

The Sunningdale Agreement | Sample Essay

Why did the Sunningdale Agreement fail?

The Sunningdale agreement was a case of desperate times calling for desperate measures. The fact that Britain would consider the admittedly undemocratic idea of a power sharing government shows that conditions in NI were truly terrible at the time. Tensions between Catholics and Protestants or Nationalists and Unionists had reached fever pitch and the country was in chaos. While this led to the birth of the agreement it also eventually led to its demise. The sheer opposition of the Unionist population, along with the ill-considered actions of both the Irish and British government was to lead to the end of the agreement before it could even begin.

NI at the time was a violent and extremely dangerous place, rife with sectarian conflict. The Provisional IRA's bombing campaign was largely to blame for a death toll of 467. The British had brought in the army in an attempt to restore order which only further worsened the situation as it led to frustrated soldiers taking their anger out on civilians in events such as Bloody Sunday, Jan 30th 1972. Internment had been brought back in, aimed to imprison IRA leaders. However those who were imprisoned were mainly the Official IRA, not the Provisional IRA who was active. Internment led to further violence. In 1971 alone 184 people died due to battles between the British troops and both IRAs. All of this chaos eventually led to the end of Stormont and the introduction of Direct Rule on March 23rd 1972. The British PM Edward Heath and NI PM Brian Faulkner realized that something had to be done. They explored a number of options but eventually realised that the SDLP's concept of power sharing was the

only realistic option. Violence continued as nationalist and unionist parties were unwilling to sit down and talk. Whitelaw was brought in as secretary of state to oversee the procedure and eventually the atrocities of 1972 forced parties to explore the possibility of power sharing and so the Sunningdale agreement began. The Sunningdale Agreement would establish a NI Assembly, elected by PR. The Assembly would then select an Executive to govern. This Executive would comprise of the largest nationalist party and the largest unionist party. As well as this it would establish a Council of Ireland.

One of the primary reasons why the Sunningdale Agreement failed was the Council of Ireland. The Council was a body in which representatives of the North, south and Britain would meet in order to discuss issues relevant to each country such as tourism and transport. Faulkner was content with this role as proposed by the Sunningdale Agreement. However John Hume in particular wanted it to have wider powers, including the control of policing. Whitelaw backed Hume, hoping that this would reduce support for the IRA. Faulkner reluctantly agreed to allow talks about giving greater control to the council. The second phase of talks to decide the amount of this control began on Dec 6th. Around this time Whitelaw was brought back to England to deal with the trade unions and was replaced by Francis Pym, who had little experience with NI. Pym contributed little to talks and Heath supported Hume's desire to extend the powers of the council. This was absolutely unacceptable to the unionist population; still constantly paranoid that partition would end. They saw it as unfair that the south should have powers in all of NI while they had little in the south. Admittedly it did convey the message that the South still had some claim to NI despite its position in the UK. The delegation from the SDLP should have realized that by extending the powers of the council they would push Unionists too far, ending with an agreement that they could never possibly

accept an leaving Faulkner in a tenuous position. This was a major reason why the agreement failed and combined with many others seemingly less significant factors eventually led to the death of the agreement.

Another reason why the Sunningdale Agreement failed was the actions of the Irish government. As mentioned they pushed for the Council of Ireland rather than understanding the sensitive intricacies of NI. As well as this they were unwilling to give much in return for Faulkner's concessions. Faulkner wanted articles 2 and 3 removed from the constitution, which stated that the south still had the right to rule NI. They were unwilling to hold a referendum and pointed out that if they did, they would be replaced by Fianna Fail, who refused to acknowledge the existence of the NI government. They assured Faulkner instead that the articles were mainly symbolic. However in a court case against Kevin Boland in which he claimed that the Council of Ireland was unconstitutional the government's lawyers had to repeatedly prove that it was not, undermining the Irish claim that they were symbolic. Faulkner also wanted the south to extradite IRA members to NI. They were also unwilling to do this as, in fairness, internment and possibly torture was still used in NI at the time. In this way Faulkner was seen to be making big sacrifices for next to no return which didn't improve the unionist opinion of the agreement. This led to further dissent among the public. While this was a factor in the failure of the agreement I don't think it was one of the more important reasons.

