

CONFIDENTIALThe Secretary of State for Northern IrelandFirst Day Briefs

Index

Brief	I	:	Northern Ireland: A Divided Society
	II	:	Main Historical Events in Northern Ireland
	III	:	Previous Constitutional Developments
	IV	:	The Current Constitutional Framework
	V	:	The Northern Ireland Assembly and Current Political Developments
	VI	:	Relations with the Republic of Ireland
	VII	:	The United States and Other International Issues
	VIII	:	Law and Order
	IX	:	Prisons
	X	:	Public Expenditure
	XI	:	Economic and Social Background
	XII	:	Structure of the NIO and NI Departments
	XIII	:	The Media
	XIV	:	Elections
	XV	:	The Legislative Process
	XVI	:	Expressions to be avoided (and notes on other terminology)

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E.R.

Brief I

NORTHERN IRELAND: A DIVIDED SOCIETY

1. This note discusses briefly how the division in Northern Ireland society developed and considers its implications today.
2. The division between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, the essential division today, was not always the dominant characteristic of society in the six counties of Ulster which have formed Northern Ireland since 1921. In the 18th century the essential division in Ireland was between members of the Church of Ireland, headed by the old Protestant ascendancy, on the one hand; and "dissenters" and Catholics - both groups sharing second class status - on the other. Indeed, the uprising of 1798 was led by Protestants (Tone and McCracken). Following that rebellion, the Irish Parliament was abolished, and in 1800 Great Britain and Ireland were unified to form the United Kingdom.
3. The present division was the product of events in the 19th century. Catholics throughout Ireland became convinced, to a greater or lesser extent, that progress lay in home rule: their consciousness was largely awakened by the zeal of O'Connell and sharpened by experience during the famine years of the 1840's. For their part, non-conforming Protestants (largely concentrated in the north east of Ireland), who were no longer the subject of punitive laws, made common cause with other Protestants. The Act of Union itself no doubt played its part here in shifting the psychological focus to London. So did commercial considerations as Ulster businessmen, nearly all of whom were Protestants, saw and seized opportunities for expanding markets in England for the new industries - linen was the staple industry, but ship building and engineering increased rapidly, especially from the 1870s onwards. But it was the rise of Irish nationalism, with its distinctively Catholic accent, which welded Ulster's Protestants together so effectively into a strong group dedicated to preserving the Union, largely because they believed in, and saw advantage in, the Union for itself; but essentially because the Union was the bulwark against incorporation into an Irish state, whose links with Britain would progress from the tenuous to the non-existent, and whose ethos they feared would be foreign to them.

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4. Thus political, religious and commercial considerations pulled together in the second half of the 19th century to produce in the north east of Ireland, notably in the City of Belfast (which had grown rapidly from 20,000 in 1800 to 87,000 in 1850 and to 349,000 by 1900) a Unionist population implacably opposed to home rule on an all Ireland basis and dedicated to the maintenance of the Union by all means at its disposal. The only part of Ireland which saw industrialisation on a scale comparable to the North of England was the Lagan Valley. Belfast, as its architecture betrays, was a great 19th century city like Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds; and it was in the greater Belfast region that Ulster Protestants were concentrated. Thus the Protestant community, largely engaged in the new industries, saw wages and working conditions improve very considerably between the 1850s and 1900: real wages in the linen industry, for example, rose by nearly 200% in that period. Outside the Belfast area, agriculture was, and is, the main industry. Much Irish history in the 19th century is concerned with agrarian reform, in particular the Land League strove for a reduction in unfair rents and the right for tenants to buy their farms. But the Land League made less impact on Ulster farmers generally because by custom they already enjoyed most of the rights for which the league was agitating; and on Protestant farmers in particular because of the association of the Land League with home rule.

