CHAPTER-VII

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing analysis it becomes quite clear that the fundamental issue, which led to the problem of Northern Ireland -- the schism between the two traditions based on Presbyterianism and Catholicism -- remains to date unresolved. The root of the trouble was that, since the partition of Ireland in 1920, the grievances of the Catholic minority in the Province piled up constantly to such dangerous proportions that a strong wall of distrust grew up in the psyche of the people belonging to the two divergent traditions. Their basic antagonism was further sharpened by the yawning inequalities between them in economic, political, religious, and social spheres. Supported solidly by the overwhelming majority of the Protestant population, the Unionist Party remained firmly entrenched in office continuously for about half-a-century since the partition in 1920, conceding little role to the Catholic minority in the political and economic life of the Province.

Northern Ireland's separate Parliament with a measure of autonomy to conduct its own internal affairs, and the abolition of the Proportional Representation system in 1929, only helped consolidate the Protestant-dominated Unionist monopoly of political power in the Province. Apart from these, measures like the Special Powers Act 1922 and the Business Premises Vote became instruments of coercion and discrimination against the Catholic minority. All these factors placed the Protestants in a permanently commanding position in the affairs of Northern Ireland, which, at times, made them somewhat insensitive to the felt needs and genuine demands of the Catholic minority. In consequence, over the years, the Catholic minority's grievances like discrimination in housing and employment snowballed out of
all proportions. It was also alleged that by means of discrimination in housing, the Protestant Unionists were, in fact, gerrymandering elections to the Stormont and the local bodies in Northern Ireland.

With the wisdom of the hindsight now available, it is evident that all these pent up feelings, accumulated over the years, found their expression in the establishment of political organisations and pressure groups like the National Unity in 1959, the Campaign for Social Justice in 1963, and the National Democratic Party in 1964. Their establishment manifested the brewing up of a new, and a potentially dangerous, situation in Northern Ireland. But, it was not until the establishment of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) in 1967, that things came dramatically to the fore in the form of sporadic violence in the Province. By raising civil rights issues, the NICRA became instantly the authentic voice of the Catholic grievances. Started as an anti-Unionist middle class pressure group, the NICRA swelled into a mass movement, and became a rallying point for the Catholics to articulate their grievances. Notably, however, the NICRA refrained from emphasising the larger question of the Irish Unity, which got it a measure of tolerance from the Protestant majority. The Civil Rights Movement spearheaded by the NICRA made a tremendous impact on Northern Ireland because, for the first time, it united all the anti-Unionist Parties under a single banner. It also added a new dimension to the politics of the Province and even drew the attention of the outside world to the problems oppressing the Catholics in Northern Ireland. Moreover, gradually it brought politics of Northern Ireland into the streets as well. The NICRA could not, however, maintain its unity for long, as it suffered multiple splits, following the achievement of the basic civil rights, it was championing. Once its demands were conceded, it failed to find a new and equally all-embracing programme with a universal appeal to all sections of the Catholic minority.
Thanks to this failure, the NICRA slowly faded into oblivion.

The disintegration of NICRA only marked the beginning of another phase of the struggle of the Catholic minority. This brought dramatically the Government in Westminster into the picture. As law and order situation deteriorated, the British Government inducted troops into the Province; and as it deteriorated further, it placed Northern Ireland under its Direct Rule. Perhaps, in the given circumstances, no other option was open to the British Government. This was, at best a holding operation, for it mollified temporarily the hurt feelings of the Catholics by bringing to an end the uninterrupted monopoly of power of the Protestant-dominated Unionist Party in the Province.

The British action failed to make any material change to the general situation. Rather, in the period that followed, the Province was plunged into more and more instability, which was fuelled by a series of splits in the Unionist and non-Unionist Parties. These never-ending splits sharpened the internal squabbles among them for dominance and for enlisting support for divergent courses of action to meet the new situation unfolding itself in the Province. Their divergent approaches made them rather ineffective, as they, in the process, seemed to have indulged in exercises of cancelling out one another in terms of ideas, objectives, and strategies.

The controversy over the introduction of the reformation programme precipitated a vertical split in the Unionist ranks. And outside the Unionist fold the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), under Ian Paisley, spearheaded a militant approach and was vociferously against the reformation programme. The DUP demonstrated a substantial following among the Protestants in the Province although, during elections, the Official Unionist Party, in
numerical terms, always enjoyed a larger popular support than that enjoyed by the Democratic Unionist Party. That apart, despite their divergent approaches, there were occasions during the period under review, when they cooperated with each other in opposing measures which, they considered, would undermine the dominant position of the Protestants in Northern Ireland.

