

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

## **How did the Unionist party manage the affairs of Northern Ireland 1920-1939? (2008)**

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. The act gave the northern parliament control over issues such as education and policing, while Westminster resumed responsibility for defence, foreign policy and taxation. In my essay, I will be analysing the Unionist party's approach in managing the affairs of their newly established state from the years 1920 to 1939.

Establishing law and order was a priority of the governments. The levels of violence rose in the aftermath of the signing of the Anglo Irish Treaty 1921. So in 1922, the government passed the Special Powers Act which allowed for arrests-imprisonments without trials for those suspected of offences against the state. The Restoration of Order in Ireland Act 1920 led to the establishment of a new Special Constabulary, as the Specials had turned out to be an entirely Protestant force. They were seen by nationalists as the British governments arming of Unionist and so in 1921, they had become the IRA's main target. While nationalist violence was brought under control, nothing was done to tackle loyalist gunman who murdered nationalist and drove them from their homes and workplaces.

The Unionist leadership believed that the security of their community depended on the maintenance of partition. This could only be possible if unionists retained control over the political system. In 1922 the unionists took the following steps to implement this; they abolished the system of proportional representation which was used to elect local authorities and in 1929 abolished it for general elections too. They limited the right to vote to property holders and they gerrymandered electoral boundaries to ensure permanent unionist dominance of local government. Northern Ireland became a one-party state dominated by the Ulster Unionist Party. Nationalist MPs and councillors were ignored or treated with contempt when they did choose to attend parliament.

Catholics constituted about one-third of the population of Northern Ireland in 1920. Both the Northern Ireland government and the local authorities operated a policy of excluding Catholics/nationalists from public sector jobs. All senior civil service posts were held by Anglicans and Protestants. In 1934, Catholics made up 10% of the lower ranks of civil service. By 1943 this figure dropped to 5%. Catholics represented over 50% of the unemployed. Few unionists considered such treatment unjust. Most believed that all nationalists were out to undermine the new state, so they could not be trusted with any kind of political power.

After a brief post-World War One economic boom, the Northern Ireland economy facade began to crack. It was hit by a severe recession that crippled both shipbuilding and textiles industries. Unemployment rose to around 25% and stubbornly stayed there for much of the inter-war period. The demand for ships 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, its 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.

Healthcare provision in the state was utterly inadequate. There were too few hospitals. By 1938, Tuberculosis accounted for 46% of deaths amongst aged 15 to 25. This was partly due to the incoherent way in which Northern Ireland's government was organised. Health was not the responsibility of a separate government department. Instead, it fell within the Department of Home Affairs. As the Stormont government was preoccupied with state security, this accounted for the lion's share of available funds. The health budget consisted of whatever was leftover. Furthermore, poverty was a serious issue in the state, 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.

Sectarianism between Protestants and Catholics was also a considerable social issue for the unionist party. 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.

The unionist party suffered considerable hardship through the years particularly with economics and the British government did not contribute much support to relieve them. Furthermore, the British government refused to intervene in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland and as a result, there was no attempt made to create a more inclusive society. Sectarian strictures were heightened during this time. Every effort was made by the Northern government to keep the two communities apart. This can be seen as a political failure of the government as it caused major threats to security and physical violence for the state for years to come.