5. These factors, which so dominated the 19th century, shaped Northern Ireland in the 20th; and they reawakened earlier differences between Catholics and Protestants, notably those of the 17th century when Catholic James II came to grief in Ireland trying to win back his crown from Protestant William III. The product of this shared, but divisive, history is that despite often good community relations at local and at individual levels, politically Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society. Not all Catholics are nationalists; but most are to a greater or lesser extent, and feel so strongly about it that at times of tension, for example the hunger strike in 1981, it is not just a small hard core who refrain from condemning violence as a means of achieving

CONFIDENTIAL

E.R.

-3-

CONFIDENTIAL

a united Ireland. Only a numerically insignificant minority of Protestants are Nationalists. Two strong, well-established traditions survive and flourish. Protestants and Catholics, on the whole, vote unionist (in some form) and nationalist (in some form) respectively; each celebrates different events in their shared history; they generally go to different schools; and inter-marriage is still unusual if on the increase. Outside the middle classes, there is little social intercourse in Belfast - indeed social segregation has changed drastically for the worse since 1969 - and other urban areas. But it should be noted that the work place, which is largely unsegregated, provides an environment in which relationships can develop. In the country, Protestant and Catholic farmers tend to farm in different areas; and West of the Bann there is even a separate Catholic farmers' union. For Catholics, Irish identity is important and to be safeguarded; while for Protestants being British is both their tradition and their defence against absorption into a Catholic Ireland. It would be mistaken to believe that people in Northern Ireland consciously measure their actions against sectarian considerations; but the religious divide nevertheless influences and indeed conditions automatic responses on both sides.

6. The influence of the churches remains strong as regards education and morals. While there is in fact a good deal of agreement across the divide on moral issues (homosexuality provides a recent and controversial example) the parallel education systems (higher education is unsegregated) result in minimal contact between Protestant and Catholic children and there is little opportunity for seeing others as individuals across the divide. Churchmen are active in politics in a way that they are not in Great Britain. Some are full-time politicians of considerable influence. Thus Dr Paisley is an MP, MEP, member of the Assembly, heads a major political party (DUP), is the leader of a sect (the Free Presbyterians) with a number of churches in Northern Ireland, the Republic and beyond and is the Minister of his own Martyrs Memorial Church. Mr Martin Smyth is a Unionist MP, member of the Assembly, a Minister in the Presbyterian Church and the world's leading Orangeman. Pronouncements of church leaders, whether or not elected representatives, on political issues are more frequent

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E.R.

than in Great Britain and have a significance akin to Great Britain between the wars (although their influence on party activists should not be exaggerated). This is particularly true of Roman Catholic prelates. For example, a major statement by Cardinal O'Fiaich on, say, a prisons matter is an important political and media event; and joint action by church leaders in condemning terrorism can have a perceptible, if short-lived, impact.

7. Since 1969, progressive changes have been made, both before and after the introduction of direct rule, to remedy injustices, for example setting up the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the introduction of investigative or monitoring authorities like the Ombudsman, the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights and the Fair Employment Agency. However, the effect of such changes can only be slow and it will take time to eradicate imbalances and social patterns which have grown up over many years. Moreover, the very fact that such efforts have been required illustrates the problems to be overcome, and the efforts themselves can be counter-productive unless handled with sensitivity.

8. Ancient loyalties remain powerful and have, if anything, been strengthened by the violence of recent years. The Alliance Party, which draws its support from both sides of the community, has not succeeded in increasing its electoral support from an average of about 8% of the vote and consequently has not made a decisive impact on the political impasse and seems unlikely to do so. The Peace People came and went. Much hard work for reconciliation goes on, but the returns have yet to be seen.

The composition of Northern Ireland society has seen few changes, although the Catholic middle class has expanded somewhat. Most of those leaving are young, many of them skilled; and an increasing number of the children of the Protestant middle class do not return to Northern Ireland after attending British universities. The sectarian balance is shifting. While the proportion of Catholics is little greater than 10 years ago, about 46% of children of school age are Catholic. However, it is plain that Protestants will remain a clear majority well into the next century.

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

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