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Background

Why did political violence break out
in Northern Ireland in 1968-69?

How stable was Northern Ireland after partition?

Partition was perhaps the most sensible way of reconciling the aspirations of Irish nationalists with the apprehensions of Ulster unionists. Irish people were divided before partition. Partition merely acknowledged that division by separating politically and constitutionally most Ulster unionists from most Irish nationalists. The majority of Ulster's Protestants and unionists could feel secure in Northern Ireland which remained part of the United Kingdom. The majority of Irish Catholics and nationalists could fulfil their aspirations in their own parliament in Dublin.

It was the form not the fact of partition was wrong. Britain could have chosen to continue direct rule over Northern Ireland, but it chose not to do so. Instead, it gave power in Northern Ireland to the Protestant and unionist majority.

Majority dictatorship

The first general election in Northern Ireland, in May 1921, returned a large majority of 40 unionists opposed by 12 Nationalists who refused to take their seats. In the following month King George V opened the new parliament amidst general rejoicing, and Sir James Craig, the first Prime Minister, pledged himself to work on behalf of the whole community.

Yet, within a matter of months, Ulster unionists had stamped their exclusive mark on Northern Ireland. Power was concentrated in the hands of the Ulster unionists, who were determined to use their new parliament not as a stepping stone towards but as a bulwark against Irish unity. Being regarded as a potential large fifth column to be kept in their place, the Catholic minority had little influence on government and frequently complained of discrimination and Northern Ireland became not a true democracy but 'a majority dictatorship' in the grip of Ulster unionists. Not surprisingly, there were persistent and insistent complaints by Catholics and nationalists about the oppressive nature of the unionist regime in Northern Ireland - reducing Catholics to the position of second class citizens and behaving even worse than Hitler.

Failure of IRA campaigns

Nevertheless, although Northern Ireland developed into 'a Protestant state for a Protestant people', the most remarkable thing about the unionist regime was that it lasted so long. Indeed, so stable was Northern Ireland that it not only survived an IRA campaign against partition between 1956 and 1962, but seemed to emerge even stronger. Welcoming the announcement of an IRA cease-fire in 1962, the *New York Times* commented:

The original I.R.A. and Sinn Fein came in like lions ... and now they go out like lambs ... the Irish Republican Army belongs to history, and it belongs to better men in times that are gone. So does Sinn Fein. Let us put a wreath of red roses on their grave and move on.

Communal violence, 1969

Such optimism was misplaced, for a few years later, in 1969, four days of communal violence shook Northern Ireland to its political core. It started in Londonderry on 12 August when Catholics and nationalists not only attacked the traditional parade by the Apprentice Boys in celebration of the action of the thirteen apprentice boys in slamming the gates of the city on the army of James II at the start of the famous siege of 1689, but also consolidated 'Free Derry'. Immediately Catholics and nationalists in Belfast paid the price for the Derry victory. Protestants wreaked their revenge on Catholics living in the Lower Falls area of Belfast, surging down the side streets, firing guns, burning Catholic houses and eventually planting the Union Jack in the heart of the Catholic area. There were similar scenes across the city in the Ardoyne, a mainly Catholic area in North Belfast. These events in Derry and the Falls were the most important of a series of bloody incidents which rocked Northern Ireland. Within the space of a few days the destruction was the most extensive and the death toll the heaviest since the

1920s. Five Catholics and one Protestant were killed and 150 Catholic homes were burned out.

These four days shook Northern Ireland to its very foundations and decisively altered the course of its political history. They finally and emphatically underlined the inability of the existing political parties and structures to cope with the challenges that had emerged in the 1960s but which were born of historic divisions. It was the beginning of the end of the 'majority dictatorship'.

Why did political violence break out in Northern Ireland in 1968-69?

There has been an veritable flood of learned books and articles exploring why the normal political processes broke down so completely in Northern Ireland, necessitating the intervention of British troops.

