

'Northern Ireland: Troubles Brewing' by Landon Hancock

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Introduction

The Troubles, as they are known to the populace, did not erupt on any specific date, but emerged as the result of several years of escalating incidents between Catholics and Protestants. This latest episode of the long-standing conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland has been going on for thirty years, and although a peace agreement has been reached, a peaceful resolution to this costly struggle is not yet in sight. The Troubles have been protracted and costly in every sense of the word. From the time of the first civil rights marches in 1968 the cost, in both human and material terms, has been steadily mounting. Between 1968 and 1994, over 3,500 people died and over 35,000 were injured in Northern Ireland as a direct result of the fighting. Robberies, bombings, assassinations, and terror tactics spread to engulf Great Britain and the Irish Republic, greatly decreasing the common person's sense of security and impinging on the populace's personal freedom. Civil rights in Northern Ireland have been seriously eroded, and freedom in the name of safety has been sacrificed to some extent in both Great Britain and the Irish Republic (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988, 51). In material terms, Northern Ireland drains over £3 billion annually from the British treasury while increased security and border patrols cost the Irish Republic over one-quarter of its annual budget.

The economy of Northern Ireland has also been deeply affected by the ongoing conflict. Manufacturing employment in Northern Ireland has declined by over 40 per cent since the beginning of the conflict, increasing the province's dependence on Great Britain for subsidies to maintain its current standard of living (see fig. 1). While part of this decline can be attributed to the decline of the world economy in the early 1970s, the 'branch plant' structure of industry in Northern Ireland has also contributed to the sharp deterioration in economic conditions within the region. These foreign-owned assembly or secondary production branch plants closed down when violence increased operating costs in the province. The fact that these plants lacked research and development or marketing facilities and were secondary (as opposed to main) plants meant that these low priority plants in Northern Ireland could shift their production elsewhere at minimal cost to their foreign owners. The constant threat of bombings, high cost of security, and lack of a stable internal market made plant openings unattractive and drove away large manufacturers in great numbers (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988, 84). In fact, only massive growth in government and security service jobs held off increases in unemployment figures until the second oil shock of 1979, when Northern Ireland joined the rest of the world in recession. It is estimated that without annual infusions of aid from Great Britain, the living standard of Northern Ireland would approach that of Mexico or Argentina (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988, 90).

Cultural Identity

To understand the historical enmity between the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, it is necessary to understand past conflicts between the two groups and to examine the reasons they have remained separate throughout their history. Catholic Ireland was ruled by Great Britain for a considerable portion of its history, from the twelfth century to 1920. During that time, there were numerous revolts by the Catholics against their Protestant landlords. The historic province of Ulster, a stronghold of Gaelic culture in the north of Ireland, successfully resisted British encroachments until the Plantation of 1609. Earlier waves of colonisation had supplanted the Irish gentry with Protestant British landlords, leaving the bulk of the population Catholic and Irish. The settlement of Ulster in 1609, by contrast, was massive in scale and resulted in the intrusion of a Protestant culture that was completely alien to its Catholic inhabitants (Darby 1976, 3). Massacres of both Protestants and Catholics took place throughout the 1600s, as the two sides battled for supremacy and the right to occupy the land each now called home. The most important of these to the folklore of Ulster was the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, in which the Protestants scored a massive victory over the Catholics.

Mistrust and bad feelings resulting from the colonisation of Ireland by Protestant settlers were followed by centuries of political and social segregation of Catholics and Protestants in all of Ireland. After the victory of William of Orange (the Protestant challenger who deposed the Catholic king, James II), laws were enacted by the all-Protestant Parliament of Ireland barring Catholics from all offices, land ownership, schooling, and other avenues leading toward wealth and education (Darby 1976, 4). These laws effectively entrenched the existing hatreds between the two communities and glorified violent action by one community to 'defend' itself from the other. The conditions created as a result of these laws became important during the early part of the twentieth century, when escalating violence and rebellion forced Great Britain to consider granting Ireland some form of 'Home Rule', a limited form of self-government. Both Catholic and Protestant extremists rejected the plan out of hand. The Catholics, led by Sinn Féin, felt that only full independence could satisfy them. The Protestant Unionists, on the other hand, greatly feared being ruled by the Catholic majority and went as far as to threaten the secession of Northern Ireland from Great Britain into a sovereign state if the British did not back away from their plans to give all of Ireland Home Rule. The resulting compromise was the partitioning of Ireland into the Republic of Ireland

and Northern Ireland in 1920 (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988, 24).

