

The End of Stormont and imposition of direct rule in 1972

Dr Marc Mulholland, St Catherine's College, Oxford

Between 1969 and 1972 a large number of reforms were passed. The *Electoral Law Act of 1969* introduced adult suffrage in local elections, abolishing the ratepayer's franchise. All local government boundaries and wards were redrawn. A Parliamentary Ombudsman and a Commissioner for Complaints adjudicated complaints of discrimination brought against all layers of government. Following a report by Lord Hunt, the Royal Ulster Constabulary was disarmed and 'civilianised'. It was no longer directly responsible for operational policy to the Minister of Home Affairs: instead a new representative police authority was set up. The Ulster Special Constabulary was abolished altogether, to be replaced by a new part-time security force incorporated into the British Army – the Ulster Defence Regiment. Prosecutions were depoliticised with the establishment of an independent Director of Public Prosecutions. A Ministry of Community Relations was set up, as was an independent Community Relations Commission. [The 1970 Prevention of Incitement to Hatred Act](#) applied the criminal provisions of the *English Race Relations Act* of 1965 to sectarian cases. Local Government was generally emasculated as gerrymandering was squeezed out. In 1971 a Housing Executive was set up to deal with public authority house building, cutting local government out of this field altogether. Houses were allocated on an objective points system.[\[1\]](#)

Certainly there were inadequacies in the reform package, particularly as regards effective legislation against discrimination.[\[2\]](#) Nevertheless, change was real and substantial.

Unionists in particular feared that they were being deprived of independent means of defence. They resented dependence on the Army, itself under the control of a London Government that might withdraw it at any time. The RUC was stood down from 'counter-insurgency'. A new Chief Constable, Sir Arthur Young, a Commissioner of the London police, was called in to oversee the RUC's new 'softly softly' approach.[\[3\]](#) The net result was a relatively small expansion, disarming, short-term disorganisation and demoralisation of the RUC. As late as March 1971 Chichester-Clark ruled out re-arming the RUC as "armed combat is a military task". (The IRA, however, targeted the force, and from November 1971 they were progressively re-armed.) Nevertheless, there remained a clear dissatisfaction in the ranks of the RUC at its perceived neutering in the face of insurgency. If anything, their role was reduced. The Army carried out almost all 'political' arrests, and indeed an Act of Parliament at Westminster, with retrospective effect, had to be passed in one sitting when this was found to be illegal in February 1972. In August 1973 instructions were circulated to troops instructing them to hand over those they had arrested not to the RUC but to the Royal Military Police.[\[4\]](#) The

RUC chaffed at policies designating them as only a civilian policing service. In February 1973, for example, there was a police strike when officers refused to escort prisoners, as protest at the failure to exempt RUC personnel from the provisions of the Emergency Powers Act. Only from April 1975 was there a serious attempt by the British government to restore 'police primacy'.

Unionist Prime Minister James Chichester-Clark attempted a balance between Unionist demands for firm government and a British desire not to be sucked into full-scale war. All the time the IRA were bloodily escalating. On 10 March 1971 the bodies of three young soldiers of the Royal Highland Fusiliers were found at Whitebrae Road in the outskirts of Belfast. Though in civilian clothes and off-duty, they had been coldly executed. The Unionist hard-liner Bill Craig threatened the IRA with an organised body of loyalists, "trained and ready to act at the drop of a hat". On 12 March over 4000 shipyard workers and shop stewards marched to Unionist Party headquarters demanding the immediate interment of known IRA members, but it was Chichester-Clarke who was the political victim; caught between loyalist demands for an iron-fist and apparent security force pusillanimity, he resigned so as to "bring home to all concerned the realities of the situation".

Faulkner elected Prime Minister of Northern Ireland

Brian Faulkner had long been heir apparent. On **23 March** he was elected head of the Parliamentary Unionist Party, and thus Prime Minister, by 26 votes to four over William Craig. In fact his initial moves immediately reflected his desire to achieve balance in the party. David Bleakley, a stalwart of the Northern Ireland Labour Party was brought into government as Community Relations Minister. Harry West of the West Ulster Unionist Council became Minister of Agriculture. He appointed the moderate Unionist Basil McIvor as Minister of Community Relations, but characteristically balanced this by making the hardline MP for Derry City, Albert Anderson, a Parliamentary Secretary with nominal responsibility for the "security situation on the ground". Gerald B Newe, though not an MP, was appointed Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office, the first Catholic in the Cabinet. Newe, unfortunately, had the undeserved reputation of being a tame 'castle catholic'. However, West's appointment led to the resignation from the Party of Anne Dickson, the moderate MP for Carrick, and even the outgoing Minister for Community Relations, Dr Robert Simpson, condemned Faulker for double-dealing. On the right of the Party, William Craig presided over a meeting in the town of Portadown, involving Unionist representatives from 43 of the 52 constituency parties. From this emerged a ginger group known as 'Vanguard' bent upon the restoration of internal security responsibility to the Ulster government. On 26 January 1972, in a speech at Londonderry to the Loyalist Association of Workers, Craig, announced his intention to organise rallies in every major centre of the province culminating in a massive demonstration in Belfast on 18 March.

