The Northern Ireland political parties, though evolved within the United Kingdom, differed in many respects, particularly in their perceptions and approaches, from the British political parties. A distinction between them is that whereas in Britain there is practically a two-party system, Northern Ireland has a multi-party system accompanied by one-party dominance.¹ Hence, in Britain while the two major parties fought the elections on fairly equal terms, in Northern Ireland there has been one-party dominance, with several small parties in opposition.² Another feature is that the cleavage among Northern Ireland political parties has been mainly on religious lines, whereas in Britain it is based largely on the socio-economic issues.³

The political parties in Northern Ireland could be broadly divided into three groups:

(i) Unionists or Loyalists: It is the major Protestant Party in Northern Ireland.

(ii) Bi-Confessionalists: Till 1969 it was mainly the Labour and the Liberal Parties, but, since 1970, its place has been taken by the Alliance Party.


Anti-Partitionists: Previously the Nationalist Party, but, after 1969, it was superseded by the Social Democratic and Labour Party. The traditional Nationalist and Republican groups also fall in this category, but they have little achievement to their credit. The politics of all these political groups in Northern Ireland revolves round one single issue, viz., "keeping the Union with Britain versus the reunification of Ireland".

The Unionist and the Loyalist Groups

Prior to 1969, the Unionist Party had a placid history of ruling over Northern Ireland, in which the Orange Order played an important role in the maintenance of the Protestant political unity. Hence, political divisions in the Ulster Unionist Party were rare. But, the rapid political change and pressure of violence in Northern Ireland, especially after the Civil Rights movement, caused splits and realignments in the Unionist Party. In fact, the division among the Unionists came with the reformation programme announced in 1968-69. These divisions among the Unionists are of considerable importance, because they are the root of many factions such as the Official Unionist Party (OUP), Unionist Party of Northern Ireland (UPNI), United Ulster Unionist Party (UUPP), Vanguard Unionist Progressive Party (VUPP), and Ulster Loyalist Democratic Party (ULDP). However, in recent years the two Unionist groups -- the Democratic Unionist Party and the Official Unionist Party -- are competing for dominance of the loyalist community.

4. Ibid., p.62.
5. Ibid., p.61.
6. Ibid., pp.64-5.
The Unionist Party emphasised the issue of partition of Ireland and, in the beginning, its slogan was 'not an inch'. The Unionist apprehension was that any action, which gave the minority a parliamentary majority, would lead to a Dublin Parliament. Thus, the Unionists left no stone unturned in the elections in Northern Ireland to portray their opponents as disloyal. Secondly, the Unionist apprehension was heightened by the emergence of the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) as an 'Official Opposition' in Stormont after the general election of 1958, when it secured four parliamentary seats. The NILP's loyalty was challenged in 1969 general election when the Unionists brought out a publication, *Northern Ireland Labour: What Are Its Real Aims?* The NILP was perceived as a threat by the Unionists, because it had also helped establish 'the Council of Labour in Ireland' in 1968 to enable joint consultations on social, economic and political issues without reference to partition -- a move which had not been made till then to link up with the political front in the Republic. Further, the NILP also joined hands with the Republicans, Communists and others from time to time.

The first phase of division in the Unionist Party came with the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement and subsequently, the announcement of reformation programme under the pressure of Westminster. The reformation programme was opposed by William Craig, Home Minister in the Unionist Government, which led to his dismissal on 11

8. Ibid., p.53.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p.54. 'The Council of Labour in Ireland' was to link the Republic's third largest party -- the Irish Labour Party -- with Northern Ireland Labour Party in the 1960s.
December 1968 by Terence O’Neill, Northern Ireland Prime Minister. Similarly, two other Ministers, Brian Faulkner and William Morgan, who opposed the setting up of the Cameron Commission, also resigned in protest. Further, the acceptance of Universal Adult Franchise for the next local government elections by the Unionist Parliamentary Party on 23 April 1969 led to the resignation of Chichester Clark, Agriculture Minister. Though he was in favour of this proposal, yet he thought, that "it was too soon for such a move". Thus, by this time fissiparous tendencies had become visible in the Unionist Party mainly on the issue of reform and the nature of the society of Northern Ireland in future.

Terence O’Neill, chose not to stand up to opposition, so he resigned in April 1969. Chichester Clark, who succeeded O’Neill, retained all O’Neill Ministers and continued the reforms, for which he got the unanimous support of the Unionist Standing Committee. But in June 1970, there emerged a pressure group, a right-wing conclave called the West Ulster Unionist Council, with Harry West, who was sacked by O’Neill when he was the Minister of Agriculture in 1967, as its President. Though Harry West declared that the "Council" was not a rebel party nor a

breakaway group of the Ulster Unionist Council, yet it was very much critical of the Government's policy, especially on housing. The West Ulster Unionist Council termed the Unionist policy as 'suicidal', which would hasten the end of the Unionist control over Ulster.\footnote{Mervyn Pauley, "The New Parties: The West Ulster Unionist Council", \textit{Fortnight}, no.2, 9 October 1970, p.11.}

Outside the Unionist Party, pressure was mounting from Ian Paisley's Protestant Unionist Party (later known as Democratic Unionist Party), which pronounced that reforms meant 'surrendering to Popery and Republicanism'. However, a major achievement of Paisley's Protestant Unionist Party was that in the April 1970 by-elections in Northern Ireland, Ian Paisley won the Bannside seat of Terence O'Neill, and William Beattie of the same party won the South Antrim seat after defeating an Official Unionist.\footnote{W.D. Flackes, \textit{Northern Ireland: A Political Directory} (London, 1983), p.76.}

It is significant to note that despite strong opposition from the radical right-wing Unionists to reform, the Liberal Unionists carried out reforms. This was done for many reasons. Firstly, the general election in February 1969 was fought on the issue of reforms.\footnote{See, \textit{Ulster Unionist Party Manifesto}, \textit{Ulster at the Crossroads: The Ulster Unionist Party's Declaration of Principles and Statement of Policy for the General Election, 1969} (Belfast, 1969), pp.1-6.} Therefore, the Unionist Party was morally bound to carry out reform programme to honour its election pledge, failure of which would have adversely affected the Party prospects in the next general election. Secondly, much was done under the pressure of Westminster, which was not willing to tolerate any major interference either in its timing or in its implementation. Apart from these factors, there were quite
a few members in the Unionist Cabinet, who believed that the reform was needed and that it was morally justifiable.20

