

I. Background

A. Introduction

There are few conflicts in Western Europe which have proven as intractable as the one in Northern Ireland. As Clem McCartney has written, the most important issues here are governance, the equilibrium of power, and relations between the communities¹. While Catholics in the main are nationalists (the most uncompromising of which are Republicans) and desire to have Northern Ireland break its connection with Britain in order to have an independent and unified Ireland, Protestants (the most uncompromising of which are Loyalists) see their political identity as unionists who strive to keep the union with Britain. These differences are the result of a historical development which in the following can be sketched only briefly. This sketch is included especially as an introduction to the documents in the Materials and Documents section, as well as a contribution to the understanding of why it has been so difficult to come to a lasting peace in Northern Ireland.

B. The seeds of sectarian conflict

Since Henry II conquered Ireland in the 12th century, a certain level of resistance to English and British involvement in Ireland has remained. English rule was extended to Ulster in the 17th century by the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. As a result, the lands of Catholic farmers in the Ulster region were taken over by the British government and handed over to companies in London who devised a settlement plan in 1609 which became known as the Plantation of Ulster. Under this plan, English settlers or planters and Scot immigrants, both of which were mainly Protestants, received tenancies to lands previously owned by Catholic farmers. Thus relations between the new Protestant settlers and the Catholics who had been disowned were marked by hostility and suspicion. The following two hundred years were characterized by outbreaks of violence, sectarian tension, and rebellions.

In 1801 Ireland was joined to Great Britain by the Act of Union, but a strong movement for Irish home rule developed during the nineteenth century².

The Great Potato Famine around 1850 destroyed the main source of food in Ireland. Approximately one million people starved, and a million and a half emigrated, most of them to the United States. The emigrated Irish formed the Fenian Movement that worked for Irish independence from abroad. The last of several Home Rule Bills was passed in Parliament in 1914 (although Ulster was to be excepted for six years), however implementation was not carried out as a result of the beginning of World War I. In the Easter uprising of 1916, the Irish Republican Brotherhood staged a rebellion against Britain. Although the uprising was limited to Dublin and ultimately failed, the nationalist Sinn Fein party won an overwhelming victory in parliamentary elections in 1918, and declared an Irish Republic instead of reporting to parliament in Britain. The British then outlawed Sinn Fein, and sent troops to restore order. The Protestants formed a militia in Ulster, and in the rest of the country the Catholics followed suit. The Loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was first founded in 1913 on a vow to take over the government

¹ McCartney, Clem (1999/2003). "Introduction", in: Clem McCartney (issue editor) Striking a balance. The Northern Ireland Peace Process. Accord Issue 8, at: <http://www.c-r.org/accord8/index.shtml> (Accessed 21 November 2003).

² See Peace Pledge Union (2002). Major wars and armed conflicts since 1945. Great Britain Conflict Background, at: <http://www.ppu.org.uk/war/countries/europe/britain.html> (Accessed 21 November 2003). See for the following also Katz, Gary (2001), "Home Rule", CBC News Online, September, at: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/indepth/nireland/homerule.html> (Accessed 21 November 2003).

of Ulster by force in the event of Home Rule, and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) devoted to Home Rule and the unification of Ireland was founded in 1919. Guerilla activities were continued. In 1921 a truce was achieved between the IRA and the British Army, and the *Anglo-Irish Treaty* was signed. Southern Ireland, which became the Irish Free State, had status as a dominion within the British Commonwealth. The new Northern Ireland, consisting of 6 of 9 counties of Ulster chose to remain part of the United Kingdom, with self-government on a limited scale.

In 1937, the Irish Free State became independent Eire. The new constitution claimed jurisdiction over the entire island and did not refer to the British connection. Eire became the Republic of Ireland in 1949 and left the Commonwealth. In a campaign of violence fought mostly on and across the northern border but also on the British mainland, the IRA continued its fight for an independent unified Ireland.

In the period after 1921 until the 1960s, sectarian divisions were not diminished. The IRA continued guerilla activity during this time. Unionists felt that the union with Britain could be kept only by drastic measures. Thus emergency legislation was drafted almost continuously. The police force that was established was dominated by Protestants. Local government electoral boundaries were gerrymandered especially by Nationalists, but also by Republicans. Catholics met with exclusion on a political and economic basis.

In the 1960s the development of a civil rights movement in Northern Ireland could be witnessed. Here, the Catholics of Northern Ireland showed their resentment of discrimination against them by the dominant Protestants. Specific areas of discrimination included employment, education and housing. One result of this was that Protestant leaders, fearing links of Catholics with republican fighters, refused to consider a united Ireland. The violence carried out by paramilitaries on both sides contributed further to the difficulty of developing trust between the conflicting parties.

The period known as 'The Troubles' began in 1968. A civil rights march which had been banned was broken up by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and two days of riots followed. In 1969 violence intensified in Northern Ireland. Loyalists organized an armed attack on a civil rights march from Belfast to Derry, resulting in deaths. British troops were sent to Northern Ireland.

