

5.IRL Politics and Society in Northern Ireland | Sample answer

What was the Coleraine University Controversy and in what ways did it contribute to tensions in Northern Ireland? (2019)

It was said that the decision to base a university in Coleraine reflected the divided society in the North. It clearly showed the divisions and suspicions present in Northern Ireland. Not only was society divided between unionists and nationalists, but there was also a geographic division between the largely protestant East and the mainly Catholic West. The Coleraine University controversy proved to be of great significance in the history of Northern Ireland. It led to great controversy and sparked feuds.

The Coleraine University controversy all began when there was a demand for a second university in Northern Ireland. The North's only university in the 1960s was Queen's University. There was also Magee College, but degrees could not be completed there. After the Education Act of 1947, which entitled more of the Northern Irish population to attend school and further their studies, there was a growth in attendance of secondary schools and therefore a demand for third level courses. O'Neill's government was then faced with the decision of either expanding Queen's or founding a second university.

The Lockwood Committee was established in order to reach a decision. This was an eight-member committee who investigated the area of third level education. This committee was chaired by Sir John Lockwood. Four of the members were English, none were Catholic. This committee was asked to "*review the facilities for university and higher technical education in Northern Ireland... and to make recommendations*". Little did they know that these 'recommendations' would prove highly significant in Northern Irish history.

The Committee ruled out the expansion of Queen's almost immediately. The college themselves were opposed to the idea as the site of Queen's was too small and underdeveloped which meant

the establishment would prove far too expensive. This brought the Lockwood Committee to a final decision to build a new university. The next decision to be reached was the new location. Four possible locations were decided: Armagh, Craigavon, Derry, and Coleraine. Armagh was ruled out almost immediately because the population was too small, and it was situated too close to Belfast which they feared might distract from its industry. Craigavon was also ruled out early due to it being a relatively new city which was quite underdeveloped. The committee felt that it would put strain on the new establishment and prove costly. This left the committee to evaluate Derry and Coleraine in more detail. Both presented cases supported by their own city councils and awaited a verdict, unaware of the controversy that would follow.

The Lockwood Committee Report was published in February in 1965. The committee recommended Coleraine as the site for the second university as they believed it “*satisfies the criteria better than any of the other areas we have considered*”. Coleraine met the majority of their criteria; it could provide residential facilities, suitable accommodation, it wouldn't be a competitor to Belfast and its industry, it would attract first rate staff, it would be convenient in terms of access to Belfast and the Northern Irish Airport, and it would be suitable for marine biology to be studied.

In conjunction with this, the Lockwood Committee rejected Derry because, according to them, the size was too small, the governing structure was poor, there was a shortage of private accommodation and most importantly it was believed that the local sectarian tension would impact on the development of the university. The report also recommended the closure of Magee College in Derry, because it would only be a drain on resources needed for the new university. This sparked outrage and caused controversy and protests that would prove significant in Northern Irish history for years to come.

Derry felt the need to fight back against what they felt was “*sectarian injustice*”. They set up a ‘University for Derry’ committee, founded by John Hume. It was supported by both the Unionists and Nationalists. They argued that Magee College could be the basis for a new university, various other sites in Derry could have been used or at least examined, and Derry had historic claims to “*The Site*”. They also found that this decision was biased and heavily political as there were no Catholics present on the Lockwood Committee. Their desire for the new university to be based in Derry is understandable. Not only would it be a major source of employment in itself, it would also attract more employment in the form of industries and services in the city.

Nationalists and Derry Unionists said that the decision in favour of Coleraine was evidence of neglect of Derry and many Nationalist believed this decision was a deliberate attempt to build up Unionist areas to maintain unionist power. As a result, the 'University for Derry' Committee staged a huge protest. Business in the city closed for the day as a motorcade of 2,000 cars went to Stormont. Some 25,000 people, nearly half the adult population of Derry, are estimated to have taken part in the demonstration. The Derry Journal reported that the city "*had a holiday atmosphere, with shops, schools and public houses closed.*" A debate took place in Stormont to discuss the Lockwood Report. O'Neill's government supported the Lockwood recommendations, except the closure of Magee College. The government won the debate by 27 votes to 19. This seemed like the end of the controversy; however, its significance did not end in Stormont.

In May 1965, a Unionist MP Dr Robert Nixon said that "*nameless, faceless men from Londonderry*" had gone to Stormont to advise against the locating of a second university, in Derry. The government denied this conspiracy and expelled Nixon from the Unionist Party. Nationalists were outraged by this information. In response a petition was signed by 15,000, calling for an enquiry. O'Neill and the government simply ignored this petition. This led to a further split between nationalists and unionists in the North of Ireland.

Unionists proceeded to defend the decision to locate the university at Coleraine. They said Lockwood would not be influenced by prejudice and that they were simply following and obliging criteria. Eventually it was decided that Magee College would remain in operation as a result of the controversy and that Coleraine University would be built. The opening of the university coincided with the beginning of the troubles which sparked more controversy while causing low enrolment rate in the 1970s. The controversy was said to be so significant that it in fact ignited the Civil Rights Movement. John Hume would later refer to the Coleraine University controversy as "*the spark that ignited the civil rights movement.*"

To conclude, the Coleraine University controversy proved significant by creating controversy, feuds, protests, and eventual change. The Coleraine University controversy demanded 'political' decisions be analysed, criticized, and reconsidered, solidifying its significance in Northern Irish history.