Faulkner, meanwhile, attempted to construct a new political dispensation. In a major speech on 22 June 1971, during the debate in reply to the Queen's Speech at Stormont, he outlined an offer of new proposals for participation by members of the opposition in the chairmanship of parliamentary committees to be set up before the end of 1971. These committees would oversee legislation and have privileged access to civil service information. It was inching the opposition into the antechamber of the executive. Paddy Devlin of the moderate nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) hailed revolutionary change and Brian Faulkner's 'best hour'. On 7 July the first ever inter-party meeting was held at Stormont, with representatives of the Ulster Unionists, SDLP, Nationalist Party and the Northern Ireland Labour Party in attendance.

All seemed set fair, but on the night of 8 July, the Army in Derry shot dead Seamus Cusack of Creggan, and the next morning George Desmond Beattie. Elaborate cover stories implicating the men in acts of potentially lethal violence were concocted, to local outrage. In fact they were victims of the Army strategy of treating rioting as a form of low-level paramilitarism. On 12 July the SDLP MP for the area, John Hume, took his own party by surprise when he declared that unless a public inquiry was held, the SDLP would withdraw from Stormont and, moreover, would set up their own assembly. A public inquiry was refused (by Lord Balniel at Westminster, as the Army did not come under Stormont's jurisdiction). Faulkner complained that it was irresponsible of the SDLP to indulge in "instant politics of exploiting every issue as it arises without consideration of the long-term effects", but the party boycotted Stormont regardless. All talk of political breakthrough was at an end, and a slugging match between the Army and IRA seemed in prospect.

Launch of "Ulster Vanguard"

On 13 February 1972, Ulster Vanguard, the new movement launched by William Craig, announced itself at a mass meeting in Lisburn. Captain Austen Ardill, former MP for Carrick, denied that Vanguard was a political party; it was, rather, a movement to bring together all loyalists. Craig, in the first of a series of speeches of increasing bellicosity, proclaimed loyalist determination to maintain their British traditions and way of life and "God help those who get in our way, for we mean business". At a rally of some 50,000 in Ormeau Park on 18 March 1972, William Craig, declared that "we must build up a dossier of the men and women who are a menace to this country because if the politicians fail us, it may be our job to liquidate the enemy". Ian Paisley held aloof from Craig's initiative, believing his evident attraction to negotiated independence for Northern Ireland was "certainly not acceptable to the vast majority of the loyalist people". Craig was, to be sure, temperamental, but he was not a lone voice. His Vanguard tendency, it was claimed in January 1973, had the support of 60 per cent of Ulster Unionists.

Vanguard often veered towards an 'Ulster nationalism', but never consistently. Launching its manifesto in the 1974 Westminster election, for example, Craig said that Britain should either give Northern Ireland its own parliament or else total integration with the rest of the United Kingdom.

Army Conduct

Despite British desires to maintain some degree of 'normality', there was a rather blasé approach to citizens' rights apparent in Army behaviour. An organisation designed for military rather than policing purposes, it was maladapted for maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of the Northern Ireland population. Soldierly conduct was often degenerate in hostile nationalist communities. In June 1971, for example, John Hume collated complaints about soldiers singing Orange songs and shouting obscene slogans while on duty in the Lone Moor Road and Brandywell areas of Derry. This was not surprising as, according to Paddy Devlin of the SDLP, the booklet issued to army officers in Northern Ireland partisanly described the Orange Order as a "nice, helpful organisation" and intimated, completely inaccurately, that Catholic societies such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Irish National Foresters were concealed organisations for the IRA. When, in April 1972, the first Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment took their leave of Catholic West Belfast after a tour of duty, they jocularly painted the Union Jack on a gable wall at Raglan Street, sang the 'Sash' (an Orange marching tune) and rattled bin-lids in Abyssinia Street, called in to local pubs to say 'bye-bye' to local men they recognised as having been arrested and later released, and generally ran amok. An Army major defended this as 'letting off steam', but locals naturally recognised the insolence of an army of occupation.

