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How the Troubles Came to Northern Ireland

Peter Rose

palgrave



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To the memory of Richard Francis

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Foreword to the Paperback Edition

Sadly all that has happened since the hardback edition of this book was published a year ago has shown that Northern Ireland remains the United Kingdom's most intractable problem since the Second World War. The Good Friday Agreement is as shaky as ever and the bombs have come back to mainland Britain. Therefore I would claim that the justification for an attempt to explain the origins of 'The Troubles' remains as strong as ever. This paperback edition has given me the opportunity to consult the government papers for 1969 – the last year considered by this book – which were not available at the time of writing. Gratifyingly those documents that were released in January 2000 largely confirm my own findings. However, as I suggested in the original book, some files were likely to be withheld. So I was hardly surprised to find, for example, that the Cabinet minutes for the period after the troops went in during August 1969 did not include ministers' discussions on the Ulster crisis. Instead the researcher reads:

The Cabinet discussed the situation in Northern Ireland and conclusions reached were separately recorded and circulated only to the Queen, the Prime Minister and those ministers who had to take action.

What is available provides valuable corroboration for the sources I used not least the published and unpublished diaries of Richard Crossman. It was fashionable to accuse Crossman of inaccuracy and irresponsibility. For example I quoted James Callaghan saying 25 years later: 'Well, of course you have to take anything Dick says with a pinch of salt.' But Crossman turns out to have been a good reporter.

What also comes out clearly from the new documents is the totally inadequate intelligence about Northern Ireland available to the government and the Army during those crucial months in 1969 before the troops went in. This I argued contributed significantly to the government's fatal hesitation that year. A revealing minute from the Joint Intelligence Committee who had been considering the

worsening situation in the July admits: 'We can only keep our fingers crossed and hope for the best.'

Another important revelation concerned the infamous Apprentice Boys' March on 12 August 1969 which in effect sparked off the whole of The Troubles. Whether or not to allow the march split the Cabinet and the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, claimed later in his memoirs that he had wanted to ban the march but had reluctantly allowed 'unwiser counsels' to prevail. This was clearly a reference to the Home Secretary James Callaghan who had agreed that the march go ahead. That this was not merely hindsight is confirmed by a memorandum from Callaghan on his decision to be found in the Prime Minister's files. In the margin is a scribbled note in green ink initialled by Wilson expressing his concerns about allowing the march.

Finally the documents confirm my findings that detailed contingency plans for intervention in Northern Ireland were well advanced by the summer of 1969 despite the Cabinet's reluctance to take any such step. My principle informant was Sir John Chilcot, former Permanent Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office, who as a young civil servant in the 1960s had prepared a 'war book' on possible intervention. He told me of these secret preparations which he rightly said would be revealed for the first time in 2000. Sure enough a Callaghan memorandum to the Cabinet in May 1969 reports that at the beginning of the year a contingency plan was drawn up including a draft Bill for direct rule from London. What is entirely new, however, is a remarkable warning from Callaghan to his Cabinet colleagues. In the event of an insurrection in Northern Ireland military rule may have to be brought in including trying civilians by Court Martial!

PETER ROSE
London

General Editor's Preface

Between 1880 and 1921 Ireland was a running sore in British politics. The constitutional settlement of 1921, however, for all its flaws, brought this period to an end. As chronicled in the first book to appear in this series, *The Northern Ireland Question in British Politics*, the British political classes, much to their relief, were then able by and large to ignore Ireland, both North and South, for much of the next 50 years. British governments of both parties essentially left the Unionist statelet that had been created in 1921 to its own devices. That statelet, meanwhile, sought to secure itself against what it saw as a disloyal – and substantial – minority. The mechanism enshrined in the 1920 Government of Ireland Act to ensure a reasonable representation of that minority, the single transferable vote, was removed for local elections and all but the university seats in the lower house in the 1920s. There was gerrymandering of boundaries and restrictions on the local government franchise. In addition, although by no means uniquely in post-war Europe, housing allocation was used to maximise the representation of the politically loyal.

