

Background to Bloody Sunday

Northern Ireland, 1969-72

1. Reform and disintegration
2. Provisional IRA
3. In what ways did IRA violence undermine the 'peace process'?

1. Reform and disintegration

British intervention in 1969 was intended to be only temporary. On 19 August the British and Northern Ireland governments re-affirmed the constitutional position of Northern Ireland and committed the government of Northern Ireland to reforming itself. The government confirmed

Every citizen of Northern Ireland is entitled to the same equality of treatment and freedom from discrimination as obtains in the rest of the United Kingdom, irrespective of political views or religion.

Sweeping reforms began immediately, and new political parties offered the prospect of the resumption of normal government. However, the reforms and the parties became almost irrelevant in the face of growing violence.

How necessary was the use of the Army in 1969?

The use of the Army in the middle of August 1969 was necessary in view of the fact that the police were overstretched. The question is whether they should or should not have been called upon sooner. The burning of Bombay Street took place largely because confusion and delay in the arrangements for the civil authorities to obtain the assistance of the military to preserve peace left the inter-sectarian boundary between the Falls and the Shankill unpoliced for half a fateful day. There is also doubt as to whether the army should have agreed not to enter 'Free Derry'. One officer who later served in Northern Ireland reckoned that the decision helped to undermine the authority of the police and army.

The people of Northern Ireland concluded that the enforcement of law, even by the military, was subject to political direction and therefore to pressure on politicians. Riots, demonstrations and uniform marches produce this political pressure; therefore such activities pay off.

The soldiers and policemen drew the conclusion that they could no longer be sure of the support of their professional or political superiors, or the legal system, if they enforced the law impartially, without fear or favour.

Nevertheless, despite these reservations at the time, the intervention of the army was seen as essential to hold the ring while the reform of Northern Ireland was carried out. According to one British minister, 'The Augean stables were nothing to the mess he found at Stormont.'

Why did the British government seek to reform rather than abolish the Northern Ireland government and parliament?

The main reason why Westminster sought reform rather than abolition was that age-old desire to distance itself from Ireland. Troops have been sent in only reluctantly and the government saw signs that timely changes could save Stormont. There were indications that the minority would welcome a new initiative and that members of the majority would assist, particularly with the formation of two new political parties.

Alliance Party

Formed on 21 April 1970, the Alliance Party was the first Irish political organisation to profess cross-sectarianism as its *raison d'être*. The party grew out of the New Ulster Movement, which had been established in April 1969 as a non-party ginger group professing traditional liberal values but firm on partition and Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom. It did gain some cross-party and cross-community support and showed a remarkable degree of unanimity on major issues of policy, including such controversial questions as integrated education. Nevertheless, it was largely a middle class

affair with restricted appeal. Ulster politics remained stubbornly soft-centred and the party lowered its sights. It stopped seeing itself as a party of government and became committed to sharing power with moderate Catholic and Protestant parties and occupying a middle ground between them, a bastion against extremism and intolerance.

Social Democratic and Labour Party

An even more hopeful sign was the formation in April 1970 of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) among more moderate Catholic politicians and laymen who had been involved in the 1960s agitation. The significance of the SDLP was that it organised for the first time the Catholic community for sustained political action in Northern Ireland and within the confines of the constitution. It decided that the minority's interests and aspirations could be best served, at least in the short term, by co-operation with the government and by trying to gain a substantial share of power. Although its membership was smaller than that of the other new party (5,000 - 6,000 to the Alliance's 10,000), the SDLP was far more effective in mobilising votes, at least Catholic votes, and quickly came to monopolise Catholics' political representation.

Although claiming to be non-sectarian, it did little to demonstrate its good faith to Protestants. It remained committed to Irish unity, although it made unity conditional upon the assent of the majority of Northern Ireland rather than asserting it as an absolute right, as did Republicans and Nationalists. Moreover, although an explicitly socialist party seeking the public ownership and public control of essential industries, its socio-economic policies were not worked out in detail and policies tended to reflect the influence of Catholic social teaching. Some of these weaknesses reflected political, personal and other differences among the leadership. Although Gerry Fitt became leader of the party, his leadership was nominal, for the other founder-members were strong personalities with clearly defined views and local power bases and perspectives of their own. Thus it was said that the party's line on any issue depended on who answered the telephone.

What reforms were introduced?