The short answer is that the collapse of the system of government midst political violence can be largely attributed to failure of leadership on all sides in Northern Ireland to manage change. By the 1960s a significant number of people on both sides of the sectarian and political divide wanted to modernise Northern Ireland - its internal relationships and its economy.

In trying to bring about change, however, they seriously under-estimated the economic and communal obstacles to turning Northern Ireland from a 'majority dictatorship' into a true liberal democracy and thus unleashed growing communal conflict which undermined the authority of the government. Failure of leadership allowed the sensible, and manageable question of how Northern Ireland should be governed to revert to that older power question as to whom should be the disadvantaged minority - Catholics in Northern Ireland or Protestants in a united Ireland.

That is the short answer which can be expanded and substantiated by raising a series of questions, paying particular attention to the nature of the Northern Ireland regime between 1921 and 1963 and the obstacles to change in Northern Ireland.

How justified were Catholic and nationalist complaints against Northern Ireland?

There is no denying that many of the complaints against the unionist regime were justified. In trying to solve one minority problem it created another - the question of the political rights of Catholics in Northern Ireland. Power was concentrated in the hands of the Ulster unionists. The Catholic minority had little influence on government and frequently complained of discrimination.

Many of the charges made against the unionist regime are grossly exaggerated. Nevertheless, in the last analysis, the unionist government did consistently use its powers in the interests of its followers, particularly in such sensitive areas as representation, education and, to a lesser extent, law and order. Northern Ireland did become a Protestant state for a Protestant people which limited the civil rights of the Catholic and nationalist minority.

Discrimination in law and order?

There is much substance to complaints about discrimination against Catholics and nationalists about discrimination in the administration of law and order, including reliance upon special powers and the sectarian nature of its police force. Law enforcement in Northern Ireland was dominated by narrow policing considerations and by hardliners in the Northern Ireland government. The latter believed that law should be enforced promptly and vigorously against Catholic and Nationalist transgressors, but with discretion against Protestants and unionists. In addition, the law was enforced by the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Ulster Special Constabulary, both overwhelmingly Protestant. The act establishing the Royal Ulster Constabulary provided that one-third of the force should be Roman Catholic, but Catholics formed at most some 17 per cent of the force.

Discrimination in government?

Although the Northern Ireland parliament was on the whole representative, other institutions of government were narrowly based and intended to serve Protestant and unionist interests.

Civil service

The civil service, especially in the higher ranks, was overwhelmingly Protestant. At least part of the reason was responsiveness of government ministers to the complaints of Orange pressure groups complaining about what they regarded as the intolerably *high* number of Catholics in the civil service. Indeed, the tendency of ministers to take such complaints seriously eventually led the permanent head of the civil service to expostulate:

If the Prime Minister is dissatisfied with our present system [of recruitment], I think that the only course would be for the Government to come out in the open and to say that only Protestants are admitted to our Service. I should greatly regret such a course, and am quite convinced ... that we are getting loyal service from all those who have entered our Service.

Local government

Local government was so arranged, so gerrymandered, as to give unionists control of all but two major councils and a disproportionate share of the benefits, particularly in respect of employment and housing, even in areas where Catholics and Nationalists formed a majority of the population.

The *cause célèbre* was Londonderry Corporation, where the government did all it could to ensure that its supporters remained in control of the Maiden City, despite its two-thirds Catholic majority. Protestants comprised 70 per cent of the administrative, clerical and technical staff, and nine of the ten best paid employees of the Corporation. The unionists were able to maintain control as a result of a restricted local government franchise (denying one man, one vote), controversial ward boundaries, and a re-housing policy which confined Catholics to the ward with an already large Nationalist majority.

Discrimination in education?

Protestants were also favoured by the education system, which was intended to make state schools safe for Protestantism, just as the local electoral system had made public bodies safe for unionism. Two schools systems operated in Northern Ireland, the clientele of one being Protestant, that of the other being either Protestant or Catholic. In schools controlled by local authorities, attended almost exclusively by Protestant children, all costs were paid out of central and local government funds. The voluntary schools, Catholic and Protestant alike, received most of their funds from public sources and made up the difference themselves.