Such measures, however, far from ensuring the survival of the Unionist statelet, seem to have contributed to its downfall. Stormont nevertheless saw off the IRA border campaign of 1956–62, not least with the co-operation of the Irish *garda*. But internal consent was failing. The 1960s saw a gathering and increasingly vociferous campaign for civil rights for the minority Nationalist community. As Peter Rose shows, by the mid-1960s the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Terence O'Neill, was already deeply pessimistic about the chances of successfully managing the situation. The Unionist statelet was falling apart and the Unionists themselves were internally divided over how to respond to the civil rights movement. The Wilson government elected in Britain in 1964, however, did little in the face of this steadily deteriorating situation.

This is the first book to examine British policy towards Northern Ireland at this critical juncture. Using newly released papers and extensive interviews with both politicians and civil servants concerned with the development of policy towards Northern Ireland, it explores the British responses to the gathering crisis. For the first time it shows how well aware the British were of the problem. Not only was there an active group of Labour backbenchers, the Campaign for

Democracy in Ulster, constantly trying to draw attention to the issue. Wilson himself promised to address the problem of civil rights abuses in Northern Ireland during the 1964 election campaign. In the event, however, his government proved no more willing than its predecessors to intervene in Northern Ireland. This arms-length principle might have been convenient, if nothing else, if the Unionist statelet had remained stable. But it did not. As a result the Wilson government was in the end forced to intervene, deploying troops in aid of the civil power in 1969.

Their reluctance to take this move is understandable; as subsequent history has shown, putting the troops in was a lot easier than getting them out again. The question Peter Rose has sought to address is whether this expedient could have been avoided by judicious and more limited intervention at an earlier stage, before the problems in Northern Ireland reached critical point. Indeed, would the British, by such means, have succeeded in continuing to keep Northern Ireland off the domestic political agenda? This is, of course, a counterfactual question – we cannot know whether such intervention would have been effective. What he does show, however, for the first time, is the extent to which such intervention was contemplated. Nevertheless, down to 1969 the Wilson government never really had the courage of its convictions, continuing to leave it to O'Neill to tackle a situation which he was not equipped to deal with. Whether a different policy would have been more successful is unknowable, though that does not mean that the question should not be asked. After all, what we do know is that the consequences of the flare-up in Northern Ireland by the end of the 1960s were years of civil strife and unrest and the deaths of more than 3000 people.

PETER CATTERALL

Author's Preface

The burden of this book is the Labour government's Northern Ireland policy from October 1964 to August 1969. The idea for the book arose out of discussions with two people personally involved in the events which followed the decision to send troops to Northern Ireland in August 1969. They were Kevin McNamara, MP, later shadow Northern Ireland Secretary, and Sir Richard Francis, Controller of BBC Northern Ireland in the early 1970s. Both pointed out that no research had been done on the failure of the Wilson government to develop a policy to meet the deteriorating situation in the province, something which was clearly discernible from 1966 onwards. Both believed that research would show that a successful intervention in some form by the British government at an earlier stage would have been possible and might have prevented the rise of the Provisional Irish Republican Army and the tragedy that unfolded thereafter.

Time spent on filling this research gap was easy to justify. The breakdown in law and order in the province, following the collapse of the Labour government's policy of non-intervention led to the loss of more than 3000 lives and nearly wiped out a Conservative Cabinet. The cost to the taxpayer of combating terrorism for nearly 30 years has been immense. The 'Troubles' consistently diverted ministers and officials from the normal conduct of business in a mature democracy. There was also the Ulster factor at Westminster which first reared its head soon after Harold Wilson came to power in 1964. His government, which barely had a majority, could have been brought down by the Ulster Unionist MPs voting with their Tory allies. Finally, we now know that the Wilson government was confronted by the Irish question early on. Papers released in January 1997 show that the government was planning to send troops to Northern Ireland to deal with an IRA bombing campaign which intelligence reports predicted would mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising in April 1966. These revelations make it all the more remarkable that Wilson and his ministers paid so little attention to Ulster until serious violence erupted in October 1968.