In March 1971, Chichester Clark was replaced by Brian Faulkner as the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. But the opposition of the right-wing Unionists to the reforms and prevailing constitutional and security policies of the Unionist Government continued, so the authority of the Unionist Government was challenged and eroded constantly by fissures in the Unionist Party.21 And on 9 February 1972, there emerged an umbrella pressure group, the Ulster Vanguard, under the leadership of William Craig. In the words of Martyn Turner:

Vanguard, at that time, was not seen by the press as anything other than the latest 'loyalist' circus act having its precedent in such notable failures as the West Ulster Unionist Council. Vanguard was launched at that time ... 'not as a political party but an umbrella for traditional Unionist groups' as the Loyalist Association of Workers, Ulster Special Constabulary Association, the Young Unionists, the Ulster Defence Association and, of course, the Orange Order.(22)

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Ian Paisley, however, saw the concessions to the Catholic minority as a betrayal of 'their loyalist Protestant heritage'.23 After all, the Unionists dominated the politics of Northern Ireland for a long time. Therefore, any such concession to the minority was regarded by the 'loyalists'


as a threat to the Protestant supremacy. Nevertheless, among all the last three Prime Ministers of Northern Ireland, the role of Brian Faulkner was viewed as lackadaisical towards reforms and his contribution was, indeed, very little.24

The British Government imposed direct rule in Northern Ireland in March 1972. With this, the Unionist Party entered the second phase of divisions.25 The Vanguard of William Craig vehemently opposed 'Direct Rule' and gave a call for a two-day (27-28 March 1972) strike against it, which was transformed into a mass rally of about 100,000 Protestants, causing severe disruption of life in Northern Ireland. Notably, William Craig believed in a 'separate Ulster identity', which could be achieved only through independent Ulster. On the other hand, Ian Paisley advocated total integration of the Provincial Administration with Westminster.26 When he was asked how he justified his policy of total integration in the context of the direct rule, he said:

When they took away our Parliament, when they took away our Government, we referred to a pact to the total integration. That was our right. But the Official Unionist Party did not agree. Though they did not oppose... the opposition came from the British Government. And it became an impossible matter to achieve. So we adopted another policy and that policy must contain linkage with Britain. We were just returning to status quo. So all legislative powers of Northern Ireland should be vested in the United Kingdom Parliament and Northern Ireland


should be seen to take its rightful place as a full partner in the nation.\(27\)

The idea of total integration with Westminster evoked, however, very little support.

In September 1972, when an All-Party Conference was called at Darlington, the Democratic Unionist Party refused to attend it on the plea that William Whitelaw, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, had failed to institute an inquiry into the killings of two Protestants by the army on Shankill Road. The DUP leader, Ian Paisley, reaffirmed on 25 October 1972 in a four-page policy document, that "Consultation and discussion on the machinery of Government can take place only when the security situation is settled."\(^{28}\) But the Ulster Unionist Party attended the Conference and called the talks 'valuable and significant'.\(^{29}\)

The Ulster Vanguard, which had been till then an umbrella pressure group, became the Vanguard Unionist Progressive Party (VUPP) in March 1973. With this, the 'fragmentation' inside the Unionist Party deepened. And when the Border Poll of 8 March 1973 was followed by the British Government's White Paper on Constitutional Proposals dated 20 March 1973 on power-sharing, it was rejected by both the DUP and VUPP. The main reasons for their opposition were the proposals for a 'power-sharing Executive, which was to be composed of Protestant and Catholic representatives, and a 'Council of Ireland'.\(^{30}\)

\(^{27}\) The author's interview with Ian K. Paisley in Belfast, 1 October 1987.

\(^{28}\) The Times (London), 26 October 1972.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 4 October 1972.

They further asserted that they would make every effort to make the Assembly unworkable. The VUPP and DUP also forged an electoral alliance for this reason. Their programme had the following planks: rejection of the 'Direct Rule', a 'return to the Stormont Parliament,' 'rejection of a Council of Ireland,' and opposition to the unification of Ulster with the Republic of Ireland. It is significant to note that Ian Paisley had dismissed the Vanguard as an organisation as early as on 11 February 1972. On the other hand, the Official Unionist Party did not reject outright the proposals in the White Paper, although it refused to share power with those groups whose aim was a United Ireland. Thus, within the Official Unionist Party there were two groups --- one which supported the White Paper, called 'pledged', and the other which opposed it, called 'unpledged'. Apart from these four groups in the 'Unionist Party, there were two more groups, namely the West Belfast Loyalist Coalition and Independent Loyalist. Subsequently, when the Assembly election took place on 28 June 1973 for 78 seats, it gave the Unionists the following results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Official Unionist (Pledged)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unofficial Unionist (Unpledged)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Unionist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanguard Unionist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Belfast Loyalist Coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Loyalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


33. Turner, n.22, p.5.


35. Flackes, n.18, p.267.
The Assembly election was followed by the Sunningdale Conference of 6-9 December 1973, and as a result Brian Faulkner agreed to share power with the SDLP and the Alliance Party. The direct rule was brought to an end and the power-sharing Executive started functioning with effect from 1 January 1974. It was for the first time in the history of Northern Ireland that the two communities shared power. But more important was probably its effect on consolidating the right-wing Unionism.

It was expected that Craig's Vanguard Party and Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party, the two Unionist groupings outside the party fold, would co-operate in their opposition to the new Executive. Faulkner's hope was belied when the Ulster Unionist Council rejected the Sunningdale proposals by 457 votes to 374. As a result, on 22 January 1974, Faulkner resigned from the Chairmanship of the Unionist Party, but remained as the Chief Executive. Faulkner, in his resignation letter to George Clark, Chairman of the Party's Standing Committee said:

In view of the decision of the Ulster Unionist Council to reject the policies of the Unionist Assembly Party I have decided that I can no longer continue as leader of the present party organisation. I would accordingly ask you to accept my resignation. I have taken this step reluctantly after so many years closely associated with the organisation and with you personally.(38)

The rejection of proposals by the Ulster Unionist Council was significant for two reasons. Firstly, there emerged a coalition of anti-White Paper Unionists under


38. The Times, 8 January 1974.
Harry West, Democratic Unionist under Ian Paisley and the Vanguard Unionists under William Craig. In January 1974, they formed the United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC), which agreed not to oppose each other in the "forthcoming elections to the Westminster Parliament in February 1974". Secondly, the isolation of Faulkner from the Unionist Party led him to form a separate Unionist Party on 4 September 1974, known as the Unionist Party of Northern Ireland (UPNI).

