the education reforms played a significant role in transforming society in Northern Ireland. Both Protestants and Catholics remained at school longer and attended university in greater numbers. The implications for the Catholic population were particularly profound. Within a short period, educated and articulate young Catholics emerged who were not prepared to put up with discrimination under unionist rule and went on to campaign for civil rights for all citizens of Northern Ireland.

One of the Catholic students to avail of the improved opportunities in education was John Hume, the future nationalist political leader. He later referred to the importance of his education:

“I had been one of the lucky ones: I was the first of my generation to take advantage of the 1944 Education Act and got myself to university. My education allowed me to put something back into my community. I became involved in housing and poverty and self-help organisations.”

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who became Prime Minister of Northern Ireland in 1943?
2. How did the Unionist Government in Northern Ireland view the introduction of the welfare state?
3. State two improvements in healthcare that came about in Northern Ireland as a result of the welfare state.
4. How was housing improved as a result of the changes?
5. What changes came about in education and why were the main churches unhappy with some of these?
6. How did changes in education help to transform society in Northern Ireland?

The Economy of Northern Ireland

While the welfare state was being introduced into Northern Ireland after 1945, changes were also taking place in the economy. At this time, Northern Ireland remained the most disadvantaged region in the United Kingdom. The average rate of unemployment during the 1950s was 7 per cent, in marked contrast to the economic prosperity in Great Britain and much of Western Europe at the time.

Agriculture remained the single most important industry in the province at this time. About a quarter of the workforce was still engaged in agriculture in the late 1940s. The majority of these worked on small family farms. Although farmers enjoyed government subsidies and guaranteed prices on the British market, this did not prevent a decline in the numbers working in agriculture. During the 1950s the number of men working on the land declined by 27 per cent, largely due to the increased use of tractors and other forms of machinery.

The Economy of Northern Ireland

The numbers working in traditional industries in Northern Ireland also declined after 1945. The linen industry experienced a rapid decline when linen became less popular on world markets. Synthetic materials like rayon and nylon had taken over much of linen's traditional trade. A large number of linen factories closed down and 27,000 jobs were lost in the industry between 1948 and 1964. Another significant traditional industry, shipbuilding, also experienced difficulties. In the immediate post-war period, it continued to prosper, but declined after 1955 due to increased competition from Germany and Japan.

In an effort to provide jobs for the increasing population, the government had to look beyond agriculture and traditional industries. A number of laws were passed to provide incentives to foreign companies locating in Northern Ireland. Largely as a result of these incentives, around 55,000 new jobs were created between 1945 and 1963. Despite these achievements, unemployment remained high, especially in strongly nationalist areas such as Derry and Newry. In the early 1960s, protests and demonstrations were organised by trade unions over the high levels of unemployment.

Whereas social and economic issues played a central role in people's lives, the underlying divisions between unionists and nationalists continued to dominate the political life of the province.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did the economy of Northern Ireland differ from the rest of the UK in the 1950s?
2. What changes occurred in agriculture in Northern Ireland at this time?
3. How did traditional industries perform in Northern Ireland in the 1950s?
4. What incentives were offered to foreign companies locating in Northern Ireland?
5. Why were protests organised by trade unions in the early 1960s?

The Anti-Partition Movement

On 15 November 1945 nationalist MPs and senators were among 500 people who gathered in Dungannon, Co. Tyrone, to set up the Irish Anti-Partition League. The aim of the new movement was to unite all nationalists into a solid bloc in order to campaign against partition.

The league also hoped to gain support from the de Valera Government in Dublin and from Irish emigrants in the United States and other countries. De Valera began an international campaign against partition. The First Inter-Party Government (1948-51), under the leadership of John A. Costello, continued the anti-partition campaign. At the declaration of the Irish Republic in April 1949, the southern state severed all connections with the British Commonwealth. Costello declared at the time that his aim was 'to take the gun out of Irish politics'. He hoped to achieve Irish unity by peaceful means. A public relations campaign was begun under the direction of the Minister for External Affairs, Seán MacBride, to persuade the British Government to end partition. Very little effort was made to persuade the Ulster unionists of the advantages of entering a united Ireland. While most Irish nationalists were committed to ending partition by peaceful means, the members of the IRA continued to take a different view.

The IRA and the Border Campaign

Between 1956 and 1962 the IRA engaged in a series of attacks on Northern Ireland from across the border in the Republic. This became known as the Border Campaign. The campaign, code-named Operation Harvest, began in December 1956 with attacks on a number of police barracks in border areas.

Most of these attacks ended in failure. The most famous episode in the Border Campaign took place on 31 December 1956 when twelve IRA men attacked the RUC barracks in Brookeborough, Co. Fermanagh. Two IRA men, Fergal O'Hanlon and Seán South, were killed in this operation.

Their deaths gave rise to a wave of sympathy and huge numbers attended their funerals. In the general election in the Republic of Ireland in March 1957, four Sinn Féin TDs were elected. However, they refused to take their seats in the Dáil. Although the Border Campaign continued until 1961, it achieved no tangible results. The Brookeborough Government took strict measures against the threat from the IRA. Security was improved at police barracks, the part-time B-Special police reserve was called into action and internment without trial was introduced. At the same time the Fianna Fáil Government in the Republic introduced internment without trial.

The IRA and the Border Campaign

By the autumn of 1958 nearly all the leading IRA activists were either in prison or dead. Internment came to an end in the Republic in March 1959 and in Northern Ireland in April 1961. On 26 February 1962 the IRA issued an official statement announcing the end of the Border Campaign.

During the campaign, twelve IRA members and six RUC men were killed, thirty-two members of the security forces were injured and over 200 IRA members were convicted and sentenced for their role in the campaign. The Border Campaign did not bring Irish unity any closer and after its close in 1962 the IRA did not re-emerge as a force in Northern Ireland until after the outbreak of the Troubles in 1969.

The Close of the Brookeborough Era

With the exception of the Border Campaign, the 1950s and early 1960s were characterised by relative political stability in Northern Ireland. The IRA campaign posed little real threat to the security of the state. Most nationalists rejected violence and supported peaceful constitutional politics. Brookeborough's Government failed to take the opportunity to encourage Catholics to participate more in the institutions of the state. Instead, unionists continued to regard Catholics with deep suspicion and remained attached to the policy of Protestant supremacy.

The greatest difficulties facing the Brookeborough Government, therefore, emerged not over political divisions, but over economic concerns. As we have already seen, unemployment rates remained high in Northern Ireland. Trade unionists protested against the record of the Brookeborough Government, and in the general election of 1962 the unionists lost votes and seats to the Northern Ireland Labour Party. In the aftermath of this election, discontent grew among unionists with Lord Brookeborough, who had been Prime Minister since 1943. Eventually, leading members of the Unionist Party compelled the reluctant Prime Minister to resign in March 1963. He was succeeded in office by the Minister of Finance, Captain Terence O'Neill.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the anti-partition movement?
2. What was the 'Border Campaign'?
3. What measures were taken by the Brookeborough Government against the IRA?
4. Was the border campaign a success or a failure? Give reasons for your answer.
5. What difficulties were facing the Brookeborough Government in the early 1960s?