

# [Devolution in northern ireland: history and future](https://assignbuster.com/devolution-in-northern-ireland-history-and-future/)

#### Given the previous record of devolution to Northern Ireland are theregood reasons to expect the current settlement to be more successful?

Historically, the society of Northern Ireland has beendeeply divided– its very history is constantly contested, politicized and woven into the fabric of contemporary political issues. In contrast to countries that have emerged from violent beginnings, Northern Ireland’s history plays a very important role in contemporary political behavior. Due to its past, history (or, more precisely historical myths) are regarded with an importance which is not seen in other, more stable societies. In this essay, I will begin by identifying the problems Northern Ireland had which prevented a successful settlement in the past. Then, by analyzing how these problems effected various attempts at a settlement and how the settlements evolved through time I will be able to conclude that the current settlement under the Good Friday agreement is the best variation and in my opinion, likely to be successful.

Within Northern Ireland there are twocommunities, divided by ethnicity, the Protestant unionists and the Catholicnationalists. Fergal Cochrane describes the relationship between these twocommunities as “[ranging] from an uneasy alliance at best, to outrighthostility and hatred”[1]. Cochrane also argues the central issue in the region for most of the twentiethcentury has centered around contested nationality[2]. I would agree with this, while the predominantly Protestant unionists wish callthemselves British and to remain within the United Kingdom, the mainly Catholicnationalists wish to leave the United Kingdom, call themselves Irish and to bea part of a ‘ united’ Irish state. Vernon Bogdanor author of “ Devolution in theUnited Kingdom” therefore comes to the conclusion that there is “ no symmetrybetween Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism”[3]because one is based on nationality and the other is based on citizenship.

Along with these clear ideological issuesthere is a much more pragmatic issue of political control. Cochrane points outthat “ both communities are concerned to uphold what they regard as theirpolitical ‘ rights’ and their ‘ civil liberties’”[4]. This is particularly the case when they considered them to be under attack fromthe other community and this has led to acts of extreme violence on both sides. Therefore, questions relating to democracy, liberty, equality, nationality andpower became part of the power struggle within the region because the twocommunities saw their interests as being mutually exclusive. Thus, historicallyan extension of freedom for one community meant a reduction in freedom for theother. Due to the intractability of the conflict created in Northern Ireland, the repeated diplomatic failure to secure a political compromise, the negativenational publicity generated and the financial cost of the conflict, NorthernIreland has been “ a thorn in the side of successive British governments”[5]. In 1920, stuck between two rivaling communities and concerned about theoutbreak of a civil war, the British government came to the conclusion it wasbest to partition Ireland keeping as many people as possible that wanted homerule in one jurisdiction and as many as possible that opposed home rule inanother. As a result, Northern Ireland was created by the British government in1920 in what Cochrane describes it a “ least worst”[6]option to appease both communities.

By 1968 the Northern Ireland parliament hadbeen dominated by unionists for over fifty years due to the numerical strengthof the Unionists in the north there was no rotation of government. Any attempts it made at resolvingpolitical and social divides such as institutional discrimination againstCatholics, were too slow for nationalists and too fast for unionists. This onlyincreased tensions between the communities and in 1969 the situation was so severethat British troops were sent in to help restore order. As author Gillespiewrote “ The political implications of putting British troops onto the streets ofNorthern Ireland… had not been thought through”[7]. The troops could buy politicians time but the army could not impose a solution, because there was no political solution to impose. This rise in sectarianviolence combined with the British governments concern at the negativeinternational publicity lead to the collapse of the Stormont regime in 1972. The British government suspended the Northern Ireland parliament and imposeddirect rule from London. Undoubtedly then, irredentism from the south andnon-co-operation by northern nationalism played a part in bringing about the“ cataclysm which engulfed Northern Ireland”[8]. However, it is the case that Stormont and London were the prime wielders ofpolitical power in the state at this time, it was them that were in a positionto affect positive change but their refusal to acknowledge and meaningfullyintegrate the Irish nationalists means they must shoulder a majority of theblame for the collapse of the Stormont regime in 1972.