After its formation, the United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC) issued a statement calling for, among other things, the abolition of the "Executive" and the end of any idea of a "Council of Ireland". The most significant achievement of the UUUC was its victory in the February 1974 Westminster general election, wherein it secured 11 out of 12 Westminster seats. During the general strike called by the Ulster Workers' Council in May 1974 to make the newly formed power-sharing Executive unworkable, the UUUC also lent its support to the strike. This strike of Ulster Workers' Council led to the collapse of the power-sharing government, which culminated in the imposition of direct rule for the second time from the Westminster.

40. Ibid.
41. The Ulster Workers' Council, which organised a strike in May 1974 by cutting power supplies and halting industrial and other activities, had massive backing of Protestant para-military groups and UUUC. This 14-day strike caused a chaotic situation in Northern Ireland so much so that the Unionist Members in the Executive were forced to resign. The UWC operated through a Coordinating Committee, headed by Glen Barr, which included three leading politicians -- Harry West (Official Unionist), Ian Paisley (DUP), and William Craig (Vanguard).
It is significant to note that none of the UUUC leaders was hopeful of the success of the strike. While Paisley left for Canada just after the second day of the strike, only to return around the end of the first week of the strike, Harry West felt nervous about the strike. Craig, however, was the only leader, who stood firmly behind the strike and gave it his ungrudging support throughout.42

With the departure of the experimental power-sharing Executive, the British Government came out in July 1974 with a fresh White Paper for the Constitutional Convention. Before the Constitutional Convention started in 1975, the 'loyalist' coalition in a press conference rejected any possibility of sharing power with members of the SDLP. Answering a question, Harry West of UUUC, said: "We think that it is quite unrealistic to -- have in the Government of the country those people whose primary objective is the destruction of that country."43 The only role the loyalist coalition was prepared to concede to the SDLP was membership of back-bencher committees, envisaged in the new Parliament. "We want to see the minority community involved in the running of the country, and they can do that without having a seat in Government",44 he added.

However, the Constitutional Convention of 1975-76 turned out to be a fiasco. Nevertheless, its major significance was William Craig's advocacy of voluntary coalition with the main Catholic party, the SDLP. This was done in order to persuade the British Government to return to a devolved form of Government.45 This led to a split in

43. The Times, 17 April 1975.
44. Ibid.
45. McAllister, n. 1, p.66.
the Vanguard, the majority of which remained loyal to the UUUC. William Craig was expelled from the UUUC. The anti-Craigites regrouped themselves under the leadership of Ernest Baird, and the remnants of the Vanguard regrouped themselves under the title, the United Ulster Unionist Movement.46

Craig's militancy got watered down with his voluntary coalition with the SDLP. The failure of the Constitutional Convention led to a political vacuum in Northern Ireland, so the direct rule continued in the Province.

The third phase of fissures in the Unionist camp surfaced up in 1977, when the Unionists got divided into 'devolutionists' and 'integrationists'.47 Ian Paisley demanded the 'old type majority rule Stormont Parliament', for which he got token support from many Official Unionist Party members. The other Official Unionist members came, however, under the influence of Enoch Powell, who demanded total 'integration'.48 The strenuous relationship among the Unionists became more manifest following the formation of the United Unionist Action Council, which was a subcommittee of the UUUC. The UUAC aired its demand for 'devolution' and better 'security'. But the Official Unionists quickly disapproved the Action Council.49 The UUAC, which consisted of the Democratic Unionist Party, Ulster Workers' Council, Ulster Defence Association, Apprentice Boys of Derry, Orange Volunteers, Royal Black Preceptory and the Independent Orange Order, gave a call for strike on 2 May 1977. Ian Paisley was the brain behind this strike, which, however, was condemned by the Official

49. Ibid.
Unionists. One major objective of the 1977 strike was to bring an end to the direct rule and restore the majority rule, whereas the 1974 strike aimed at bringing down the power-sharing Executive and was much against the Sunningdale agreement. But the strike failed ignominiously. After eleven days, i.e., on 12 May 1977, it was called off. The reasons were many. The most significant among them was that it failed to get support from the Official Unionists and the Orange Order. Secondly, it failed to win the support of the mass media. Thirdly, it was much personalised and appeared like "Paisley's Strike". Lastly, the massive security force dealt with the strikers firmly. But Paisley refused to take it as a failure. Though he blamed the OUP for voting against the strike, yet he expressed satisfaction over its results, particularly his achievements in the subsequent local government elections, where he gained the highest votes. "So politically", he said, "it was a success."52

The Parliamentary coalition of the United Ulster Unionist Council at Westminster also broke up at the time of the strike, because two of its MPs, Ian Paisley and John Dunlop, did support the strike. However, the UUUC experiment at Westminster had important political implications. It marked the real break between the Conservative Party and the Ulster Unionists in Parliament. According to Arthur and Walker: "It was during this period that the Unionists persuaded the Government to increase Northern Ireland representation at Westminster and succeeded in diluting the concept of power-sharing and the

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid., pp.368-78.

52. The author's interview with Ian K. Paisley in Belfast, 1 October 1987.

155
Irish dimension. At the same time, i.e., on 25 February 1978, William Craig dissolved the Vanguard Unionist Progressive Party and merged it into the Official Unionist Party. The Ulster Defence Association, the most powerful para-military organisation of the Protestants, advocated, however, a plan for an independent Northern Ireland with a Presidential system of constitution, which would enable the Roman Catholic minority to take part in the Government without institutionalising the concept of power-sharing. Under the Plan, the elected President would nominate his Executive, with checks and balances, as in the United States of America.

When the four-party (OUP, DUP, SDLP and the Alliance Party) Conference was called by Humphery Atkins, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, on 25 October 1979, which was held from 7 January to 24 March 1980, the DUP suggested that any future Government in Northern Ireland should be based entirely on the majority party in an elected Assembly and that there would not be any minority representation in the Cabinet. It further suggested that there should be a system of all-party Departmental Committees, which would tender advice on legislation and could call the Ministers to account for their actions.

