

How was Northern Ireland affected by changes in one or more of the following: housing, education, health?

In the period of 1949-1969 the Northern Irish population was faced with a number of problems. It was the most poverty-stricken society in Britain at the time and 50% of housing in Belfast had been destroyed in the bombings of April 1941. As a reward for the contributions which Northern Ireland had made to the war effort, when the welfare state, a series of social reforms, came into Britain, it was extended to Northern Ireland.

The welfare state had an enormous effect on the health system in NI. The National Health Service was set up which provided free health care to every NI citizen. This included free GP care, dental, eye care etc. The Northern Ireland General Health Service was also set up and a Hospital Authority which took control of all hospitals. NI Tuberculosis Authority tackled this disease to the extent that TB was less common in NI than the south. All of these health reforms meant that people could now afford to go to their GP or the hospital where they could not have before. This increased life expectancy dramatically and lowered infant mortality rates.

However despite the good work which the welfare state did for health care there was still the problem of the Mater Hospital. This was run by Catholic nuns. They rejected placing the hospital under the control of the hospitals authority, as they feared they would be compelled to provide abortions and contraception. They opted out of the scheme and so received no

grants. This meant that Catholics had to support their hospital while paying for the public system through taxes. This led to resentment among Catholics and increased tensions between the Catholic and Protestant population. In this way the Welfare State led to some issues which we see are prevalent again and again. The government should have realised that this would be a problem and taken some action.

The Welfare State also did great work in improving housing in NI in this period. A survey in 1945 predicted that 200,000 new house would have to be built. A Housing Trust was set up to build and allocate houses to those in need and to clear the slums. By 1965 95,000 new homes had been built, about 40,000 of them by private companies. This did much to improve the problems with housing. Whereas people had previously been living in dark, cramped cottages, families of up to 8 in 2 rooms, they were given much nicer homes. As well as this the building of these homes provided work temporarily for some of the 30% unemployed in NI at the time, improving the economy briefly.

However once again these new measures presented problems, this time in the form of discrimination against Catholics when it came to selecting the new tenants of houses. The Housing Trust typically allocated the houses fairly, based on need. However 12 local councils, all west of the Bann, most notably in Dungannon, Derry and Omagh discriminated against Catholics. In one case a family who was squatting in a new house were expelled and the house was instead given to a 19-year-old single Protestant woman. One reason why the Catholics were discriminated against here was because Brookeborough had refused to get rid of the property qualification to vote. A property owner alone had the right to vote. As the area of Derry's voting system was heavily rigged at the time through gerrymandering to give an area which was 60% Catholic a local council controlled by Unionists, they feared that if to

many Catholics were given houses they would quickly lose control. Once again these social reforms are seen to contribute to the tensions between these 2 religious groups. Despite the fact that it was really an excellent idea, never intended to benefit Protestants more than Catholics, it still managed to cause further discrimination.

Perhaps most importantly another area which the welfare state affected was education. The Education Bill of 1947 changed education in NI entirely. Free primary and secondary education would now be provided for all. Not only this but a free uniform, free meals, free transport and free school books. This led to a major increase in those attending school, approximately 100% by 1962. A new exam was also brought in, the eleven plus exam. At the age of 11 all school children sat an exam. The 25% who passed, the most academic group, went on to grammar school while the other 75% who failed went on to vocational colleges. This presented an enormous change in the school system. As numbers attending school spiked so too did numbers attending third level education. This in turn led to a far more educated work force which would prove beneficial to the economy.

And finally once again the Catholics were provided unequal rights. The Welfare State set up a number of state schools which received grants of 100%, paying for everything. However there was contention between Catholic and Protestant groups over the curriculum. Catholics wanted Irish history and Catholicism to be taught in religious education, as well as Irish. Protestants wanted British history and Protestantism taught. The Catholics eventually decided to withdraw from these state schools and set up their own. These while still state subsidised only received 65% grants. This meant that once again Catholics had to pay for their own services while supporting the state services by taxes. However 90% of Catholic students received scholarships. Yet again this led to increased tensions. But the new education had

another enormous effect. Bright young Catholics who previously could not afford education as they may have come from families of the 50% of unemployed Catholics at the time. They were now given the opportunity to attend school due to the free system. This led to the emergence of a new group, of young, educated Catholics in the 1960's who were ready to stand up and fight for their rights, against the abuses of the Unionists. John Hume, a figurehead of the NICRA was one example of this. Bernadette Devlin was another.

It can be seen clearly that the Welfare State had an enormous effect on each of education, housing and healthcare. It improved dramatically the living standards of many NI citizens. However each of the areas have examples of a lack of equality between Catholics and Protestants. The Welfare State also had a knock on effect in a number of areas. It would prove to be just one more factor which partially contributed to the Troubles and the civil rights movement which were soon to follow, especially the discrimination in housing and the education of young Catholics.