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*Origins of the Religious conflict
in Northern Ireland
A Historical Overview*

ABSTRACT :

Northern Ireland, administrative division of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, situated in the north-eastern portion of the island of Ireland. The remaining portion of the island is part of the Republic of Ireland

Northern Ireland's population is deeply divided along religious and political lines. The split between the Protestant majority and the Catholic minority extends deep into Northern Ireland's past and has strongly influenced the region's culture, settlement patterns, and politics.

The main defining components of ethnicity in Northern Ireland are religious and political affiliation. In general, Catholics/nationalists regard themselves as Irish, and Protestants/unionists regard themselves as British.

To explain the nature of the conflict it is necessary to go through three sections first, an outline of the development of the Irish conflict; second, brief descriptions of the main contemporary parties and interests in conflict; and third, an overview of approaches to managing or resolving the conflict.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the island of Ireland and the main land Britain has mostly been an unhappy one, chiefly because of the two inherent ethnic and religious differences between them. The Irish are Celtic and largely Roman Catholic race, whereas the British are mostly Anglo Saxon and Protestant. The Irish would add that they are by nature a peace loving people, whereas the English, who came to dominate the rest of the British isles, have been seen more as 'empire-builders'.

To explain the nature of the conflict it is necessary to go through a number of sections first, an outline of the development of the Irish conflict; second, brief descriptions of the main contemporary parties and interests in conflict; and third, an overview of approaches to managing or resolving the conflict.

2. DATES AND SLOGANS

Dates are important in Ireland. This section will select four critical dates, each of which represents a major lurch in the already unstable chronicle of Anglo-Irish relationships. What follows, therefore, is not an abbreviated history but an attempt to identify a succession of themes.

2.1 - 1170: The Norman Invasion

More than a century after the Norman Conquest of England, Henry II of England claimed and attempted to attach Ireland to his kingdom. He succeeded in establishing control in a small area around Dublin known as the Pale. Over the next four centuries this area was the beach-head for the kingdom of Ireland, adopting English administrative practices and the English language and looking to London for protection and leadership. A number of attempts were made to extend English control over the rest of Ireland, but the major expansion of English dominion did not take place until the sixteenth century. For the Irish clans who disputed the rest of the

island with each other, England became the major external threat to their sovereignty and customs.

2.2- 1609: The Plantation of Ulster

By the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign, military conquest had established English rule over most of the island of Ireland, with the principal exception of the northern province of Ulster. The Ulster clans, under Hugh O'Neill, had succeeded in overcoming their instinctive rivalries to create an effective alliance against Elizabeth's armies. After a long and damaging campaign, Ulster was eventually brought under English control and the Irish leaders left the island for Europe. Their land was confiscated and distributed to colonists from Britain. By 1703, less than 5 per cent of the land of Ulster was still in the hands of the Catholic Irish.

The Plantation of Ulster was unique among Irish plantations in that it set out to attract colonists of all classes from England, Scotland and Wales by generous offers of land. Essentially it sought to transplant a society to Ireland. The native Irish remained, but were initially excluded from the towns built by the Planters, and banished to the mountains and bogs on the margins of the land they had previously owned. The sum of the Plantation of Ulster was the introduction of a foreign community, which spoke a different language, represented an alien culture and way of life, including a new type of land tenure and management. In addition, most of the newcomers were Protestant by religion, while the native Irish were Catholic. So the broad outlines of the current conflict in Northern Ireland had been sketched out within fifty years of the plantation: the same territory was occupied by two hostile groups, one believing the land had been usurped and the other believing that their tenure was constantly under threat of rebellion. They often lived in separate quarters. They identified their differences as religious and cultural as well as territorial.

