

Ch. 6 - **DIRECT RULE** *Continues*

Learning Intentions

In this chapter you will learn about:

- The continuation of direct rule
- Roy Mason as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
- Margaret Thatcher and the IRA hunger strikes
- The New Ireland Forum and Margaret Thatcher's reaction

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

Political Stalemate

With the failure of the Sunningdale Agreement, the British Government restored direct rule in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State, Merlyn Rees, took over the day-to-day government of Northern Ireland. Like the previous Conservative Government of Edward Heath, the Labour Government of Harold Wilson favoured a power-sharing arrangement. Although a number of efforts were made to restore such an arrangement in Northern Ireland, none was successful in the short term. The main obstacles in the way were political opposition by a majority of unionists and violent resistance by loyalist and republican paramilitaries. In the British general election of October 1974, the anti-power-sharing United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC) won 10 out of the 12 Northern Ireland seats in the Westminster Parliament.

During the early months of 1975, the British Government decided to set up an elected convention in the hope of restoring power-sharing to the province. However, in the convention election in May 1975 the unionists opposed to power-sharing won 58 per cent of the vote, resulting in 47 seats out of 78. Brian Faulkner's pro-power-sharing unionists only won 5 seats, Alliance won 8, the SDLP 17 and the Northern Ireland Labour Party one seat. As a result, the convention was doomed to failure from the outset.

At this time of political stagnation and continuing paramilitary violence, Northern Ireland also faced deep economic problems.

Economic Failure

During the 1970s, Northern Ireland was beset by serious economic difficulties. Between 1973 and 1979 the economy grew by only around 2 per cent a year and most of this growth was due to subsidies from the British Government.

After reaching a peak in 1973, the numbers employed in manufacturing industries fell rapidly. The big employers of the past, such as the shipbuilding and engineering industries, were in serious decline.

Along with the Republic of Ireland, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. Entry to this large free-trade block threatened traditional industries such as clothing and textiles, which could not compete with the more efficient companies in other parts of Europe.

The oil crisis of the mid-1970s had a severe impact on Northern Ireland. By 1974 the province had become more dependent on cheap oil than any other region in the United Kingdom. Therefore the huge increase in energy prices had a particularly severe impact on the local economy and contributed to rising levels of unemployment.

As well as suffering a decline based on economic factors such as the oil crisis, the economy of Northern Ireland was seriously damaged by the effects of political unrest and violence. The sustained bombing campaigns of both loyalist and republican paramilitaries resulted in massive destruction of factories, shops and homes. Furthermore, the widespread violence discouraged foreign companies from locating industries in Northern Ireland.

Economic Failure

Unemployment rates among Catholics remained extremely high they were almost three times as likely to be unemployed as Protestants. In order to lessen the inequalities, the British Parliament passed the Fair Employment Act in 1976. This set up a Fair Employment Agency in Northern Ireland and made it illegal for employers to discriminate on the basis of a person's religion or politics. Although this measure brought about little practical improvement, it was a significant first step that paved the way for more effective change in fair employment in the future.

The Troubles also had a serious impact on the housing situation in Northern Ireland. By 1976 around 25,000 houses in Belfast alone had been either destroyed or damaged. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive had been established in 1971 to provide public housing. It faced serious challenges from the outset. Not only did it have to deal with years of neglect in the provision and maintenance of housing, it also had to confront the problems of violence and intimidation. During the Troubles there was a huge population movement as both Catholics and Protestants were forced to flee from their homes. As a result, the community became more polarised and most localities were overwhelmingly either Catholic or Protestant.

Against this background of sectarian tension and economic stagnation, both the British Government and the Provisional IRA were preparing for a long struggle.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What were the main obstacles in the way of a restoration of power-sharing from 1974 onwards?
2. Which group won 58% of the vote in the Convention Election in Northern Ireland in May 1975?
3. What was the trend from 1973 onwards in the numbers employed in manufacturing?
4. How did the oil crisis of the mid-1970s affect Northern Ireland?
5. List two ways in which violence damaged the economy of Northern Ireland in the 1970s.
6. Why did the British Parliament pass the Fair Employment Act in 1976?
7. How did the Troubles worsen the housing situation in Northern Ireland?