C. The peace process: a rocky road³

On 'Bloody Sunday' at the end of January 1972, 14 unarmed civilians were killed by British paratroopers in Derry. It is recommended to read *The Widgery Tribunal Report* in connection with the *Irish Government Assessment of the Widgery Tribunal Report* in order to put that event into context. Reprisals and attacks followed this event. The British imposed direct rule on Northern Ireland.

In 1973 an attempt was made to create a power-sharing executive and devolved government, which took its form in the *Sunningdale Agreement*. This agreement is significant in that many of the ideas formulated here can be found in later treaties between the two governments, especially including the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, as well as providing a framework for further peace discussions. However, the power-sharing

³ See for the following: Darby, John (1995). Conflict in Northern Ireland: A Background Essay. In: Facets of the Conflict in Northern Ireland, ed. by Seamus Dunn. New York: St. Martin's Press, 18-23. See also: Darby, John (2003). Northern Ireland: the background to the Peace Process. CAIN Website, at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/darby/03.htm> (Accessed 21 November 2003); see also Peace Pledge Union (2002). Major wars and Armed conflicts since 1945. Great Britain Conflict Background, at: <http://www.ppu.org.uk/war/countries/europe/britain.html> (Accessed 21 November 2003).

executive had a short life of only five months as a result of unionist strikes in 1974.

A new Northern Ireland Assembly was elected in 1982 with a plan for 'rolling devolution', however some members refused to take their seats and this plan failed.

The *Anglo-Irish Agreement* was signed in 1985, allowing for regular consultation with the Republic of Ireland on security, legal, political and cross-border issues. It was agreed not to change Northern Ireland's status without majority consent of the population. Peace talks were initiated many times in the 1990s, but violent incidents and refusal to compromise on both sides ended them.

Little progress was made until 1994, when the IRA announced an end to its violent campaign and Loyalist militias called a ceasefire. The parties involved took steps to start peace negotiations. The handing over of weapons, (decommissioning) proved to be a huge stumbling block. George Mitchell, a former US senator, was appointed head of an international body on decommissioning. The *Mitchell Report* appeared in January 1996, shortly before the end of the IRA ceasefire, which was followed in that year by more violence.

In April 1998 the *Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement* was signed by most of the political parties, and supported by referenda in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland. It proposed a power-sharing government and National Assembly to deal with most of Northern Ireland's affairs; 'parallel consent' for key decisions there; a North/South Council of Ministers to support cooperation between the two and handle cross-border issues; and a civil forum to give voice to communities, trade unions and other groups.

A bombing in Omagh in August 1998 by an IRA splinter group calling itself 'Real IRA' was the single worst atrocity of the Troubles, killing 29 people and 2 unborn babies. Yet the political parties were determined to set up the administrative bodies proposed in the Belfast Agreement. Direct British rule ended in 1999.

The Loyalist Volunteer force, a unionist paramilitary organization, decommissioned some of its weapons, and the IRA in May 2000 opened up some of its secret arms dumps for inspection, both in the interests of the Belfast Agreement. While in 2001 Sinn Fein leaders stressed that the struggle should continue not through violence but at the conference table, the so-called 'Real IRA' at Easter exploded a bomb in a London postal sorting office.

One of the most important obstacles to the implementation of the Belfast Agreement remains policing reform. The recommendations of the *Patten Report* include a proposal for a reduction of force size and a significant increase of Catholic representation in the police force. In 2002 the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly were once again suspended. At present the peace process is frozen as unionists demand the break up of the IRA and nationalists insist on demilitarization, police reform, and a return of local institutions. Thus the sectarian tensions described above had unfortunately not been diminished as of 2003, and constitute a block to lasting peace in Northern Ireland.

In July 2005, the IRA in an official declaration stated that an end to the armed campaign against Britain had been ordered. According to this statement, IRA units were ordered to put their arms "beyond use"⁴ in a way that could be verified by international officials. The British and Irish governments praised the IRA statement as a key step in the continuation of the peace process.

⁴ Cited in: Chrisafis, Angélique (2005). "After 35 years of bombs and blood the IRA ends its war", in: *The Guardian Weekly*, vol. 173, no. 7, August 5-11, p. 1.

It is hoped that the promise of the IRA to lay down arms verifiably will be carried out in a timely manner, and that all paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland will follow suit.

The disarming and renunciation of violence by the IRA in 2005 was followed in January 2007 by a Sinn Fein pledge to cooperate with the Northern Ireland police⁵. These developments have proven to be key steps in the path to an accord between the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein which foresees power sharing in a devolved Northern Ireland starting 8 May 2007.

Politicians in both London and Dublin have highly praised this agreement as the most crucial moment of a difficult peace process which as of March 2007 has lasted ten years.

For more detailed information on background and current situation in Northern Ireland, please go to: <http://www.ecmi.de/emap/download/Background2.pdf>.

⁵ For this and the following, please see: Pogatchnik, Shawn [Associated Press Writer], "U.K. may extend N. Ireland deadline." Yahoo news 25 March 2007, available at: http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20070325/ap_on_re_eu/northern_ireland_9 (Accessed 27 March 2007); see also Bowcott, Owen, "Northern Ireland's arch-enemies declare peace." Guardian, 27 March 2007, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/frontpage/story/0,,2043741.00.html> (Accessed 27 March 2007)