CHAPTER-III

ATTITUDES OF BRITISH POLITICAL PARTIES

Since the inception of Northern Ireland, the British political parties had been pursuing a policy of non-interference in the affairs of Northern Ireland. But, after the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland, this attitude underwent a sea-change, for now they began to view the problem of Northern Ireland from various angles. Their attitudes were conditioned generally by local developments in Northern Ireland and also by their possible repercussions on the composition of political power in Westminster. However, among all political parties in Britain, as parties of governance, only the Conservative and the Labour Parties have been involved directly in the problem of Northern Ireland. They had been alternatively in power after the trouble started in Northern Ireland in 1968-69. Apart from these two main political parties, the Liberal Party took a keen interest in the issue of Northern Ireland.

THE LABOUR PARTY

The Labour Party was in power, when the Civil Rights Movement was launched in 1967-68. This brought the Labour Party instantly into direct involvement in the affairs of Northern Ireland. The initial attitude of the Labour Party during the riots of 1968-69 was, however, identical to that of the British Government. After the two civil rights marches in 1968, the Labour Party leader and Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, urged the Northern Ireland Prime Minister, Terence O’Neill, for speedy action and readiness to carry out the five-point reformation
programme,\(^1\) which included, a Point System\(^2\) for housing allocation; appointment of a Parliamentary Commission for Administration (Ombudsman); abolition of Company vote in local elections; a review of the Special Powers Act; and replacement of the old Londonderry Corporation by a Development Commission.\(^3\)

The reformation programme was delayed due to the eruption of violence in 1969, which led to the induction of the British troops in Northern Ireland in April 1969, ostensibly to man the major public services like electricity and water installations in Northern Ireland.\(^4\) Indeed, the responsibility for sending troops to Northern Ireland also rested with the Labour Party, which welcomed the move.\(^5\) As the role of the police was suspected, the Hunt committee was appointed to examine the recruitment, organization, structure and composition of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The committee came out with the recommendation that the Royal Ulster Constabulary should be disarmed and that the Ulster Special Constabulary (B-Specials) should be replaced by a part-time military force known as the Ulster Defence Regiment.\(^6\) However, this could not satisfy the Catholics'  

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2. The Point System means that there would be a Central Housing Authority, which will ensure a complete absence of any discrimination or any complaint of discrimination in housing allocations.


hope. As Michael Foot, the Labour Party leader, also said in this regard on 27 November 1969: "Many people were deeply apprehensive that the proposed Ulster Defence Regiment might be merely a recreation of the old B-Specials." 7

Henceforth, Labour Party aimed at creating a viable alternative to the Unionist Party in Northern Ireland. This was envisaged shortly after the second visit of the Labour leader and the Home Secretary, James Callaghan, in October 1969 to Northern Ireland. Many Labour MPs thought that the merger of Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) with the trade unionist and more radical MPs in Stormont could give a viable alternative to the Unionist Party in Stormont. But the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) showed little interest in the proposed merger. Instead, the NILP showed interest in a merger proposal between them and the British Labour Party. 8 This plan was in turn scuttled by the British Labour Party, 9 because although the Labour policy was oriented to creating a viable alternative to the Unionist Party but the immediate task before the Labour Party was to bring in reforms in Northern Ireland. 10 These development activities were confined largely to areas like housing, work and religious freedom, which could promote harmony between both the communities. The Labour Party made it clear that it would support a Government, which would work within this broad framework. 11 Thus, it was clear that the Labour Party's prime objective was to introduce meaningful reforms in Northern Ireland.

9. Ibid.
The manifesto of the Labour Party for the June 1970 elections focused the Party's approach on the problem of Northern Ireland. It said:

Northern Ireland presents major problems. Fifty years of one-party Tory rule have led to social tensions and lack of opportunities, which erupted into major disorders last summer. The Government has helped stabilise the situation and has insisted reforms being carried out in Northern Ireland based on the practice and principle of non-discrimination. In particular, it has been agreed that the reform of local government in Ulster shall proceed and that a Central Housing Authority shall be set up. British troops will remain in Northern Ireland so long as they are needed. (12)

The Labour Party lost the 1970 general election, but this did not cause any change in its basic policy, which was reaffirmed at its Annual Conference held at Blackpool in October 1970. The Annual Conference called upon the Parliamentary Labour Party "to bring pressure on the Government to ensure that the Government of Northern Ireland introduces reforms immediately." (13) Speaking at the Conference, James Callaghan, a prominent Labour leader, demanded expeditious establishment of a more efficient 'housing authority' and "reform of local government boundaries and the reform of local government functions" to meet the demands of the minority. (14) He warned that the Labour Movement would oppose any move to frustrate the reforms, which the Unionist Party had agreed to. (15) The Party also opposed the move of releasing political prisoners on the ground, that it would be an "endorsement of those, who


14. Ibid., p.266.

15. Ibid.

96
used violence as a means to political ends". 16 The Party stressed that violence was not the solution of political problems and that it could never unite Ireland, but could destroy it. It further asserted that the suspension of Parliament in Northern Ireland should not be seen as a first step towards a solution of the problem, 17 and that the Parliament could be suspended only when the Ulster Government halted its reform programme. 18 It is, however, notable that the Labour Party policy on the question of the suspension of Northern Ireland constitution was identical to that of the Conservative Party. 19

Even after the reform programme was announced by the Northern Ireland Prime Minister, Chichester Clark, violence continued in Northern Ireland, which led to the introduction of "internment" on 9 August 1971. This was done in consultation with the Conservative Government in Britain. The internment had been used in the past (1921-24, 1938-45 and 1956-62). As a security measure, it had been moderately successful. 20 However, the Labour Party opposed the introduction of "internment" in 1971, particularly the way it was introduced. Speaking on this issue, Albert Stallard, a Labour MP, stated in August 1971:

We want the chance to question the Government about internment, which I have always opposed. We also want an opportunity in the Commons to put pressure on the Government to follow up some of the many suggestions made by Mr. Callaghan for getting politicians in Dublin talking to politicians in Stormont and Westminster. (21)

17. Ibid., pp.266-7.
18. Ibid., p.266.
The Labour policy on "internment" was also expounded by the Labour leader, Harold Wilson, in the House of Commons on 22 September 1971:

The internment decision and the manner in which it was carried through have created a new and grave situation in Northern Ireland. British Ministers are responsible to this House, and in the course of this debate the House and those whom we represent here have the right to much fuller and franker information on where the Government are going, or think they are going, in the weeks ahead and what, if any, constructive proposals they have for ensuring in the future, as has not been the case in the past, that this Parliament and the Government responsible to it assert the authority in Northern Irish affairs, which the situation now requires (22).

Although internment was introduced in Northern Ireland to preserve peace and maintain order, it proved to be a failure. The whole issue was internationalised and it became difficult for Britain to satisfactorily explain it to the international community, Meanwhile, Harold Wilson presented a 12-point programme in September 1971 as part of the Labour Party's effort to bring peace in Northern Ireland. These twelve points were:

(1) A Parliamentary commission should be appointed consisting of equal numbers of MPs of the Westminster and Stormont Parliaments...(2) The Parliamentary Commission would be endowed by Statute with all the powers adhering to a Westminster select committee, such as the Committee of Public Accounts or the recently created Select Committee on Expenditure,...(3) The parliamentary commission would be charged with the duty of examining all proposed Stormont legislation, including ministerial orders and Orders in Council made under statutory authority, which affect any aspects of human rights and the provisions of the Downing Street Declaration of August 1969...Stormont legislation which was not approved by the select committee with an

appropriate majority, such as two thirds, should not come into effect unless approved by a specific resolution of the Westminster Parliament. The Parliamentary Commission would be empowered to make reports to both parliaments proposing new legislation. If such a report were approved by the two parliaments, it would be for Stormont to legislate. The Parliamentary Commission would be required to produce an annual report to the two parliaments on the detailed operation of the Northern Ireland Special Powers Act, and action taken thereunder. The continuance of the Northern Ireland Special Powers Act would require an annual vote of the Westminster Parliament by affirmative resolution. In default of such a vote, the Act would lapse. The Parliamentary Commission would be required by statute to prepare, and to submit to both parliaments, an annual report on Northern Ireland finances, taxation and expenditure, with particular reference to the spending of subventions, grants and other aids provided directly or indirectly for industrial development and expansion. All subventions and other financial aid for Northern Ireland should cease to be carried out on the Consolidated Fund and be the subject of Annual Estimates and Votes of the Westminster Parliament. A Minister for Northern Ireland Affairs, of Cabinet rank, should be appointed as a member of the United Kingdom Government. Legislation would be introduced to provide that future elections for the Northern Ireland Parliament would be on the basis of proportional representation (PR), with multi-member constituencies. An All-Ireland Council, representing the two Irish parliaments, would be established in accordance with their elected strengths, from the several parties whose members form the parliaments of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It would act as a consultative body to debate all matters of common interest to Ireland, North and South. As an urgent contribution to the reduction of violence, immediate legislation should be introduced in the Stormont Parliament or, in default, in the Westminster Parliament to ban the private holding of, and private traffic in, firearms of all types.

The introduction of internment caused some changes in the Labour policy. This was reflected in the Annual

Conference of the Labour Party in October 1971, where it demanded immediate release of those interned without trial in Northern Ireland, suspension of Stormont and imposition of direct rule, and repeal of the Government of Ireland Act 1920, and Ireland Act 1949.24

The growing violence in Northern Ireland led Westminster to think in terms of assuming the responsibility of security in the Province in its own hand. Brian Faulkner, Northern Ireland Prime Minister, did not, however, agree to the British Government's proposal, so the negotiations on transfer of "security" broke down.25 Following this, on 24 March 1972, the Province was placed under the direct rule from Westminster.

The Labour Party welcomed the imposition of 'Direct Rule'. Speaking in the House of Commons on that very day, viz., 24 March 1972, Harold Wilson, the Labour Party leader, said: "Direct Rule has always been regarded by both governments, and by both of us in opposition, as the very last resort, not an objective to be sought for itself, and we have maintained this."26 The Labour's support to the imposition of direct rule in the Province was based on the fact that the Government had added a point which, Labour Party thought, was essential -- "transfer of responsibility for security from Stormont to Westminster".27 Wilson stressed that the transfer of security to Westminster was necessary, because the "British troops, who were in the

26. Ibid.
27. Sunday Times, 26 March 1972. This was stated by Harold Wilson in London on 25 March 1972.
streets when the Labour Government put them in August 1969 to guarantee firmly and fairly and impartially all communities from any threats of violence are now, through no fault of their own, being pilloried and attacked as a military support to a sectarian regime.\textsuperscript{28}

After the imposition of direct rule, an immediate initiative taken by the British Government was the Darlington Conference (25-27 September 1972), which was attended by the Ulster Unionist Party, the Alliance Party and the Northern Ireland Labour Party, to resolve the political impasse. The Labour Party took the position that under no circumstances should the North be forced into the South against the will of the majority, and that the discrimination against the Catholic minority should end.\textsuperscript{29}

This was affirmed by Merlyn Rees, Labour Party Shadow Secretary for Northern Ireland, in a speech at the Northern Ireland Labour Party Conference, held at Portadown on 30 September 1972.\textsuperscript{30} The Party was not very optimistic about the outcome of the Darlington Conference. At its Annual Conference held at Blackpool, in the first week of October 1972, the Party leader, Harold Wilson, said: "A peaceful democratic settlement in Northern Ireland seemed further away than ever after the Darlington Conference....The situation has degenerated, and in both communities there is a real fear of civil war, with British troops perhaps caught in the cross-fire."\textsuperscript{31} He further suggested a 15-point

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\item \textsuperscript{28} London Press Service, Verbatim Service, Text of a Broadcast made by the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Harold Wilson, on Sunday, 26 March 1972 (London), 108/72, Monday, 27 March 1972.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{31} The Guardian, 4 October 1972.
\end{itemize}
proposal, which included all-party talks on Northern Ireland with an open agenda and tripartite talks to "consider the implications of a move to a united Ireland, based on consent, with the enactment and guarantee of full civil rights and with full provision and protection of the religious, political, economic and social interests of all communities, majority and minority, in Northern Ireland and the wider Ireland."  

The National Executive Committee of the Labour Party reaffirmed that the responsibility for security must remain with Westminster and the "Special Powers Act" and "internment" should be scrapped, so that there is no longer any imprisonment without trial. It further demanded, in the context of the failure of the Darlington Conference, a Conference of all the principal parties in Britain and in Northern Ireland, and at a later stage, of representatives of the main parties of the Republic of Ireland.

On 20 March 1973, the British Government published a White Paper on the Constitutional Proposals on Northern Ireland. The White Paper established a new Northern Ireland Assembly, elected by Proportional Representation, and proposed an Executive in which power was to be shared between representatives of the two communities. The principles of this Constitution were based essentially on those which were advocated by the Labour Party in the months preceding the publication of the White Paper. Welcoming the White Paper, Harold Wilson, Labour Party leader, stated categorically in the Commons on 29 March 1973: "I will vote for the White Paper ... and appeal to as many of our hon.  

33. Ibid.
friends as possible to vote with us", though, he clarified: "It does not mean that we regard the White Paper as perfect." Subsequently, the Labour Party presented its perspective on Northern Ireland in its Programme of 1973, which said:

The temporary suspension of Stormont in March 1972 and the imposition of 'direct rule' provided a breathing space,... the Party has called for a new Assembly, elected by proportional representation and involving genuine power-sharing between the communities; the repeal of the Special Powers Act and its replacement by emergency provisions legislation accountable to Parliament and based on a comprehensive Bill of Rights; and the creation of an all-Ireland institution.... After the White Paper, the next step is the election to the new Assembly... for power-sharing and the speed of devolution of the 'transferred' powers. (35)

Subsequently, elections for the twenty-six new District Councils were held on 30 May 1973 under the Proportional Representation system. It is pertinent to mention that, since the 1920s, this was the first time, when the PR system was used in Northern Ireland. This was followed by an Assembly election, of 78 members to be elected by the PR (single transferable vote system) on 28 June 1973. The results of the Assembly election were as follows: 36

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Seats</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Official Unionists</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unionists</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Unionist Loyalist Coalition (led by Ian Paisley)</td>
<td>8</td>
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On the proposed new Executive, which was supposed to involve both the minority and the majority communities of Northern Ireland, the Deputy Spokesman of the Labour Party on Ulster, Stanley Orme, remarked on 2 October 1973: "If the new Executive and new constitution in Northern Ireland were to fail, there would have to be a return to temporary direct rule,... [in that case] Labour would have to redress the position." He also stated: "No settlement would be acceptable to Labour, which was not firmly based on Civil Rights, non-discrimination and democracy." The Party opposed, however, the idea of either 'total integration' into the UK or a 'Unilateral Declaration of Independence'.

Following the tripartite talks at Sunningdale, 6-9 December 1973, the 'direct rule' was brought to an end on 1 January 1974 and the new Executive started functioning. This power-sharing Executive was composed of 11 members: six Unionists, four SDLP, and one from the Alliance Party with Brian Faulkner and Gerry Fitt as Chief Executive and Deputy

38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
Chief respectively. The Labour Party emphasised its view on the form of Government in Northern Ireland in its February 1974 election manifesto, which said:

There must be some form of power-sharing and partnership, because no political system will survive, or be supported, unless there is widespread acceptance of it within the community. Secondly, any pattern of government must be acceptable to the people of United Kingdom as a whole and to Parliament at Westminster. Thirdly, there is an Irish dimension. (40)

The ascent of the Labour Party to power in 1974 did not mean any change in its policy towards Northern Ireland. It was confirmed, however, that the British troops will remain in Northern Ireland till peace was restored. The "militants", who opposed the power-sharing and Sunningdale Agreement, called for a strike in June 1974 which resulted in the collapse of the new Executive. Following this, the Labour Government imposed the 'direct rule' in the Province again. It also published another White Paper on Northern Ireland in July 1974 as a measure of fresh political initiative for a power-sharing government in the Province. In this connection, a Constitutional Convention of Northern Ireland political parties was convened by the British Government on 1 May 1975 to consider "what provision for the Government of Northern Ireland is likely to command the most widespread acceptance throughout the community there". The Convention was reconvened, after it was first dissolved in November 1975, on 3 February 1976. It ended its sittings in March 1976 without finding any agreement acceptable to Westminster.