The Partition of Ireland did little to ease the sectarian mistrust and separateness between Catholics and Protestants left in the six counties of Ulster which were devolved to Unionist rule. Each community continued to be defined by its religious affiliation, with little mixture between the two groups. Education, neighbourhoods, workplaces, entertainment, and numerous other social activities remained segregated. The names of places also continue to be used to denote religious and national affiliation. For example, those aligned with the Protestant Unionists call Londonderry¹ by its official name, while those of Nationalist sentiment refer to it as Derry (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988, 15).

After the Partition of Ireland in 1920, sporadic violence continued between the two communities. The violence was cyclic in nature and often coincided with downturns in the local economy (e.g., riots during the depression of the 1930s). Conversely, when the economy picked up, as it did in the post-war years, ethnic violence subsided; for example, during a peak of the economy in the 1950s, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) was unable to launch a successful bid for secession due to apathy in the Catholic community (Darby 1976, 13). The pattern of separate settlements, school districts, and employment, however, continued as before.

The physical segregation of the two communities can be attributed to various reasons, not all of which stem from a fear of violence. For instance, as most schooling is conducted by religious denomination, it makes sense for Protestant and Catholic families to find housing closer to their schools. Church attendance is high in Northern Ireland, with the church community providing the structure for social interaction. In addition, marriages in Northern Ireland primarily take place with people from the same local area, creating elaborate family-based structures that tend to be exclusionary and segregated (Darby 1976, 37). These trends tend to isolate and insulate local communities from outside influences, preserving old attitudes towards outsiders and considerable conformity within the community.

Like most cultural differences, the roots of the Protestant-Catholic enmity in Northern Ireland are buried in the distant past, with fresh incidents only serving to reopen old wounds and solidify negative stereotypes. The siege mentality of the Unionists continues to stem from the fortified townships in which they were forced to live following the 'Plantation' of 1609. Thus, each new threat is perceived as dire, within the context of brutal pogroms which took place hundreds of years before. For example, in 1964, the Unionists rioted in response to the legal Nationalist opposition party flying the Irish Tricolour, rather than the Union Jack, from their local headquarters in Belfast (Darby 1976, 14).

The Catholics still feel as if they have an alien culture living amongst them. This feeling has been enhanced through the separation of the two communities and the continued enforcement of the Special Powers Act of 1922. This act, designed to combat IRA resistance to Partition, was left in force until well after the beginning of the Troubles, thus perpetuating a climate of mistrust that has yet to be dispelled (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988, 28).

With the exception of their competition for the same resources, the two communities can be characterised by a lack of contact. Their lack of contact has created feelings of deep distrust between the Catholic and Protestant communities. This work argues that those deep feelings do not condition daily relations, but flare up in response to specific events. For example, the IRA started a new campaign for secession between 1956 and 1962; however, its decision in 1962 to renounce military activity resulted from the fact that its "defeat owed more to apathy than to the efficiency of law enforcement machinery" (Darby 1976, 13). In other words, since the Catholic community did not have a strong perception of relative deprivation, the feelings of mistrust and hatred did not surface. As a result, the IRA was unable to generate support for its secessionist campaign.

The IRA was able to re-establish itself and its military methods in 1969 / 1970, as a result of the rising frustrations of the Catholic populace, rather than the continuing ethnic hatreds between the two communities. Many authors have noted that violence in Northern Ireland stems from reactions to real (or perceived) discrimination between the two groups. This discrimination has a long historical record, dating to the fifteenth century when it was sanctioned as a tool to pacify an occupied land and settle a Protestant populace who would prove more loyal to the Crown than its Catholic inhabitants. Sections B and C address the extent and forms of the discrimination in terms of political influence and economic participation, respectively.