The OUP viewed the Conference as unproductive, so it did not attend it. But, prior to the Conference, it submitted a proposal to the British Prime Minister for restoration of the Old Stormont system, with a Cabinet formed by the leader of the largest group of members in the Assembly. Further, it proposed a single-chamber Parliament.


at Stormont with a range of powers in line with those assigned to Northern Ireland by the Government of Ireland Act, 1920, and controlled by a Cabinet.56

The OUP-DUP rivalry was once again revived during the 1981 Council election, in which the OUP fell behind the DUP in terms of votes polled but retained its superiority in the number of seats won. Though the DUP of Ian Paisley welcomed the Government's proposal to hold an Assembly election on 20 October 1982, yet it was disappointed to see that the DUP could win only 21 seats against the OUP's 26. The OUP, which had declined to participate in the talks on James Prior's proposal for 'rolling devolution',57 took five seats more than the DUP. This was a modest victory for the OUP. The other two parties -- the Independent Unionist and the Ulster Popular Unionist -- won one seat each.

It is pertinent to mention that though the rift between the OUP and the DUP continued, yet time and again they went in for electoral alliances, e.g., during the June 1983 Westminster election. In the elections the OUP proved its dominance by capturing 11 seats out of 17, whereas the DUP got only three.

------------------------------


57. In 1982, James Prior, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, proposed to the local political parties in Northern Ireland a plan, which was called "rolling devolution". It was a system, where an Assembly would start off with only a consultative and security role. This could later be extended to embrace the devolution of one or more local departments, but this devolution would depend on the achievement in the Assembly of 'cross-community support'.

157
THE ANTI-PARTITIONIST PARTIES

(i) The Social Democratic and Labour Party

In the absence of any solid political organisation for the Catholic minority till 1969, the Unionist political dominance in Northern Ireland was a fact of life. Nevertheless, while the late 1960s witnessed fissiparous tendencies among the Unionists, pressures were building up for achieving political unity among the Nationalists. Such moves were discernible, when the National Unity and the National Democratic Party (NDP) were formed in 1959 and 1964 respectively.58 But in concrete terms they achieved little and their prospects of making further progress became slim following the formation of the Civil Rights Movement in 1967. Thus, the two major Catholic groups -- the Nationalists and the Republicans -- who were vying with each other for Catholic support during the period 1921-1969, remained unsuccessful. Two main reasons for their failure were: their inability to raise socio-economic issues, rather than 'united Ireland', and personality clashes among their top leaders. The policy of absenteeism also "highlighted the Catholic community's political dilemma".59

In retrospect, the emergence of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in 1970 ought to be viewed against this background. On 21 August 1970, the six Stormont MPs, belonging to different political affiliations, formed the SDLP "in an attempt to give the Catholic community, in particular, an alternative focus to street violence."60 Hence, the formation of the SDLP could

60. David Harkness, Northern Ireland since 1920 (Dublin, 1983), p.165.
be considered as the direct result of the Civil Rights campaign. The six MPs, who were initially involved in its formation, were from the Nationalist Party (Patrick O'Hanlon and Austin Currie), Republican Labour Party (Gerry Fitt), and the Northern Ireland Labour Party (Paddy Devlin). The other two, John Hume and Ivan Cooper, were from the Civil Rights Campaign itself. Subsequently, many members of the NDP and Republican Parties also joined it. Its policy was radical, socialist, and aimed at the establishment of a united Ireland. The SDLP was under attack from the NILP, Sinn Fein, Nationalists, Alliance Party, People's Democracy and the Republican Labour Party. But it was welcomed by the NDP and the Government of the South and was financed largely by the Southern businessmen.

The SDLP was predominantly the voice of the Catholics, but it proclaimed that it was non-sectarian. It also supported the proposal made by the Unionist Government under Brian Faulkner on 22 June 1971 for the creation of three new Parliamentary Committees to deal with social services, industrial development and environmental matters, with at least two of the Committees having Opposition MPs as salaried Chairmen. This was followed by

63. Ibid.
discussions between the Government and all shades of political opposition on 6 July 1971.

The support of the SDLP proved premature when, on 9 July 1971, the army shot dead two Catholics in Derry and the British Government failed to order an independent enquiry. The SDLP withdrew its support given to the Unionist Government. In a statement issued on 16 July 1971, it denounced the Conservative Government’s policy towards Northern Ireland. It also announced boycott of Stormont and threatened to form an alternative assembly, which would be the ‘voice of non-Unionists’.67

The boycott of Stormont by the SDLP could be regarded as the first major move by the Party. With this, the IRA Campaign began to gain strength, leading to the introduction of ‘internment’ in August 1971. Internment provoked bitter public resentment, so, on 15 August 1971, a Civil Disobedience movement was launched, which included non-payment of ‘rent and tax’.68 The Civil Disobedience movement met with partial success, setting aside the normalization talks between Reginald Maudling, the British Home Secretary, and the SDLP leaders. Debunking the Government’s policy, the SDLP made it clear that talks with the Government could take place only when all detainees held without trial were released.69 At that time, the SDLP leader, Austin Currie, suggested the establishment of a ‘Council of State’ to administer the province, and holding


69. The author’s interview with Mark Durkan, Research Assistant of John Hume, in Belfast, 12 September 1987.
of talks between the Opposition, Stormont, Westminster and Dublin.

Although the SDLP rejected any kind of violence, it decided to continue its campaign of Civil Disobedience and passive resistance.\(^{70}\) The British Government first supported Brian Faulkner, while Reginald Maudling talked about achieving 'an acceptable level of violence' in Northern Ireland. This drew strong resentment and protest from the Northern Ireland Government.\(^{71}\) The British Government was under pressure. When it realised that matters could aggravate, it took the responsibility of security in its hand by imposing in March 1972 direct rule from Westminster. In fact, John Hume and other SDLP members had won the backing of John Lynch, the Irish Prime Minister, and Harold Wilson, the British Labour leader, for their demand for the 'suspension of Stormont'.\(^{72}\) The imposition of 'Direct Rule' was welcomed by the SDLP, because for them the 'one-party dominance' was over.\(^{73}\) A survey conducted at that time also showed that the direct rule was acceptable to most of the Catholics and Protestants as a last resort.\(^{74}\) Subsequently, the six SDLP leaders, including Gerry Fitt, met the leaders of the Irish Labour Party in Dublin, where they issued a statement, which ran as below:

Both parties are agreed that it is their joint wish that, in the present serious and critical situation facing the people of this country, we will be able to approach the future in the same

\(^{70}\) Ibid.

\(^{71}\) Flackes, n.18, p.147.