Had the opportunity of operating publicly maintained schools been open equally to both religious faiths, there would have been nothing inequitable about such an arrangement. However, the option was not so open, since simple Bible teaching, which had to be provided in state schools, was anathema to Catholics. Simple Bible teaching was 'based upon the fundamental principle of Protestantism, the interpretation of sacred Scriptures by private judgement'. For Catholics, however, the Bible was only one source of their faith. According to one nationalist MP,

[The Bible] is but a dead letter, calling for a divine interpreter. There are the traditions of the [early] Church.... There is also the tradition of the Church which is not human opinion but the divine teaching of an infallible apostolate established by Christ Himself.

Education policy drew from Catholic and Nationalist leaders some of their most extravagant denunciations of the government of Northern Ireland, but the outlandishness of such outbursts should not obscure the fact that the 1930 Education Act constituted a genuine Catholic grievance.

Were Ulster unionists alone responsible for the political imbalance in Northern Ireland?

This question is worth asking since it is usual to blame all the ills for Northern Ireland upon the prejudices and intransigence of Ulster unionists. This explanation is very convenient, because it absolves almost everybody else of responsibility and relieves them of the need to look critically and objectively at the true difficulties of governing Northern Ireland. In many respects, it was inevitable that Northern Ireland should become an imbalanced state.

Lack of outside supervision

It was one of the tragedies of Northern Ireland to have been a victim of the conflict between Irish nationalism and British imperialism.

The British and Irish governments were not blameless. From the very beginning Britain's overriding concern was not to secure good government in Northern Ireland but to ensure that events there did not hamper the British withdrawal from Ireland by jeopardising negotiations or agreements with Irish republicans.

Nor was the good government of Northern Ireland a prime concern of republicans. At the same time as Michael Collins was signing peace agreements with James Craig, one of which proclaimed in March 1922 'PEACE IS TODAY DECLARED', he was also sending arms to the IRA in the north intent on bringing Northern Ireland down. Consequently, the settlements of 1921-22 took too little account of the obstacles to good government and civic contentment in the six counties. These obstacles included, an ailing economy, a narrow political culture; and, above all, a deep sectarian divide.

Lack of effective opposition in Northern Ireland

The absence of effective opposition helped to sustain the Protestant state. In Northern Ireland there was nobody to mount an effective challenge to the regime. The Northern Ireland Labour Party was weak and divided, while the Catholic minority almost connived at the compromising of its civil rights by refusing to play a full role in public life.

Politically Catholics remained divided between Republicans and Nationalists (the old Home Rulers) and there was never a coherent nationalist party complete with headquarters and party organisers on the lines of the Ulster Unionist Council. There were merely loose alliances between local notables - the clergy and the small-town middle class - which produced only ephemeral organisations.

Moreover, nationalists and Catholics took no interest in the general development of Northern Ireland. At first they refused to enter parliament and, despite being the largest opposition party after their eventual entry in the mid-1920s, nationalists refused to act as the official opposition and were prepared to revert to the policy of abstention. Their prime focus was the achievement of Irish unity, and pending Irish unity, the immediate priority was the defence of Catholic interests.

This retreat and refusal to play a full role in public life rebounded on the Catholic minority. Retreat confirmed the identification of Catholicism with hostility both to the state and the Protestant majority, especially when in 1931 Cardinal Archbishop Joseph MacRory of Armagh declared that the Protestant Church of Ireland 'is not even part of the Church of Christ'. Retreat also detracted from the effectiveness of even valid criticisms of the unionist regime, because they could plausibly be dismissed as purely destructive attempts to discredit Northern Ireland in the interests of Irish unity.

Who wanted to 'modernise' Northern Ireland in the 1960s, and why?

By the 1960s a demand for change in Northern Ireland came from many quarters.

Unionists : O'Neill and O'Neillism

A new prime minister, Terence O'Neill, sought to attract employment to Northern Ireland and to build bridges between Protestants and Catholics. O'Neillism, as O'Neill's reforming tendency was often called, was prompted primarily by the need to re-vitalise the Northern Ireland economy and create more employment, particularly among his Protestant and unionist supporters.

