

5.IRL Politics and Society in Northern Ireland

| Sample answer

What was the contribution of Margaret Thatcher to affairs in Northern Ireland? (2014)

Margaret Thatcher, who was Conservative Party leader and British Prime Minister from 1979-90, was a self-described Unionist-sympathizer with utmost concern for the security of Northern Ireland, had stewardship over the region during a time of intense sectarian violence. This essay will explore her contributions to the province during her time in power.

Thatcher's first act in relation to Northern Ireland was not to outline attempts at bridging gaps within the community but to announce 1,000 extra jobs for the Royal Ulster Constabulary, which was made up of essentially all Protestants. Thatcher's aims were not necessarily to bring all elements of Northern Ireland's society together; instead she intended bring an end to the violent activities of the IRA and other paramilitary groups. However, her government did want to find a political solution to the Troubles as well as employing the role of security forces. A positive contribution to Northern Ireland was her perspective on a solution to the conflict. She realized that there was an all-Ireland dimension to finding a positive outcome to the Troubles and that the Republic of Ireland government would need to be part of brokering peace. In May 1980 Irish Taoiseach Charles Haughey met with her in London. Here she wanted to see if she could increase cooperation between the British and Irish governments with the central aim of defeating the IRA. A joint statement was issued following the meeting declaring the "totality of relationships" between the two states – this signified that Thatcher recognised that the Republic had legitimate interests in the affairs of the North. More positivity followed when they again met for a summit in Dublin Castle in December 1980. This time the two governments announced the ambition to seek greater cooperation in not only security, but economics also. Though this was a positive step in the eyes of both the Irish and Northern Catholics, dissenters like Ian Paisley were furious at the thought of Thatcher pursuing notions that went against Unionist aims.

However, it is fair to say that Thatcher contributed to serious divisiveness and controversy to affairs in Northern Ireland while she was in power. Regarding the hunger strikes in the Maze prison in the early 1980s, her refusal to give special status to Bobby Sands and other protesters resulted in widespread criticism. With Thatcher resolute in her stance on the strikers, Sinn Fein was consequently afforded the perfect propaganda opportunity. They organised a campaign that took aim at Thatcher's approach and glorified the actions of the strikers. When Sands stood for election to Westminster and eventually won, it was a massive victory for Sinn Fein. Thatcher's handling of the situation had a polarizing effect on Northern Ireland's society – further deepening bitterness and resentment between the two communities. The hunger strikers evoked enormous sympathy in the Nationalist community and they were evermore frustrated by the British government's capacity to remedy the problems in the North. Therefore, increasing numbers of Catholics went from following the more moderate SDLP to seeking representation in Sinn Fein.

Another controversy came in October 1984. In her infamous "Out, Out, Out" speech responding to the New Ireland Forum proposals, she again showed an unwillingness to change her position. The three proposals regarding the future of Northern Ireland in question were a unitary state, a federal state, or a joint authority. These suggestions were rejected wholesale by Unionists, but Thatcher's opposition to them was particularly emphatic. Therefore, when she signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement a year later in 1985, it is all the more surprising. It was signed by Thatcher and Irish Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald on the 15th of November and was a significant move towards cooperation between the two states that established the Inter-Government Conference and signified a major step towards peace. It was set up under the leadership of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs and 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. Hence, it is evident, though she had the capacity to provoke discontent; she had a political pragmatism that ensured her aims were achieved. 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.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement was not only important in and of itself, but it had important consequences that highlight Thatcher's steely nature and her refusal to veer from her chosen direction. 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. However, unlike Terence O'Neill who was successfully pressurized by extremists in 1969, Thatcher did not yield to Paisley's "Ulster Says No" campaign or other paramilitary threats.

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.

Overall, it is clear Margaret Thatcher contributed significantly to Northern Ireland affairs. The "Iron Lady" with her draconian approach did little for the economic prosperity of the North, but the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 must be seen as a triumph in terms of an attempt to find peace as well as an unwillingness to yield to Unionist agitators.