\(^{72}\) Barry White, John Hume: Statesman of the Troubles (Belfast, 1984), p.117.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., pp.123-4.

harmony and agreement as we have done in the past. (75)

The SDLP, by this time, had become a major force for the minority Catholics. Its refusal to attend the Darlington Conference for the 'end of internment' and further abstention from the border poll of 8 March 1973 were major setbacks to the process of normalization of the situation. The British Government's White Paper, published on 20 March 1973 for a power-sharing Government, got a guarded welcome from the SDLP. (76) Before the White Paper was published, the SDLP also proposed joint control of the Province with two Commissioners -- one from Dublin and another from Westminster. (77) But there was no room for such proposals in the White Paper.

The SDLP got favourable support from the Catholic community and won 19 seats out of 78 in the Assembly election of 28 June 1973. Thus, for the first time, it strengthened its position in the Assembly under the leadership of Gerry Fitt. (78) In the following month, the new Assembly met and negotiations began between the major parties and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, William Whitelaw. These negotiations culminated in the Sunningdale agreement, which established a power-sharing Executive.

It is pertinent to mention here that the history of SDLP since its inception remained unique, as it took different political positions. For example, in 1970 and

75. The Times, 18 October 1972. A detailed discussion took place on the SDLP proposals, contained in their policy document, Towards A New Ireland.

76. Vivekanandan, n.31.

77. Irish Times (Dublin), 23 March 1973.

1971 it functioned as a constitutional opposition, and in 1971 and 1972 it functioned as an anti-system opposition, employing various tactics like the parliamentary abstentionism and civil disobedience against the government. And in 1974 it joined a power-sharing government and contributed six Ministers out of a total of 15. But, in the 11-man Executive, Brian Faulkner had a majority (6 Unionists, 4 SDLP, 1 Alliance).

Major achievements of the Sunningdale agreement were the ‘release of internees’ and the decision to establish a ‘Council of Ireland’. Finally, the Direct Rule came to an end and the new Executive assumed its responsibilities with effect from 1 January 1974. The SDLP took the responsibility for Commerce, Health and Social Services, and Housing, Local Government and Planning, with Gerry Fitt as a Deputy Chief Executive. Outside the Executive, the SDLP portfolios were Community Relations and Planning and Co-ordination.

The newly formed power-sharing Executive could not face the Ulster Workers’ strike in May 1974, so the SDLP Ministers gave an ultimatum to Merlyn Rees, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, that they would resign from the Executive unless he called the army to suppress the loyalist strike. Rees sent troops to the Province on 27 May 1974 to ‘take the control of the distribution of petroleum

79. McAllister, n.1, pp.73-4.
80. Ibid., p.74.
81. McAllister, n.66, p.141.
products to essential users,' but it was of no consequence, as the strikers gave a call to all electricity, gas and oil supply workers to cease work from the following night. Faulkner's proposal, made on 28 May, that Rees should negotiate with the UWC was opposed by the SDLP members. According to Martin Wallace: 'If Rees had accepted Faulkner's request, the SDLP members would have immediately resigned.'

In July 1974, the British Government brought out a fresh White Paper on Northern Ireland Constitution, which proposed an election on Constitutional Convention. Though the SDLP regarded it as a 'hopeful document', because it included the concept of 'power-sharing clause' and the reference to the 'Irish Dimension', yet it had, according to John Hume, "completely dodged" the question of detention without trial and policing.

The election for the Constitutional Convention took place in May 1975. Out of 78 seats, the SDLP got 17, increasing its share of the votes polled to 23.71 per cent. It lost nonetheless two seats. The SDLP's basic approach remained in favour of power-sharing, in which both the majority and the minority could participate in policy-making and administration. The SDLP also initiated a series of inter-party talks, which appeared to be making progress when the hard-line Loyalists withdrew from the talks. The UUUC then pushed through the Convention their own report, which advocated a return to straight majority rule. Commenting on the Loyalist proposal, the SDLP leader, Gerry Fitt, said: 'The SDLP have made it equally plain that no other form of Power-Sharing would be acceptable, certainly not the Committees which have been proposed by

84. Wallace, n.82, pp.106-7.

the Loyalists." 86 He further warned the Loyalists, saying: "If the minority is excluded from a voice in government, then no army in the world, however well-equipped, will be able to keep the voice of the minority still." 87

The failure of the Constitutional Convention of 1975-76 to produce any agreement on the future government of Northern Ireland gradually led the SDLP to seek progress in the first instance through the development of a wider framework embracing Anglo-Irish relations. Emphasis on this approach emerged in the discussions at the Party's Annual Conferences held since 1977. The Annual Meeting of the SDLP in November 1978 called for a British-Irish Conference to hammer out a permanent solution to the Irish problem. The leaders of the SDLP, however, made it clear that the solution they had in mind was reunification of the Protestant North with the Catholic South and eventual British withdrawal from the Province. 88 They also asserted that "Irish unity would work only if the Northern Ireland Protestants who would become the island's minority were somehow guaranteed protection by the British Government." 89

The main ideas of the SDLP owe their origin to its original document, Towards A New Ireland, 90 which became the basis for the Party's submissions to the ill-

86. Ibid., 3 May 1975.
89. Ibid.
fated Atkins Conference in the Spring of 1980. Though the majority of the SDLP members refused to attend it, Fitt's argument was that the participation in the devolution talks was 'imperative to maintain the Party's credibility within the Catholic community'. When the decision of the SDLP went against him, Fitt resigned in protest. However, the SDLP was allowed by Humphery Atkins, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, to submit its paper on 'Irish Dimension' and the Party's proposals regarding the form of government in Northern Ireland. The Party's policy proposals, which were presented by John Hume to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, said:

... the British Government alone can resolve the crisis in Northern Ireland but that is a joint responsibility of both the British and Irish Governments. They should take that joint responsibility now and declare themselves committed to eradicating violence in Ireland forever. They should announce that there are no longer any unconditional guarantees for anyone in this situation, only an objective which would achieve guarantees for everyone and their objective would be produced by achieving agreed means of living together. The first step in such an agreed means might be a partnership administration in Northern Ireland, agreed among the representatives of Northern Ireland. A further step would then be the creation of machinery, established in friendship, which would examine the differences between the people of Ireland and between Ireland and Britain and create the process which would eliminate, in time, these differences and allow the people to grow together in harmony and peace.... We advocate the coming together in agreement of both parts of Ireland. The people of the North must negotiate with the people of the Republic, through their representatives, arrangements whereby the peoples

---

91. In January 1980, a Constitutional Conference was organised by Humphrey Atkins, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, in which all the four main political parties of Northern Ireland (OUP, DUP, SDLP and the Alliance) were invited to come to an agreed solution on the form of government in Northern Ireland. Because of the failure to reach an agreed solution, the Conference lasted till March 1980.