Political Access/Power

Politics in Northern Ireland have always been dominated by the necessity for Protestant control of the government and its processes. The requirement that a Protestant majority be created in Northern Ireland was a major determinant in drawing the boundary for the Partition of Ireland. Northern Ireland is composed of six of the original nine counties of the province of Ulster. The remaining three counties of Ulster were not included in Northern Ireland due to the fact that the higher percentage of Catholics in these counties posed a threat to

Protestant control of the country. As illustrated (see map 1), only those counties of Ulster province that had a Protestant population of at least 30 per cent were included in the Unionist enclave of Northern Ireland.

Acts ostensibly aimed at increasing security but used to intimidate and discriminate against Catholics were utilised by the Unionist parliament at Stormont to ensure Protestant control of Northern Ireland. The most prominent of these was the Special Powers Act of 1922, which was implemented to stem the tide of Nationalist violence by splinter groups of the IRA who did not accept the terms of Partition. Although most of the secessionist violence ceased by 1927, the Special Powers Act remained in force until it was repealed by the British government in 1973, well after the beginning of the Troubles.

It has been well established that the police forces of Northern Ireland acted in collusion with Unionist political forces in the systematic discrimination and repression of Catholics. Several British-sponsored and independent commissions investigated allegations of discrimination against Catholics, publishing reports that universally condemned police actions; however, these reports usually produced little change in the situation.

Protestant control of the judicial system and the courts was also maintained by Unionist control of the government of Northern Ireland. In the judicial system, Protestants outnumbered Catholics by sixty-eight to six in 1968. Fifteen out of twenty-eight appointees to the high court of Northern Ireland between 1921 and 1972 were either current or former members of the Unionist political party, strengthening the link between political control and judicial control (Darby 1976, 64).

Economic Participation

Control of the national and most local governments also gave the Unionist majority the power to determine Protestant and Catholic share of public sector benefits.

...Overall, due to the larger number of poor Catholics, the proportion of Catholics in public housing was slightly higher than Protestants. That there was a greater proportion of Catholics receiving public housing does not necessarily indicate a lack of discrimination in this area; but, the higher proportion of Catholics living in poverty points to employment and access to wealth as key areas of discrimination.

Catholic employment in the public sector (aside from the police and judiciary) averaged at about 30 per cent, a figure almost proportional to their percentage of the overall population. A closer look, however, proves that these statistics are misleading. While Catholics made up about 40 per cent of manual labourers, they held only 11 per cent of senior positions in 1951. This figure shrank to 6 per cent by 1959, but began to rise subsequent to reforms which followed the outbreak of violence, reaching almost 15 per cent by 1973 (Whyte 1980, 9). The Cameron Commission thoroughly investigated Local Authority employment and found that Unionist councils had used their power to discriminate against Catholics in the hiring process (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988, 32).

In the private sector, two main categories of imbalance existed between Catholics and Protestants: the level of unemployment and the type of employment. Catholic employment tended toward the lower end of the job market. Catholics were employed predominantly in unskilled and lower-paying jobs, such as clothing manufacture and textiles. Protestants, on the other hand, dominated the relatively higher-paid areas of shipbuilding and engineering. As illustrated in figure 2, the more an industry paid (and the more regular the work) the fewer Catholics it tended to employ, while the lower-paid and less regular positions (like seasonal building work) employed Catholics at a rate close to their demographic representation.

In each profession, Catholics tended to occupy the lower ranks. Thus, in white-collar sectors, Catholics would be far more likely to have clerical than managerial positions, mirroring their distribution in the public sector (Whyte 1980, 15). Catholics also tended to work in industries (e.g., construction) that were more sensitive to economic downturns and, therefore, more likely to layoff workers during periods of economic recession.

The segregation and imbalance of the educational system also affected Catholic employment opportunities. Religion and education in Northern Ireland have been linked for almost the entirety of Irish history and remain so today. Due to persecution after the victory of William of Orange, Catholics have been deeply suspicious of state involvement in education and have fought to retain church control of their own schools. Likewise, the Protestant community has argued against the secularisation of the educational system, successfully defeating proposals that were suggested immediately following Partition to integrate the school system and place religious education on a voluntary after-school basis (Darby 1976, 126). The result was an educational system that allowed bible teaching of predominantly Protestant ethics and the withdrawal of Catholics to religious schools that received funding equal to only 65 per cent of that given to the state-sector, Protestant-affiliated schools (Darby 1976, 128).