The reform programme favoured by the British government amounted to the virtual dismantling of the Unionist ascendancy by conceding most of the demands made during the civil rights campaign.

Law enforcement

The question of law enforcement received the highest priority. By the spring of 1970 the process of 'civilianising' the RUC had begun and the USC had been disbanded and replaced by a new part-time security force, the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR). The system of public prosecutions was overhauled and in 1972 the first Director of Public Prosecutions was appointed with full responsibility for the selection and prosecution of all serious criminal charges and for advising the courts on applications for bail throughout Ireland.

Community relations

There were attempts to improve community relations by establishing both a Ministry of Community Relations and an independent Community Relations Commission; by the appointment of a Commissioner to deal with complaints against local authorities and public bodies; and by Prevention of Incitement to Hatred Act which made incitement to religious hatred a statutory offence.

Local government

Local government underwent dramatic changes in an attempt to root out sectarianism and inefficiency. The congeries of local bodies were abolished and their functions distributed between government departments, nominated Areas Boards and twenty-six councils elected by Proportional Representation and on the basis of adult suffrage. The old property qualifications were abolished to concede that much desired one man one vote, while the electoral boundaries were drawn up by an independent

commissioner. Accepted by parliament in December 1970, these changes did not come into effect until October 1973. The new local authorities were not given any say in the allocation of housing, which was placed entirely under the control of an appointed central body, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, responsible to the Ministry of Development.

Regional government and the minority

Efforts were made to associate the minority with the work of the regional government. In June 1971 the Prime Minister, then Brian Faulkner, announced to SDLP acclaim a scheme for three parliamentary committees to review policy and advise on legislation in respect of social, environmental and industrial services. Membership would be in proportion to party strength at Stormont but the opposition would provide two of the three chairmen who would be paid a salary. In October 1971 Faulkner brought the first Catholic into the government - G.B. Newe became Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office to advise on minority matters.

Why did these measures not secure peace in Northern Ireland?

These measures aroused as much controversy as approbation. Unionists lambasted them as betrayal, and organised more effectively to limit the impact of change. On the other hand, others criticised the reforms as giving too little too late. More importantly, the reform programme became almost irrelevant in face of growing violence, particularly with the revival of the IRA.

How well organised were the Unionist opponents of reform?

The Unionist alliance continued to disintegrate in face of reform and continued violence and new parties emerged offering different versions of Unionism.

Democratic Unionist Party

Paisley formed the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in September 1972. The co-founder, Desmond Boal, a barrister, said that the party would be 'right wing in the sense of being strong on the constitution and restoring security, but to the left on social policies'. Nevertheless, its appeal lay largely in its strident anti-republicanism, which many of its followers regarded as synonymous with anti-Catholicism. Paisley clung to the traditional definition of loyalty, holding that 'If the Crown in Parliament decreed to put Ulster into a United Ireland, we would be disloyal to Her Majesty if we did not resist such a surrender to our enemies.' Indeed, the distinctive feature of the DUP was its reversion to nineteenth century Unionism and its advocacy, when Stormont's existence was threatened, of closer integration with Britain, including increased representation at Westminster to put Northern Ireland on a par with Scotland and Wales.

Vanguard Unionist Progressive Party

William Craig's Vanguard Unionist Progressive Party (VUPP) was not formed until March 1973, but arose out of Ulster Vanguard, a pressure group launched by Craig at the beginning of 1972 as a protest against government policy and rumours of the suspension or abolition of Stormont. Vanguard flirted with the idea of a unilateral declaration of independence, maintaining that an independent Ulster was the surest way of maintaining its British heritage. The party's symbol was the Red Hand of Ulster, emphasising its commitment to a mythical Ulster nationalism. Vanguard also differed from other Unionist parties in the open and close links it maintained with the various Protestant paramilitary groups which began to proliferate after 1969.

Protestant paramilitary groups

At one time there was said to be some forty-six Protestant paramilitary groups, most formed in the years 1971-2 in response to increasing IRA violence. A motley collection of local defence associations, in urban areas they patrolled neighbourhoods at night and erected checkpoints for motorists, while in the

countryside they patrolled roads and guarded such buildings as Orange Halls, which were the likely objects of arson or bomb attacks.