British statements early in the Troubles only served to reinforce this bellicose image. In July 1971, for example, the Home Secretary, Reginald Maudling bluntly stated that he considered that a state of war existed between the IRA and the British Army. Blanket policing, even if in the rough and ready Army guise, was keeping the lid on nationalist rioting, but at the cost of generating huge resentment. Faulkner caused consternation when, on 25 May 1971, he informed the Stormont Parliament that, "At this moment any soldier seeing a person with a weapon or acting suspiciously may fire to warn or with effect depending on circumstances without waiting for orders. ... This is a strong warning to the whole community". At Westminster the embarrassed Lord Balniel, Minister of State for Defence, clarified the position. "Troops may open fire when it is judged necessary to do so to save life." He added that in giving support to a civil power a soldier should use "no more force than was necessary". Nevertheless, a new, ruthless spirit was abroad.

In fact the Army strategy of heavy-handed containment was prone to collapse under its own weight. The Army shootings on 8 July 1971 of Seamus Cusack and George Desmond Beattie resulted in

Catholic opinion in Derry being noticeably radicalised. When, on Saturday 24 July, a skidding army lorry crushed a young boy in the Bogside, members of the Derry Citizens' Central Council were forced to protect investigating RUC officers from an angry crowd. Similar Army heavy-handedness wound tension in Belfast beyond breaking point. On 7 August 1971, a Catholic civilian was shot dead by a soldier when his van backfired outside Springfield Road RUC station. The dead man's passenger was promptly arrested and beaten-up in the station. Widespread rioting erupted as the news spread and troops were attacked in the Falls, Ardoyne, New Barnsley and Ballymurphy areas. More than 80 shots were fired at army patrols.

Internment

The Provisionals were escalating their bombing campaign, and late in July the Army uncovered the largest quantity of gelignite yet discovered, 235 pounds. Faulkner was under enormous pressure to activate the alternative security 'panacea': [internment](#).

A dry-run was launched on 23 July, when army units in conjunction with RUC swooped in dawn raids, during which documents were seized and 48 people were taken for questioning. This action served only to alert the IRA to the coming security initiative. The blow fell on Monday 9 August 1971. Dawn raids on houses throughout the province, labelled Operation Demetrius (a Roman deity described by Plutarch, fittingly enough, as "intemperate, warlike and ... overbearing"), triggered a deluge of violence in Catholic areas on a scale not seen since 1969. By 12 August, the death toll had risen to 25, and over 7,000 nationalist refugees from Belfast were reported to have arrived in army camps in the Republic.

The day after 'Demetrius', the British Army triumphantly claimed a major victory in their war against the IRA. But they were immediately trumped by a Provo press conference in the Whiterock Community Centre in Belfast, at which a Nationalist Stormont MP, Paddy Kennedy, introduced Joe Cahill as the leader of the IRA. Cahill insisted that only two members of the IRA had been shot in the recent fighting. He cannily presented the IRA as vanguard of an undoubtedly sympathetic nationalist Ireland, admitting that supplies of ammunition were running low and appealing for military assistance from the Republic. Certainly this found an echo at popular level. In a striking and controversial incident on 29 August, two British Army ferret cars accidentally crossed the border with County Louth in the Republic where they were surrounded by a crowd which set one of the cars alight. The retreating soldiers were ambushed as they crossed back into Northern Ireland, and one was killed. Fearing that it was being outflanked, the moderate nationalist SDLP responded by calling for a campaign of civil disobedience. Thirty Catholic public officials in Derry, including Vice-Chairman of the Derry Development Commission, and Chairman of the Police Liaison Committee, resigned their

posts a few days later. On 6 August, a general strike closed down businesses in solidly nationalist areas of Northern Ireland. Rather belatedly, and shortly before the end of his statutory tenure as a non-elected Stormont minister, the Minister of Community Relations, David Bleakley, announced his resignation from the Government on 26 September 1971 on behalf of “moderate” opinion.