The Long War

With the failure of the Sunningdale Agreement (1973) and the convention (1975), the British Government concentrated on defeating the IRA. They felt let down by the failure of the IRA ceasefire in 1975 and there was widespread outrage at the assassination of the British ambassador in Dublin, Christopher Ewart-Biggs, in July 1976.

Meanwhile, the IRA had been reviewing their approach. A group of republicans inside Long Kesh internment camp, including Gerry Adams, concluded that the struggle to achieve Irish unity was going to be slow and long-lasting. They hoped to wear down the British resolve to remain in Northern Ireland by a long campaign of bombing and shooting.

The group also set about radically reforming the structures of the IRA. The old structures were to be replaced by a system of active service units, each consisting of four members. This was done to reduce the risk of infiltration by informers. In future, IRA activities in Northern Ireland would come under the control of a Northern Command consisting of local young IRA members. A very important innovation was the decision by the IRA to build up Sinn Féin as a political organisation to campaign for British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.

The Long War

By the mid-1970s, violence had become a way of life in many working-class areas of Northern Ireland. Both the IRA and loyalist paramilitaries controlled areas and carried out acts of violence, robbery and intimidation.

During the winter of 1975-76, a gang of UVF members known as the 'Shankill Butchers' roamed the streets kidnapping, torturing and murdering innocent Catholics. Their leader, Lenny Murphy, was also feared in Protestant areas because he shot anybody who quarrelled with him.

Against this background of constant violence and sectarian attacks, a movement sprang up demanding an end to violence and a return to peace in Northern Ireland.

The Peace Movement

In August 1976, two women founded a peace movement, one a Protestant named Betty Williams and the other a Catholic named Mairead Corrigan. Betty Williams had recently witnessed an accident in which Mairead Corrigan's sister Anne was injured and three of her four children were killed when a gunman's getaway car crashed into them. The new movement was initially called 'Women for Peace' and later became known as the 'Peace People'. It organised rallies and marches to promote peace and reconciliation. Unlike previous efforts, the Peace People attracted widespread cross-community support, with some of their rallies being attended by over 20,000 people.

Directed by the journalist Ciaran McKeown, the peace movement attracted widespread support both at home and abroad. However, in a deeply divided society, the movement was opposed by extremists on both sides in Northern Ireland. After seven years of violence, the leaders of the peace movement found it difficult to bring about any great change in existing attitudes and the violence continued throughout the province.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the main priority of the British Government in Northern Ireland after the failure of the Sunningdale Agreement and the convention?
2. Name the British ambassador to Ireland who was assassinated by the IRA in Dublin in 1976.
3. How did the IRA change its structures during the 1970s?
4. What decision was taken regarding Sinn Féin?
5. Who were the 'Shankill Butchers'?
6. What was the Peace Movement? Name two of its leaders.
7. Was it a success? Explain your answer.

A New Secretary of State: Roy Mason Arrives in Northern Ireland

In September 1976 a new Secretary of State arrived in Northern Ireland. Roy Mason was appointed by James Callaghan, who had replaced Harold Wilson as British Prime Minister the previous April. From the outset, Mason was determined to defeat the IRA. His strong statements supporting law and order and condemning republicans won favour with unionists but made him unpopular among nationalists. Mason believed that the North's problems were primarily due to massive unemployment and poverty. If the IRA could be defeated, economic prosperity would follow, resulting in a more stable society. Due to his hardline approach to republican violence, Mason faced accusations of turning a blind eye to brutality perpetrated by members of the British Army and the RUC. He refused to take action over complaints of brutality by RUC interrogators against IRA suspects at a specially built interrogation unit at Castlereagh outside Belfast.

A few months before Mason's arrival in Northern Ireland, the British Government had ended the Special Category Status for paramilitary prisoners. Under this status, IRA members and loyalists had been treated as political prisoners, with permission to wear their own clothes. Under the new regulations they would be treated as ordinary criminals and would have to wear special prison clothing. The resistance of the IRA prisoners to the new prison regime was to lead to major convulsions in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain in the years ahead.