Catholics and nationalists

At the same time, Catholics began to demand their proper place in the state and an end to their second-class citizenship. This change was evident in the reforming of nationalist groups, but even more significant was the new civil rights movement, a coalition of different groups demanding equal civil rights for Catholics in Northern Ireland.

Civil rights

The original organisation was the Campaign for Social Justice, but in 1967 a new umbrella organisation was formed, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA). Modelled on the British National Council for Civil Liberties, NICRA's membership covered a wide spectrum of political views, but was predominantly Catholic. Eschewing violence and traditional nationalist aims, it sought to organise Catholic resentment towards clear social goals and its target was less the regional government than unionist-controlled local authorities.

Its basic aims were: one man, one vote in council elections; the ending of gerrymandered electoral boundaries; machinery to prevent discrimination by public authorities and to deal with complaints; the fair allocation of public housing; the repeal of the Special Powers Act; and the disbandment of the USC.

How far did demands for change reflect changes in the Catholic community?

This demand for greater rights reflected a fundamental change in the Catholic community. Particularly significant was the emergence of a broader and self-confident Catholic middle class. The product of the benefits of the Welfare state, especially the expansion of education, these graduates, managers and teachers sought a much wider role in the economy and society than the old small-town middle class. They were less ready to acquiesce in the acceptance of a position of assumed or established inferiority and discrimination than had been the case in the past. They were also very much aware that Northern Ireland had more to offer, at least materially, than the Republic.

It is often said that the civil rights movement was inspired by the Black civil rights movement in the United States, but its founders - the educated Catholic middle class, trained in Catholic schools and colleges, were also influenced by Catholic social teaching - the term 'social justice' having been given wide currency by Pope Pius XI in his 1921 encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*.

What were the obstacles to reform in Northern Ireland?

The advocates of change in Northern Ireland constituted a potentially powerful coalition, but their weakness was that they failed to take seriously the obstacles to change in Northern Ireland. For obstacles there were, including the disadvantaged and peripheral position of the Northern Ireland economy and the deep and abiding nature of the sectarian divide.

Northern Ireland - a peripheral economic region

Largely because of Northern Ireland's peripheral position, there was limited scope for creating jobs in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland continued to have the highest rate of unemployment in the United

Kingdom, the lowest level on earnings and the highest percentage of households in low income groups. Unemployment tended to be higher in Catholic areas, but in working class Belfast, the low level of income affected Protestant and Catholic households alike.

Sectarian divide - fundamental and self-perpetuating

Added to this economic disadvantage was Northern Ireland's fundamental and self-perpetuating sectarian divide. The spiritual incompatibility between ultramontane Irish Roman Catholic and Evangelical Fundamentalism was matched by temporal separation

In what areas of life did the sectarian divide manifest itself?

Protestants and Catholics cut themselves off from one another in three vital areas of life - marriage, residence and education.

Marriage

Marriages between Protestants and Catholics were infrequent and discouraged. Those mixed marriages which did occur did little to bridge the sectarian divide, for they were subject to considerable isolation and stress. In fact, endogamy, marriage within one's own group, seems to have been the most powerful mechanism dividing people, especially in rural areas.

Residence

In urban areas, especially working class areas, residential segregation was an even more potent divisive force than endogamy. The largest towns, which contained the majority of the urban population, were highly segregated. There were not only clearly defined Catholic and Protestant areas, but also clearly differentiated patterns of behaviour. In Belfast, for example, closely contiguous communities read different newspapers, supported different football teams, used different shops and bus routes, and clearly marked out the border between them with evocative slogans such as 'Taighs [Catholics] Keep Out', 'Prods Keep Out', 'No Pope Here', and 'No Queen Here'.