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40. Craig, n.12, p.463.

The Labour Government’s initiative for a viable solution to the problem of Northern Ireland came under heavy fire within the Party, when Joan Maynard, Labour MP, along with many other Labour MPs like Stan Thorne and Maureen Colouhoun found fault with it. In a letter to The Times, these MPs criticised the Government’s bi-partisan policy on Northern Ireland. They said: "It should now be clear to even the most blinkered amongst the Parliamentary Labour Party that bi-partisanship over Ireland means that the policy is dictated today, as it has been since the end of the last century by the Tories and the Unionists." 42 They continued:

The only achievement of 1975 was the phasing out of internment without trial. This should have been the prelude to a political solution, with the initiative coming from the Government. But how could that happen when the Government was outside the discussions taking place in the Convention and whilst inside the Unionists were allowed to use the opportunity thus given to them to argue for the restoration of the power they had abused for so many years and which they see as having been temporarily taken away. (43)

They made, however, two suggestions: (a) "Northern Ireland must again be placed in an all-Irish context"; and (b) "there must be more democracy in Ulster, a repeal of Emergency Powers Act and a phasing out of the role of the army...." 44

Ironically, the Labour had no new plan for Northern Ireland except the calling of the Constitutional Convention, which emphasised that the solution to the problem could only come through the people and the politicians in Northern Ireland. This was stated in the Labour Party programme of 1976, which said:

42. The Times, 19 February 1976.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
The latest attempt in Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention ... which asked the people and politicians of Northern Ireland themselves to produce an acceptable form of Government .... Most of all, the Northern Ireland people have consistently expressed their determination to remain with United Kingdom. This determination was manifested in the result of "Border Poll" of March 1973 .... The Labour Party respects and supports the will of Northern Ireland people to remain within the UK. (45)

Though the Labour Party held that the "Direct Rule" could not be a long-term solution, it believed that "Peace and stability [could] be restored in Northern Ireland by creating a system of devolved government ... acceptable to both communities." The Labour was of the view that the devolved form of government would work in such a way that it threatened neither of the communities in Northern Ireland.46 The Labour Party Conference, held in October 1976, called for: (a) abolition of the Prevention of Terrorism Act; (b) withdrawal of the troops; (c) a defence force in Northern Ireland based on the trade unions; (d) workers' unity around a socialist programme; (e) an all-Ireland mass party of Labour; and (f) a Socialist United Ireland. But this resolution moved by David Nellist (Coventry South-East), a Labour leader, got defeated.47

It is clear, that the Labour Party's initiative to bring a new form of government in Northern Ireland during its tenure of power proved infructuous. It failed mainly because it had no new proposals, which could satisfy the wishes of both the communities in Northern Ireland. Apart

46. Ibid.
from this, the Labour Government had to face the hostile attitudes of the militant organisations in Northern Ireland, which were totally opposed to any form of power-sharing government.

Following the defeat of the Labour Party in the British general election of 3 May 1979, the new Conservative Government under Margaret Thatcher took the initiative of calling a four-party conference (UP, DUP, SDLP and the Alliance Party) on 25 October 1979. Though the Conference failed ignominiously, the Labour Party affirmed its position at its Annual Party Conference in October 1979, that unless both the communities were brought together, the problem could not be resolved. It held the view that until a solution was achieved, the withdrawal of British forces could have catastrophic effects. This position of the Labour Party was identical to the one adopted by the Conservative Party.

The failure of the four-party conference in October 1979 led the Conservative Government to publish a "Working Paper" on 20 November 1979. This paper dealt inter alia with the "extent to which powers should be transferred" to the locally elected representatives in Northern Ireland. In this regard, three broad possibilities were identified: (a) the transfer of all executive and legislative powers; (b) the transfer of all executive powers; (c) the transfer of only those executive powers which were exercised by local authorities in Great Britain.

Humphrey Atkins, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, played a cautious role in bringing the main


political parties of Northern Ireland to the negotiating table for an agreement on a transfer of powers to locally elected representatives. His proposals did not, however, include issues like the 'Irish Unity', 'Confederation', and 'Independence'. The Labour was somewhat lackadaisical towards the 'Working Paper', as is evident from the following remarks made by its chief spokesman on Northern Ireland, Brynmore John, on 29 November 1979:

I think [that the Secretary of State, for understandable reasons, has been somewhat cautious in dealing with the prospects... One party has formally declined to take part in the talks. The only one which has not formally commented has indicated its unwillingness to attend....We must know, therefore, whether the talks will go ahead in the absence of one or more of the invitees....If we do not get it, Parliament will to a large extent be debating this matter today in a vacuum...four Members of Parliament who are here today...are not members of any of the invited parties....Therefore, if the matter is to proceed...if the Secretary of State is to make progress he should involve those four Members of Parliament in associated bilateral talks whilst the main conference is in progress. (50)

The Convention, which was proposed earlier, met on 7 January 1980 and was adjourned on 24 March 1980 without achieving any concrete solution. In continuation of the 'Working Paper', the Government brought out another White Paper on 2 July 1980.51 Welcoming the White Paper, the Labour leader, Brynmore John, said:

...the talks that he [Humphery Atkins] proposes to launch in Northern Ireland as a result of the White Paper will be crucial if any progress is to be made? We want to see a properly devolved


Assembly, with people working together in Northern Ireland, as the main aim, but may we assume that such an Assembly will not be established without a wide measure of agreement in the Province? The right hon. Gentleman mentioned talks. Is he aware that since there is so much hanging on talks between the communities in Northern Ireland, the Labour Party will not do anything to impede those talks or to make an admittedly already difficult task much harder? (52)

In order to prepare a new policy for Northern Ireland, the Labour Party formed a study group in 1980 under the Chairmanship of Alexander Kitson of the Transport and General Workers' Union. The study group had 17 members -- nine of the Party's National Executive Committee and eight of the Parliamentary Labour Party. All these members had special knowledge and experience of the Northern Ireland affairs. Subsequently, at the Labour Party's Annual Conference in October 1980, a Party member, Angela Sheriff, moved a motion, calling for the British withdrawal from Northern Ireland, reflecting the bi-partisan policy of the Parliamentary Labour Party, and demanding the repeal of Prevention of Terrorism Act and political status to H Block and Armagh jail prisoners. But the National Executive Committee of the Party held the view that "It would be a mistake to change the long standing policy of the Party radically and dramatically without examining the study group's findings."55

Although it was believed in the on going reappraisal of the Labour Party policy on Northern Ireland


53. H-Blocks or the Maze Prison Cell blocks -- so called because of their "H"--shape -- which were designed to accommodate terrorist-type prisoners with the ending of special-category status.