The focus of my research was entirely on Westminster and Whitehall. Much had already been written about events in Northern Ireland, including the role of the Stormont government. The political parties and the pressure groups which arose in Ulster in the 1960s

such as the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) and People's Democracy (PD) are beyond the scope of this survey and have in many cases been the subject of thorough academic research. Much has also been written about the Northern Ireland Labour Party which in any case was in decline by the time of the 1964 General Election.¹ The one exception to this general rule is the Ulster Unionist Party at Westminster, which drew considerable hostility from Labour MPs, not least Harold Wilson himself.

In addition, the examination of the role of Dublin during these years is somewhat limited. By the 1970s, of course, the Republic was a key factor in the attempts by successive British governments to resolve the crisis. But until the violence of August 1969 Dublin did not really impinge on the Wilson government's thinking. Relations with the Republic had improved and the Irish government seemed happy enough to shadow London's policy of non-intervention in the province.

Research into government policy during the 1960s faced serious difficulties. Because of the 30-year rule no official documents were available for much of the period under examination. This meant that it was essential to interview the major players, the senior politicians and civil servants of the day. However, several of them had died or were too frail to interview. These, alas, included the Prime Minister of the time himself, Harold Wilson, Michael Stewart, the Foreign Secretary, and George Brown, Deputy Prime Minister until 1968. Fortunately this deficiency was at least partly made up by wide use of the primary sources available. These included: national newspapers, the weeklies, and the Ulster press, particularly the estimable *Belfast Telegraph*.² A detailed analysis of *Hansard* for the years 1964–69 proved invaluable. I also consulted archives not subject to the 30-year rule including the records of the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster, the principle pressure group for reform at Westminster, the Society of Labour Lawyers [who took up discrimination in Ulster very early on], the Labour Party and the Conservative Party.

Crucial information came from a seminar on Northern Ireland policy in the late 1960s which I organised in conjunction with the Institute of Contemporary British History (ICBH). The chief witness was the Home Secretary of the time, James Callaghan. His evidence, and that of several other witnesses, provided some of the most illuminating material in the course of my research. I am grateful to the ICBH, and its director, Dr Peter Catterall, for giving me this opportunity.

The secondary sources were meagre. Memoirs and ministerial

diaries were consulted but the subject has held little interest for historians and politicians. An exception is Richard Crossman, who gives revealing, if highly personalised, insights into Wilson's thinking as the situation in Northern Ireland worsened. Wilson's own memoirs, much criticised and self-serving though they were, contained brief but significant references to his Northern Ireland policy. The remainder of the diaries, monographs, memoirs and so on consulted proved disappointing. The politicians wrote largely about the momentous events of the time seemingly unaware of what was happening in Northern Ireland, something which itself is a significant factor.

The aim of the book, in short, has been to answer one central question: why did the government not act sooner? It is taken as read that the only people capable of bringing reform to Ulster were Labour ministers elected in October 1964 and returned 18 months later with a majority of 97. The full weight of the 'establishment' in Britain may have been against intervention and certainly the traditional advice of the civil service was always cautious. The media, with a couple of honourable exceptions, were not interested. (I was a lobby correspondent at Westminster from 1966 onwards and I was as unaware as the rest of my colleagues of the growing crisis in Ulster.) However, what are ministers for if not to act? Wilson came to power sympathetic to the idea of Irish unity, and having made promises to Ulster civil rights workers that a Labour government would tackle Catholic grievances.³

Five years later little had been achieved. I have attempted to establish whether or not the government was guilty, as some have argued, of moral failure in not acting decisively earlier. But whatever else I hope I can claim that a research gap has been filled.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The Introduction is concerned largely with the development of Labour's Irish policy from the later 1930s, when the party supported the return of the Treaty ports to Eire, to the guarantee given by the Labour Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, to the Protestants of Northern Ireland after Dublin's decision in 1948 to set up a Republic. In general, the subject is treated chronologically. Chapter 1 deals with the election in 1964 of a Labour government committed to reform in Northern Ireland but with a tiny majority. The constitutional question and the convention that Ulster matters could not be discussed at