Internment rapidly became an even greater propaganda debacle for Stormont and the British when, within days of Demetrius, rumours emerged of ill-treatment of detainees including making them run barefoot over barbed-wire and broken glass. Physical brutality against internees seemed fairly endemic and the Association for Legal Justice pointed out instances where internees transferred to Armagh prison had been re-directed to hospital because of their physical condition on arrival. Some interrogated prisoners were doped with amphetamine. After the initial swoop, 12 senior IRA men were subjected to hooding, continuous noise, posturing against a wall for up to six hours, a diet of bread and water and deprivation of sleep. The Government commissioned Compton Report, with fine hair-splitting, found no evidence of brutality but rather of “ill-treatment”. Amnesty International disagreed, saying the “ill-treatment used amounted to brutality”. A further Government report, by a team headed by Lord Parker, specifically examined in-depth interrogation techniques. It concluded that these were justified in exceptional circumstances. Lord Gardiner dissented, however, believing the methods to be illegal and immoral, even in time of war. British Prime Minister Edward Heath, on 2 March, told Westminster, as no doubt he had to, that the techniques would no longer be used. After the Al Quaida attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, they seem to have become fairly common practice again in the ‘War against terror’.

A basic problem was that prison facilities were inadequate and utterly overwhelmed. Sixteen convicted IRA prisoners escaped from Crumlin Road Prison in Belfast on 16 November 1971. Another three, Martin Meehan, Dutch Doherty and Hugh McCann, rapidly won cult status when they escaped on 2 December, and three escape tunnels were discovered in early January 1972. A Government report that month declared that ‘the Crum’ could not be made escape-proof and had to be replaced. The makeshift [Maidstone prison ship](#), anchored in Belfast Lough was still less satisfactory. A horror for its inmates, it proved leaky in more ways than one. On 17 January 1972 seven internees swam ashore and made good their escape.

Creation of Prison Camps

The only possible improvised solution was POW style camps. On 19 September 1971, Wessex helicopters ferried the 219 interned prisoners to a specially built camp at Long Kesh, near Lisburn. Only perimeter security was maintained and prisoners were marshalled by their own IRA commanders. When it was considered necessary to intrude into the ‘cages’, as prisoner compounds

were known, this was carried out by Army raids, which easily escalated into full-blown riots, as on 26 October 1971 when tear gas was used on the inmates. Conditions in the camps remained dire throughout. In September 1974, Peter McLachlan, a moderate Unionist politician, described the conditions in Long Kesh as “intolerable”. In that year, prisoner protests over conditions escalated into a huge riot. Convicted Republican prisoners burnt down a major part of the camp, setting alight at least 11 huts. Troops swamped the camp, and dogs were let loose on the internees (a number of the unfortunate animals were burnt alive in the huts). Helicopters sprayed CS gas from above.

Internment was only ended in December 1975 because, as Merlyn Rees, Secretary of State at the time, explained, “it was a real and continuing cause of discontent”.

Internment has often been laid at the door of Brian Faulkner, but clearly the decision was not his to take alone. Reginald Maudling, the British Home Secretary, was candid enough to say later that the “decision on whether to lock them up without trial was formally in the hands of the Northern Ireland Government, and, of course, in particular, Mr Faulkner, but there was an understanding between us that it would not be exercised without the agreement of the British Government, for the simple reason that it would be the British Government and, above all, the British Army who would have to carry the can for whatever happened”.[\[5\]](#)

Bloody Sunday

A ban on marches was to have a calamitous impact on the government’s steadily deteriorating relations with the Catholic community. Civil right marches had clashed with increasing intensity with the Army at Armagh, Magilligan Strand near Derry (where a new internment camp was being constructed) and Dungannon. Possibly to sell the ban on marching to Unionist opinion, which was primarily directed against coat-trailing Orange processions, the Army was cracking down with all vigour on Catholic marchers. On **30 January, 13 men were shot dead in Derry** by British troops following the violence at the fringes of a 20,000 strong procession. A wounded victim later died. All were unarmed civilians. Bloody Sunday, as it was immediately labelled, sparked rioting across nationalist Ulster. Bernadette Devlin, a radical Nationalist MP, physically assaulted Reginald Maudling in the House of Commons. He condescendingly observed, with chilly sang froid, that he was well used to having his hair pulled by his children. Faulkner more appropriately spoke of “mounting hysteria” on all sides, and called for calm. More than ever, outrage spilled over the border. On 2 February, the day of the funerals, five Irish ministers joined 20,000 mourners in Derry while nationalist Ireland shut down in a socially inclusive general strike. In Dublin a crowd of 1,000 provided cover for the IRA to set alight the British Embassy.