Education

Segregated education, the education of Protestant and Catholic children in separate schools, reflected and re-inforced the effects of endogamy and residential segregation. Nearly all Protestant children attended exclusively Protestant schools; nearly all Catholic children attended exclusively Catholic schools. There is much dispute about the precise effects of segregated education, but its critics are probably right in claiming that it perpetuates and re-inforces the division between Protestants and Catholics by physically separating children and by propagating different and mutually hostile cultural heritages - the result of the attitude of teachers just as much as differences in the formal curriculum. Just as Sandy Row Protestants learned of the iniquities of Rome, so Bernadette Devlin, one of the civil rights leaders, learned to despise the British connection. In her Roman Catholic grammar school in Co. Tyrone, Irish history, particularly the Gaelic revival and the national struggle, was the obsession of the vice-principal who *'hated the English'*.

Mutual ignorance

In many respects, Protestants and Catholics existed in mutual isolation and mutual ignorance. Unflattering stereotypes took the place of social intercourse and understanding, although the Catholic view of Protestants seems to have been less harsh and entrenched than of Protestants towards Catholics.

For Catholics the problem was largely political; for Protestants largely religious. Catholics looked to a united Ireland and objected to Protestant attitudes towards politics. Their attitude to Protestants was not supported by an 'underlying labyrinth of psychological fears'. By contrast, Protestant attitudes towards Catholics were more permanent and psychologically deep-rooted. According to one social psychologist, their objections to a number of aspects of Catholicism are 'underpinned by a complicated

psychological network of fears and apprehensions about the political power and dexterity of the Roman Catholic Church’.

It is another of the tragedies of Northern Ireland that the modernisers in the 1960s failed to pay sufficient heed to such obstacles. Full of self-belief, if not self-righteousness, they failed to look beneath the surface and were too-ready to dismiss as a final atavistic spasm challenges to modernisation motivated by sectarian suspicion and old political antagonisms.

How determined and well organised were the opponents of change in Northern Ireland?

It was unfortunate for the modernisers that they underestimated not only the obstacles to change but also the determination and abilities of their opponents, particularly among Protestants and unionists.

Within the government

Within the government there was sullen though muted opposition to O’Neillism, but outside there were more vocal and organised expressions of opposition to change, including a revived Ulster Volunteer Force and the street agitation of the Reverend Ian Paisley.

Importance of Rev. Ian Paisley

Paisley was important in developing Protestant opposition to O’Neillism because he combined religious and secular authority. In religion he was an evangelical fundamentalist in the mould of a peculiarly Ulster line of Protestant political evangelists, such as Henry Cooke and Hugh Hanna. He was a bitter opponent of ecumenicalism and would have no truck with Rome or church unity. As head of his own church, he quickly achieved notoriety by his assertion of Protestant principles and resistance to Rome.

Paisley’s emergence as a political leader took a little longer, but his influence grew and lasted because Paisley was willing to say out loud and in public what others only thought or said in private. O’Neill’s rhetoric of reconciliation, his superficial *rapprochement* with the traditional enemies of Northern Ireland, confused and even demoralised many unionists. They welcomed Paisley’s anti-ecumenical, anti-Republican speeches, which re-affirmed in ringing phrases the traditional values and superiority of Protestantism and unionism.

How far was the civil rights movement a front organisation for Irish republicans, seeking the re-unification of Ireland?

One of the reasons why Paisley was able to gain such influence was the nature of the civil rights movement. While it would be wrong to regard the civil rights movement as simply a front movement for the IRA, it is true that republicans took advantage of the new movement. The IRA had not abandoned the armed struggle after the debacle of 1956-62, but used the civil rights movement to re-group and devise additional strategies to secure Irish unity.

As part of the more flexible policy of working within the system to bring it down, republicans established two new organisations. The Wolfe Tone Societies acted as a forum for discussion among Republicans, communists, socialists and radicals. The Republican Clubs, banned in March 1967 by the Northern Ireland government, organised open and legal political activity, including the contesting of elections. The impact of the new Republicans on social and political protest was most obvious in Derry. Although Eamon McCann, a Young Socialist, later became the best-known left-wing agitator in Derry, the pioneers of left-wing protest in the city were republicans. In October 1966 the Derry Young Republican Association organised an open-air meeting, protesting at the eviction of a family from a house in Creggan, denouncing the corporation’s housing record, and telling nationalist Councillors that they should be taking up these issues instead of ‘attending functions behind closed doors at which toasts to the Queen were drunk’.