Prison Protests

The abolition of Special Category Status met with an immediate response by the IRA prisoners in the Maze Prison (the former Long Kesh). They refused to wear prison clothes and covered themselves instead with blankets. By 1977 over 150 republican prisoners were on the blanket protest. When these tactics failed to result in concessions, the prisoners began the dirty protest, which involved spreading their excrement on the walls of their cells. The Secretary of State, Roy Mason, ignored this protest as well, believing that he could eventually force the prisoners into submission. He was encouraged in this approach by declining levels of violence in 1977 and 1978.

Mason's tough approach to the IRA appealed to the unionists, who felt more secure than at any stage since the outbreak of the Troubles in 1968. However, his preoccupation with crushing the IRA in the absence of any political initiatives further alienated nationalists. Therefore, when Mason left office on the defeat of the Labour Government in May 1979, bitter tensions and divisions continued and the difficulties within the prisons remained unresolved.

Margaret Thatcher Becomes Prime Minister

In May 1979 the Conservative Party under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher won the general election in Great Britain. The new Prime Minister, known as the 'Iron Lady', already had a reputation as a strong and tough personality. While in opposition, Thatcher and her friend and Northern Ireland spokesman Airey Neave had been sympathetic to the unionists. She later remarked in her autobiography, 'My own instincts are profoundly Unionist... Airey Neave and I felt the greatest sympathy with the Unionists while we were in Opposition.'

Both Thatcher and Neave strongly believed that the solution to the problems in Northern Ireland lay in the military defeat of the IRA. However, in March 1979 - two months before the general election – Neave was killed by a car bomb in the grounds of the House of Commons at Westminster. The bomb was planted by members of a small breakaway republican paramilitary group called the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA).

On coming to power as Prime Minister, Thatcher appointed Humphrey Atkins as the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. On 27 August 1979 the IRA carried out two bombing attacks on the same day. In Mullaghmore, Co. Sligo, a bomb blew up the boat of Earl Mountbatten, a cousin of the British royal family. He and three other people were killed, including his fourteen-year-old grandson, Nicholas and a local boy named Paul Maxwell. Meanwhile, eighteen British soldiers were killed by an IRA double bomb at Warrenpoint in Co. Down.

Thatcher immediately flew to Belfast and announced an increase of 1,000 members to the police force. These atrocities had clearly shown the new Prime Minister the ruthlessness and the destructive capacity of the IRA.

The Pope's Plea for Peace

In September 1979 Pope John Paul II paid a historic trip to Ireland. He spent a few days in the Republic but did not visit Northern Ireland because of the security situation. However, tens of thousands of Catholics from the north were present during the Pope's visit to Drogheda on 29 September. He made a passionate plea to all men and women engaged in violence: 'On my knees I beg you to turn away from the paths of violence and return to the ways of peace.'

The vast majority of people, north and south, supported the Pope's plea. However, three days later, on 2 October, the IRA rejected his plea and pledged to continue their campaign.

Attempts to Break the Deadlock

The new Conservative Government under Margaret Thatcher continued to adopt a hardline approach to the IRA. However, like the previous Conservative and Labour governments since the introduction of direct rule in 1972, the Thatcher Government also attempted to find a political solution in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Humphrey Atkins, proposed a round-table conference involving the four main political parties in the province. The attempt met with almost total failure.

On the unionist side the Rev. Ian Paisley, leader of the DUP, flatly rejected Atkins' proposal and called on the British Government to defeat the IRA. Paisley was in a strong position because he headed the poll in the first ever election for the European Parliament in June 1979. The new leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, James Molyneaux, was also opposed to the initiative. He had succeeded Harry West as leader of his party in 1979. He favoured the continuation of direct rule and believed that Northern Ireland should be integrated more closely with the rest of the United Kingdom.