Westminster are analysed and the new papers revealing that the government was warned of a major IRA campaign in the spring of 1966 are examined in detail. Chapter 2 is concerned with the first five months of Wilson's second administration when there was a growing demand from Labour backbench MPs for intervention in Northern Ireland and when sectarian violence returned to the province. Chapter 3 examines the pivotal period in the first half of 1967 when the government received a series of warnings about Catholic unrest. Chapter 4 covers the period between May 1967 and March the following year when the government's policy of non-intervention was consolidated, first by Roy Jenkins and then by his successor as Home Secretary, James Callaghan. Chapter 5, covering the period from April to October 1968, charts a sharp change in the political atmosphere, from the optimism arising out of Captain Terence O'Neill's fifth anniversary as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland to the explosion of violence in Londonderry. Chapter 6 deals with the collapse of O'Neillism and the demise of the Labour government's policy of non-intervention. Chapter 7 examines the period between O'Neill's resignation in April 1969 and the decision to intervene by sending troops to Ulster to contain the outbreak of serious violence in the province in August. The Conclusion summarises and evaluates the evidence thrown up by the research which, it is suggested, demonstrates that there was a real chance that earlier intervention by the government might have prevented the rise of the Provisional IRA without provoking an unmanageable Protestant backlash. It is not possible to prove that such a course would have worked but many share the view that it might have done.

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In addition I am grateful for permission to quote from the unpublished diaries of Crossman, CDU files (PRONI), Society of Labour Lawyers' files (the B.L.P.E.S. LSE) and the Macmillan diaries.

List of Abbreviations

CDU	Campaign for Democracy in Ulster
CSJ	Campaign for Social Justice [in Northern Ireland]
DEA	Department of Economic Affairs
ICBH	Institute of Contemporary British History
ICJ	International Commission of Jurists
IRA	Irish Republican Army
NCCL	National Council for Civil Liberties
NEC	National Executive Committee [of the Labour Party]
NICRA	Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association
NILP	Northern Ireland Labour Party
PD	People's Democracy
PIRA	Provisional Irish Republican Army
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
PPS	Parliamentary Private Secretary
PRO	Public Record Office
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
SLL	Society of Labour Lawyers
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force

Chronology

- 1921** *May:* George V inaugurates Northern Ireland Parliament.
- 1948** *December:* Irish Premier J.A. Costello announces that Eire is to become a Republic and leave the Commonwealth.
- 1949** *June:* British government passes Ireland Act which guarantees that Northern Ireland will remain within UK unless its parliament decides otherwise.
- 1963** *March:* ‘Liberal’ Terence O’Neill succeeds Lord Brookeborough as PM of Northern Ireland.
- 1964** *October:* Labour win the British General Election. Harold Wilson is the new Prime Minister and pledges to improve civil rights for Northern Ireland’s Catholics.
- 1965** *January:* historic meeting between Irish Prime Minister Sean Lemass and Northern Ireland premier O’Neill.
June: Campaign for Democracy in Ulster (CDU) founded in London.
- 1966** *June:* sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. UVF commit three murders. Ian Paisley convicted of unlawful assembly and sent to prison.
- 1967** *April:* Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) formed.
- 1968** *October:* RUC clash with civil rights marchers in Londonderry. [Television coverage worldwide.] People’s Democracy (PD) radical leftist group formed at Queen’s University, Belfast.
November: British government forces Stormont to bring in reforms; subsequent reforms regarded as inadequate by civil rights movement.
December: O’Neill’s televised ‘Crossroads’ speech appealing for reconciliation.
- 1969** *January:* ‘Battle of Burntollet Bridge’. PD march attacked by Protestants.
February: General Election in Ulster fails to strengthen

O'Neill's position. He resigns in April and is succeeded by James Chichester-Clark.

August: outbreak of violence in Londonderry followed by riots in Belfast. Wilson sends troops to Northern Ireland to prevent civil war. Irish Prime Minister Jack Lynch threatens to intervene. The Troubles and decades of slaughter begin.