

II. The Role of Government in Northern Ireland

2.1 At the most fundamental level, the Government is responsible for ensuring the protection of life, liberty and property of those individuals whom it governs. In the modern age, the agencies of government also have the important functions of promoting the welfare of its subjects in addition to maintaining their security. HMG has greater difficulty in achieving these objectives for its subjects in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK. The root of the problem lies in the contested nature of the legitimacy of government.

Legitimacy

2.2 A sizeable minority of those living in Northern Ireland consider themselves to be Irish rather than British, and therefore do not regard rule by a British Government as legitimate. To the extent that the Government is perceived to be "good", impartial and non-oppressive, it may nevertheless secure the tolerance or at least acquiescence of many of those who would prefer to be governed from Dublin. However, irrespective of the way in which the Government conducts itself, there will always be some who will withhold their acceptance on the grounds that British government is foreign government.

Government policy

2.3 Government policy is intended to safeguard and promote the interests of all those who live in Northern Ireland. It seeks to provide the circumstances in which the Catholic and Protestant or unionist and nationalist communities can live and work together peacefully and harmoniously. As long as there remains a significant group who seek to subvert the State by violent means, the government will continue to have, as one of its primary aims, to ensure that such terrorism does not succeed. This can only be

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achieved by both undermining the credibility of political and constitutional objectives of PIRA/Sinn Fein and tackling directly their terrorist manifestations.

2.4 While inequalities between different parts of the community remain, whether as a result of past practice and habit, or overt discrimination, it must be an important part of the Government's duty to seek to equalise those opportunities that exist. By redressing grievances that exist in economic, social and political arenas, the Government aims to remove the fuel that fires the campaign of violence. It is more fundamentally seeking to meet its objective of serving the people it governs. As we shall see, difficulties arise when this policy is put into practice. What is good for the community may also be good for the paramilitaries - at least in the short run, especially when the two are so intertwined as they are in West Belfast. Examples of this can be seen in the range of services offered by PIRA/Sinn Fein in the social and economic spheres of life - such as the provision of a cheap transport system for all (black taxis). These areas are elaborated in Part IV below.

Community perception of Government

2.5 West Belfast experiences all the problems of Northern Ireland as a whole, but in a more concentrated fashion. The atmosphere of isolation is intensified because of the physical situation. West Belfast is surrounded by hostile or unaccommodating forces on all sides. Feelings of alienation against the communities bordering West Belfast lead to an inward-looking community, which is strong and united, but which is not capable of integration with surrounding areas. This leads to what is sometimes described as a "ghetto" mentality.

2.6 The minority status of Catholics within Northern Ireland means there can be no 'Catholic Government'. When this is combined with the perception of previous maladministration under

the Stormont regime, the result is a strong distrust of the system of government. The people of West Belfast do not believe that HMG is impartial. Security policy is seen as oppressive, and specifically designed to harass their community. This perception results in hostility towards the security forces and towards other policy areas - especially those which are not seen to be contributing to the welfare of all of the community. The security forces fall into this category and because they have a high profile and are seen as representatives of an uncaring and insensitive administration they are faced with the full force of community hostility and solidarity. It is against this background that security policy must be synchronised with other policies with the overall objective of providing the kind of beneficial administration outlined above.

Priorities and perceptions

2.7 Inevitably, as in any system of governance, priorities must be set and decisions taken by the government of the day which may cut across what are considered lesser objectives. It is unrealistic to expect that all policies will at all times be seen to be working to the same end. However, that should not stop any government from working with this common purpose to the greatest possible extent. Ultimately perceptions cloud the objective truth still further. That is something that the Government can only do so much about. The public relations effort is important in the battle for hearts and minds in Northern Ireland, but it should be recognised that those who seek to make political capital out of what are perceived to be the failings of the British Government, will always be able to draw on a wide range of historical and current perceptions and misperceptions of the "oppression of the Irish people".

2.8 The various analyses of policy in different areas which follow, show the different ways in which policy operates in the context of the problems that are faced and the level of

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paramilitary influence on the community in Catholic West Belfast. The central question is whether policies could and should be more closely harmonised or whether the dislocations that exist are unavoidable. There is undoubtedly a view that all the efforts to regenerate the economically depressed area of West Belfast do not carry the weight with the local people that they deserve whilst policing tactics lead to perceived harassment of the local community. The use of excessive force, and heavy-handed dealings with the public are two of the main areas in which the security forces are criticised. This perception has recently been enhanced by the shooting of three men outside a betting shop in West Belfast on 13 January 1990. No matter what the RUC investigation of this incident recommends, most of those living in West Belfast will see the action as typical of the ruthless attitude of the security forces towards the nationalist/republican people of West Belfast.

Quasi Government?

2.9 The extent of the problems facing the Government can be seen by the way in which the paramilitaries seek to perform a quasi-governmental role. This stretches from providing an informal local 'police' force, to dealing with relevant parts of the government machine on behalf of the local community in matters of concern. These actions form a policy designed to legitimise the actions of Sinn Fein/PIRA and to negate any perception of the Government itself acting in the interests of the community. The effect is therefore intended to aid the portrayal of the Government as distant, uncaring and hostile to the Nationalist community. Sinn Fein/PIRA are relatively effective in their efforts, and particularly in the provision of essential social and economic services for those they purport to represent.

2.10 Part IV of this paper explains the network of activities in which the Republican movement is involved. As well as performing the above-mentioned quasi-governmental role, these activities also

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help to provide the resources with which to run their dual-pronged terrorist and political campaigns. The difficulty is for formal authority as vested in government to assert itself in an area such as West Belfast where it is unpopular, and to take the credit for all the activities which assist and benefit the people of West Belfast, rather than allowing Sinn Fein to draw a veil down over them. The Government needs to seek the formal acceptance of its role by the people of West Belfast as a first step towards legitimacy there.

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