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Northern Ireland

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The origins of the state

When Ireland gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1921 after two years of violent ‘Troubles’, six counties in the northern province of Ulster remained within the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland, with a population of around one and a half million, was established to satisfy the demands of a Protestant Unionist minority in Ireland that wished to remain within the United Kingdom, but it included a large Catholic and Irish nationalist minority comprising one third of the population. The new entity enjoyed a very high level of autonomy and the new Northern Ireland parliament and government at Stormont, on the outskirts of Belfast, was insulated to a large degree from ‘interference’ by the British parliament at Westminster. For the following fifty years the Ulster Unionist Party, a party of Protestant unity, won every election and formed every government and the Catholic minority was almost completely excluded from the exercise of power at all levels.

Violent conflict

In the late 1960s a civil rights movement enjoying strong support in the minority community presented an innovative challenge to government control. A police force closely associated with the Unionist party and dominated by the Protestant community, came into increasing conflict with protestors and rioters on the streets. Sectarian rioting compounded the conflict and by August 1969 the breakdown of order was so severe that British troops were deployed on the streets. In 1970 the newly-formed Provisional Irish Republican Army, recruiting among a newly radicalised minority, launched a campaign of violence aimed at ending British sovereignty and re-uniting Ireland. By 1972 violence had escalated dramatically and in March 1972 the British Government instituted ‘Direct Rule’, suspending the parliament and government of Northern Ireland.

A further two decades of low intensity conflict followed, during which almost 3,500 people were killed, most of them by Irish Republican groups, mainly the IRA, and almost a quarter by Ulster loyalist groups who sought to illegally augment state efforts against the IRA. Repeated initiatives to end direct rule and re-establish a stable form of regional autonomy that guaranteed participation in government to both Protestant and Catholic communities failed.

The peace process

The IRA ceasefire of 1994, followed by a loyalist ceasefire, opened the way to inclusive negotiations on a political settlement involving the British and Irish governments with significant international support from the United States and the European Union. The 1998 Belfast Agreement, or ‘Good Friday Agreement’ established consociational structures for governing Northern Ireland, and was accompanied by conflict resolution measures including the early release of prisoners and radical reform of policing. The Agreement was endorsed in separate referenda in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland, thereby addressing long-standing Irish nationalist demands that the Irish people as a whole should decide the future of the island. The agreement also established new structures to manage relations between the two Irish jurisdictions and relations between Ireland and Great Britain.

The prolific output of McGarry and O’Leary synthesizes much of the academic literature on the conflict, while firmly situating the conflict within the context of comparative work on ethnic conflict, nationalism and violence (*Understanding Northern Ireland*, 1993; *Explaining Northern Ireland*, 1995; *Northern Ireland Conflict*, 2004). They engage with the comparative work of writers such as Horowitz and Lijphart both of whom have addressed the Northern Ireland case directly (Horowitz, *Explaining the Northern Ireland Agreement*, 2002; Lijphart, *Constitutional Design*, 2004). Political scientists who use the analytical framework of comparative conflict tend to be implicitly sympathetic to the peace settlement while others are more sceptical or more critically sympathetic, including Bew (*Good Friday Agreement*, 2007) and Dixon, who argues that the arrangements are not in fact consociational (*Good Friday Agreement is not consociational*, 2005).

Contemporary issues

The current political settlement brings together Irish republicans, including former IRA activists, with their most outspoken Ulster loyalist opponents in a mandatory coalition that guarantees seats at the cabinet table to all significant parties. High levels of discontent with this compromise among a large section of the Protestant majority, and a resurgence of violence by ‘dissident’ Irish republicans seeking to restart a campaign, pose ongoing challenges to the settlement.

The consociational arrangements have been criticised for embedding sectarianism in the structures of government and rewarding extremism, while others argue that they have in fact drawn the extremes towards the centre and generated cross-community co-operation, at least at the elite level.

As a settlement that determinedly internationalises Northern Ireland by creating interlinking internal structures and cross-border institutions within Ireland, the new structures of government are an innovative attempt to resolve an ethno-national context by simultaneously softening and securing a contested international border, within a European Union context in which borders between members states have shed many of the functions and meanings they used to have. It provides an example of

conflict resolution through negotiation rather than military victory that has been frequently cited by actors and analysts in other conflict situations in recent years.

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