54. The Times, 2 October 1980.

55. Ibid.
in May 1981 that "there is a possibility of withdrawal of
the guarantee that the constitutional relationship will not
be changed until majority in the province approves it",
Merlyn Rees, MP and former Secretary of State for Northern
Ireland, when confronted with that possibility in a
television interview by Brian Walden on 17 May 1981, said,
he "did not particularly want the guarantee to be
withdrawn." Explaining his stand further, he said: "If
you took the guarantee away, I do not think it would make
much difference, because you cannot push a million people
into the South if they do not want to go." However, the
Labour Party was against the withdrawal of military force
from Northern Ireland and believed that there was no
alternative to the direct rule in the near future although
it did not provide a permanent political solution.
This was clearly stated by James Callaghan, former Prime
Minister, on 2 July 1981 in the Commons. He also said:
"Britain should at once begin the process of formulating a
new policy...[which ] should provide ... for a continuous
series of separate steps taken at deliberate intervals with
the ultimate aim of giving the people of Northern Ireland
complete responsibility for their own affairs." Continuing, he said: "The process that I envisage would take
some years to complete and the final step would be that a
new Northern Ireland would emerge as a broadly independent
State...that had in the process forged a new relationship
with both Dublin and London." Commenting on the bi-
partisan policy on Northern Ireland, he said:

56. Ibid., 18 May 1981.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. UK, Commons, Parliamentary Debates, series 6, vol.7,
60. Ibid., col.1049.
61. Ibid., cols.1049-50.
...there has never been any formal agreement between Government and Opposition, whichever party was in office. Certainly there is strong disagreement between the Government and the Labour Party ...on the remedies for the economic and social ills of Northern Ireland, but I have never seen any advantage, and I see none now, in deliberately trying to magnify differences between the Government and the Opposition on the political future of that country, if by taking some steps together we can relieve any part of the torment.(62)

Callaghan's plan for an independent Northern Ireland appeared to be a step-by-step approach, whereby the two communities would have complete responsibility for their own affairs and whereby Britain would have an obligation to support the economy of an independent Northern Ireland. Callaghan also wished to abandon the idea of "guarantee", which was given in 1949 to the Northern Ireland Government by the Westminster, and demanded a Bill of Rights to safeguard the citizens in Northern Ireland.63

It is significant to note in this context that the Labour Party had rejected the concept of an 'independent Ireland' as early as in June 1973, and had never even considered the idea of scrapping the 'guarantee'. Therefore Labour members, including Michael Foot, were astonished, when James Callaghan spoke in the Commons in these terms. In fact, they seldom agreed to Callaghan's view. Holding himself responsible for the Labour policy of the past 13 years, Callaghan said that he fully took his share of blame for the Labour mistakes. He thought that the paternalistic attitude of Westminster had undermined the sense of responsibility of Northern Ireland's people for their own destiny.64

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62. Ibid., col.1050.
63. The Times, 3 July 1981.
64. Ibid.
On 23 July 1981, the Labour Party study group, which was set up in 1980, published its draft policy statement on Northern Ireland for its final approval at the Party's Annual Conference, September-October 1981. The draft policy statement stated:

We believe the attainment of Irish unity, with the introduction of socialist policies, will bring benefits to the people of both Northern Ireland and the Republic...it will enhance the prospects of working class unity throughout Ireland by harmonizing and intergrating economic and social interests, and bringing the Labour and political movements together on a national basis ... We [the Labour Party] respect the strongly held views of the majority community in Northern Ireland. But our proposals for progress towards a united Ireland must be seen as a contribution to a continuing democratic political process --- for we certainly do not believe that partition can be ended by threats, coercion or force. Our aim is to help bring about the unification of Ireland by agreement and consent between the two parts of Ireland: ... If the majority community in Northern Ireland is to be reconciled to the creation of a united Ireland, then discussions should proceed between the British Government, the Irish Government and the two communities in Northern Ireland ... it would be no part of the political programme of the Labour Party to force Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom or into the Republic of Ireland. Before any constitutional change is made, therefore, we would seek to obtain the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. Labour will campaign actively to win that consent, for peaceful unification. (65)

It is significant to note that the study group, which drafted the policy statement, did not have any member from Northern Ireland Labour Party (apart from a few trade union delegates), and Northern Ireland had no voice at the Annual Conference. The exclusion of Northern Ireland from

the process of drawing up the National Executive Committee's policy statement accounted for the unrealistic commitment to a united Ireland. According to the MORI poll, published in the Sunday Times of 18 June 1981, a united Ireland was unacceptable not only to virtually the entire Protestant community but also to 35 per cent of the Catholics. Yet the Labour Party's National Executive Committee (NEC) proposed it as the Party's objective and wanted the Party to "campaign actively" to win the support of the people of Northern Ireland for that objective.

Secondly, the NEC emphasised "unification" with the introduction of the "socialist policies". How this was going to be introduced in Southern Ireland was not specified in the NEC document. The unmindful reference to "socialist policies" also shows, that the Labour Party was taking a great deal for granted, because both the political parties in the Republic -- Fianna Fail and Fine Gael -- were non-socialist.

Thirdly, the NEC document's emphasis on devolution and power-sharing seemed unattainable, because on several occasions in the past efforts in that direction had failed. It was also argued that the two communities in Northern Ireland would not be able to have a say in their destiny, if they were not allowed to share power with the people of Great Britain, for which they had their representatives in the Westminster Parliament. Thus, the involvement of Great Britain was also important in bringing about a peaceful solution to the problems in the Province.

The widespread criticism of the study group's document notwithstanding, the Party's National Executive

68. Ibid., 20 August 1981.
endorsed in 1981 its recommendation of "unifying Ireland", but rejected the motion advocating the withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland.69

In April 1982, the Government published another White Paper, Northern Ireland: A Framework for Devolution.70 On the basis of that, it introduced on 22 June 1982 a new draft Bill in the Parliament. Though the Labour policy aimed at improving the socio-economic condition of the people in Northern Ireland, it assumed that it was the right time to propose devolution of political power in Northern Ireland. Commenting on the Bill, the Labour Party's chief spokesman on Northern Ireland, Don Concannon, said: "Much of the Government's White Paper had been in line with the Labour Party document on Northern Ireland .... Their aim all along had been to see that the Bill achieved maximum support in Northern Ireland by offering something to each community."71 Of course, the support of the Labour Party for the Bill emanated from the fact that the Labour Party had nothing new to offer except some form of "devolution of power" and when the Government came with such proposal, the Party had no other option but to support it.

THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

Historically speaking, the Conservative Party had close links with the Unionist Party in Northern Ireland and at Westminster its members took the Conservative whip. Since the disorders began in 1968-69, the policy followed by the Conservative Party on Northern Ireland had all along been bi-partisanship except on few issues. The Conservatives were in the Opposition, when the Civil Rights march took place.

69. Ibid., 1 October 1981.
70. See, UK, HMSO, Cmnd.8541 (London, 1982).
They supported the Government's move of calling the British troops to protect the major installations in Northern Ireland. Supporting these measures in the Commons on 21 April 1969, the Party leader, Reginald Maudling, said: This is a grave and ugly situation. We on this side of the House join the Government in condemning these outrages and support their action in meeting the request of the Northern Ireland Government. 72

The Annual Conference of the Conservative Party, held in October 1969, also adopted a resolution pledging its support to the Labour Government. The resolution, passed unanimously, read as follows:

... this conference, recognising that the use of British troops as a temporary measure is inescapable,

(i) renews its unequivocal adherence to the principle embodied in the Ireland Act 1949 that the constitution of the United Kingdom with regard to Northern Ireland should not be altered without the consent of the Northern Ireland parliament;
(ii) reiterates its support for the reforms originally initiated by the Government of Northern Ireland;
(iii) again expresses its view that all forms of discrimination, based on religion, class, race, colour, or political opinion, are indefensible.
(iv) recognises that the return to law and order and the implementation of the reforms must be a first priority;
(v) but is convinced that the true solution of Ulster's problems is dependent on the ability of the two communities to live side by side, in accordance with the often expressed desire of the Government of Northern Ireland. (73)


The Conservative support was also explicit, when the Party leader, Edward Heath, stated in the House of Commons on 8 May 1969:

Would the Prime Minister accept that we on this side of the House fully support the reforms, which the Government of Northern Ireland are pledged to carry through...Indeed, in the same way as the Prime Minister and his colleagues and, I think, the whole House have pledged. Will he therefore agree that the thing now to do is to give the Northern Ireland Government the opportunity to get on with the job? (74)