Ulster Defence Association

These local defence associations achieved greater significance by affiliating to some wider body, such as the 10,000-strong Ulster Special Constabulary Association or the better-known Ulster Defence Association (UDA), which started life in September 1971 as a co-ordinating body for local associations. Its formation with the motto 'Law before Violence' reflected the growing anger and frustration of many Protestant working men and women at seeing 'the enemies of Faith and Freedom' destroying Northern Ireland in order to 'enslave the people of God'. At its peak in 1972, it had some 40,000 members and took on a distinctively working-class image, excluding MPs and clergymen from membership.

The UDA's massive military-style demonstrations were impressive reminders that Protestant volunteers were ready to defend their ideal Ulster should the Crown forces prove unwilling or unable to do so.

Fragmentation of Unionism

There is insufficient evidence to support the view that the continued fragmentation of Unionism was the result of class differences, with the Vanguard movement speaking primarily for small local capitalists, and the DUP and the paramilitaries for the Protestant working class. (The DUP had strong roots in rural areas.) Still, whatever the explanation, the proliferation of parties and organisations hardly made for peace and stability in Northern Ireland. Nobody could speak with confidence on behalf of the Protestant community or deliver unanimous support for any political initiative. Furthermore, the failure of reforming Unionism meant that opinion in Northern Ireland was more polarised than ever before. Most Unionists were as determined as ever to uphold their ascendancy in some form or other, and many were prepared to resort to extra-constitutional methods to do so.

Why did the reform package fail to create confidence in Stormont among those whom it was intended to benefit?

Some of the criticisms of the reform package, such as the delay in changing local government, underrated both the commitment of some leading Unionists to reform and the difficulties they faced. Moreover, no wand-waving could dispel discontent, frustration and a deep-seated sense of grievance. Nevertheless, it is also true that many of the changes were superficial and ill-conceived. There were significant omissions, such as the failure to examine the question of segregated education, and generally the reform programme injected Northern Ireland with a dose of the 'institutionitis' then fashionable in Britain in the belief that problems did not need fundamental reform but could be administered out of existence by tinkering with a few institutions.

Community relations

The community relations measures were not carefully devised to suit Northern Ireland conditions, but closely followed British legislation concerning coloured minorities, regardless of whether or not the racial and ethnic conflict theories on which such legislation was based were adequate to explain the nature of conflict in Northern Ireland. The establishment of a separate ministry encouraged the view that the problem of community relations could be compartmentalised into one department instead of recognising that it was a central problem of government, which ought to be a consideration in almost every decision taken by every department. Admittedly, the Community Relations Commission was given wide terms of reference but its independence was illusory and it was virtually ignored by the government.

Parliamentary committees

Faulkner's new parliamentary committees might have provided good jobs for opposition MPs, but since they would have dealt only with uncontroversial topics and would have had in-built Unionist majorities, they would not have given the opposition any effective share of power.

Police

Above all, the police reforms did not gain for the forces of law and order general public confidence. At one time it looked as though a considerable number of Catholics would join the UDR, but the percentage of Catholic recruits dropped quickly from 18 to 3 to the accompaniment of complaints about the enrolment of too many ex-Specials. Catholic suspicions of the loyalist orientation of the new force were scarcely allayed by well-founded stories that some members of the UDR had close links with the Protestant paramilitary groups which abounded in the early 1970s.

Security

Above all, the minority's scepticism of reform was turned to outright hostility by the security policies adopted in an attempt to put an end to violence.

How extensive a problem was violence after 1969?

Political violence increased after 1969.

	1969	1970	1971
Shootings	N/A	213	1,765
Explosions	8	153	1,022
Armed robberies	N/A	N/A	437
Deaths (army and police)	1	2	59
Deaths (civilians)	12	23	114
Injuries (army and police)	733	811	707
Injuries (civilians)	NA	NA	1,838

Who was responsible for the violence?

Protestants and Unionists

At first Protestants and Unionists presented the greater obstacle to the restoration of order, since they resented the army protecting Catholics, even to the extent of respecting the existence of no-go areas in Belfast and Derry. The expected 'backlash of outraged Loyalist opinion' began on 11 October 1969, when rioting and loyalist sniping in the Shankill resulted in the first death of a member of the Crown forces, an RUC constable, in this particular phase of Northern Ireland's history. Loyalist violence was not confined to Northern Ireland and seven days later a member of the UVF and Paisley's Free Presbyterian Church was blown up and killed planting a bomb at an electricity plant at Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal, in the Republic.