There was a wide range of reactions to the British government’s decision to introduce direct rule. Many nationalists were pleased as it ended the unionist control and gave them hope for reform in the future where as many unionists felt “ betrayed”[9]by the British and some began to support more extreme parties. Similarly, the IRA saw direct rule as a British attempt to claim a country to which it had no legal right, so they escalated their campaign of violence. It was clear then that direct rule from Westminster was not going to be the successful solution in Northern Ireland. The Sunningdale Agreement of 1973was viewed as a short-term measure and a process designed to restore self-government to Northern Ireland. It provided for both a devolved, power sharing administration and a role for the Irish government in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland. However, this failed to please anyone, the Ulster Unionists totally opposed power sharing as for them “ anything short of a return to Stormont was unacceptable”[10]. Along with the UK and Irish governments only three Northern Ireland political parties participated in the talks. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) was wholly opposed to Sunningdale and did not participate. Meanwhile representatives of the perceived ‘ extremes’ loyalists and republican paramilitaries were not invited which only escalated tensions. This meant that the very foundations of the agreement were unstable and likely to fail.

The failures of the Sunningdale talks meantthat the Irish Executive faced considerable problems. There were strongdisagreements within the Assembly and the role of the Council was not madeclear, as terrorist activity continued the blame was placed on the Executivedespite the police being controlled from London. As a result, Sunningdale’s political institutionscollapsed as early as 1974, toppled by the Ulster Workers Council (UWC) strike, a near-insurrection spearheaded by a coalition of unionists and loyalists that“ effectively brought Northern Ireland to a standstill”[11]. Despite attempting to increase inclusion of nationalists in the NorthernIreland Parliament Sunningdale failed in effectively integrating them. Althoughthe number of nationalists in the executive of Northern Ireland was much higherwhen compared to Stormont, many felt as though the unionists wereover-represented. The fact that none of the republican parties were included inthe talks shows the extent to which they were seriously dedicated to inclusionof the nationalists. Ultimately the Sunningdale agreement failed because thedeep political divisions in Northern Ireland meant its politics were operatingwithin an atmosphere of distrust. Sunningdale, highlighted that something hadto be done whereby both communities felt as though their grievances wereconsidered.

The collapse of the Sunningdale Agreementtriggered a decade of division, tension and paramilitary violence and by early1975 the Wilson government was contemplating “ washing its hands of Ulster bywithdrawing British troops and granting independence”[12]. However, the escalating violence shown on both sides created fears in Irelandthat Ireland would soon descend into civil war should Britain give themindependence. Therefore, a second attempt at creating a successful devolvedgovernment came in 1985 in the form of the Anglo-Irish agreement. Presented byIrish Prime Minister Garrett Fitzgerald and British Prime Minister MargaretThatcher it set up an intergovernmental conference where the Northern IrelandSecretary and Irish Foreign Minister would meet regularly. It outlined cross boarderco-operation on security, legal and political issues. A new civil service wasset up with staff from both sides of the border and the British governmentaccepted that one day Ireland may be united but only with the “ consent”[13]of its people. In effect, the Anglo-Irish agreement created a stalemate inNorthern Ireland politics over the next five years. In my opinion, it was animprovement upon the Sunningdale talks as it established regular meetingsbetween UK Northern Ireland secretary and Irish foreign minister to discussmatters of ‘ common concern’ which encouraged cross border co-operation. It wasa positive move which acknowledged the ‘ Irish dimension’ and “ established adialogue and better relations between Westminster and Dublin”[14].

However, the SDLP were the only party whichsupported the Anglo-Irish agreement. The unionist community felt alienated andbetrayed by the agreement and Sin Fein, was as vociferously opposed to theagreement as once again they were not included and felt as though the Irishwere abandoning the Northern Catholics. As Sinn Fein and the Unionists bothrefused to accept the agreement and would not compromise or negotiate with eachother the Assembly was dissolved in June 1986. Although an improvement fromprevious attempts as the Anglo-Irish agreement had a much clearer framework anda step towards better relations between the Northern and Republic of Ireland, it was not enough. Once more, the exclusion of certain parties and theirinterests meant that the agreement did not effectively identify or solve any ofthe problems previously seen in the Sunningdale agreement. It did not addressthe increasing violence seen in Ireland nor did it attempt to resolve the coreof the issue which was the severely damaged relationship between the unionistsand the nationalists.

