

Political Resolution to the Troubles

Sample Essay

What moves were made towards finding a peaceful resolution to the Troubles, 1973-1993?

In the period up to 1973 NI was in chaos. Sectarian violence had been rampant for decades and the IRA's bombing campaign had spiraled out of control. In 1972 alone 467 were killed. Internment had been reintroduced in the 60's, leading to further violence. Finally the British army had to be brought in, in an attempt to control the situation. This proved to only cause further problems as frustrated soldiers lashed out in events such as Bloody Sunday, 30th of Jan 1972. Eventually things became so bad to Stormont collapsed and Direct Rule had to be reintroduced on March 23rd. Heath, the British PM and Faulkner, the NI PM realised that something had to be done about the situation.

The first attempt to resolve the Troubles was the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973. This was also the first attempt at power sharing in NI, an idea founded by Hume and the SDLP. Talks between Irish, British and NI representatives went on at Sunningdale in order to discuss the terms. Finally it was decided that the Sunningdale agreement would lead to the election of an Assembly, elected by proportional representation. The biggest Unionist and biggest Nationalist party would then form an Executive, which would actually govern the country. Not only this but a Council of Ireland, a council between representatives of the English, and Irish and NI governments would be established. It was never decided in concrete terms what this council would do. Faulkner believed that they would discuss issues such as transport and tourism.

However Hume pushed for the control of policing. Heath supported this, in the hope that it would appease the IRA and Faulkner reluctantly agreed. The Council of Ireland was really detrimental to the Agreement, more so even than the admittedly undemocratic concept of power sharing. Unionists didn't like that the South would have a say in NI affairs, still paranoid about the end of partition.

However this initial attempt was not successful. The Sunningdale Agreement failed for a number of reasons one of these the actions of the Irish government. In return for the Council of Ireland, Faulkner wanted the Irish to remove articles 2 and 3 from the constitution and agree to extradite IRA members to the north. However the Irish government was willing to do neither. Changing the constitution would require a referendum which would lead to Fine Gael being replaced by Fianna Fail who refused to acknowledge the existence of the NI government. Instead Cosgrave reassured him that the articles were purely symbolic. However this was directly contradicted by the court case against Kevin Boland, a former Fianna Fail politician who claimed the Council of Ireland was unconstitutional. Lawyers had to repeatedly claim that articles 2 and 3 were in fact in operation, damaging support for Faulkner. They also refused to extradite IRA members due to internment and possible torture. All of this undermined support for Faulkner and by extension the agreement.

Another reason why Sunningdale was unsuccessful was the actions of the British government. I think they were far more damaging than those of the Irish government. First of all William Whitelaw, the first NI Secretary of State was removed just as the second phase of talks began on Dec 6th and replaced by Francis Pym. They lost Whitelaw's experience in the matters of NI and his skills as a negotiator. The biggest blow to the agreement however was the general election of Feb 28th 1973. It was treated as a referendum on the Agreement and anti-agreement politicians won 11 of 12 seats, the 12th by Gerry Fitt of SDLP. This was

extremely damaging to the agreement as it showed the sheer lack of support for power sharing. This left Faulkner in an extremely tricky position. The final truly damaging action of the British government was Merlyn Rees reluctance to use the army in combatting the UWC strike. This could have prevented the end of the agreement, or more realistically put it off longer. All of these factors were to lead to the end of the Agreement almost before it could begin.

The UWC strike of May 15th was the final blow that led to the immediate end of the Agreement. This loyalist unions group went on strike and threatened others into doing so. Electricity output was at 60%, within days and eventually forced the Executive to resign, presenting the end of the agreement. However the strike was just a symptom of the much wider unionist dissent in NI. Even within Faulkner's party, the UUP not all would support the Agreement, dividing into 'pledged' and 'unpledged', led by Harry West. In the Assembly elections Faulkner's party won 24 seats while all unionist anti-agreement parties combined won 26. The support of the agreement simply wasn't there from the start. Unionists like Paisley claimed it was undemocratic while others feared the Council of Ireland. Still possessing the siege mentality of the 20s, they feared all Irish involvement and realistically the agreement just didn't have a large enough foundation of support.

Another political attempt to solve the Troubles was the Anglo-Irish Agreement of Nov 15th 1985. The Hunger Strikers and Sands' death on May 5th 1981 led to pressure on Britain to take action in NI. Thatcher, PM at the time, despised violent republicans as the INLA had killed her close friend Airey Neave. However Thatcher realised that a political solution was necessary. The first step towards this was the New Ireland Forum of 1983 where anyone interested in the Troubles could come and suggest solutions. While Thatcher rejected each of their solutions it initiated talks. Eventually this led to the agreement. This stated that the status of NI would not

change without the consent of the majority and would remain part of the UK but that an inter-governmental council would be set up. The Unionists protested strongly with 100,000 showing up to an 'Ulster says no' rally, but this was futile. The Agreement was carried out although Thatcher herself later questioned its success. She had hoped it would improve security as Ireland would extradite IRA members. This did not in fact happen. However it did establish more solid Anglo-Irish relations which would then lead to the Downing Street Declaration.

The Downing street Declaration of 1993 was the next attempt at a political resolution. This was the first instance of extremists such as Adams being involved in talks. Adams and Hume began to talk in 1988 and Adams was allowed travel to the USA by Clinton. This helped talks majorly. There was also Irish talks on the issue from 1990-1992. The friendship between Taoiseach Reynolds and British PM Major was also helpful in the agreement. It recognised that the status of NI, once again, could only be changed with the consent of the majority, but vitally removed British claim on NI. This appeased both Unionists and Nationalists. British claim to no strategic or economic interests in NI made Adams finally examine his traditional Nationalist views. Talks almost broke down due to the Shankhill bombs and Greystell massacre but were in the end successful and led to an IRA ceasefire in August 1994.

This finally led to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 which essentially had all the same terms as the initial Sunningdale Agreement. The mentality of the public had simply changed by this stage so that they were more willing to accept the deal, which was not yet the case for any of the previous attempts to resolve the Troubles.