Onset of Conflict

The patterns that signalled changes in Northern Ireland's peace and stability took place over more than a decade. Beginning with changes in the economic outlook following the recession of the 1950s, Catholics in Northern Ireland experienced a rise in economic fortunes (albeit smaller than their Protestant neighbours) as a result of stimulus programs instituted by Stormont and Westminster. These changes generated a rise in Catholic awareness of their political shortcomings, creating the perception of relative deprivation. Demonstrations for redress interacted with a culturally-generated fear of extinction (fanned by extremists on both sides) on the part of Protestants, creating the spark which set all of Northern Ireland ablaze for more than twenty-five years.

Changing Fortunes

Although unemployment in Catholic sectors has always been higher than in the Protestant community, several changes that benefited both communities in Northern Ireland were brought about by modernisation programs initiated in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the early 1950s demand in areas such as shipbuilding and textile manufacturing began to decline, as the United Kingdom moved from war production to rebuilding Great Britain's economy. Between 1951 and 1954, linen production in Northern Ireland fell 15 percent, causing a corresponding increase in unemployment. Shipbuilding and agriculture also experienced sharp declines, as other nations began to realise their own post-war recoveries. Since shipbuilding, textiles, and engineering represented almost 50 per cent of the manufacturing jobs in Northern Ireland, the effects of the slowdowns were devastating to the province's economy (Bew et al. 1979, 133). Unemployment jumped by over 40,000 jobs, offsetting gains in the public and service sectors over the same period. Figures show that unemployment in Northern Ireland at this time was more than twice that of the rest of the UK, hovering between 5 per cent and 7.5 per cent (Bew et al. 1979, 135).

Fears of the Protestant Community

The fear of extinction is generated out of a perception of threat to Cultural Identity, with past perceptions being projected onto current events....

Although it seems improbable, fear of extinction is quite real in the minds of Protestants who not only do not want to lose their position in society, but fear a cultural 'genocide' if they are forced into a union with the Republic of Ireland to the south.

Among the issues that contributed the most to Protestant insecurity and their fear of extinction in Northern Ireland were the 3.2 million Catholics who lived south of the border and their link (through the Roman Catholic Church) to Catholics in continental Europe and the Vatican in Rome. Within Northern Ireland itself Protestants make up about 58 per cent of the population of 1.6 million people, but if united with the south, then the Protestants would move from being a majority to a minority, subject (they fear) to the will of the Catholics. (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988, 17).

...The twin fears of Catholic violence and Catholic domination have become a part of the Cultural Identity of Protestants in Northern Ireland, lying below the surface and waiting for events (or individuals) to bring them into full bloom...

The Cycle of Violence: Onward to the Troubles

The final straw, which escalated the violence to an insurgency, was the 1971 introduction of Internment without trial by the government of Northern Ireland. Using legislation from the Special Powers Act, Stormont introduced internment in August of 1971, with 342 men picked up in the first dawn raids. Since the British Army was instructed to carry out the Internment raids, they then became the focus of Catholic anger and demonstrations. The most famous of these anti-Internment demonstrations resulted in the Bloody Sunday killings in Derry in January 1972, when British soldiers fired into the Catholic crowd, killing thirteen people (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988, 42). By March of that year, the British government had dissolved Stormont (to rule directly from Westminster), Internment was in full swing with the implementation of the 'Diplock Courts', and the IRA had reconstituted itself fully by providing defence from police and Protestant paramilitaries to Catholic areas. The Troubles, which have lasted thirty years to date - resulting in thousands of deaths and millions of Pounds of damage - moved on that fateful morning from small-scale clashes to a full-blown sectarian conflict. At the time of this work, tensions between Unionist and Nationalist, Irish and British, Protestant and Catholic continue to run high. Regardless of the optimism generated by the recently signed Good Friday agreement mistrust between the two communities remains high and a host of difficult issues - such as the routing of Loyalist parades - continue challenge leaders and ordinary residents on all sides. One can only hope that this agreement, unlike many that preceded it, can provide the basis for better understanding and a lasting peace between the two communities.