

Devolution in northern ireland: history and future



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

Historically, the society of Northern Ireland has been deeply 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 two communities, divided by ethnicity, the Protestant unionists and the Catholic nationalists. Fergal Cochrane describes the relationship between these two communities as “[ranging] from an uneasy alliance at best, to outright hostility and hatred”[1]. Cochrane also argues the central issue in the region for most of the twentieth century has centered around contested nationality[2]. I would agree with this, while the predominantly Protestant unionists wish call themselves British and to remain within the United Kingdom, the mainly Catholic nationalists wish to leave the United Kingdom, call themselves Irish and to be a part of a ‘united’ Irish state. Vernon Bogdanor author of “Devolution in the United Kingdom” therefore comes to the conclusion that there is “no symmetry between Irish

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nationalism and Ulster unionism"[3]because one is based on nationality and the other is based on citizenship.

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

By 1968 the Northern Ireland parliament had been dominated by unionists for over fifty years due to the numerical strength of the Unionists in the north

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there was no rotation of government. Any attempts it made at resolving political and social divides such as institutional discrimination against Catholics, were too slow for nationalists and too fast for unionists. This only increased tensions between the communities and in 1969 the situation was so severe that British troops were sent in to help restore order. As author Gillespie wrote " The political implications of putting British troops onto the streets of Northern 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 sectarian violence combined with the British governments concern at the negative international publicity lead to the collapse of the Stormont regime in 1972. The British government suspended the Northern Ireland parliament and imposed direct rule from London. Undoubtedly then, irredentism from the south and non-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 of political power in the state at this time, it was them that were in a position to affect positive change but their refusal to acknowledge and meaningfully integrate the Irish nationalists means they must shoulder a majority of the blame 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 1973 was 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 meant that the Irish Executive faced considerable problems. There were strong disagreements within the Assembly and the role of the Council was not made clear, as terrorist activity continued the blame was placed on the Executive despite the police being controlled from London. As a result, Sunningdale’s political institutions collapsed 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 Northern Ireland Parliament Sunningdale failed in effectively integrating

them. Although the number of nationalists in the executive of Northern Ireland was much higher when compared to Stormont, many felt as though the unionists were over-represented. The fact that none of the republican parties were included in the talks shows the extent to which they were seriously dedicated to inclusion of the nationalists. Ultimately the Sunningdale agreement failed because the deep political divisions in Northern Ireland meant its politics were operating within an atmosphere of distrust. Sunningdale highlighted that something had to be done whereby both communities felt as though their grievances were considered.

The collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement triggered a decade of division, tension and paramilitary violence and by early 1975 the Wilson government was contemplating “washing its hands of Ulster by withdrawing British troops and granting independence” [12]. However, the escalating violence shown on both sides created fears in Ireland that Ireland would soon descend into civil war should Britain give them independence. Therefore, a second attempt at creating a successful devolved government came in 1985 in the form of the Anglo-Irish agreement. Presented by Irish Prime Minister Garrett Fitzgerald and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher it set up an intergovernmental conference where the Northern Ireland Secretary and Irish Foreign Minister would meet regularly. It outlined cross border co-operation on security, legal and political issues. A new civil service was set up with staff from both sides of the border and the British government accepted 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 in Northern Ireland politics over the next five years. In my opinion, it was an improvement upon the Sunningdale talks

as it established regular meetings between UK Northern Ireland secretary and Irish foreign minister to discuss matters of 'common concern' which encouraged cross border co-operation. It was a positive move which acknowledged the 'Irish dimension' and "established a dialogue and better relations between Westminster and Dublin"[14].

However, the SDLP were the only party which supported the Anglo-Irish agreement. The unionist community felt alienated and betrayed by the agreement and Sinn Fein, was as vociferously opposed to the agreement as once again they were not included and felt as though the Irish were abandoning the Northern Catholics. As Sinn Fein and the Unionists both refused to accept the agreement and would not compromise or negotiate with each other the Assembly was dissolved in June 1986. Although an improvement from previous attempts as the Anglo-Irish agreement had a much clearer framework and a step towards better relations between the Northern and Republic of Ireland, it was not enough. Once more, the exclusion of certain parties and their interests meant that the agreement did not effectively identify or solve any of the problems previously seen in the Sunningdale agreement. It did not address the increasing violence seen in Ireland nor did it attempt to resolve the core of the issue which was the severely damaged relationship between the unionists and the nationalists.

