

## **MODERN HISTORY: *ANGLO-IRISH CONFLICT***

**Evaluate the attempts at peacemaking in the Anglo-Irish conflict in the period 1968-1985.**

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During the three decades of 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland, there have been several attempts at peacemaking from all sides of the Anglo-Irish conflict, in order to quell both sectarian and nationalist clashes between the ideologically divided populace of Northern Ireland. The first formal attempt was the Sunningdale Power Sharing Executive in 1973, which spawned 2 popular movements towards peace, the County Clare (1974) and the Women's Peace Movement (1976-7). The Anglo Irish Agreement in 1985 was also an attempt to quell increasing IRA violence, and emphasised more the containment of IRA violence rather than the resolving of the deep seated political chasms in NI.

Apart from the GFA, all attempts at peacemaking had failed to produce a lasting peace for a variety of reasons, including paramilitary retaliations from both Loyalist and Republican sides, as well as political conflict between Nationalist and Unionist interests.

Sunningdale was proposed by the NI Secretary William Whitelaw in order to share political power fairly between Catholics. It's committee contained 6 Unionist ministers from the UUP, 4 from the SDLP and 1 from both the cross platform Alliance Party and the Catholic Social Democrats. It aimed mainly to undermine support for the IRA by increasing nationalist political representation and thus eliminate the idea in nationalist minds that violence was their only political leverage. Its discussions about forming a council of Ireland, thereby acknowledging the 'Irish dimension' to the problem of political struggle in NI, aroused Unionist suspicions that the agreement would give greater power to Ireland, and thus to the notion of Irish reunification. This would be the driving factor of the Ulster Workers Strike, which aimed to bring down the Sunningdale Agreement. Ultimately it succeeded, however it was aided by tensions caused by nationalist parties' continued opposition to the policy of internment. Sunningdale can be considered a failure as means towards peace in itself, however can be seen as the first stepping stone in the British government's acknowledgement of the Nationalist cause and thus the beginning of the peace process.

A year after Sunningdale, delegates from many different churches in Northern Ireland came together at the Feakle Conference in order to negotiate peace by Christmas (1974). Proposing to open incident centres to investigate suspicious political and paramilitary activity, they aimed to mediate between the Provisional IRA and the British troops/RUC. They succeeded in getting the PIRA to announce a ceasefire between 22nd of Dec 1974 to 16th of January 1975. Tim Pat Coogan, an Irish historian, called it 'the most effective peace movement of the decade' However, it ultimately failed and increased Loyalist paranoia and violence towards Catholics due to the secrecy of the conference. However the level of success was markedly better than its cultural successor, the Women's Peace Movement. Founded after three children died in a paramilitary accident, its influence spanned from 76 to 77 involving thousands of civilians united against the idea of IRA violence. It consisted mostly of marches and vigils and petitions to local lawmakers. In the end however it's populist base petered out and failed to make any discernible impact on cycle of violence.

The 1985 Anglo Irish Agreement between the Thatcher and Fitzgerald governments aimed to decrease the support of Sinn Fein and to curb IRA violence, it also implicitly contained the possibility of a united Ireland, if the majority of NI gave its consent. Its granting of the Irish Republic a significant consultative role in NI's affairs outraged and alienated many Unionist MPs and increased Loyalist retaliatory attacks, as they had felt it would weaken NI's place in the British Union. To add insult to injury, many important Unionist leaders such as James Molyneaux were given assurances that no deal was being struck with the Republic on their behalf by Thatcher. This betrayal in the form of lack of consultation resulted in higher levels of Loyalist and sectarian violence towards Catholics, as well as huge protest rallies led by prominent Unionist leaders such as Ian 'Dr No.' Paisley. It also resulted in the resignation of all 15 Unionist MPs at Westminster on 17th December 1985.

Thus within the immediate context, the Agreement led to a spike in violence and failed in its attempts to bring about peace between Loyalist and Republican factions, however it did lay the groundwork for future attempts at peacemaking, due to its acknowledgement of the Irish Republic's important role within the peace process

To conclude, the main factors that obstructed significant progress being made in the peacemaking process was chiefly Republican violence, but also the reactionary elements of Unionism, which actively rejected any move that involved compromise that threatened Northern Ireland's place in the Union.