2.3. -The Risings of the 1800's

The next two centuries consolidated the differences. There were many risings. The Dublin based institutions of government - an Irish monarchy, parliament and government, reflecting those in Britain enforced a

series of penal laws against Catholics and, to a lesser extent, Presbyterians. In 1801, in an attempt to secure more direct control of Irish affairs, the Irish parliament and government were abolished by an Act of Union and its responsibilities taken over by Westminster. During the nineteenth century a succession of movements attempted to overthrow the union. Some of these movements, including the Repeal movement in the 1840s and the Home Rule movement from the 1870s, were parliamentary. Others, like the Fenians and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, were dedicated to overthrowing the union by the use of physical force. It is probable that the union would have been repealed by a Home Rule act but for the intervention of the First World War. During the war an armed rising was attempted in Dublin during Easter week, 1916. The rising failed and the leaders were executed, creating a wave of sympathy for the IRA and its political wing, Sinn Féin. In the 1918 election Sinn Féin effectively replaced the old Irish Parliamentary Party and established its own Irish parliament. The resulting War of Independence between Britain and the IRA was eventually ended by a treaty and the Government of Ireland Act in 1920.

Since the 1880s, many Ulster Protestants had become increasingly concerned about the possible establishment of home rule for Ireland. They prepared for resistance. In 1912 a civil war seemed imminent, but the focus was shifted from Ulster by the start of the First World War and by the Easter rising. From 1918, Ulster Protestants increasingly settled for a fall-back position and set out to ensure that the northern counties of Ireland, at least, should be excluded from any Home Rule arrangements. The 1920 Government of Ireland Act, which came into effect in the following year, recognised and confirmed their position by partitioning the island.

2.4. - 1921: Partition

The 1921 settlement precipitated a civil war in the southern 26 counties, between those willing to accept the settlement and those who believed it was a betrayal. Northern Ireland, the name given to the new six county administration, had been created through demographic compromise. It was essentially the largest area which could be comfortably held with a majority in favor of the union with Britain. The new arrangements established a bicameral legislature, and a subordinate government in Belfast with authority over a number of devolved powers, including policing,

education, local government and social services. London retained ultimate authority, and Northern Ireland sent MPs to Westminster.

The establishment of these institutions was a challenge to what some Irish republicans saw as unfinished business. The objective of securing a united independent Ireland, by force if necessary, remained, and there were IRA campaigns in the 1920s, 1940s and 1950s. For many unionists the new arrangements and the union itself could only be maintained with constant vigilance. Emergency legislation was introduced on a permanent basis; a police force and police reserve was established which was almost exclusively Protestant; local government electoral boundaries were openly gerrymandered, a stratagem also used by nationalists when they were able to do so; and a system of economic discrimination was introduced against the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. This minority formed about one third of the population for most of the twentieth century, and currently represents around 40 per cent.

A number of Westminster-led social changes after the Second World War, including the introduction of free secondary education for all, led during the 1950s to the emergence of a Catholic middle class. It was their growing dissatisfaction that led to the civil rights campaign of the 1960s.

2.5. -Civil Rights and After: 1969

By the 1950s there were growing signs that some Catholics were prepared to accept equality within Northern Ireland rather than espouse the more traditional aim of securing a united Ireland. In 1967 the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was formed to demand liberal reforms, including the removal of discrimination in the allocation of jobs and houses, permanent emergency legislation and electoral abuses. The campaign was modeled on the civil rights campaign in the United States, involving protests, marches, sit-ins and the use of the media to publicize minority grievances. The local administration was unable to handle the growing civil disorder, and in 1969 the British government sent in troops to enforce order. Initially welcomed by the Catholic population, they soon provided stimulus for the revival of the republican movement. The newly formed Provisional IRA began a campaign of violence against the army. By 1972 it was clear that the local Northern Irish government, having introduced internment in 1971 as a last attempt to impose control, was unable to handle the situation.

Invoking its powers under the Government of Ireland Act, the Westminster parliament suspended the Northern Ireland government and replaced it with direct rule from Westminster. This situation continued into the 1990s.

On paper the civil rights campaign had been a remarkable success. Several of its objectives had been conceded by the end of 1970. By that time, however, proceedings had developed their own momentum. The IRA campaign developed strongly from 1972. Instead of the riots between Catholics and Protestants which had characterised 1969 and 1970, the conflict increasingly took the form of violence between the Provisional IRA and the British Army, with occasional bloody interventions by loyalist paramilitaries. The violence reached a peak in 1972, when 468 people died. Since then it has gradually declined to an annual average of below 100.

2.6. Themes

Since the twelfth century therefore, it is possible to discern significant shifts in the Irish problem. Until 1921, it was essentially an Irish-English problem and focused on Ireland's attempt to secure independence from Britain. From 1921 the emphasis shifted to relationships within the island of Ireland, between what later became the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland; this issue has somewhat revived since the signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement in 1985. Finally, since 1969, attention has focused on relationships between Catholics and Protestants within Northern Ireland.