The next major step in addressing devolutionin Northern Ireland came in 1993 with the Downing Street Declaration. Thisdeclaration was a major step forward in securing a successful peace process inNorthern Ireland because it began to address the issues that resulted infailure during previous attempts. The first important aspect was that thedocument recognized that in order for devolution to be successful three sets ofrelationships needed to be addressed between: nationalists and unionists, northern and republic of Ireland and between Dublin and London. Thisdeclaration stressed the importance of the people of Ireland in deciding theirfuture, they could decide if they wished to be part of Britain or Ireland. Italso stressed that the British governments role was simply to “ encourage, facilitate and enable”[15]the peace process insteadof encouraging a specific outcome. Secondly, unlike in previous attempts thedeclaration included all political parties which rejected violence, givingthose previously left out of negotiations an opportunity to be a part of them. As author Margaret Greenwood wrote “ it signaled a new readiness for dialoguewith all sides involved in the troubles- including Sinn Fein and the IRA”[16]. They were repeatedlyassured of their place at the negotiating table if they accepted the DowningStreet Declaration and the violence ceased. The document was a “ delicatebalance”[17]between the nationalistobjective of a united Ireland and the unionist demand for recognition of theirright to remain as part of the United Kingdom. Therefore, for the most part itwas welcomed as a “ workable compromise”[18]and as a result it went onto provide a point of reference in the developing devolution. The DowningStreet Declaration effectively signaled a public sea-change by the twogovernments in how they were prepared to approach Northern Ireland’s politicalfuture. The fact it identified the issues at hand and was much more conclusivethan its predecessors meant that the Downing Street Declaration had a much betterchance at securing a successful settlement in Northern Ireland. It was now overto the paramilitaries to decide whether or not they would be part of that.

The stage was set for political talks tofinally take formation. In July 1994 Sinn Feinrejected the Downing Street Declaration but was persuaded of the “ virtues ofparticipation in a nationalist coalition”[19]. Thus, on August 1994 then the IRA declared a “ complete cessation”[20]of military activities and loyalist paramilitaries announced their ownceasefire two months later.  This set inmotion a series of events which lead to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The GoodFriday agreement attempts to deal with the two issues at the core of politicalconflict within Northern Ireland, namely how contested political identities canbe accommodated and how power can be shared between the two main communities. Anew Northern Ireland Assembly was set up, all key decisions now required theconsent of both communities in the province. A North-South Council of Ministerwas set up made of the new assembly and ministers from the Republic. There havebeen a number of setbacks over the implementation of the Good Friday Agreementmostly relating to unionist disenchantment with the settlement and a generallack of trust on all sides. Despite this, the Good FridayAgreement was a little short of an historic breakthrough, although a gruelingprocess in the end, the Ulster Unionist, SDLP and Sinn Fein leadership welcomedthe agreement making this an improvement from the Downing Street Declaration. Theagreement brought about a collaboration of parties who previously would noteven sit at negotiating tables together and deescalated the violence which hadpresided over Ireland for decades by requiring both sides to disarm. Unlikeattempts before it, the Good Friday agreement identified the issues of violenceand distrust in Irish society and worked on a more inclusive settlement to helpimprove the situation.

For the first time since the fall of theStormont Regime, Northern Ireland had its own form of government and “ for thefirst time ever, it largely represented the composition of the electorate”[21]. I believe that there is a compromise in the Good Friday Agreement which mayconceivably allow for a more porous sense of political and cultural identity toemerge. Over time, the issues over what it means to be British and what itmeans to be Irish will increasingly become blurred. With the properimplementation of the Good Friday Agreement I believe an administration willdevelop with its own form of government based on social and economic issues. This is already apparent with the fragile existence of the Northern Irelandexecutive in 2000 which meant that broader ideological issues began to slipdown the agenda as resource-based issues began to dominate the politicaldebate. Following the Good Friday Agreement politics in Northern Ireland becamemore practical as they move from the politics of demand to the politics ofdecision. As the structures of the Good Friday Agreement are cemented we cansee a movement towards political realignment along class lines and thedevelopment of a more orthodox form of politics which is good reason to expectthe current settlement to be more successful in the future.

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