

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

Would you agree that Terence O'Neill and/or Brian Faulkner failed as a political leader? Argue your case. (2018)

Brian Faulkner became Prime Minister of Northern Ireland in March 1971 after Chichester-Clarke's resignation. During his time as Prime Minister the IRA intensified their campaign. In an effort to stem the violence, Faulkner introduced internment in April 1971. The policy was a disaster. It increased nationalist grievances and won support for the republican cause. After Bloody Sunday, 30th January 1972, the British government lost faith in Faulkner's ability to restore order in Northern Ireland and introduced direct rule, suspending the Stormont Government. This essay aims to examine how Brian Faulkner failed as a political leader.

Brian Faulkner was born in Co. Down in 1921. He was elected to Stormont as MP for East Down in 1949; he was appointed Minister for Health Affairs in 1959. Following the resignation of Lord Brookeborough as Prime Minister in 1963, Faulkner was seen as a likely candidate to succeed him. However, he lost out to Terence O'Neill. Faulkner served under O'Neill as Minister for Commerce and excelled in stimulating economic growth. Faulkner resigned from the cabinet in January 1969 in protest of O'Neill's intention to reform local government, particularly the one man one vote. He finally became Prime Minister in March 1971.

While his career ended in failure, Faulkner's strengths saw him successfully manoeuvre between demands from Unionists and Nationalists. He worked efficiently to strike a balance between the demands of ordinary unionists and the demands of the British for concessions to nationalists. Faulkner tried to win over moderate nationalists by offering them a greater role in government. He asked the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) to chair a number of government committees. He offered them a limited form of power-sharing. Faulkner's offer received a guarded response from the SDLP's John Hume, who said it did not go far enough, but represented a good start. However, the SDLP eventually withdrew from Stormont on 16th July when the government refused

to hold an official investigation into the shooting dead of two Catholic men by British soldiers earlier that month.

One of Faulkner's main failures was that he misread the situation and introduced internment. He took a tough line against the IRA. Faulkner demanded that the British government allow him to introduce internment and threatened to resign if they refused. Increasing violence helped him to get the Prime Minister, Edward Heath, to agree. Up to July, there had been over 300 bomb explosions, most, but not all, by the Provisional IRA. If nothing was done, both Faulkner and the British feared a Protestant backlash, with loyalists taking matters into their own hands. The British granted Faulkner's request.

On 9th August 1971, internment without trial was introduced when the army introduced Operation Demetrius. The operation was used exclusively against IRA suspects, resulting in the immediate arrest of 342 men, although fewer than 100 were actually active members of the IRA. Many senior IRA leaders managed to avoid capture. In the first 48 hours of Operation Demetrius, 7000 Catholics fled their homes and moved south. 17 people were killed. Among those killed were 10 Catholic civilians, including a priest that was shot as he was administering Last Rites. By the end of the year over 2000 people had been arrested.

A major failure of Brian Faulkner as a political leader was the fact that internees lived in appalling conditions in Long Kesh. Internees were lodged in a ship moored in Belfast Lough or in rusting huts at Long Kesh which was an old army camp. Conditions in the prisons were bad and reports soon emerged that about a dozen internees had been beaten, hooded, and forced to stand for long periods of time, deprived of food and water. There was an outcry from nationalists and civil rights groups. The British dismissed the reports, but journalists uncovered too many cases to be ignored. Eventually, the Irish Government took a case to the European Court of Human Rights. They condemned the treatment as "inhumane and degrading" though not quite torture.

Bloody Sunday was seen as a failure for Brian Faulkner and the Northern Irish government. Civil Rights groups held a number of peaceful demonstrations to protest against the internment. The government decided to ban a march planned for Sunday 30th of January, in Derry. However, a large crowd estimated between 15,000 and 30,000, gathered in open defiance. As the march got under way, soldiers from the British Parachute Regiment were given orders to enter the Bogside area following a reported IRA sniper sighting. The order was also given that soldiers were to use live ammunition. As the regiment sighted the marchers, they opened fire, hitting 26 civilians, of whom 13 were killed. One of the injured later died from his wounds bringing the final death toll to 14.

Faulkner's failure to deal with problems in Northern Ireland led to the collapse of Stormont. Heath met with Faulkner and Lynch to try to find a solution to the crisis. Heath suggested that there should be more Catholic representation in Stormont. What he suggested was essentially power sharing. This led to threats of violence from loyalists, who were not prepared to tolerate any dilution of unionist control. The extreme of unionist opposition was shown by William Craig, who left the Unionist Party in protest and set up the Vanguard Unionist Party (VUPP). Craig was utterly against any concessions offered to the majority. On 18th of March, he addressed a rally of 60000 unionists in Belfast where he described the Catholic people as "a menace to the country".

Faulkner clearly failed to restore order to Northern Ireland. On 21st March 1972, Faulkner travelled to Westminster and was informed that internment was going to be phased out gradually and that the RUC, the courts and prisons were going to come under the direct control of Westminster. This brought Faulkner's government to an end. The IRA saw the collapse of Stormont as a victory and believed that it marked the beginning of British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. The end of Stormont outraged Unionists. The unionist party had controlled Northern Ireland for over 50 years. That dominance was now gone.

To conclude, Brian Faulkner wanted to restore law and order in Northern Ireland during a time of extensive unrest. His biggest mistake was introducing internment which enraged the Catholic community and increased tensions in Northern Ireland. Faulkner retired from politics in 1976 and died the following year in a horse-riding accident. While his career ended in failure, he showed considerable foresight and determination in achieving his most cherished political objective – the preservation of the union.