How united was the civil rights movement?

Indeed, this was a besetting weakness of the civil rights movement. It was essentially a coalition of different reforming groups. Whereas Ian Paisley successfully mobilised Protestant resistance, the civil rights movement lacked a leader who combined spiritual and secular authority in the way that Paisley did. The movement lacked a leader of Martin Luther King's authority, which severely restrained the tactical flexibility of the inexperienced and divided civil rights leadership.

What precipitated violent confrontation in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s?

What ensured that dispute about how Northern Ireland should be governed was the fateful decision of the civil rights movement to demonstrate on the streets. In 1968, impatient with the slow pace of change, the inexperienced and divided leadership decided to copy the civil rights marches which had made such an impact in the United States and they took to marching.

Provocation

In many parts of the world, marching may seem a normal and unexceptional part of the political process. This was not the case in Northern Ireland. Marching was provocative. Marches in Northern Ireland were never regarded as neutral or secular events, but as party occasions, as re-assertions of historic differences and territorial sectarian claims. Misrouted marches could all too easily be seen as Catholic and Republican demonstrations and trigger the sectarian rioting which had long been a recurrent feature of life in Northern Ireland.

This proved to be the case. The first march, from Caledon to Dungannon, passed off peacefully on 28 August 1968, but the second demonstration in Derry on 5 October 1968, ended in violence as a section of the marchers clashed with the police who broke ranks and used excessive force on the demonstrators who were batoned and hosed with water cannon. Some seventy-eight civilians and eighteen policemen were injured and television sent pictures of the scene around the world. This incident established a pattern of violent confrontations, including Burntollet Bridge (4 January 1969), and eventually led to the breakdown of government in Northern Ireland.

Why did the violence associated with marching lead to the breakdown of government?

The violence associated with marching led to the breakdown of government for two reasons.

Loss of government control of unionism

First, the government lost control of unionism, as Paisley spearheaded Protestant and unionist opposition to O'Neillism, especially by confronting the civil rights movement clashed on the streets. The marches played into Paisley's hands, turning him from a marginal street politician to the main defender of Protestant and unionist rights.

Radicalisation of the civil rights movement - the People's Democracy

Secondly, such events led to the radicalisation of the civil rights movement with the formation in People's Democracy in October 1968. Originally a student movement to extract reform from the government, it quickly fell under the influence of able but doctrinaire leaders, who generally followed Connollyite Republicanism, very different from the 'New Left' ideology developed by the continental student movement. The vision of Eamon McCann and Michael Farrell went beyond the redress of immediate grievances. Instead they envisaged the eventual creation of a workers' and small farmers' republic for the whole of Ireland which would dissolve the religious differences that had long divided the working class in the interests of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, flushed with their own success to date, they preferred confrontation with government to working through reforms and saw Derry as the best battle ground.

How far was the collapse of government the result of a conspiracy?

In view of the growing influence of the People's Democracy, it is tempting to see the events of 1968-69 as the outcome of a conspiracy on the part of a revolutionary elite. This does not seem to have been the case. Quite simply, leaders lost control of events by conjuring up the ghosts of the past. A slide into violence was almost inevitable, as Ulster's disturbed past and Ulster people's selective history caught up with the present. It was an outcome wished by nobody, not even the most radical of the civil rights leaders.

It was certainly not an outcome wished for or foreseen by the British government. For the first time in fifty years, Britain was drawn again into the maelstrom of Irish politics. Troops were sent into Northern Ireland to restore order and hold the ring while a programme of reform was rapidly implemented, conceding most of the demands of the civil rights movement. Yet, far from restoring peace and stability to Northern Ireland, British intervention seemed to stimulate further violence.