3. THE MAIN PARTIES

Northern Ireland as a country of different socio-cultural and religious tendencies witnessed the emergence of political parties clearly taking part in the social division of the Ulster population.

3.1. Unionists

Unionists are the successors of those who opposed Home Rule in the nineteenth century, and eventually settled for the state of Northern Ireland. The main unionist parties are the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), which formed all governments from 1921 to 1972; and the more recently

established Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which is more populist, more anti-nationalist, but less popular in electoral support. Both are opposed to the involvement of the Irish Republic in Northern Ireland, and are unwilling to share executive power with non-Unionist parties. They also share a suspicion of Britain's commitment to the union. The DUP holds all these positions more extremely than the UUP, and also is more preoccupied with the power of the Catholic church. In 1994 the leader of the UUP was James Molyneaux, and Ian Paisley led the DUP.

3.2. Nationalists

The basic tenet of nationalists is the aspiration to unify the island of Ireland. The main constitutional party is the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), which contests the nationalist vote with Sinn Féin, generally accepted to be the political arm of the IRA. The SDLP campaigns for internal reforms, and has accepted that unity must await the support of the majority in Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin argues that force is necessary to remove the British presence, and that its mandate is historical. Sinn Féin has refused to condemn the IRA, and has not been included in any official political talks. John Hume led the SDLP in 1994, and Gerry Adams Sinn Féin.

3.3 .The Paramilitary Organizations

The republican paramilitary organizations, of which the IRA is by far the most important, believe that only force will remove the British from Ireland. Initially they saw themselves as defenders of the Northern Catholic minority, but later spread their military activities throughout Northern Ireland, Britain and Europe. There is disagreement about whether loyalist violence is essentially reactive, but certainly the pattern of loyalist violence has shadowed republican violence. There has been a major shift in the form of violence since 1990, with loyalists for the first time killing more victims than republicans. It has been speculated that this rise in loyalist violence may be connected to the failure of recent political talks.

3.4. The United Kingdom

The official British position is that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. This is shared by all parties, although the Labor Party favors Irish unity, when the majority in Northern Ireland supports it. Until 1993 most political talks have aimed to restore a devolved government, with power shared between unionists and nationalists. The 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement between the British and Irish governments accepted that the Dublin government had the right to be consulted on Northern Irish affairs.

3.5. The Irish Republic

Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution lay claim to the 32 counties of Ireland, somewhat modified by the Irish government's acceptance in the Anglo-Irish Agreement that any move towards unity required the agreement of a majority in Northern Ireland. The same agreement assures the Irish government a role in Northern Irish affairs, which tends to be primarily an advocacy one for Northern nationalists.

4. The Management and Resolution of the Conflict

'The Irish problem' is a term widely used in Northern Ireland and outside as if there were an agreed and universal understanding of what it means. It is more accurate, and more productive, to consider the issue, not as a 'problem' with the implication that a solution lies around the corner for anyone ingenious enough to find it, but as a tangle of interrelated problems:

- There is a central constitutional problem: what should be the political context for the people of Northern Ireland? Integration with Britain? A united Ireland; independence?

- There is a problem of religious difference which has lead automatically to a number of day to day problems such as:

 - there is a continuing problem of social and economic inequalities, especially in the field of employment,

 - there is a problem of cultural identity, relating to education, to the Irish language and to a wide range of cultural differences;

- there is clearly a problem of security;

-there is certainly a problem of the day-to-day relationships between the people who live in Northern Ireland.

All of these are elements of the problem, but none can claim dominance. Each affects the others. Any approach to change needs to take into account all elements of the problem. Viewed against this broader context, an evaluation of conflict relations policy over the last 20 years can point to some successes: discrimination in the allocation of housing, a major grievance in 1969, has been removed; integrated schooling has been encouraged, and the segregated schools attended by the vast majority of children are required to introduce the concepts of cultural diversity and mutual understanding; minority cultural expression, especially through the use of the Irish language, has been allowed and even encouraged through the acceptance of a small number of Irish language schools. At local government level, 11 of Northern Ireland's 26 councils were in 1993 operating a power-sharing regime, often involving rotation of the chair, and 18 had agreed to implement a community relations programme with specific and binding requirements.