However, the policy of the Conservative Party was to preserve Northern Ireland's status as an integral part of the United Kingdom. It may be mentioned, in this context, that since 1912 the Conservatives had been consistently opposing the re-union of Northern Ireland with the Catholic Republic of the South. This was again reiterated in the Party manifesto of 1970, which ran:

We reaffirm that no change will be made in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without the free consent of the Parliament of Northern Ireland .... We support the Northern Ireland Government in its programme of legislature and executive to ensure equal opportunity for all citizens in that part of the UK. We will provide the military and other aid necessary to support the Royal Ulster Constabulary in keeping the peace and ensuring freedom under the law .... We think it wrong that the balance of power between central and local government should have been distorted, and we will redress the balance and increase the independence of local authorities. (75)

Hitherto, the Conservative Party had supported the reform programme in Northern Ireland, but it had never


75. Craig, n.12, p.340.

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insisted on its prompt implementation.76 With the advent of Conservatives to power in 1970, the Conservatives' and the Unionists' link got further strengthened. This raised apprehensions among the Catholics that whatever reform programme was set in motion by James Callaghan, the outgoing Home Secretary, its pace might be slowed down considerably by the Unionist Government in Northern Ireland.77 This apprehension of the Catholics was deepened when the British troops conducted searches in Catholic houses in Belfast for arms, which provoked riots. For the Catholics, the searches reinforced their belief that the army, which they welcomed in 1969 as protector, had become "a tool of the Protestant Government of Northern Ireland".78 The introduction of internment in the Province in August 1971 added fuel to the fire, particularly because it was introduced in consultation with the Conservative Government. Reginald Maudling, Conservative leader, told the Conservative Party's Annual Conference on 14 October 1971:

Internment, imprisonment without trial, is a hideous thing .... But it is no more hideous than murder and bombing, and any society is entitled to protect itself by this measure against the sort of campaign now being waged against the peaceful people of Northern Ireland -- a measure, mark you, which has been used in the past for the same purpose on both sides of the border....It is simple fact that, with the terrorism now rampant in parts of Northern Ireland,...we are going ahead supporting the policy of internment...(79)

Internment failed to check the growing violence in the Province. At the same, time it received international


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attention. The Conservative Government, led by Edward Heath, summoned Brian Faulkner, Northern Ireland Prime Minister, on 22 March 1972, and proposed to him to hand over the responsibility of "security" to the Westminster. But, Faulkner declined the proposal, so two days later, viz., on 24 March, the Province was placed under the "Direct Rule" from the Westminster. William Whitelaw became the first Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.  

The imposition of Direct Rule, though welcomed by the minority community, raised fear among the Unionists in Northern Ireland, as it broke the Unionist monopoly of 50 years rule in the Province. However, many Conservative members demanded a new policy for Northern Ireland. They also criticised the policy of William Whitelaw, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, for having held a secret meeting with six IRA leaders in London. They said: "He has not only broken faith with the majority in Ulster, but also given an accredited status to men who employ murder for political purposes, defy lawful authority and scorn parliamentary government."  

The Annual Conference of the Conservative Party, which met after the Darlington Conference in 1972, reaffirmed its policy on Northern Ireland. Referring to the imbroglio in Northern Ireland, the Party leader, William Whitelaw, told the Annual Conference:

Following the Darlington Conference, where a most valuable dialogue took place, Her Majesty's Government will be publishing a Green Paper...which I believe to be right, leading as quickly as possible thereafter to substantive legislation....There can be no change in the

constitutional position of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom unless by the will of the majority. Equally, of course, if the majority of the people in Northern Ireland were to opt for a united Ireland, no British Government would stand in the way. (82)

The border poll in Northern Ireland was held on 8 March 1973, and the White paper on Constitutional Proposals was published on 20 March 1973. This White Paper proposed inter alia a Northern Ireland Assembly of 80 members elected by the single transferable vote (STV) method of proportional representation for 12 Westminster constituencies. It also said that there would continue to be a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and 'law and order' will remain with Westminster. The White Paper contained additional safeguards for the rights of the entire community. It also recognised the 'Irish Dimension'. (83) The White Paper was welcomed by the Conservatives. According to John Biggs Davison, a Party leader:

Here is the new opportunity for the minority and the majority in the community to declare with the ballot against the bullet and bombs, and expose the outrageous pretensions of those who terrorise because they cannot peacefully persuade their fellow countrymen. (84)

The Annual Conference of the Conservative Party in 1973 also passed a resolution on Northern Ireland with an overwhelming majority, which said:

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That this conference congratulates Her Majesty's Government on its determined efforts to secure peace in Ulster but urges Westminster to pass legislation to declare the IRA illegal in Great Britain whilst it effectively maintains a state of war against this country.(85)

After six months' effort of the Conservatives, and twenty months of direct rule, a new type of coalition government started functioning with effect from 1 January 1974. On this new form of Executive, the Conservative Party manifesto published in the following month, said:

It [the power-sharing Executive] is still a tender plant. But the fact remains that those who used to be political opponents are today working together on the new Executive in Northern Ireland to bring a better life to their strife-torn Province.(86)

However, the new experiment of power-sharing executive conducted by the Conservative Government proved short-lived, because, in May 1974, when a strike was organised by the Ulster Workers' Council, the new Executive collapsed. The main targets of attack of those loyalists, who organised the strike, were the "power-sharing" and the "Council of Ireland". 87 In the meantime, the Conservatives were defeated in the general election held in February 1974. With the fall of the power-sharing Executive, direct rule was once again imposed in Northern Ireland.

It is significant to note that the Conservative Party's painstaking efforts to launch a new form of government, whereby both Protestants and Catholics could share the state power, showed that it had a wider base of


86. Craig, n.12, p.394.

87. Author's interview with Ian K. Paisley in Belfast on 1 October 1987.
support at home and abroad. At home, when the Labour was in the Opposition, the Labour leader, Merlyn Rees, stood four square behind the Conservatives' peace effort in Ulster, and when in power, Harold Wilson said in a TV programme on 5 March 1974: "Nothing could be more harmful or more calculated to cause disorder and loss of life than to start changing a policy, which has a broad measure of support throughout this country." While abroad, the power-sharing government was welcomed by both the Prime Minister of Ireland, Liam Cosgrave (Fine Gael), and the leader of the Opposition, John Lynch (Fianna Fail), when they spoke in the Dail on 22 November 1973. Nevertheless, the policy of bi-partisan-ship helped multiply the paramilitary groups, which had been allowed to get away with armed training and posed a major threat.

The Conservative manifesto of October 1974 did not reflect any change in the Conservative policy towards Northern Ireland. It affirmed:

The next Conservative Government...will work for peace and consent in Northern Ireland. There can be no military solution without a political solution that is fair to both the majority and the minority communities. Equally there can be no political solution unless terrorism is curbed and the law is respected and upheld by all. There must be partnership between the communities. We will seek the closest cooperation with the Republic, but Ulster is, of course, part of the United Kingdom.

89. The Times, 6 March 1974.
92. Craig, n.12, p.447.
The Conservative Party was of the view that any old type Stormont system would be unacceptable to it, so it would oppose any such move. It also criticized the Labour Government's "gentle approach" towards Northern Ireland, which, in its view, was doomed to failure. Merlyn Rees, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who had done a deal with the IRA over the cease-fire, came under heavy fire from the Conservative members. They were also critical of Merlyn Rees' prolonged policy of releasing hard-line IRA terrorists from detention; his alleged failure to take effective security control over border like South Armagh; and his alleged lack of frankness over the episode involving Seamus Twomey, Belfast IRA chief, and an Army document which implied his freedom of movement in Northern Ireland. All these episodes brought the bi-partisan policy under a severe strain.

