

5.IRL Politics and Society in Northern Ireland

| Sample answer

What was the importance of each of the following: the Anglo-Irish Agreement, 1985; the Downing Street Declaration, 1993? (2007)

Both agreements in question were important, quite simply, as they sought to create peace in a world where violence too often reigned. They were significant moments in the intertwined histories of Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the British government. Not only were they symbolic in nature but had practical implications attempted to find a peaceful resolution to the complications that have “troubled” Northern Ireland for so long.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 was signed by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Irish Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald on the 15th of November. It was a significant move towards cooperation between the two states in an attempt to find a solution to the violence that plagued Northern Ireland since the outbreak of the Troubles. It was a positive step, especially in light of previous failures such as the New Ireland Forum talks in 1983. The agreement was important in that it highlighted to the IRA that Thatcher was determined to seek a political solution to the crisis. In October of 1984 the IRA bombed the hotel in Brighton that was hosting the Conservative Party Conference in an effort to assassinate Thatcher. Indeed, in the aftermath of the incident Fitzgerald travelled to London for a meeting with Thatcher. The signals were evident – both individuals were driven to find a way forward through discussion, and were committed not to let paramilitary actions derail their ambitions.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement has numerous important features that sought to build a framework for lasting cooperation and peace in Northern Ireland. In particular, the establishment of the Inter-Governmental Conference under the leadership of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs intended reasoned discourse to occur on issues of cross-border relevance. It meant that Irish representatives could air grievances of the Catholic minority in

Northern Ireland. This was seen as a critical step towards peace as citizens who had concerns had an official forum to raise their concerns. Thatcher, who envisioned the Northern Ireland “question” primarily through the lens of security, believed this would mean issues could be resolved through dialogue and in turn prevent those who felt aggrieved from finding a more radical solution through paramilitary action. The conference, which did not have the power to change laws but was a consultative forum, was serviced by a secretariat of civil servant based at Maryfield in East Belfast.

For Fitzgerald, the agreement was an important success as it now meant the Republic had a more significant role in the affairs of Northern Ireland. Though Charles Haughey of Fianna Fail, Sinn Féin and the IRA roundly criticized the agreement, seeing it as a betrayal of the principle of attaining Irish unity, on a democratic level it was an important success in the history of Northern Ireland. In this sense, one critical aspect that identified the choice of individual citizens was that no change to the position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom could occur unless a majority of the people living there agreed to any such change. However, one important caveat must be mentioned. As part of the agreement, Unionists did have the power to veto a united Ireland.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement was not only important in and of itself, but it had important consequences that require description. Principal among them was the reaction of Unionists. Unionists rejected the agreement as it gave the Irish government a role in the affairs of the North. They rallied together to show their discontent with over 100,000 assembling outside City Hall in Belfast. It was an opportune moment for hard-line Unionists like Ian Paisley to repudiate the actions of Thatcher, as he declared infamously “Ulster says no!” Leader of the Unionist Party James Molyneaux had purposely not participated in the talks leading to the agreement hoping no deal would be brokered as a result. He thought that no agreement would be made without his party’s consent. Hence, his dismay when it was signed. Unionists subsequently withdrew their support for the British government and Unionist MPs resigned their seats in protest.

Likewise, Loyalist groups attempted to dismantle the agreement, though in their case, through violent means. In fact, even during the first meeting of the Anglo-Irish secretariat on December 11th 1985 a Loyalist mob fought police and attempted to tear down the gates. Throughout the following year the UDA and UDF attacked the homes of police officers and simultaneously ramped up attacks on Catholics in the North. Therefore, if anything, though the agreement was an important step, it was an important reminder that sectarian violence had not gone away. However,

despite this, Thatcher would not budge. Facing opposition from many domains, she was determined that the Anglo-Irish Agreement remain.

Another important milestone in the search for peace in the North was The Downing Street Declaration which was made on December 15th 1993. This was a crucial indicator by the British and Irish governments that they desired a non-violent and cooperative solution to problems in the North. It showed that they were determined to find an answer, particularly in response to what was at the time, growing violence. The IRA persisted in a bombing campaign that had both human and commercial costs. Throughout 1992 and 1993 millions of pounds of damage was caused and numerous lives were lost. And so, in an effort to end the destruction British Prime Minister John Major and Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds decided to drive the peace process forward themselves.

The declaration was significant in a number of ways. Primarily, the British government formally decreed that it had no “selfish, strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland”. This specifically was an attempt to eliminate the IRA’s justification for violence, which was the presence of imperial Britain, as they saw it, in Ireland. Enshrined in the document also was the principle of consent – that a united Ireland could only come about through the will of the people. It was important in that it emphasised “the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland”. The endeavour overall was an important effort at building trust between the different factions. The British government accepted in the declaration that agreement within the island of Ireland may lead to unity while Reynolds agreed to examine any aspects of life in the Republic that by be a threat to Unionists’ ethos. The declaration was vitally important in that it was a commitment to peace and democracy. It was a landmark moment that promoted to “give legislative effect” to the wishes of the people and stated that the future of the North would only be decided by “a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods”.

In conclusion, the agreements in question were important moments in the tumultuous narrative of Northern Ireland. The Anglo-Irish Agreement was a move towards cooperation rather than division and resulted in a closer relationship between Ireland and Britain. The Downing Street Declaration’s impact is possibly best explained by the IRA’s agreement to enter a ceasefire the following year. Clearly then, it was a particularly significant achievement.