

Ireland: The Pursuit of Sovereignty and the Impact of Partition, 1912 - 1946 | Sample Answer

What were the main social and economic challenges facing Northern Ireland 1920-1945? (2009)

The Northern Irish State was established under the Government of Ireland Act 1920. The act was introduced by the British Minister, Lloyd George, as a way of solving divisions between nationalists and unionists that had emerged following the Ulster crisis that followed the Third Home Rule Bill 1912. This act proposed the creation of two Home Rule governments in Belfast and Dublin. To which the Ulster unionist party accepted and the Sinn Féin party rejected. Over the following years, the Northern Ireland government faced considerable amounts of economic problems and social issues. In this essay, I will be discussing just how the newly established government tackled these challenges.

A major social problem in Northern Ireland during the inter-war years was the serious shortage of houses. Only 8,000 houses were built by local authorities. Likewise, the healthcare provision in the country was utterly inadequate, tuberculosis accounted for 46% those aged 15-25. Another social problem facing the state was the high level of unemployment and poverty, 25% of people were unemployed. Over one-third of the population of Belfast lived on the breadline. Dole payments were low and many people had to fall back on the Poor Law Workhouses. During this time the state did not have a specific department for health so their approach towards such problems was poor.

Sectarianism between protestants and Catholics was also a social problem for the state. In 1923 Lord Londonderry Education Act made an effort to bridge the divide between the two religions.

The intention was to create a non-denominational secondary school system. Religion was to be taught outside school hours. Catholic schools refused to participate as they saw it as an attack against their religion. Protestant and Anglican schools, on the other hand, transferred their schools over to State control, they received grants for heating, lightening and teachers salaries. But through campaigns by church leaders and the Orange Order, the act was amended in 1930. Although the ministers had good intention with the act, it did nothing to bring the two communities together.

In 1914 the six counties in Northern Ireland were more economically advanced than the rest of Ireland, one of the main reasons for unionist opposition to Home Rule was the claim that Ulster would suffer economically under parliament in Dublin's rule. However, after a brief post World War One economic boom, Northern Ireland's economic facade began to crack. It was hit by a severe recession that crippled both shipbuilding and textiles industry. Unemployment rose to about 25% and stubbornly stayed there for much of the inter-war period. In the shipbuilding industry, the demand for new vessels fell due to the surplus of merchant ships and Belfast's overseas customers developed their own shipbuilding industries. Changes in fashion lowered demand for textiles. Women's dresses became shorter and petticoats were not worn. The demand for linen to cover aircrafts' wings steadily declined with the arrival of new all-metal aluminium designs. The state was forced to fall back on its agricultural sector.

Northern Ireland's economy was integrated with that of Great Britain's. As such, it's government could not pursue an independent economic policy. However, Northern Ireland's specific needs were often ignored by Westminster. For instance, Craig's government was not consulted before Britain decided to return sterling to the Gold Standard in 1925. This greatly damaged Belfast's export industries and unemployment. From 1923 onwards, the state's income was falling and its expenditure rising and so Stormont became more and more dependent on grants from Westminster, to which Craig kept a secret from his party and the wider population.

The North's economy prospered once again during WW2. In 1941 Britain could no longer produce enough war materials and re-located all war-related industries to the North of Ireland. 140 warships and 123 merchant ships were built. Harland and Wolff produced tanks and aircraft parts. Shorts built 1,200 bomber planes. Likewise, the North's linen mills boomed. They had orders for uniforms, tents and parachutes. Later in the war, American troops stationed in Northern Ireland, which also helped to boost employment. Unemployment dropped below 5%, a dramatic reduction from the pre-war period. However, Belfast paid a big price for their help in the war effort. From the 7-16th April 1941 Belfast was bombed by the Germans and as a result, they suffered casualties of 1,000 deaths and 100,000 left homeless.

In conclusion, Northern Ireland did not successfully tackle its social pressures during the years 1920-1945. However, this was all down to their lack of surplus government funds. Without two world wars, Northern Ireland's economy wouldn't have prospered as much as it did. Economically, they relied heavily on the industries that produced war materials for their main source of income and this can be seen as a very negative aspect of their policies. If the government invested in other industries it would have been likely that they wouldn't have suffered a large economic depression after both WW1 and WW2.