It is important to note that though the Conservative Party's relations had been strained with the Government over Merlyn Rees' handling of detention and general security problems in Northern Ireland, yet it was determined as ever to maintain the bi-partisan policy with the Government on the constitutional issues of Northern Ireland.

94. Ibid., 12 September 1975.
95. An Army document dated June 1975, disclosed by Ian Paisley (UUUC MP for Antrim North), showed that Seamus Twomey, a leading Provisional IRA member, was no longer a wanted man. This caused the Conservative backbenchers much anger. That anger was evident again on 10 September 1975, when Lieutenant General Sir David House, GOC Northern Ireland, confirmed that the extract from the document shown to the press by Ian Paisley was authentic. The Times, 11 September 1975.
When the Constitutional Convention of 1975-76 was heading towards failure, the Conservative leaders at Westminster were anxious to see that the Government should act to prevent an Ulster political vacuum, which paramilitary groups were waiting to exploit. They wanted some sort of a new body, which would be non-executive and purely advisory but useful enough to harness an agreement on power-sharing.\footnote{Daily Telegraph, 2 March 1976.}

The Government's effort to bring a new form of Government through Constitutional Convention (8 May 1975 - 4 March 1976) proved abortive. The Conservative Party termed the failure of the Convention as "depressing and unconstructive"\footnote{Ibid., 6 March 1976.} -- depressing, because both the Government and the Opposition, hitherto, were equally committed to the idea of a devolved form of Government in Ulster; unconstructive because of the considerable confusion it caused. For instance, Merlyn Rees wanted a new phase of direct rule to be "positive", with no new machinery and no new "devices".\footnote{Ibid.}

Nevertheless, a poll conducted jointly by the BBC and the Belfast Telegraph in the week after the collapse of the Constitutional Convention showed that 74 per cent of those interviewed favoured direct rule as an acceptable form of Government.\footnote{Ibid.} With no other alternative to fall back on, the British Government continued with the direct rule. The Government's handling of the security situation in Northern Ireland, however, provoked sharp criticism from the Conservative Party. For example, at the Annual Party Conference in Brighton, 1976, Airey Neave, a Conservative leader, said:

\footnote{Ibid.}
The Ulster situation has to be faced. . . . We have to defeat terrorism first . . . we shall continue in Parliament to criticise Government security policy until these arch-terrorists and murderers are behind bars . . . By creating false hopes that terrorism might force the British to withdraw from Northern Ireland, these talks between Government officials and men of violence have prolonged the struggle. We shall press the Government for undertakings that there are no more negotiations with terrorists . . . we shall also continue to meet other parties in Northern Ireland to pave the way for an acceptable form of Government . . . for devolved government, and this is what we are aiming at.(102)

On the question of withdrawal of troops from Northern Ireland, he said:

Our document, The Right Approach includes the commitment that a Conservative government will not withdraw the troops until they are no longer needed. That means until there is effective policing throughout the Province. . . . That point has not been reached.(103)

It was during this time that Merlyn Rees, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, came under heavy criticism due to his Northern Ireland policy. As a result, he was replaced by Roy Mason. Thus the Conservatives achieved one of their long standing demands that Merlyn Rees should be replaced, as he had failed to stem the growing tide of violence besides showing his "gentle approach" to them. Time and again, the Conservatives had advocated that the Government should take tough anti-terrorist measures. The new, uncompromising anti-terrorist strategy introduced since September 1976 by Roy Mason owes a great deal to the Conservative pressure for it. This is exemplified by the following statement made by Airey Neave, a Conservative leader:


103. Ibid., p.40.
For the Conservative Party, who for the past three years have advocated a tough anti-terrorist strategy in the Province, the position must give great satisfaction...On security at least Mr. Roy Mason is a Tory, although on principle he never acknowledges Tory support. (104)

The Conservatives pledged their support to the Government, when the militant loyalists tried to organise a general strike in May 1977 to change the course of events in Northern Ireland as dramatically as in 1974. The leader of the Conservative Party, Margaret Thatcher, assured the Labour Prime Minister, after a Cabinet meeting of 28 April 1977, that the Conservative Party would support the Government in every action taken to minimise the dislocation that might be caused, especially Prime Minister's appeal to the people of Northern Ireland to "reject the appeal of the strike organised". (105) Addressing an Ulster Unionist Council luncheon in Belfast on 19 June 1978, she said: "The Conservative Government would establish a regional tier of local government in the Province." (106) Further, she said:

With the support of all those who believed in the union we will continue to uphold the clear and democratically expressed wish of the majority of Ulster people to remain citizens of the United Kingdom. Talk of a federal Ireland may be fashionable in certain circles; it is not a fashion that my party intends to follow. We shall not consider any plans for the political future of this part of the United Kingdom which could result in weakening of the union. (107)


105. The Times, 29 April 1977.

106. Ibid., 20 June 1978.

107. Ibid.
Subsequently, the Conservative Party came forward with a new proposal to end the political deadlock in the Province. Its policy was summed up in the following statement by Airey Neave:

...a power-sharing administration in Northern Ireland is no longer practical politics.... A new system of local government is needed for the benefit for all sections of the community. It would diminish the power of the Northern Ireland Office and its legion of civil servants. It could also foster a better understanding between the various political parties, who would at last have an opportunity of doing constructive work again on behalf of the community.(108)

The Conservatives' manifesto of 1979 also reiterated the Conservative resolve to maintain the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and defeat terrorism. It said:

In the absence of devolved government, we will seek to establish one or more elected regional councils with a wide range of powers over local services. We recognise that Northern Ireland's industry will continue to require government support.(109)

With the advent of the Conservatives to power, a four-party conference (OUP, DUP, SDLP and the Alliance Party) was proposed on 25 October 1979 by Humphrey Atkins, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. In this regard, the British Government published a Working Paper on the form of government in Northern Ireland, which contained a proposal, by which representatives of the minority community


could play a positive role in the administration of the devolved form of government. The Working Paper also sought to restore to the people of the Northern Ireland more control over their own affairs. The four-party conference was held from 7 January to 24 March 1980. But, it failed to produce any acceptable solution.\textsuperscript{110} A few months later, in July 1980, the Government published another discussion paper, entitled The Government of Northern Ireland: Proposals for Further Discussion.\textsuperscript{111} It said inter alia that there was substantial agreement on many issues like the form of locally elected administration, a unicameral assembly, elections based on proportional representation, range of devolved powers, the office of the Secretary of State and safeguards against discrimination.\textsuperscript{112}

According to Christopher Thomas, the significant elements in these proposals were that the Conservatives moved in the direction of a devolved form of government rather than sticking to their original approach of an "imposed solution." They were also critical of continuing "direct rule" in the Province.\textsuperscript{113}

The growing wave of terrorism and hunger strike by the Irish Republican Army in H-Blocks prison in Northern Ireland blocked, however, the possibility of carrying forward the discussion on devolution. As a result, the

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112. Ibid., p.5.
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Conservative Government came out with the proposal of establishing a non-executive and purely advisory Northern Ireland Council, which would consist of elected representatives without itself being directly elected.\textsuperscript{114}

Summing up the Conservative policy, James Prior, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, told the Conservative Party's Annual Conference held in Blackpool in October 1981:

The British people will always stand against terrorism and violence. They will stand by the desire of the majority in Northern Ireland to retain their United Kingdom connection. But they also expect the people of Northern Ireland to seek to get on with each other, to get on with their close neighbours in the Republic, and to get on with the job of healing and reconstruction....We therefore have to consider how we are to proceed. There are, of course, risks in anything we do. But I must add emphatically that there are just as many risks involved in doing nothing.

