

## 5.IRL Politics and Society in Northern Ireland

### | Sample answer

### **What was the contribution of Ian Paisley to the affairs of Northern Ireland? (2017)**

Despite the perspective taken on Ian Paisley, it is fair to claim that he was someone who contributed significantly to affairs in Northern Ireland. The often controversial figure was a mainstay in the social and political arena of the North for decades. Undoubtedly, while he was the thorn in the side for many of his adversaries – be they Nationalist or Unionist – he was an important focal point for the groups he represented. Possibly most famous for his inflammatory speeches in which he used his powerful oration skills to reveal what was a virulent anti-Catholic sentiment, he managed to be seen as a man largely advantageous to the Unionist community.

Paisley's contributions to Northern Ireland can be traced as far back as the 1950s. In 1951 founded the Free Presbyterian Church and in 1956 he joined Ulster Protestant Action in 1956, eventually becoming the group's leader. The 1960s saw Terence O'Neill in charge of the province where he attempted to bridge gaps between the Nationalist and Unionist communities. This was met with vehement opposition by Paisley who was O'Neill's constant critic. He saw any concessions to Catholics as an affront to Protestant and Unionist status in the North. He was particularly infuriated when O'Neill met with Irish Taoiseach at this time. In 1966 he founded the Protestant Telegraph which was to become a weekly newspaper, the perfect springboard for promoting the Unionist cause.

Paisley was opportunistic in that he capitalised on events whereby he could promote his agenda; that being a hard-line Unionist stance, utterly opposed to any change in the status quo for Protestants in Northern Ireland. Paisley was a seemingly ever-present face at marches. He rallied protestors who like him, feared Nationalist progression and the diminishing of Unionist dominance. As an example, he led a crowd to Belfast City Hall in protest at the Union Jack being put at half-mast after the Pope's death. In October 1964 he threatened to remove the tri-colour that was on

display at republican offices on Davis Street in Belfast; riots occurred on site related to this controversy.

Clearly at this time, he was not interested in fixing the inequalities that existed in the region and was determined to prevent, through his actions at least, any remedy to the ills of inequality in the society. Simply, he wanted Unionists and Unionist identity to reign supreme in Northern Ireland.

In 1966 he was imprisoned after violent demonstrations against the “soft” Presbyterian Church. Throughout 1968 Paisley was the ever-present figurehead countering marches to the civil rights protests. In November of that year he was again imprisoned when blocking one of these marches. By 1969 he opposed O'Neill in the election and won 40% of the vote – a clear indicator that his contributions were certainly having an impact on some in Northern Ireland. However, the Scarman Tribunal found that his speeches contributed to the tension which sparked violence in August 1969 proving that Paisley had the equal potential to make negative contributions to the situation in the North. The 1960s was a time that saw Paisley oppose ecumenism – a movement that sought to bring Catholics and Protestant churches closer together through shared activities and dialogue. In 1964 Paisley led the picketing of Protestant meetings being addressed by Catholic priests and in 1966 he sent a telegram to the Queen opposing the proposal of having a priest speak in Westminster Abbey during a prayer week for Christian unity.

By the 1970s Paisley's political career was progressing. He managed to win a seat in Westminster in 1971. Evidence of his shrewdness in this regard can be seen by the fact that he had an excellent record representing his constituents, either Protestant or Catholic. In September of the same year, Paisley made a major contribution to Northern Irish affairs by founding a new political party, the DUP (Democratic Unionist Party). Paisley embarked on this new endeavour as he felt the Ulster Unionist Party was not robust enough in defending the interests of the Unionist cause at this time. Paisley was party leader for 37 years, and testament to their enduring influence, Arlene Foster of the DUP is current First Minister of Northern Ireland.

In 1974 Paisley contributed by helping precipitate the fall of the Sunningdale Agreement. He, along with Harry West and William Craig, were powerful opponents of the agreement and were determined to undermine this attempt at power-sharing. In particular, they opposed the Council of Ireland dimension of the agreement and came up with the slogan “Dublin is just a Sunningdale

away". By forming the United Ulster Unionist Council they helped force Brian Faulkner's resignation from the Executive. Paisley declared in January of 1974 addressing an anti-agreement rally: "Mr Faulkner says it's 'hands across the border' to Dublin. I say if they don't behave themselves in the South, it will be shots across the border!" Paisley was then on the co-ordinating committee that helped orchestrate the General Strike that followed in 1974. This strike was a further blow to any hopes of the agreement's existence.

Paisley continued to make controversial contributions to Northern Ireland affairs in the 1980s. In 1981 attempted to set up a militia group called Third Force. Their aim as he said was to "destroy the vermin of the IRA". He helped organise rallies to show the strength of this new group, such as the one in Enniskillen on November 16<sup>th</sup> when hundreds attended. However, Secretary of State James Prior condemned this mission by Paisley declaring that private armies in the North would not be tolerated. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 Paisley involved himself in many contentious occurrences. He infamously led what became known as the "Ulster says No!" campaign against the agreement. He supported a campaign of mass civil disobedience in response to the agreement and addressed a crowd of more than 100,000 people at Belfast City Hall on November 23<sup>rd</sup> 1985. To the audience he proclaimed: "Mrs Thatcher tells us that that Republic must have some say in our Province. We say Never! Never! Never! Never!" This sort of rhetoric is some ways epitomises the mindset Paisley employed throughout the period in question.

It is evident that Ian Paisley had a big impact on the affairs of Northern Ireland. To summarise his contributions quotes from an SDLP member and a Protestant journalist accurately capture the nature of the man in question, with the former labelling him as a "destructive figure" who "desired absolute power" and the latter identifying that he was "shrewd and self-interested" sowing "dissent among his own God-fearing Presbyterians".