In that vein they opposed the introduction of the Direct Rule in the Province, and also the Power-Sharing scheme. They were also firmly opposed to any proposal, which recognised the existence of an Irish dimension to the problem of Northern Ireland. Of course, a small section among them, who formed the Alliance Party in 1970, was not inimical to the idea of Power-Sharing and also the Irish dimension. In order to systematically oppose any kind of Power-Sharing and the Irish dimension, the Unionists formed an umbrella group, called the United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC), composed of the Official Unionists, led by Harry West, the Democratic Unionists, led by Ian Paisley, and the Vanguard Unionists, led by William Craig. In the February 1974 Westminster elections, this group won 11 of the total 12 Westminster seats. In May 1974, it also extended full support to the Ulster Workers' Council strike, against the Power-Sharing system, which virtually paralysed normal life in the Province. At the hustings, the Power-Sharing experiment could not survive the combined onslaught of this powerful group. Of course, the measure was also opposed by the extremist groups among the Catholics, which too contributed to the collapse of the Power-Sharing Executive. But, in 1975, when the Constitutional Convention took place all the three constituent elements of the UUUC were found pulling themselves in different directions. One of its constituents -- the Vanguard Unionists -- even showed readiness for joining a voluntary coalition with the Catholic-dominated Social Democratic and Labour Party in a Power-Sharing administration. Another dimension of the
division among the Unionists was their differences over the question of devolution. While one section, 'devolutionists' (led by Ian Paisley), favoured the restoration of the old Stormont system, the other section known as 'integrationists', led by James Molyneaux and Enoch Powell, favoured total integration of the Province with Britain. Simultaneously, there were competing pulls between the Official Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party for the leadership of the Protestant majority in the Province. Cumulatively, they all found themselves in utter confusion.

A similar metamorphosis also took place in the non-Unionist camp in Northern Ireland. The Nationalist Party gave way in 1970 to the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). This new Party composed of the supporters of the Civil Rights Movement, the Republican Labour, the Northern Ireland Labour Party, and the Nationalist Party. Although from the very inception it professed to be non-sectarian, yet it functioned mainly as the voice of the Catholic minority. However, it was basically a moderate party, which subscribed to the ultimate goal of reunification with Irish Republic through peaceful means. It viewed the Assembly of Northern Ireland and the Council of Ireland as the stepping stones towards that goal and did not hesitate, at times, to use absenteeism in the elected bodies as a pressure tactic. It welcomed the introduction of the Direct Rule in the Province largely because it brought an end to the half-a-century long uninterrupted monopoly of power of the Unionist Party, and also because it destroyed the very monolithic character of the Unionist themselves. It participated in the Sunningdale Agreement of December 1973 and in the short-lived Power-Sharing Executive in 1974. It appears that, from among the non-Unionist Parties, the SDLP could exert at least a modicum of influence on the thinking in Westminster and Dublin.
Another notable actor in the non-Unionist camp was the Republican Party, which also had undergone a process of fission and fusion. The split in the Party in late 1969 gave birth to two distinct groups - the 'Officials' and the 'Provisionals', which vied with each other for the leadership of the Catholic community. Although the 'Officials' also believed in violent means to achieve their aim of Irish unification, yet they eschewed violence since 1972 and adopted Parliamentary means to achieve their goal of a united socialist Ireland on the basis of a non-sectarian working solidarity. But the 'Provisionals' believed in hot pursuit of driving the British out of Northern Ireland and integrating the Province with the Irish Republic through violent and terrorist methods. In pursuing this objective they seem to have been aided and abetted by their supporters in countries like Libya and the United States of America. In the USA, an organisation called the Irish Northern Aid Committee (NORAID) was said to be actively at their back.

The 'Officials' and the 'Provisionals' had the same objective - unification of Ireland. Between them, however, the 'Provisionals' enjoyed more popular support than the 'Officials'. This was particularly notable after the death of Bobby Sands, one of the hunger-strikers in the Maze Prison in May 1981. As a result, in the 1982 Assembly elections the 'Provisionals' won five seats and an overall 10 per cent of the votes. This increase in their popularity led to modify their strategy slightly. They now follow a dual strategy of pursuing "community politics" by focussing on the need to develop radical socio-economic policies, and carrying on, simultaneously, with their violent and terrorist methods. After winning five Assembly seats in 1982 elections, they refused to take their seats in the newly formed Assembly with a view to undermining its effectiveness. In 1974, the 'Officials' got splintered further and a small breakaway group formed the Irish
Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) with the objective of pursuing more radical policies than pursued hitherto by the ‘Officials’. The new party established the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) as its military wing, and identified itself with the wider international struggle for a Marxist revolution. But, being a small group, its impact in Northern Ireland has been rather negligible.