I do not believe -- and here I come to that part of the motion -- at the moment that it would be right to push ahead with the proposed Northern Ireland Council. But I do believe that we have to find a new momentum and sustain it.\textsuperscript{115}

In order to end the political deadlock, the Government published on 5 April 1982 a White Paper, which proposed to hold Assembly election in Northern Ireland, leading to the formation of a power-sharing devolved government. The proposed election was to result in a 78-member Northern Ireland Assembly elected by the single transferable vote system of proportional representation. The Assembly election took place on 20 October 1982. It

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 2 July 1981.

failed, however, to meet the aspirations of two political parties - the SDLP and Sinn Fein.

The first meeting of the Assembly took place on 11 November 1982. Since then it held debates on a number of issues including security, and established Committees to undertake detailed examination of the policies pursued by the Stormont departments, manned by some 32,000 civil servants. But the two main anti-Unionist parties, having campaigned on an unambiguously abstentionist platform and having won 19 seats in the Assembly election of 20 October 1982 (14 SDLP and 5 Sinn Fein), refused to take their seats in the Assembly and thus, brought the Province once again under direct rule from the Westminster.

THE LIBERAL PARTY

The Liberal Party, though much smaller than either of the Labour and Conservative Parties, has also contributed substantially to the debate on a viable solution to the Northern Ireland problem. The Liberals supported the Government's reformation programme in 1968-69, but were disappointed with the unwillingness of the Unionist Government in Northern Ireland to implement it. The Liberal disappointment was ventilated by Jermy Thorpe, Liberal Party leader, in his speech in the House of Commons on 22 April 1969 in the following words:

The Northern Ireland Government must produce a timetable for carrying out the reforms which Captain O'Neill has promised, and which, unhappily, a large minority of Unionists have succeeded in delaying. The timetable must be publicly announced and it must be brief. It would be utterly inadequate, in the present circumstances, to delay until the Cameron Commission, inquiring into the causes of unrest in Northern Ireland, has reported. The appointment of the Commission was a wise step, but its value
would be undermined if its existence were made the excuse for delaying measures which all reasonable opinion recognises to be necessary. (116)

After the general election of 1970, the Liberals mooted a new proposal to form a Joint Consultative Council of Parliamentarians from London, Dublin and Stormont. However, the Liberals like other major parties, held the view that "there can be no change in the border without the consent of the majority of Northern Ireland." They were also of the view that if the reformation programme was not implemented by Chichester Clark, or if he was overthrown by the enemies of reform, the only alternative would be imposition of direct rule from Westminster.

The initial response of the Liberals to the introduction of internment was identical to that of the Labour Party, but the Liberals were sharper in their criticism of its implementation. Referring to the internment, Jeremy Thorpe said in the Commons on 22 September 1971:

...British troops were sent to Northern Ireland ostensibly to maintain peace and to protect the Catholic minority who at the time were in fear of their lives. This may not have been the view of certain Ulster-Unionist M.P.s, but it was

118. Ibid.
119. Ibid.
120. Ibid.
certainly the view of the then Government, and it was not challenged at the time.

I therefore find it extraordinary that internment has been such an arbitrary weapon in its implementation, with the only people falling into the category of internees being those who happen to belong to the minority group. (121)

Soon after the imposition of Direct Rule in March 1972, the Liberals, in their Annual Conference held on 24 April 1972, called for the "abolition of the Ulster Defence Regiment in Northern Ireland, the withdrawal of troops in barracks and peace-keeping lines, and the introduction of United Nations observers." (122) That apart, the Liberals subsequently supported the Government's new initiative as contained in the White Paper on Constitutional Proposals for Northern Ireland published in 1973. Participating in a debate on the White Paper in the House of Commons, Jeremy Thorpe said:

I believe that the White Paper should receive the support of the House. I equally believe and fervently hope that it will be given a fair chance of working in Northern Ireland... It would be impossible for any member of the Liberal Party to oppose the White Paper. (123)

A year later, the Young Liberals, who had the support of some Liberal MPs, called upon the Government "to set a date for the complete withdrawal of all British troops from Northern Ireland, and hand over the control of security to a UN peace-keeping force." (124) At the same time, the


122. Deutch and Mirgowan, n.29, p.167.


124. The Times, 1 June 1974.
Liberals believed in continuation of the bi-partisan policy to achieve some form of power-sharing in Northern Ireland. But, when the Constitutional Convention of 1975-76 failed, the Liberals were disappointed beyond measure. On the failure of the Constitutional Convention, the Party leader, Jo Grimmond, said: "It is tragic that the present policies are failing. We were right to support them. Perhaps we should continue to do so for a time. But we cannot put up with the present situation for ever."125 The Liberals criticised, however, the Conservative leader, Margaret Thatcher, for her visit to Belfast on 19 June 1978 to address the Ulster Unionist Council. The Liberal leader, John Pardoe, described her trip "as one of the most despicable made by any politician since Chamberlain's last trip to Munich."126 Speaking at Slough, Berkshire, he said: "She [Margaret Thatcher] is not there [in Belfast] to solve the problems of province, but to forge an electoral alliance with the representatives of religious bigotry in Northern Ireland."127 Continuing, he said:

She has decided that she will need the votes of the Ulster Unionists, who in their neglect of minority interests have brought Northern Ireland to a state of civil war.... Airey Neave [Conservative] had got his history wrong. It was not the Liberals who toaded to Hitler but the forces of big business and the radical right, as represented by Mrs. Thatcher and her friends.(128)

The Liberals' election manifesto of 1979 included a proposal to end the political stalemate in Northern Ireland. The manifesto proposal read as below:

127. Ibid.
128. Ibid.
As an interim measure we propose that a 15 to 20 member Advisory Council be elected by the people of Northern Ireland using PR(STV). Such a Council would be large enough to let every significant viewpoint have a voice but small enough for all its members to have real discussion with each other as well as with the Secretary of State and other political representatives.(129)

According to the manifesto, the proposed Advisory Council would:

1. Represent the views of the people of Northern Ireland to the Secretary of State and advise him accordingly, and

2. discuss how a Constitutional Conference should be set up to consider the means, by which a generally acceptable form of government for the Province should be devolved.(130)

At the same time, the manifesto asserted:

There must be no capitulation to violence. Direct Rule must continue for the time being.

The civil power must be given military assistance as long as required. Britain will not force Northern Ireland to unite with the Republic of Ireland.(131)

The Liberals gave firm support to the Government's Northern Ireland Act, 1974. They, however, complained that it did not include a Bill of Rights.132 It is also significant to note that in March 1981, five liberal MPs, including David Steel, voted against the renewal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act.133 The 'special court for

130. Ibid.
131. Ibid.
terrorist trial in Ulster also created great resentment among the Liberals. The Party leader, Stephen Ross, said in the Parliament on 2 July 1981, after meeting one of the Maze hunger strikers, that: "they [the Conservative Government] should consider whether in some areas they might be able to bring back the jury system to allay some legitimate fears expressed elsewhere."134

With a view to breaking the political stalemate, the British Government brought forward a Bill on Northern Ireland Assembly. When it came up for third reading in the House of Commons in June 1982, it was opposed by certain Conservative MPs, who wanted to force the Government to drop the Bill altogether. However, the Liberals confirmed their support to it. On 22 June 1982, the Liberal leader, Alan Beith, said:

I want to put it on the record that the Liberal Party is in favour of the Bill and wants it enacted. Nobody claims, not even the Government, that the Bill provides a certain solution to the problems in Northern Ireland. However, it is supported by many people in Northern Ireland. The Bill gives people in Northern Ireland the opportunity to elect representatives to discuss and, if they so choose, to deal with a wide range of their own affairs. As such, both I and my party welcome it.(135)

Henceforth, the Liberal Party made an alliance with the splinter group of the Labour Party, the Social Democratic Party. The first combined manifesto of the Liberal and the SDP was brought out before the general election in 1983, which clearly projected the Party's view. The combined manifesto said:

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We support the present Northern Ireland Assembly and will work towards a return to devolved power in place of direct rule from Westminster. We favour the early establishment of an Anglo-Irish consultative body at Parliamentary level representing all parties at Westminster, Belfast and Dublin. (136)

Thus, it may be seen that on fundamental questions pertaining to the tackling of the problem of Northern Ireland, there was a large measure of consensus among the political parties in Britain. This was particularly true of the major governing parties -- the Labour Party and the Conservative Party -- which tended, by and large, to maintain an 'imperialistic' framework for the Province (may it be through bringing 'reforms' or by maintaining 'law and order'). As a result, they adopted a bi-partisan approach to the vital issues afflicting Northern Ireland. This bi-partisan approach became most convenient and could provide continuity to policies and tactics, as they were in power alternatively from the very beginning of the trouble in the Province in 1968-69. And at all stages, whether in government or in opposition, they extended support to each other in dealing with the problem. Two spillover effects of this approach were increased violence in the Province and the significant growth of reactionary forces like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).