The moderate Alliance Party favoured Atkins' attempt to reach a political consensus. However, the main nationalist party, the SDLP, was divided on the issue. The party leader, Gerry Fitt, was in favour of the proposed round-table talks. However, a majority of his party colleagues opposed the proposal because it lacked an Irish dimension. As a result, Fitt resigned as leader in November 1979 and was replaced by John Hume. Although the parties were willing to talk separately to the Secretary of State, they refused to participate together in a round-table conference. Eventually Atkins abandoned the initiative in March 1980. Together with the attempts to initiate all-party talks in the north, the British Government also engaged in discussions with the Irish Government in Dublin.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What policies were pursued by Roy Mason on his appointment as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland?
2. What new regulations did the British Government introduce for paramilitary prisoners and how did the IRA prisoners respond?
3. What did Margaret Thatcher see as the best means of solving the problems in Northern Ireland?
4. What happened on 27 August 1979? How did Margaret Thatcher respond to these events?
5. What plea was made by Pope John Paul II on his visit to Ireland? How did the IRA respond to this?

Haughey and Thatcher Meet

In May 1980 the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, met Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in London. Thatcher's priority was to secure increased co-operation from the Irish Government in the struggle against the IRA. For its part, the Irish Government was hoping for greater co-operation between the two governments on Northern Ireland. To the alarm of Ulster unionists, both governments issued a joint statement which contained the phrase 'totality of relationships'. This signified that the British Government appeared to be recognising an Irish interest in the affairs of Northern Ireland.

In December 1980, Thatcher and her leading ministers attended a summit in Dublin Castle. The two governments announced the establishment of joint studies to explore the possibility of greater co-operation in areas such as the economy and security. In Northern Ireland, Ian Paisley organised a mass rally to protest against the Anglo-Irish talks.

Thatcher was furious when members of the Irish Government exaggerated the significance of the talks. Soon, however, the relationship between the British and Irish Governments was to come under more severe strain as a result of a crisis in the prisons of Northern Ireland.

The H Block Hunger Strikes

With the failure of the blanket and dirty protests, certain IRA prisoners in the Maze Prison decided to go on hunger strike in order to be classified as special category or political prisoners. These prisoners were located in new single-storey brick units known as the H Blocks.

The first hunger strike began in October 1980 when seven IRA prisoners refused food. This protest was called off two months later. However, in March 1981 a new hunger strike began, led by the IRA commander in the prison, Bobby Sands. This time the prisoners were determined to continue until the British Government conceded to their demands. Unless this occurred, they were willing to die. Despite the concerns of the families of the hunger strikers and the opposition of Catholic bishops and priests, the hunger strike continued. Outside the prison, Sinn Féin was to organise a massive propaganda campaign aimed at glorifying the prisoners and placing pressure on the British Government of Margaret Thatcher.

KEY CONCEPT: PROPAGANDA

Propaganda is a one-sided or distorted version of events to promote a particular point of view. It often consists of **simple slogans or images** that seek to influence public opinion. During the Troubles in Northern Ireland, propaganda was frequently used by opposing groups. Good examples can be found in the election posters of the various parties. As the Troubles were reported on television and by means of photographs in newspapers, increasingly visual images became useful as a means of propaganda by various organisations.

Bobby Sands Elected MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone

During the time of the hunger strike, the independent nationalist MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone, Frank Maguire, died. Sinn Féin decided that the leading IRA hunger striker, Bobby Sands, should contest the ensuing by-election. Other nationalists interested in contesting the election withdrew and the contest was between Sands and the unionist candidate, Harry West.

The election campaign was extremely bitter as unionists and nationalists had totally opposing views on the hunger strikes. Most unionists regarded the IRA as murderers and supported the refusal of Margaret Thatcher to grant any concessions to the prisoners. Many nationalists, on the other hand, regarded the British Prime Minister as unfeeling and uncompromising. While they did not necessarily support the IRA, they sympathised with the plight of the hunger strikers and believed that a compromise should be reached. When the by-election took place on 9 April 1981, Sands defeated his unionist opponent by a margin of 1,446 votes. He secured over 30,000 votes and had been on hunger strike for forty days when the election took place.

The election of Sands to the Westminster Parliament did not alter Thatcher's determination to defeat the hunger strikers. Unionists were outraged that over 30,000 people had voted for a member of the IRA. Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA, had won a huge propaganda victory and were encouraged by the result to become more involved in politics in the future.

The Hunger Strikes Continue

On 5 May 1981 Bobby Sands was the first of the hunger strikers to die in the Maze Prison. His funeral was attended by over 100,000 people and attracted worldwide attention. By the time the hunger strike ended in October 1981, ten men had died. It came to an end when the families of prisoners began to intervene to prevent further deaths.