A scheduled [Civil Rights March \(again illegal\) in the nationalist border town of Newry](#) on Sunday 6 February was expected to prove a flashpoint and, with Unionist firebrand Bill Craig intent on a counter-demonstration, perhaps the start of civil war. Field hospitals were readied in the Republic near the border and Northern Ireland hospitals were placed on red alert. The Roman Catholic Church, however, applied pressure on the organisers to exercise restraint, and they agreed to ask sympathisers not to travel from the Republic. The 20,000 or so demonstrators avoided the town centre and collision with the Army. In fact, this marked something of an end to nationalist mass demonstrations in the North. The IRA was now making the running in Catholic areas, and they were on a war-footing. In the South, freer from Army observation, open IRA demonstrations were possible for a period. One such, on 13 February 1972, was held in Dublin outside the historic shrine of the GPO building, site of the 1916 rebellion. It featured escaped IRA volunteers on the run and attracted some 15,000 people.

British reluctance to impose Direct Rule

The initial response of the British Government to the Northern Ireland Troubles was to pressurise the Unionist devolved government into reform in the hope that Stormont would again become an acceptable political forum for Catholics. Indeed the first offer of substantive constitutional change, it seems, came from Brian Faulkner as Prime Minister rather than the British Government. On 22 June 1971 Faulkner, in a major speech during the debate in reply to the Queen's Speech at Stormont, outlined new proposals for participation by members of the parliamentary opposition in the chairmanship of parliamentary committees which are to be set up before the end of 1971. This, however, was scuppered by the SDLP's withdrawing from Stormont.

After the introduction of internment, and the consequent [escalation in violence and insurgency](#), Reginald Maudling, the British Home Secretary, concluded that 'real' Catholic demands had moved on:

What I was aiming at was some means of providing the Catholic community with what had really become their objective, and a perfectly legitimate objective, which was no longer merely the avoidance of discrimination against them but a guarantee of an appropriate place in the governing of their own country. I was able to agree with Brian Faulkner a form of words to describe what we were seeking to establish. The formula was a 'Permanent and guaranteed role for the minority community as well as the majority in the life and public affairs of the Province'. The words were admirable. The problem was to interpret them and make them effective in practical terms.^[6]

Britain's unwillingness to replace the Unionist controlled devolved government at Stormont with Direct Rule is usually put down to an amorphous desire to avoid being sucked into the "Irish bog". This phrase, taken from the account written by Labour's Home Secretary to 1970, James Callaghan,^[7] is used in the context of a discussion of the problems to be confronted in deploying British troops on the streets of Belfast. There was a much more specific reason why Britain was unwilling to impose Direct Rule. This was the fear of an effective Unionist revolt. As Callaghan wrote:

We had no idea what the attitude of the RUC would be if such a drastic step became necessary, nor did we know with certainty whether we could expect loyal services of the Northern Ireland civil servants ... might both majority and minority communities turn on the British Army?^[8]

There was no lofty disregard for the 'men of violence', rather an intense regard for the loyalist threat in particular, most especially as it was unrealised and could only be luridly imagined.

Suspension of the Stormont parliament, March 1972

The national and international concern expressed over Bloody Sunday and the widespread feeling that the resulting **public inquiry** exonerating those responsible had been 'widgered' brought a new urgency to British Government policy on Northern Ireland. At the end of March 1972 the Stormont Parliament was suspended, when the Northern Ireland Premier, Brian Faulkner, refused to hand over formal control of internal security to Westminster. 'Direct rule' from London was immediately imposed. William Whitelaw was appointed 'Secretary of State for Northern Ireland'. Jim Prior, who later held this position, described its rather anomalous content:

As Secretary of State for Northern Ireland I found myself performing a dual role, as a Governor-General representing the Queen and as such the enemy of every Republican in the Province, but also as a Secretary of State acting like a referee in a boxing ring whose authority seemed to be resented equally by both sides.^[9]

The out-going Unionist Government at Stormont was outraged at the imposition of Direct Rule and deeply anxious for the future: said Faulkner "you have also made it clear that even this change is intended only to create a situation in which further radical changes, of the nature we believe to be unrealistic and unacceptable, will be discussed". Whitelaw proposed to nominate a **commission drawn from Ulster to advise him in his duties**, on which Faulkner commented tartly that "it may be an interesting – but it will certainly not be a pretty sight when we are faced with the sort of people who

will creep out to collaborate in this totally undemocratic sham”. The retiring Unionist Lord Mayor of Belfast later bitterly complained that Ulster had been betrayed by Britain and relegated to the status of a “fuzzy wuzzy colony”.

Britain, meanwhile, pressed on to Power-Sharing and an all-Ireland ‘dimension’ as a framework for settlement.

© *Northern Ireland*, Cengage Learning, 2006