What moves were made towards finding a peaceful resolution of the “Troubles”, 1973-1993? (2008)

In the period up to 1973 NI was in chaos. Sectarian violence had been rampant for decades and the IRA's bombing campaign had spiralled out of control. In 1972 alone 467 people were killed. Internment had been reintroduced in the 60's, leading to further violence. The British army had to be brought in, in an attempt to control the situation, but this proved to only cause further problems as frustrated soldiers lashed out in events such as Bloody Sunday, 30th of Jan 1972. Eventually things became so bad that Stormont collapsed, and Direct Rule had to be reintroduced on March 23rd. Edward Heath, the British PM and Brian Faulkner, the NI PM realised that something had to be done about the situation.

The first attempt to resolve the Troubles was the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973. This was also the first attempt at power sharing in NI, an idea brought forward by John Hume and the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP). Talks between Irish, British and NI representatives went on at Sunningdale in order to discuss the terms. Finally, some decisions were made. Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom as long as the majority wanted that. It would have an assembly, elected by PR (proportional representation). The assembly would elect a Northern Ireland executive, but it must contain representatives from both Communities within Northern Ireland. London would then hand over control of health education and local government. Over the police and courts could be handed over later if the executive was successful. To satisfy a nationalist, a council of Ireland will be set up to encourage cooperation with the Republic.

However, this initial attempt was not successful. The Sunningdale Agreement failed for a number of reasons. There was much controversy about how much power the Council of Ireland should have. Faulkner wanted it to contain only members of the two Irish governments and to deal with uncontroversial issues like tourism. John Hume and the SDLP wanted to contain members of the Dáil and the Assembly and deal with important issues like the police. Many backed the SDLP, hoping this would undermine support for the IRA. Reluctantly, Faulkner gave way. The SDLP agreed to end the rent and rates strikes which should be gone after internment.
Faulkner was forced to agree to a council of Ireland with strong powers, but he hoped for something in return. He wanted Cosgrave to promise to: extradite IRA members to Northern Ireland to stand trial there, and to Remove articles 2 and 3 from the Irish constitution. These articles offended unionists because they claimed that the Dublin government had a right to rule the whole island of Ireland. Cosgrave could not do either of these things. Changing the constitution would require a referendum which would lead to Fine Gael being replaced by Fianna Fail who refused to acknowledge the existence of the NI government. They also refused to extradite IRA members due to internment and possible torture. In the end, all Faulkner got was a promise to do more about policing, and a promise that Cosgrave would acknowledge the right of Northern Ireland to exist as long as the Unionist majority wanted it. The lack of concessions made it very difficult for Faulkner to sell the agreement to a sceptical Unionist community.

The worst blow to the Executive was Edward Heath’s decision on February 28th to call a general election in the United Kingdom. The United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC) treated the election like a referendum on the Agreement. They put up just one anti-agreement candidate in each of the North 12 Westminster constituencies, while all the pro agreement parties competed with each other. The result undermined Faulkner’s credibility. The UUUC won 11 of the 12 seats and 51% of the votes. Paisley Craig and West were all elected, with only Gerry Fitt winning on the pro agreement side. In Britain, Heath lost the election and Harold Wilson returned to power. He appointed Merlyn Rees to be northern secretary.

The immediate cause of the failure of the Sunningdale Agreement was the UWC strike. On May 15th, when the Assembly passed a vote of confidence in the Executive, the Unionist Workers’ Council called a strike. The strikers controlled the power stations. Within days they had cut electricity output by 60%. As a result, people could not cook, factories closed, sewage plants did not work and in hospitals, life support systems began to break down. Loyalist paramilitaries supported the strikers. They formed gangs who blocked roads and "persuaded" workers not to go to work. The RUC did not interfere in the strike and Merlyn Rees, failed to order the British Army to dismantle the barricades. This was partly because it was soon clear that many Protestants supported strikers. Their support grew even stronger after Wilson, in a badly judged broadcast on May 25th, accused Northern Irish people of "sponging" on the British taxpayer. The Sunningdale Agreement collapsed on 28th May 1974 after two weeks of crippling strikes.
Another political attempt to solve the Troubles was the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. The increasing number of hunger strikers, and Bobby Sands’ death, led to pressure on Britain to take action in NI. Soon talks began between the British and Irish governments. These talks led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which the two leaders, Fitzgerald and Thatcher, signed at Hillsborough, County Down on 15th November 1985. The Agreement contained several important parts: To reassure unionists, the Irish government accepted that Northern Ireland was part of the United Kingdom and that could only change with the consent of the majority of the people in Northern Ireland. An intergovernmental conference would be established. At this conference the Irish could put forward their views and make proposals on any topic they wished. The IRA and Sinn Fein denounced the agreement. So too did Charles Haughey, saying it "copper fastened partition". He later amended this attitude when it became clear that the majority of people in the Republic supported the agreement.

The Unionists were shocked and frightened by the Agreement. For the first time in the history of Northern Ireland, the British government had made a major agreement without consulting them. The leader of the Unionist party, James Molyneaux, had opted out of all discussions prior to the agreement. He believed that by doing so, no agreement could be reached without the consent of the Unionist party. But now Thatcher had gone over their heads and reached an understanding with Dublin, their feared enemy. When it became clear to the Unionist that Molyneaux had been mistaken, they threatened large-scale protests. Paisley declared that the agreement would be "resisted to the death" and accused Thatcher of being prepared "... to wade knee-deep in the blood of Loyalists for this document of treachery and deceit". More than 100,000 Unionists assembled in Belfast to listen to fiery speeches of defiance at an “Ulster says no” rally. Loyalist violence increased and there was much talk of the use of force against the army and the RUC. Although Unionist opposition continued for some years, the Agreement survived. The Agreement established more solid Anglo-Irish relations which eventually led to the signing of the Downing Street Declaration.

Two new leaders appeared on the scene in the early 1990s. They were: John Major, who replaced Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1990, and Albert Reynolds who replaced Charles Haughey as Taoiseach in 1992. Progress towards peace was interrupted in October 1993 when an IRA bomb exploded in a Protestant Shankill Road area of Belfast, killing 9 Protestants as well as the IRA bomber. Outrage at this nearly ended all negotiations, but Reynolds convinced Major that it was important to keep the talks going. In October 1993 the Irish government issued "six principles"
which most underlie any peace settlement. They included: No talking to people who used violence, and, and no change to the status of Northern Ireland without clear consent of the majority there. Major accepted these principles. On 15th of December, Reynolds met Major in Downing Street and they issued the Downing Street declaration. A short document with just 11 paragraphs, it stated firmly that it was up to "the people of the island alone" to decide their future and that a united Ireland could only come "on the basis of consent, freely given, North and South".

The period 1973 to 1993 saw many moves towards the finding of a peaceful resolution to the Troubles. All of these steps eventually led to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. This agreement marked the official end of the Troubles; Northern Ireland had taken its first major steps towards long lasting peace.