

5.IRL Politics and Society in Northern Ireland

| Sample answer

What were Brian Faulkner's strengths and weaknesses as a political leader? (2016, 2013)

Brian Faulkner's political career in Northern Ireland was marked by disappointing lows such as the consequences of internment in 1971, and redemption of sorts in his willingness to engage in power-sharing with the Sunningdale Agreement in 1973. Weakness evident in his career was a lack of political shrewdness during his time as Prime Minister that resulted in deterioration in relations between Catholics and Protestants in the North. However, it has to be noted that Faulkner presided over a jurisdiction fraught with social and political tension. Any strength or weakness that he portrayed has to be considered in light of the tumultuous context in which he ruled. He was a political leader during a time of a polarised thinking, so any decision he made had the potential to satisfy one tribe while at the same time displeasing the opposing one. In the following essay I aim to explore what can be considered his essential strengths and weaknesses.

From a political point of view, one of Faulkner's great strengths was his ambition. The long-held desire to become Prime Minister of Northern Ireland was realised in March 1971. Perhaps it was this same ambition to be at the forefront of the political arena in the North that later drove him to adapt his views and engage in peace talks with the SDLP. However, Faulkner's decision-making at this point in his career demands scrutiny. His refusal to order an enquiry into the shooting of two men by the British Army in Derry resulted in the SDLP walking out of Stormont. His next move, requesting the Conservative government in London to allow him introduce internment, is further evidence of one of his weaknesses at this time – poor decision-making. He wrongly justified this action by comparing it to the success of the internment of the IRA after the Border Campaign of 1956-62. The "shoot with effect" policy he introduced had terrible consequences also – not only for suspects but it resulted in the IRA again stepping up its campaign of violence. Another clear weakness of his at this time was a lack of objective thinking. Despite the reality that loyalist paramilitary groups had murdered scores of Catholics, no such terrorists were interned until February 1973. The vast majority of internees were Catholics which resulted in condemnation by

the Nationalist public and precipitating a surge in IRA membership. Evidently, Faulkner's move of introducing internment had in fact resulted in the inverse of its original aim.

A weakness evident during Faulkner's time as Prime Minister was his unwillingness to grant sufficient concessions to Nationalists or improve their community's situation in any meaningful way. For example, at this time, unemployment rates were three times as high among Catholics when compared to Protestants. Faulkner's government was clearly ineffectual in tackling what was the inequitable status quo. Also, his inaction in intervening in the heightening crisis can be seen as a weakness in leadership. It was widely known that internees were routinely tortured much to the horror of the Catholic community, yet Faulkner did not readily seek to end such practices. The statistics make for grim reading and are indicative of Faulkner's poor management of the situation. 29 people were killed in 1970, whereas in 1971 the death count rose to 180. The events that took place in Derry on January 30th 1972, becoming known as Bloody Sunday, marked a further degradation of the situation and effectively signalled the end of Faulkner's tenure as Northern Ireland's Prime Minister. With Westminster declaring Direct Rule over the North, it can be argued that Faulkner did not have the strengths or political nous capable of governing the situation himself.

Any assessment of Faulkner's role in the Sunningdale Agreement is entirely dependent upon the perspective taken. Arguably, Faulkner showed moral strength in overcoming the tribal prejudices that existed at the time by entering into peace-talks with former adversaries like Gerry Fitt and John Hume. It could also be said that by making such a notable change from antagonising the Nationalists, as he did while he was in charge of Northern Ireland, to working alongside the SDLP in a search for harmony, he was displaying an ability to extend his career and return from the political wilderness after his previous resignation. This ability to moderate his perspective can also be viewed as a strength worth praising, and a fact upon which historian D. Bleakley states: "If lifelong opponents like Gerry Fitt and Brian Faulkner get together, why not the rest of us?"

Despite his willingness to cooperate with Nationalists and despite his ability to show political astuteness in downplaying the influence of the Council of Ireland, an aspect of the Sunningdale Agreement much maligned by Unionists, Faulkner's strengths could not purchase him the mandate required to represent Unionists in the North. Even by describing much of the power-sharing executive as "necessary nonsense" he tried to appease his Unionist base and allay their

fears that too much was being conceded to the Nationalists. This was to no avail. Faulkner failed to realise how unpopular the power-sharing arrangement would be among Unionists. Previously, after June 1973 elections, deep divisions in the Unionist Party were evident. Anti-power-sharing Unionists outnumbered "Faulkner's Unionists" by 26 to 24. Given this, the above-mentioned dearth of political shrewdness can be a weakness seen in Faulkner here. Perhaps he should have predicted that pursuing the route he did would lead to negative outcomes for the Executive and for him personally. Indeed, only three days into the power-sharing's existence the Ulster Unionist Council voted against the proposed all-Ireland Council settlement and Faulkner had to resign.

To conclude, it is worth bearing in mind Terence O'Neill's (Northern Ireland Prime Minister from 1963-69) successes and failures which help make sense of Faulkner's performance. O'Neill's tenure came to an end as he was seen to offer too many concessions to the Nationalist agenda from a Unionist perspective. Likewise, Faulkner's attempts to placate Unionists resulted in inflaming the Nationalist community, and his eventual efforts to come to agreements with Nationalists equally frustrated hard-line Unionists. In summary, Faulkner's weaknesses were poor decision-making and inadequate situation management. Probably his best strength was his willingness to alter his standpoint and move towards a more cooperative approach – a strength too rarely seen in the world of politics.

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