IRA

In the following year, however, the traditional battle lines were re-formed, as the Provisional IRA (PIRA) emerged as a new hardline organisation committed to the achievement of a united Ireland by military means. Their campaign in the early 1970s destroyed whatever chance there had been of reforming the Stormont regime.

2. Provisional IRA

The events of August 1969 had caught the IRA totally unprepared. The leftward and political trend pursued since the middle of the decade had left Republicans with neither the organisation nor the arms to defend the Catholics of Derry and, particularly, Belfast. This led to a split in the IRA into the more political Official IRA (OIRA) and the military minded Provisional IRA (PIRA). It was fatal to the peace of Northern Ireland that the PIRA was the more successful in establishing itself in Northern Ireland.

Who initiated the split in the IRA?

The split in the IRA was initiated by the staff of the Belfast brigade. They were humiliated by the events in August after which 'I.R.A. - I Ran Away' was chalked up on the walls of the beleaguered ghettos. In September 1969 the Belfast brigade re-organised itself and broke away from the official Army Council. They wanted a return to direct military action to end partition. Three months later, in December, the split was formalised when the Army Council in Dublin voted by three to one to give at least token recognition to the three parliaments at Westminster, Dublin and Stormont. The minority seceded and set up a Provisional Army Council. A corresponding split occurred in January 1970 at the convention of the IRA's political front Sinn Fein. Henceforth, the Provisionals (the 'Provos' or 'green Republicans') followed the example of the Belfast brigade and adhered to the Provisional Army Council. The Officials (the 'Stickies' or 'red' Republicans) continued to recognise the Official Army Council.

What were the aims of the PIRA?

Despite some social democratic rhetoric, the Provisionals were cast in the dogmatic mould of physical force nationalism established by the Fenians in the second half of the nineteenth century. For them, the one vital issue was the overthrow of British authority in Northern Ireland and the re-unification of Ireland. Once this was achieved, they assumed that all other problems, such as relations between different communities, would be resolved in a new democratic and socialist Ireland. 'Our aim,' the Provisional Army Council declared in Easter 1970,

is to make the Irish people masters of their own spiritual destinies, controlling all the wealth of the nation, material and spiritual, in an independent republic of 32 counties, in which protestants, catholics and dissenters will have equal rights.

What were the PIRA's methods?

The Provisionals would have no truck with the parliamentary methods which had left them so exposed in 1969. Their methods remained military. At first, they insisted that they were acting only defensively, protecting the Catholic community from outside aggression by loyalists or the Crown forces, but in February 1971 they went unequivocally on the attack. They embarked on, as they put it, 'an offensive campaign of resistance in all parts of the occupied area'. Like the Fenians, they had no doubt of their moral right to wage war against Great Britain, for they saw themselves as the 'infallible interpreters of the will of the Irish people to achieve independence and unification, no matter the cost.'

Did the PIRA seek a military victory?

The Provisionals did not necessarily believe that they could achieve a military victory, but they did intend to make government impossible in Northern Ireland and break the will of the Northern Ireland and British governments. Time and history, they thought, were on their side.

How did the PIRA differ from the OIRA?

The rift between the Provisionals and the OIRA is often explained as a split between the political right and the political left, between fascists and Marxists. This simple characterisation of the split between conservative and Marxists ignores the fact that both wings of the IRA had several aims in common: the withdrawal of British troops from Ireland; the legalisation of all forms of republican activity in Northern Ireland; and the establishment, or what they saw as the re-establishment, of a thirty-two county Irish Republic. Nevertheless, the conventional labels accurately reflect different emphases. The Officials were more steeped in socialist ideology and more inclined to dabble in politics. They sought an all-Ireland workers' republic and, while not averse to guerrilla warfare, thought that their aims could be achieved through the ballot box.

Relations between the two wings were bitter and often violent. The Provisionals accused the Officials of betraying republicanism, while the latter charged the Provisionals with fomenting sectarian war instead of promoting solidarity among the workers. Often, however, at a local level, differences were expressed not dogmatically but more in terms of a domestic squabble about status, family and community allegiance and, later, as a feud or vendetta. This may help to explain the high level of violence between the wings, which sometimes erupted in open fighting, as in Belfast on 10 March 1971, when, with the British army standing carefully aside, a fierce battle in the Lower Falls resulted in one man shot dead and several wounded.