92. McAllister, n. 1, p.74.
of Ireland can live together in harmony and peace. (93)

However, according to two well-informed analysts the SDLP had a "virtual monopoly of the nationalist electorate for its constitutionalism and its advocacy of social and political reform within Northern Ireland, although sometimes conflict emerged from within the Party as to which objective was more important." (94)

In November 1980, the SDLP proposed a number of reforms at the political level for the creation of a "New Ireland" and issued a discussion paper, entitled Northern Ireland: A Strategy for Peace, which said, "... SDLP remains firmly committed to partnership as the only basis upon which progress towards any settlement will be made." (95) It also suggested a "Unitary State and a Federal or Confederal State." (96) It stressed that the constitutional guarantee given to the Unionist Party should be removed, because it "operates against the spirit and the intent of democratic Government". It assured: "Whatever might be the Constitutional arrangement for a New Ireland, SDLP believes that it will be necessary to bring forward a Bill of Rights as part of that constitution in order to indicate clearly the safeguards for the basic human and civil rights, which would be provided as part of any settlement." (97)

93. Statement by Mr. John Hume, SDLP Leader when Introducing the Party's Policy Proposals to the Secretary of State's Conference, Tuesday, January 8, 1980 (Belfast, 1980).


96. Ibid., p.2.

97. Ibid., p.3.
However, the SDLP suffered a serious setback in 1981 when the Republican hunger strikers were imprisoned. Among them was Bobby Sands, MP, who had won by-election to the House of Commons from Fermagh and South Tyrone in March 1981. Bobby Sands died along with nine other hunger strikers. The SDLP failed to put up any candidate both against Sands earlier, and against his Republican successor, Owen Carron, in August 1981 for his seat.\(^{98}\) It, thus, lost its support among both the moderate and extreme Catholics.\(^{99}\)

The proposal of the British and the Irish Governments to establish an 'Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council' in order to give an expression of their "unique relationship" could not satisfy the aspirations of the Catholic minority, because the proposed Council had no elected representation.\(^{100}\) Subsequently, the British Government, as envisaged in the 'White Paper' of April 1982, proposed an Assembly election in Northern Ireland. But the SDLP was sceptical of it. The Party leader, John Hume, commented: "Although most people in Northern Ireland wanted political stability and an initiative, James Prior's proposals could not work."\(^{101}\) The SDLP manifesto, which was published in October 1982, said:

The immediate objective of the SDLP is...quick end to the proposed Assembly.... It is abundantly clear that a purely internal solution to the problem of Northern Ireland is not possible. A solution must deal with the problem which is one of relationship not only within Northern Ireland but within Ireland and between Britain and Ireland.\(^{102}\)

---

98. McAllister, n.1, p.74.
99. Ibid.
100. The Times, 7 November 1981.
101. Ibid., 6 April 1982.
102. NI, SDLP, Election Manifesto: Stand Firm (Belfast, 1982), p.3.
The Assembly election was held on 20 October 1982. The SDLP won 14 seats in it, but the SDLP elected members refused to take their seats in the Assembly. Commenting on the election results, John Hume, the Party leader said, it shows that "James Prior's [the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland], Assembly is as 'dead as a dodo.' Thus, once again, absenteeism was the preferred strategy of the nationalist politics. According to O'Malley, "The SDLP umbrella had all but folded, the perspective narrowed, and the main question was no longer power-sharing or even alternative systems of devolution, but unification, leaving only the when and the how would be determined."103

(ii) Sinn Fein and the IRA

The inability of the Republican movement to protect Belfast Catholics against attacks during the 1969 civil disturbances split the Sinn Fein organisation into two.104 With the split of the Sinn Fein in late 1969, there emerged two groups --- the "Provisional Sinn Fein" and the "Official Sinn Fein". The Provisional Sinn Fein supported the campaign of the Provisional IRA in Northern Ireland, but the Official Sinn Fein opposed the IRA violence and went more and more in favour of political activities.105


104. McAllister, n.l, p.75.

105. In 1970, the Official IRA was the military wing of the Republican Clubs in Northern Ireland. The Official IRA halted its military operations in 1972. In 1976, the Official Sinn Fein movement split; the more radical and militaristic wing formed the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) and its military counterpart the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). In 1979-80, the Republican Clubs changed its name as Republican Clubs the Workers' Party and, in 1982, it became the Workers' contd....
Of the two wings, which emerged from the split, the "Officials", dominated by Cathal Goulding, President of Sinn Fein, were more left-oriented, so they adopted the socialist line envisaging a United Socialist Republican Ireland. For them, the struggle for National Independence and Social Revolution were inseparable. With their Marxist ideology, they dominated the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association after 1971. The other wing, "Provisionals", believed in action rather than ideology. Its leadership was taken over by Sean MacStiofain, who believed that "Ireland could be united only by means of violence, bombs and bullets." The Provisionals also believed in a federal constitution of Ireland. The first declared task of the Provisionals was to protect the Catholic community against the para-military forces.

The year 1970 saw intermittent rioting and violence in Northern Ireland by both the Provisionals and the Officials who sometimes fought against each other also. However, the Provisionals were more successful in attracting the Catholic community rather than the Officials. In the beginning, both the groups committed terrorism; it was estimated that, in 1971, 20 per cent of the terrorist activities were committed by the Officials and rest the remaining ones by the Provisionals.

[f.n.105 contd..]

Party. Today, they disavow violence, contest elections, and support majority rule devolved government in Northern Ireland as a first step towards an all-Ireland Workers' Republic.


107. Ibid., p.435.


It was during 1971 that the IRA intensified its bombing campaign. On 10 March 1971, three Scottish soldiers were brutally killed by the IRA. In July 1971, its massive bombing and sabotage campaign also destroyed the Daily Mirror, a pro-British Labour Party newspaper, which was traditionally anti-Irish. Subsequently, on 8 August 1971, it killed a British soldier. The following day, the 'internment' was introduced and 337 persons, overwhelmingly Catholic, were interned on the very first day of its introduction.110 Similarly, apprehensions about the IRA forced the British Government to take the responsibility of 'security' in the province in its own hand. During this period, when the direct rule was not imposed, the IRA made the following three-point proposal:

(i) immediate withdrawal of the British forces from Northern Ireland; (ii) abolition of Stormont Parliament; and (iii) amnesty for all political prisoners (tried, untried and those on the wanted list).111 This proposal was supported by both the 'Officials' and the 'Provisionals'.