The bi-partisan approach of the two major British parties was discernible when, following the growing violence of 1968-69, the then Labour Government decided to send the British troops to Northern Ireland, while introducing reforms simultaneously. Of course, this policy of the Labour Government had the support of the Liberal Party also. It is worth recalling, in this context, that when the

Government decided to send troops to Northern Ireland, the
Conservative Party spokesman, Reginald Maudling, affirmed on
21 April 1969 his Party's support to the measure. He said:
"We on this side of the House join the Government... and
support their action."\textsuperscript{137} A few days later, i.e., on 8 May
1969, the Party leader, Edward Heath, also spoke on the
question of Reforms in the same vein in the Commons: "We in
this House fully support the reforms... in the same way as
the Prime Minister and his colleagues and, I think the whole
House have pledged."\textsuperscript{138} An identical approach was also
notable, when, in March 1972, the Conservative Government
imposed 'Direct Rule' in Northern Ireland. Indeed, this
move was welcomed by all political parties in Britain. At
the same time, all of them held the view that the Direct
Rule was only a temporary measure and not a permanent
solution to the problem. They unanimously supported the
Darlington Conference of September 1972 and the resultant
border poll in March 1973, in which a majority voted in
favour of Northern Ireland's union with Britain. This
majority view was subsequently incorporated in the Northern
Ireland Constitutional Act of 1974 in the form of a
'Constitutional Guarantee', which said: "In no event will
Northern Ireland or any part will cease to be part of Her
Majesty's dominions and of the United Kingdom without the
consent of the majority of the people of Northern
Ireland."\textsuperscript{139}

Similarly, all the national parties were united on
the fundamental approach, that a solution to the problem
should come by political means and not by violence. They
also held an agreed view that the majority Report of the

\textsuperscript{137} UK, Commons, Parliamentary Debates, series 5, vol.782,
session 1968-69, col.33.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., vol.783, session 1968-69, cols.655-6.

\textsuperscript{139} UK, HMSO, Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973
Constitutional Convention of 1975-76 did not constitute "widespread acceptance throughout the community" in the Province, and therefore, did not fulfill the stipulation in the Northern Ireland Act of 1974. They also, by and large, maintained an identical approach on the question of the composition of the devolved form of Government in Northern Ireland, in which the participation of the minority was considered essential, whether in a set-up like the Power-Sharing Executive of 1974 or in an elected Assembly like the one which was constituted in 1982. Significantly, they all rejected the idea of the restoration of the old type of Stormont Government in the Province. And finally, they were unanimous in their opinion that the involvement of the Irish Republic was essential for a lasting solution to the problem.

All this should not obscure the fact that despite the bi-partisan approach on fundamental issues, on many occasions there were variations in emphasis and priority among the national parties. For example, it is true that from the very beginning the Reformation programme, introduced by the Labour Government, had the support of the Conservative and Liberal Parties. It is, however, equally true that the pace of implementation of these reforms was perceptibly slow after the Conservative Government assumed power in June 1970. Of course, it is possible that this might have been caused by the traditionally close relationship between the Conservative Party and the Unionist Party of Northern Ireland, and by the apprehension that any serious move towards the implementation of reforms would cause frictions in this relationship. However, the result was that this led the Labour Party to urge the Parliamentary Labour Party "to bring pressure on the Government to ensure that the Government of Northern Ireland introduces immediate reforms".

Differences among the major parties again surfaced in August 1971, when the Conservative Government introduced internment in the Province. This measure was opposed by both the Labour and Liberal Parties on the premise that, in effect, it would be applied more against the minority community rather than against the Protestant offenders.

Similarly, though the Labour Party officially supported the Constitutional Guarantee, yet many senior Labour leaders like James Callaghan and Merlyn Rees were lukewarm towards it, so much so that they even went on chipping it off. This was clear from James Callaghan's speech in the House of Commons on 2 July 1981, which surprised even the Labour Party leaders. They too raised discordant voices on the question of the continued presence of the British forces in the Province.

While both the Conservative and Labour Parties were united on the issue of maintenance of 'law and order' in the Province and believed that the withdrawal of the British forces would have catastrophic consequences, the Liberal Party demanded the withdrawal of British forces and the introduction of United Nations observers in the Province.

It is interesting to note that although officially the Labour Party maintained its bi-partisan approach with the Conservatives on 'security', yet many prominent Labour MPs, like Joan Maynard, Maureen Colouhoun, Stan Thorne, Sydney Bidwell and Ron Thomas, criticised the Labour Party's bi-partisan approach and demanded an early withdrawal of the British troops from Northern Ireland. This, and the way, in which the 'security' question was dealt with during Merlyn Rees' tenure as the Secretary of State for Northern

Ireland, caused rift in the relations between the Labour and Conservative Parties on bi-partisan policy. Many Conservatives were critical of Merlyn Rees' circumlocuted way of dealing with terrorists, his sloppy 'security control' across the border and the freedom of movement enjoyed by Seamus Twomey (the Belfast IRA Chief). They alleged that Rees had let off hard-core IRA terrorists, so they demanded his removal from the post of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, no matter 'whatever the eventual fate of political bi-partisanship.'

The Conservative and Labour Parties also differed on the possible remedies for the economic and social ills of Northern Ireland. The Labour Party believed that "peace and security cannot be achieved if policies are divorced from the conditions in which people live". In its election manifesto of 1983, the Labour Party rebutted the Conservative view that the "Tory policies have been a disaster for the Northern Ireland economy. Unemployment has soared. The economy is in ruins. Housing and social services in desperate straits." At the same time, the


144. See, UK, Labour Party, The New Hope for Britain: Labour Manifesto 1983 (London, 1983), p.31. In 1979, unemployment in Northern Ireland was 10 per cent, which went up to 22.3 per cent (127,954 unemployed) on 9 September 1982; manufacturing jobs fell by 33 per cent since 1978; over 10 per cent of housing in Northern Ireland was unfit for human habitation; housing construction fell over 40 per cent since 1978. For details, see Labour Party, n.143, pp.3-5, and also see for Labour Party's criticism of Conservative Government's new economic initiative for Northern Ireland, UK, Commons, Parliamentary Debates, series 6, vol.39, session 1982-83, cols.865-70.
Labour emphasised the need to create more jobs and to provide for additional investment in Northern Ireland for its economic stability. The Conservatives emphasised above all, the 'security' aspect, so they attributed the economic setback in the Northern Ireland to the increased violence in the Province. According to Robert Rowthorn, a Cambridge economist, about 24,000 jobs were lost in the Province in the decade of 1970-80 as a direct result of terrorist activities. However, the Conservatives were of the opinion that the main cause of Northern Ireland's economic difficulties was the steady and unrelenting decline of its four traditional mainstays: agriculture, shipbuilding, textiles and clothing.

It is notable that although on many occasions there were departures from the bi-partisan approach by the British political parties on issues pertaining to Northern Ireland, yet it would be a mistake to assume that there was any substantial difference in their basic approaches. This was reflected in what James Callaghan stated in the House of Commons on 2 July 1986. He said: "... I have never seen any advantage, and I see none now, in deliberately trying to magnify differences between Government and the Opposition on the political future of that country...