During the hunger strikes there was widespread rioting in nationalist areas in the north. The hunger strikes also had a huge impact on the Republic of Ireland. There were marches, rallies and black flags throughout the country. The Irish Government tried in vain to persuade Thatcher to compromise. Irish-Americans also campaigned for a resolution to the issue and Pope John Paul II sent Monsignor John Magee as his envoy to visit the Maze Prison.

During the crisis, a general election took place in the Irish Republic in June 1981. Two republicans were elected as TDs, including Ciaran Doherty, a hunger striker who died soon after his election. Although the hunger strike was defeated, these events marked a turning point in the development of Northern Ireland. They had further polarised the two communities. Unionists believed that because nationalists supported a compromise, they were sympathetic to the IRA. Nationalists for their part felt totally alienated and turned in increasing numbers from the moderate SDLP to Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin itself learned valuable lessons concerning the powerful weapon of political agitation.

The Irish Government was particularly concerned at the alienation of the nationalist minority in Northern Ireland. This concern lay at the heart of a new initiative called the New Ireland Forum.

The New Ireland Forum

The New Ireland Forum, which first met in Dublin in May 1983, was a gathering of constitutional nationalists from Ireland, north and south. It was convened by the opinion that any other single event since internment in Taoiseach, Dr Garret FitzGerald, who was anxious to strengthen constitutional nationalists and to draw support away from Sinn Féin and the IRA. He particularly wanted to strengthen the position of the SDLP as the main constitutional nationalist party in Northern Ireland.

The most influential figures in the forum were FitzGerald; the Tánaiste and leader of the Labour Party, Dick Spring; Charles Haughey, the Fianna Fáil leader; and the leader of the SDLP, John Hume. The aim of the forum was to explore ways of achieving Irish unity by consent and to protect the identity of northern Protestants in a new Ireland. They also wished to show that Irish unity could be achieved by peaceful means.

The forum issued its report in May 1984, which offered three solutions to the problem of relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic:

- A unitary state
- A federal state
- Joint authority in Northern Ireland by the British and Irish Governments.

The New Ireland Forum

A unitary state would involve a completely united Ireland under a government in Dublin. In a federal state, Northern Ireland would maintain its own parliament within a united Ireland.

Under joint authority, the state of Northern Ireland would continue to exist but would function under equal British and Irish rule.

To the annoyance of the other parties, Charles Haughey, leader of Fianna Fáil, almost immediately repudiated the agreed report and stated that a unitary state was the only possible solution.

The unionist parties in Northern Ireland totally rejected the report of the New Ireland Forum. However, the most dramatic rejection of the report was to come from the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.

Margaret Thatcher Rejects the New Ireland Forum

In October 1984 the IRA attempted to kill Margaret Thatcher and members of her government during the Conservative Party Conference in Brighton. A massive bomb exploded in the Grand Hotel during the conference. Although Thatcher, the target of the attack, was uninjured, five people were killed and many more were seriously injured. The IRA claimed responsibility and stated, 'Today we were unlucky, but remember we only have to be lucky once.' Thatcher, however, refused to allow the Brighton bombing to divert her attention from confronting the problems of Northern Ireland.

In the aftermath of the Brighton bombing, Garret FitzGerald travelled to London for a meeting with Thatcher. Although the talks were positive and friendly, controversy emerged during the press conference at the conclusion of the joint discussions. When asked about the New Ireland Forum, the British Prime Minister categorically dismissed all of the suggestions put forward: 'I have made it quite clear... that a unified Ireland was one solution that is out. A second solution was confederation of two states - that is out. A third solution was joint authority - that is out.'

Despite this obvious setback in Anglo-Irish relations, both leaders remained committed to closer co-operation in an effort to achieve a political solution to the problem of Northern Ireland.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did proposals by Humphrey Atkins for a round-table conference in Northern Ireland meet with almost total failure?
2. Why did IRA prisoners decide to go on hunger strike?
3. What was the New Ireland Forum?
4. What was Margaret Thatcher's reaction to the report of the New Ireland Forum?