The Direct Rule confronted the Provisionals with severe problems. For them, it was merely a stage in creating conditions for an intensified struggle to force the British Government into serious negotiations.112 At the same time, the Catholics viewed the Direct Rule as a major victory. They wanted peace, not the IRA's military campaign. The SDLP, which had maintained its position of not talking to the British Government until it ended internment, now demanded that the Provisionals should declare a cease-fire. Even some of the rank-and-file in

111. Faulkner, n.13, p.150.
the Provisionals saw the Direct Rule as a watershed and favoured a truce. 113 Thus, the Provisionals were under heavy pressure to declare a cease-fire. As a result, a secret meeting took place between the IRA leaders, including MacStiofain, and William Whitelaw, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, on 7 July 1972, in which the SDLP played the role of an intermediary. But nothing concrete came out of it and the negotiations broke down on 9 July 1972. On that very day, the leader of the Provisional IRA issued a statement that the leadership of the movement "still hopes that the British Government will come forward with a positive reply to the IRA peace proposals...designed to create a climate within which a just and lasting solution can be achieved to the age-old conflict between Britain and Ireland." 114

The truce ended and contrary to the peace plan terrorist activities, including bombings, continued. On 21 July 1972, what is known as "Bloody Friday", there were 22 explosions in Belfast, which took a toll of 11 lives and injured 120. 115

Despite these setbacks, the British initiative continued and, on 8 March 1973, the border poll was held. But Sinn Fein, along with the SDLP, refused to participate in the border poll. The Assembly election result in June 1973 demonstrated the strength of the SDLP, when it won 22 per cent of the total votes polled, brushing aside the Provisionals and the People's Democracy and emerging as the recognised voice of the Catholic minority. 116


114. Ibid., 10 July 1972.

115. McAllister, n.66, p.118. See also Magee, n.34, pp.152, 156.


172
During the strike of Ulster Workers' Council in May 1974, the Sinn Fein adopted 'a wait and watch' policy, though, paradoxically, they affirmed that "they would not welcome an immediate withdrawal of the British troops from the country."117 The Ulster Workers' Council strike, which led to the collapse of the power-sharing Executive, paved the way for the British Government to bring out a fresh White Paper on Northern Ireland Constitution in July 1974, to break the political impasse in Northern Ireland. But the Provisionals' reaction to the publication of the White Paper did not come at once. The Vice President of the Provisional Sinn Fein, Maire Drumm, said that the "republican movement had all along demanded that the people of Northern Ireland should decide their own future without British interference."118 Commenting on the White Paper, she said: "There was no mention in the White Paper of ending internment and...this makes me wonder how our people could be involved."119

However, according to O'Malley, by late 1975, "they were ebbing badly: the movement had largely disintegrated, gangsterism was pervasive, internecine feuding between the Officials and Provisionals left eleven people dead in one two-week period, and informers were ubiquitous."120 The IRA survived, however, because of one simple fact that as long as the British remained in Northern Ireland, armed resistance to their presence could be justified. And, so, the terrorist activities of the Provisionals continued. When the British Government called a Constitutional Convention in February 1976, the death of an IRA hunger striker, Frank Stagg, ignited mass violence.

118. The Times, 5 July 1974.
119. Ibid.
120. O'Malley, n.103, p.260.
This undermined the Catholic support to the SDLP. A riot broke out following a march by the IRA supporters, who were protesting against abolition of the Special Status to the Republican prisoners.121

With the emergence of the issue of Republican prisoners, who were protesting against the withdrawal of their political status by the authorities, the Sinn Fein began to foresee a possible erosion of the support for constitutional nationalism. Therefore, it adopted a cynical strategy of the "armalite and the ballot" box, which it explained with logic in its organ.122 To achieve their goal, the Provisionals once again started hunger strike in the Maze prison in 1981. The demands they put forth before the British Government were: (1) the right to wear their own clothing at all times; (2) exemption from all forms of penal labour; (3) free association with one another at all hours; (4) right to organise their own recreational and educational programmes; and (5) full restoration of

-------------------

121. The issue ostensibly was special-category status. In June 1972, as a result of hunger strike in Crumlin Road Prison by Billy McKee, formerly the IRA leader in Belfast, William Whitelaw introduced "special-category" status for prisoners convicted for "political" crimes. Prisoners were not required to wear prison uniforms or to work; they were allowed more visits and food parcels and better facilities than ordinary prisoners; and they were housed in compounds. In short, special-category status was equivalent, at least in the eyes of the prisoners, to political status. The situation changed in March 1976. The special-category status was abolished. Under the new policy, persons convicted for political crimes committed after 1 March 1976 were treated as ordinary criminals, although those convicted before that date retained their special status. Ibid., p.264.

These were the main demands of the Provisionals, which the British Government fulfilled -- some of them, however, only after the loss of 10 lives in 1982.

The IRA resumed its violent tactics as part of a larger campaign to advance its goal of a united Ireland. Referring to the British Government's proposals for a 78-member Assembly elected by single transferable vote method of Proportional Representation, contained in the White Paper of April 1982, David O'Connell, Vice President of the Provisional Sinn Féin, termed them as "a futile exercise in attempting to defend Britain's indefensible position." The essence of the Republican struggle continued to be armed resistance coupled with popular opposition to the British presence. The logic therein was that while not everyone could plant a bomb, everyone could plant a vote. In the words of Arthur and Walker:

"... Sinn Fein managed to plant quite a few votes. Starting from an electoral base of zero it won five of the 78 Assembly seats in October 1982 (10.1% of first preference votes) and pushed its support up to 13.4% in the Westminster election of June 1983, making it the fourth most popular party in the province. Such electoral prominence held out a threat to the SDLP in the first instance but ultimately to the legitimacy of Government."