How strong were the respective wings of the IRA in Northern Ireland?

The Provisionals were more successful in establishing themselves in Northern Ireland than the Officials. With their own six-counties organisation based in Belfast, they quickly assumed leadership of Northern Republicanism, becoming well-entrenched in Belfast and in the Bogside and Creggan districts of Derry. Their strongholds were the so-called no-go areas. The Provisionals saw themselves and acted as an army of liberation. The backbone were the full-time volunteers subject to a military code of discipline, obliged to obey orders from officers, and liable to severe penalties for any infringements, including execution for bringing the movement into disgrace.

The growing ascendancy of the PIRA in the Catholic ghettos brought to an end the period of fraternisation between Catholics and the army. The beginning of the end occurred on 2 April 1970, when rioting in the Catholic area of Ballymurphy was put down by troops, who were met with petrol bombs. The British General Officer Commanding in Northern Ireland, Lieutenant-General Sir Ian Henry Freeland, went on television and threatened to shoot petrol bombers dead. Henceforth, the PIRA increasingly appeared in action against the troops and decisively moved from defence to attack in February 1971.

What occasioned the change from defence to attack in February 1971?

The change to attack followed the breakdown of secret talks between the army and the Provisionals about the control of rioting. On 6 February, the latter shot dead a British soldier in the New Lodge Road, the first British soldier killed in action in the North for almost fifty years. The same night a Provisional officer was shot dead in a three-way battle between the PIRA, loyalists and the army in the Bone, a border area between Protestants and Catholics in Belfast. The Prime Minister, still Chichester Clark, announced on television that 'Northern Ireland is at war with the IRA Provisionals'.

3. In what ways did IRA violence undermine the 'peace process'?

The Republican campaign destroyed what little chance Stormont had of saving itself. It undermined what little Protestant and Unionist belief there was in the efficacy of reform. It also ruined any chance the reforms had of creating confidence in the justice of the Stormont regime and giving it legitimacy in the eyes of the minority.

In what ways did the IRA campaign result in the minority's alienation from the regime?

The government's need to respond to the IRA undermined its reforming efforts, particularly in relation to law and order.

First, the process of civilianising the police was interrupted and a growing police force was soon re-equipped with arms and found itself travelling around in armoured cars.

Secondly, the army and not the police continued to dominate the peace-keeping effort in the province. While the original decision to call on the army in August 1969 was fully justified, its continued presence created new problems which had not existed before. The revival of Republicanism was greatly encouraged by the physical presence of the traditional enemy on the streets, particularly since the army was by its very nature little suited to the sensitive tasks of peace-keeping and restoring respect for the law in a divided society.

Thirdly, in August 1971, an ill-conceived and carelessly executed policy of internment was regarded by Catholics as the final outrage in a system of law and order that had been pressing heavily upon them for years, particularly over the preceding eighteen months. Internment weakened the will and support of those Catholics who favoured working within a modified Unionist regime. Thus the SDLP, which had been temporarily boycotting parliament, refused to return until internment was abandoned. Finally, internment raised rather than lowered the incidence of death and destruction. Between 1 January and 8 August 1971 thirty-four people had been killed, but from the introduction of internment until the end of the year 139 people died as a result of political violence.

Was the situation retrievable?

By the beginning of 1972 the situation in Northern Ireland was reminiscent of that in 1921-22, when the existence of the new state had been threatened, but in 1971-72 there was a crucial difference. In 1921-22 the government of Northern Ireland had been able to save itself by presenting a united Unionist front and by relying, with the connivance of the British government, anxious to avoid direct involvement in the North, on its own security force, the Ulster Special Constabulary.

In 1971-72, however, Unionists were in disarray and the government of Northern Ireland was entirely dependent upon the security forces of a British government which was becoming increasingly concerned at the extent to which its support of the Stormont regime was committing resources to Northern Ireland, losing men and bringing British liberal traditions into disrepute.

What was the significance of 'Bloody Sunday'?

The furore surrounding 'Bloody Sunday' in Derry, when on 30 January 1972 thirteen people were shot dead in the Bogside by soldiers of the Parachute Regiment, brought matters to a head. It finally determined Edward Heath's government to suspend the government and parliament of Northern Ireland. Henceforth, Northern Ireland would be the direct responsibility of Westminster