Among the local parties in the Province, the Alliance Party adopted a more centrist position by following a constructive line, which could possibly lay the basis of reconciliation between the warring Catholics and Protestants in the Province. In a way, its non-sectarian approach enabled it to play the role of a bridge-builder in the strife-torn Province. This notwithstanding, it did not make much headway. By drawing adherents from both the traditions and attracting both the liberal Unionists and moderate Nationalists, it showed its potential for a constructive role in future. Its participation in the Power-Sharing Executive in 1974 was considered as a momentous step forward in the right direction. At present, it commands, however, only about 10 per cent of the votes in the Province.

A question which comes naturally in this context is how the national parties in Britain conducted themselves in dealing with the problem of Northern Ireland. As is quite clear from the present analysis, right from the beginning the British national parties followed, by and large, a concensual approach to the problem. Since 1968-69, when trouble broke out, both the ruling parties - the Labour and the Conservative - have been adopting a bi-partisan approach and supporting measures like the reformation programme introduced by the Government of Northern Ireland. The introduction of the British troops in Northern Ireland too had their joint support. The fact that the reformation programme did not yield the desired result is a different matter. So has been the perpetuation of terrorism and
violence in the Province despite the deployment of the British troops. However, the national parties in Britain have been unanimous in their view that violence is not the answer to the problem of Northern Ireland, and that any solution to it should come by peaceful means. Although they all supported the move to place the Province under the Direct Rule from Westminster, yet they shared the view that the Direct Rule was not a permanent or lasting solution to the problem. Simultaneously, they favoured an approach, which could redress the genuine grievances of the Catholic minority in the Province. This, they thought, could be achieved by giving them a meaningful share in the administration of the affairs of Northern Ireland. They supported, therefore, the creation of the Power-Sharing Executive in 1974, thinking that that could be a model for the promotion of reconciliation between the two hitherto antagonistic traditions in the Province. They also held identical views on how to deal with terrorism unleashed by extremist elements like the Provisional IRA and the Ulster Volunteer Force and took the position that violence must not be allowed to succeed.

Despite this identity of views on many a fundamental issue pertaining to the problem of Northern Ireland, one finds that, in certain matters, their perceptions and emphases differed. For example, while the Conservative Party tended to treat the issue largely as a law and order problem, and emphasised that a solution would have to be found within the Province, the Labour and Liberal Parties tended to view the problem in an all-Ireland context. Similarly, one finds differences in their approach to the 'Constitutional Guarantee' given to the Province that it would remain part of the United Kingdom so long as the majority desired this. While the Conservative Party passionately defended this Constitutional Guarantee, the Labour Party did not show much enthusiasm for it and gave the impression that a lasting solution to the problem, according to it, lay in the peaceful unification of Ireland.
Political parties and other pressure groups, as analysed above, did play important roles in certain given situations. It is, however, the British Government, which played the central role in dealing with the problem. It may be recalled that traditionally, ever since the partition of Ireland, the policy followed by the British Government was that it would not interfere in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland so long as there was stability in the Province. But this much cherished stability was seriously impaired, following the launching of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland and the ensuing growth of violence, which led to the collapse of the security system in the Province. This sorry situation inevitably brought the Government in Westminster face to face with the internal affairs of Northern Ireland. With the growth of riots and violence, which had the certain potential of developing into a Civil War, the British Government sent its troops to the Province to quell violence quickly. As the situation was becoming grave, and beyond the control of the Government of Northern Ireland, in March 1972 Westminster brought the Province under its Direct Rule. This did help restore a measure of confidence in the minority community, but its incidence was transitory. With a view to mollifying the lacerated feelings of the Catholics, the Government followed up this measure with the passage of the Northern Ireland Constitutional Act 1973, which provided for the establishment of a Power-Sharing Executive for the Province from among a 78-member Assembly to be elected on the basis of Proportional Representation. As a result, for the first time in the history of the Province, the Catholics, through the SDLP, were able to share power in the Government. The Act also gave an Irish Dimension to the issue by making a provision for the establishment of a Council of Ireland, which gave some scope to the Catholics to envisage a unified Ireland eventually. But the Act gave the constitutional guarantee that there would be no change of borders, unless the majority in the Province so desired. In essence, it was
a solution based on the principle of self-determination. However, the programme did not work the way the Government desired. The Power-Sharing Executive was knocked out after just five months by the strike called by the Ulster Workers' Council in May 1974, which paralysed the Province. As a sequel thereof, the Province was back again under the Direct Rule of Westminster.

In subsequent years, the Government took some additional initiatives, like the Constitutional Convention of 1975, the move to establish an administrative set-up for the Province based on devolution in 1977, and the 4-Party Conference convened in January 1980 by Humphrey Atkins, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, with a view to finding out ways and means of transferring power from Westminster to the locally elected representatives. But all these efforts proved infructuous. The last initiative the Government took to break the deadlock in the Province during the period under review was the proposal, which James Prior, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, made on 5 April 1982 for the establishment of a new Consultative Assembly in the Province, elected on the basis of Proportional Representation, to which in certain circumstances, the Executive powers would be devolved. This move, which is now known as the "Rolling Devolution", also did not succeed, as after winning elections, the SDLP and the Sinn Fein refused to take their seats in the newly constituted Assembly.