On the other side of the balance, a number of major problems remain. Catholics are much more likely to be unemployed than are Protestants, more than twice as likely in the case of males. The problem of violence remains as persistent as ever. Progress towards a more general political solution has been disappointing. Since the introduction of direct rule from Westminster in 1972 there have been six attempts to reach a political accord. All have failed.

1973-74: The power-sharing Executive, which lasted for three months, remains Northern Ireland's only experience of a government shared by Catholics and Protestants. It attempted to construct a devolved system based on power-sharing between Protestants and Catholics, and on a Council of Ireland to regulate affairs between the two parts of Ireland. It was opposed by the Democratic Unionist Party and most of the Ulster Unionist party, but eventually was brought down through a Protestant workers' strike in May 1974.

1975-76: A Constitutional Convention was convened to enable elected representatives from Northern Ireland to propose their own solution. The majority unionist parties proposed a return to majority rule, modified by a committee system with some minority rights inbuilt. It was rejected by both the British and the minority SDLP.

1977-78 and 1980: Two attempts to set up devolved institutions were initiated by two Northern Ireland secretaries of state, Roy Mason and Humphrey Atkins. Neither got to first base. They were opposed, for different reasons, by the SDLP and the UUP, but both simply petered out. As a measure of the cultural gap between the two sides, two bars were set up in Stormont during the Atkins talks of 1980, one serving only non-alcoholic beverages. Students of national stereotyping may guess which bar was designed for which political parties.

1982-84: Rolling Devolution, introduced by James Prior, was perhaps the most ingenious proposal, again involving an elected assembly and a committee system. This envisaged a gradual return to power by elected representatives, but only if the proposed powers had 'Widespread acceptance', defined as 70 per cent agreement. In other words, the amount of power allowed to local political parties depended on their ability to agree, and would roll along at the speed of progress determined by them. It was boycotted by the SDLP because it did not guarantee power-sharing.

1991-92: The Brooke-Mayhew initiatives sought to introduce phased talks, involving the Northern Irish parties first and the Dublin government at a later stage. This initiative followed the introduction of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, an agreement signed by the governments of the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic, but which did not involve local politicians and has been bitterly opposed by unionists. A major survey in 1990 confirmed that, for Protestants, the Anglo-Irish Agreement is still perceived to be the biggest single obstacle to peace.

Prior to 1993 Sinn Féin was excluded from all major political talks, mainly because unionist parties refused to talk with terrorists. In 1988 and 1993, however, those whom they regarded as the leaders of the SDLP and Sinn Féin held two series of bilateral talks. The consequences remain to be seen.

1993: The Downing Street Declaration, jointly announced by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, John Major, and the Irish Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds, introduced for the first time the possibility of Sinn Féin becoming involved in talks. The condition was an ending of violence for at least three months. In return, the Irish government accepted that any constitutional change in the status of Northern Ireland required the support of a majority within Northern Ireland. At the time of writing, three months after the Declaration, the unionist parties were divided on the initiative and Sinn Féin was still considering it. The Declaration offered, for the first time, the possibility of addressing the constitutional and security problems together as part of a peace package.

In summary, then, if a broader definition of conflict management or resolution is accepted, Northern Ireland has experience of a wide variety of approaches:

- Majority domination, from 1921 to 1972;
- Integration, for a three-month period in 1974 when a power-sharing executive was formed and failed;
- Administrative reforms, since 1969, when legislative changes covering housing, employment, social and educational reforms were introduced, with varying results;
- 'Holding the fort' with a standing army, since 1969;
- Political talks, as detailed above;

After the tentative to explain the origins of the religious sectarianism that split such a society which seems to stick to its religious principles, since it has the highest rate of religious practice in the christian world, one would end up this article asking himself :Are the churches willing to examine in depth their responsibility for any way encouraging their attitudes? To what extent are the churches prepared to actively oppose sectarianism in Irish society and to actively make changes in their structures to help in its eradication, thus furthering the process of peace? Is the nature of the Anglo Irish conflict really religious? Tentative answers to such questions would require other research that can be the topic of our next article.

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