The next major step in addressing devolution in Northern Ireland came in 1993 with the Downing Street Declaration. This declaration was a major step forward in securing a successful peace process in Northern Ireland because it began to address the issues that resulted in failure during previous attempts. The first important aspect was that the document recognized that in order for

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devolution to be successful three sets of relationships needed to be addressed between: nationalists and unionists, northern and republic of Ireland and between Dublin and London. This declaration stressed the importance of the people of Ireland in deciding their future, they could decide if they wished to be part of Britain or Ireland. It also stressed that the British government's role was simply to "encourage, facilitate and enable" [15] the peace process instead of encouraging a specific outcome. Secondly, unlike in previous attempts the declaration included all political parties which rejected violence, giving those previously left out of negotiations an opportunity to be a part of them. As author Margaret Greenwood wrote "it signaled a new readiness for dialogue with all sides involved in the troubles- including Sinn Fein and the IRA" [16]. They were repeatedly assured of their place at the negotiating table if they accepted the Downing Street Declaration and the violence ceased. The document was a "delicate balance" [17] between the nationalist objective of a united Ireland and the unionist demand for recognition of their right to remain as part of the United Kingdom. Therefore, for the most part it was welcomed as a "workable compromise" [18] and as a result it went on to provide a point of reference in the developing devolution. The Downing Street Declaration effectively signaled a public sea-change by the two governments in how they were prepared to approach Northern Ireland's political future. The fact it identified the issues at hand and was much more conclusive than its predecessors meant that the Downing Street Declaration had a much better chance at securing a successful settlement in Northern Ireland. It was now over to the paramilitaries to decide whether or not they would be part of that.

The stage was set for political talks to finally take formation. In July 1994 Sinn Fein rejected the Downing Street Declaration but was persuaded of the “virtues of participation 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 own ceasefire two months later. This set in motion a series of events which lead to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The Good Friday agreement attempts to deal with the two issues at the core of political conflict within Northern Ireland, namely how contested political identities can be accommodated and how power can be shared between the two main communities. A new Northern Ireland Assembly was set up, all key decisions now required the consent of both communities in the province. A North-South Council of Ministers was set up made of the new assembly and ministers from the Republic. There have been a number of setbacks over the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement mostly relating to unionist disenchantment with the settlement and a general lack of trust on all sides. Despite this, the Good Friday Agreement was a little short of an historic breakthrough, although a grueling process in the end, the Ulster Unionist, SDLP and Sinn Fein leadership welcomed the agreement making this an improvement from the Downing Street Declaration. The agreement brought about a collaboration of parties who previously would not even sit at negotiating tables together and deescalated the violence which had presided over Ireland for decades by requiring both sides to disarm. Unlike attempts before it, the Good Friday agreement identified the issues of violence and distrust in Irish society and worked on a more inclusive settlement to help improve the situation.

For the first time since the fall of the Stormont Regime, Northern Ireland had its own form of government and “ for the first time ever, it largely represented the composition of the electorate”[21]. I believe that there is a compromise in the Good Friday Agreement which may conceivably allow for a more porous sense of political and cultural identity to emerge. Over time, the issues over what it means to be British and what it means to be Irish will increasingly become blurred. With the proper implementation of the Good Friday Agreement I believe an administration will develop with its own form of government based on social and economic issues. This is already apparent with the fragile existence of the Northern Ireland executive in 2000 which meant that broader ideological issues began to slip down the agenda as resource-based issues began to dominate the political debate. Following the Good Friday Agreement politics in Northern Ireland became more practical as they move from the politics of demand to the politics of decision. As the structures of the Good Friday Agreement are cemented we can see a movement towards political realignment along class lines and the development of a more orthodox form of politics which is good reason to expect the current settlement to be more successful in the future.

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