Basically, the British Government's initiatives revolved all along round the principle of self-determination with a view to establishing some kind of a devolved form of government for the Province, wherein representatives of both the majority and minority communities could participate directly in the administration of the Province. At the same time, there was also increasing recognition in the Whitehall of the role of the Irish Republic in finding a lasting solution to the problem. The Sunningdale Agreement of 1973
recognised this by accepting the idea of a ‘Council of Ireland’. In 1981, an Anglo-Irish joint study recommended closer economic and cultural ties, besides the setting up of an ‘Intergovernmental Council of Ministers’ to review the existing arrangement of cooperation. This culminated in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. That apart, it became prudent also for Britain to enlist the cooperation of Ireland for combating terrorism in the Province. If that were not done, it would have been well-nigh impossible for Britain to deal with it because of a long open border and with a population generally sympathetic to the terrorists all along the Irish side of the Province’s southern border.

Northern Ireland’s constitutional position as an integral part of the United Kingdom and its geographical position as part of the island Ireland, which makes it geographically closer to the Irish Republic contribute massively to the critical importance Dublin attaches to the issue. Being a Catholic-dominated state, with a long common border with Northern Ireland, traditionally, the Irish Republic’s sympathy had ever been with the Catholic minority in the Province. However, as the analysis in this study shows, for many years the Irish Republic has been giving de facto recognition to the separate existence of Northern Ireland and has been accepting the position that there would be no change of borders without the consent of the majority in the Province. Significantly though paradoxically, Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution claim ultimate sovereignty of the whole of Ireland. Notwithstanding this theoretical position, successive governments of the Irish Republic have been laying emphasis on the establishment of a devolved legislature for Northern Ireland, which could ensure the Nationalist minority a permanent share of the executive power. The Irish Republic has also been seeking establishment of all-Ireland institutions like the Council of Ireland. But, the ultimate objective of its policy continues to be the realisation of a united Ireland.
Meanwhile, the Government of the Irish Republic had extended its cooperation to the British Government in combating terrorism in the Province. In fact, during the period under review neither the Government nor the Opposition in the Republic called for an immediate withdrawal of the British troops from Northern Ireland, because it seemed to apprehend that, if this did happen without a satisfactory political solution, the Provisional IRA's terrorism and violence would spread to the Republic itself, as extremist groups, like the Provisional IRA and the INLA, aim not only at the ouster of the British from Northern Ireland, but also the destruction of the existing political establishment in the Republic. Therefore, there has been a happy convergence of interests between Great Britain and the Irish Republic in combating terrorism. As a result, there has long been substantial cross-border cooperation between the two states on security matters. That cooperation, however, did not operate in full steam due to various historical factors. The Irish Republic, for example, has been unwilling to agree to a direct contacts between its own army and the British army in Northern Ireland, although Dublin had permitted direct contacts between the police forces of the two countries. Such constraints have hindered effective policing of the long, winding border between the Republic and Northern Ireland, making it easy for the terrorists to escape to the Republic.

The prolong strife in Northern Ireland has had a crippling impact on the economy of the Province. As a result, the Province's old industries like textiles, engineering and ship-building have registered a marked decline. The prolonged strife has also affected adversely the socio-economic conditions of the local population as a whole irrespective of their communal affiliations. Therefore, it may be seen that, at the end of the period under review, there was a perceptible stalemate in the situation in Northern Ireland. And, no solution was in
sight. This was partly because the political parties in the province seem to have lost their clarity and vision and also their sense of direction, as vertical and horizontal splits in them made them play infructuous negative politics. Barring the SDLP and the Alliance Party, they, by and large, seem to be still under the spell of their past prejudices, which rendered them incapable of playing any constructive role in ending the strife. At the same time, it is also a fact that the British national parties, much less the British Government, have not succeeded in presenting a viable solution, which is acceptable to the overwhelming majority of the local population belonging to both the communities. This does not imply lack of any genuine efforts in this direction on their part. Indeed, they made stupendous efforts and the guiding spirit behind these efforts was fairness to both the communities, redress of the minority grievances, and promotion of reconciliation. The nearest they could propose towards a solution was the Power-Sharing system. But that was acceptable to only a limited number of small political parties. As a result, that experiment too collapsed. At the same time, it may also be underlined that violence, which claimed lives of important personalities like Lord Mountbatten, also failed to make much of a dent on the will of the British Government to stand up firmly against violent methods, because these strike at the very root of the democratic process. Therefore, at the end of 1982, as unfortunately today as well, the problem of Northern Ireland remained intractable to the genius of the British Government and the British political elite.