The actions of the British government also contributed to the failure of the Sunningdale Agreement. Heath really possessed the power in the talks and as an outsider had a lack of proper understanding. He gave too much power to the Council of Ireland. Another action of the British government which damaged the agreement was the withdrawal of Whitelaw at a

crucial moment. They lost both his skill as a negotiator and his experience of NI. The main action of the British which was detrimental to the agreement was the British General Election of Feb 28th, called by Heath. It was a disaster for the treaty. 11 of the 12 seats at Westminster were won by anti-treaty candidates. These completely undermined support for Faulkner's party, and by association the agreement. Finally the lack of action of Merlyn Rees, the Secretary of State of NI, further damaged the agreement. He was hesitant to use the army to tackle the UWC strike which later proved the tipping point on the Sunningdale agreement. The British government's actions were incredibly damaging to the treaty, due once again to a lack of sensitivity and knowledge. Had Whitelaw not been removed at this point he could have injected vital understanding into talks and perhaps saved the agreement. The General Election was also extremely destructive to it.

Essentially each of these factors were only damaging as they added to the unionist opposition to the agreement. The Unionists were divided on opinion on power sharing. Most moderates saw it as the only peaceful option, which would finally end the era of violence in NI. However the more radical unionists such as Ian Paisley fought tooth and nail against power sharing, declaring it to be undemocratic. Previous to the Assembly election of June 28th there was 2 main unionist parties: Faulkner's UUP and Paisley's DUP. Within the UUP members were divided on the issue. Trying to ensure unity in his party Faulkner insisted that all the Unionist candidates sign a pledge saying that they supported power sharing. He couldn't enforce this and those who were 'unpledged' separated from the 'pledged' and were led by Harry West. The results of the election were detrimental to the agreement as Faulkner's section of the UUP won only 24 seats and all anti-power sharing candidates combined won 26. This revealed the weakness of Faulkner's position. Overall Unionist opposition was the main

reason why the agreement failed. While such a large portion of the population still didn't support it, it was never going to work. Unionists still had the siege mentality of the 1920s and feared giving any power to the nationalists and especially any claim of ownership the South possessed over the north. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 had essentially all the same terms as the Sunningdale agreement and yet this succeeded as the mentality of the NI population had changed.

The immediate cause of the failure of the Sunningdale Agreement was the UWC Strike. The Ulster Worker's Council was a group of loyalists workers, spread across a number of industries. They were anti-power sharing and on May 15th called a strike. They threatened other workers into striking and essentially all of NI shut down. They blocked roads and shut down power stations. Within days electricity output was cut by 60%. This brought the country to a stand still, with no light, no ability to power machines in factories and danger to those in hospitals. The police and the army stood by, as we've previously seen because Merlyn Rees was hesitant to use them against strikers. Faulkner tried to bring an end to the strike by convincing the SDLP and Dublin to reduce the powers of the Council of Ireland but was unsuccessful. By then it was too late. Electricity output was further reduced and the Executive resigned. This signaled the end of the Sunningdale Agreement. While the strike was initiated by a few extreme loyalists it gained support among many unionists for a number of reasons. Among these reasons were the Council of Ireland and what they viewed as the unfair practice of power sharing. While the UWC strike was the final hammer blow which ended the agreement, it was the result of the culmination of factors such as Rees' lack of action and the dissent among the Unionist population.

Essentially the agreement was doomed from the start. It simply didn't have a solid enough

foundation of support from the beginning. Furthermore a number of actions by both the Irish and British governments worsened the situation. Perhaps had Whitelaw not been removed or had Rees been more decisive with his use of the army the situation would have been different. While Unionists such as Paisley declared power sharing as undemocratic, I think that the Council of Ireland was far more central to the reasons for the failure of the agreement. It's understandable that Unionists should be uncomfortable with the Irish involvement in NI affairs when the very constitution said that NI belonged to Ireland and ending partition was still a goal held by many nationalists, particularly the IRA.