THE CENTRIST PARTIES
The Northern Ireland Labour Party and the Alliance Party

The history of the Alliance Party and the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) is quite different from that of

---

124. The Times, 6 April 1982.
the confessional parties. The two parties also ran different courses from each other. Though the NILP had a long history, yet it had seldom been effective in the political mainstream of Northern Ireland. As mentioned earlier, it grew up along with the trade union movement in the Province, which owed its origin to the growth of shipbuilding industry in Belfast in the late nineteenth century.127 It got considerably weakened, when many prominent members like Gerry Fitt left it and founded the SDLP. The emergence of the Alliance Party also hastened its decline.128

Like the Social Democratic and Labour Party, the Alliance Party was formed in 1970, but the latter differed from the SDLP in many ways. The Alliance Party was considered a non-sectarian party, whereas the SDLP, though claimed to be non-sectarian in the beginning, became the voice of the minority community. Secondly, they also differed from time to time on their Northern Ireland policies.

The fragmentation of the Unionist Party (The New Ulster Movement, which had emerged in February 1969 to support Terence O'Neill) paved the way for the birth of the Alliance Party. The Party's formation can best be seen in the historical context of the failure of any party to unite the Protestant and Catholic communities in support of a common political programme. The Alliance Party was not formed until 1970, although the divided community had been existing for over 200 years and these divisions had become structured with partition in 1920. Therefore, any study of the Party should consider why it emerged at that particular time. It appears that the tensions and conflicts which

127. McAllister, n.1, p.68.
128. Ibid., p.69.
developed in Northern Ireland during the reformation programme under the regime of Terence O’Neill and the Civil Rights Campaign during the late 1960s, manifested themselves in the birth of the Alliance Party.

The Party was formally launched on 21 April 1970. It was led by Oliver Napier, Robert Cooper, John Hunter and Brian Walker. Its aim was "to unite the Ulster people without regard for class, creed or tradition." At its maiden press conference in April 1970, it made this position quite clear. It supported the union, but rejected outright the arguments, which had kept the Protestants and the Catholics apart. While it recognised that the divisions existed, its principal aim was to bring both the Catholics and the Protestants together in a bi-confessional party. The Party, supported, however, the programme of reform, which was being carried out by the Unionist Government. Its aim was not to be just another opposition party but to win power at the next general election.

The Alliance Party welcomed the imposition of Direct Rule in 1972. Subsequently, it attended the Darlington Conference, held on 25-27 September 1972, where the party leader Phelim O’Neill, stated the party position:

The Alliance Party is fully committed to the establishment of a regional parliament or assembly in this province. The structure and powers of a regional assembly need to be clearly defined. Alliance is not demanding the restoration of an

129. Extract from the Alliance Party address which was issued to every elector in Northern Ireland prior to the 1973 Local Government Elections.

130. Belfast Newsletter (Belfast), 22 April 1970.

unreformed Stormont but a new form of democratic structure with legislative powers.\(^{132}\)

The Northern Ireland Labour Party, which also attended the Conference along with other political parties, suggested in its policy document published on 6 September 1972: "Northern Ireland should have a regional parliament elected on a liberal (i.e., genuinely proportional) basis of proportional representation. The Northern Ireland Assembly should have 100 members. It should have power to dissolve itself by a simple majority vote and elections should be held at least every fourth year."\(^{133}\)

When the Government brought out a Green Paper, called \textit{The Future of Northern Ireland}, on 30 October 1972, it was supported by the Alliance Party and the Green Paper was hailed by it as "a major historical document".\(^{134}\) The Alliance Party and the NILP also supported the White Paper on power-sharing, published in March 1973. In a pamphlet, \textit{Policies for Reconstruction}, the Alliance Party enunciated six bold principles for which it stood. These were: (1) Support for the constitutional link between Northern Ireland and Great Britain -- which is the will of the great majority of all the people of Northern Ireland and on which the standard of living of all of us depends; (2) Getting rid of provocative extremism -- whether it comes from the so-called "Loyalists", "Republicans" or "Revolutionaries";

\begin{itemize}
\item 134. \textit{The Times}, 31 October 1972.
\end{itemize}
(3) Building up universal respect for the rule of law, administered without fear or favour in every part of Northern Ireland; (4) Rooting out discrimination and injustice; (5) Guarantee of equal justice to all citizens regardless of their political or religious persuasion; and (6) Complete and effective participation in government and public life by people from all sections of the community. 135

In order to establish an acceptable form of Government in Northern Ireland, an Assembly election was held in June 1973. The Alliance Party fought the elections to the Assembly on a policy of community reconciliation and support for partnership between the Catholics and the Protestants in the government. To that end, the Alliance Party supported the proposals contained in the British Government’s White Paper on the future governance of Northern Ireland. In the Assembly elections, it secured 9.2 per cent of the votes, polled and won eight out of the total 78 seats, whereas the NILP got only one seat. A notable feature of this election was that the Alliance was able to have a Catholic leader, Oliver Napier, elected from an overwhelmingly Protestant East Belfast constituency and the Deputy leader, Bob Cooper, a Protestant, was elected from an overwhelmingly Catholic West Belfast constituency. This demonstrated the success the Party had achieved in crossing the sectarian divide in the Province. 136

The Alliance Party became a partner in the power-sharing Executive, its representatives, Oliver J. Napier and Robert G. Cooper becoming the Law Minister and the


Minister of Manpower Services respectively. But the NILP found no place in the power-sharing Executive. Commenting on a speech given by the Chief Executive of Northern Ireland on 1 January 1974, the Alliance Party leader, Oliver J. Napier said: "It would be foolish to believe that the emergence of the coalition would cure Ulster's ills overnight." 137

The collapse of the power-sharing Executive in May 1974 was a turning-point in the history of Northern Ireland. The Ulster Workers' Council was largely responsible for the collapse. It is equally important to note that the NILP, which was mainly represented by the Protestant Working Class, also had some role in bringing down the power-sharing government. As a result, the manifesto of the NILP for the 1975 Convention election opposed both "institutionalised power-sharing and any form of association with the Irish Republic." 138 In consequence, many of the Catholic members left the NILP.

After the collapse of the power-sharing Executive, the Alliance Party proposed an all-party meet, including the Ulster Workers' Council and the Provisional IRA, to come to an agreement. It also felt that the only alternative would be a "unilateral declaration of Independence", 139 which William Craig had once advocated. But, the proposal for the all-party meet could not get off the ground, because Brian Faulkner and his supporters favoured a conference based on the present Assembly membership. 140

138. McAllister, n.1, p.69.
139. The Times, 6 June 1974.
140. Ibid., 12 June 1974.
When the British Government published a White Paper on the Constitutional Convention, in July 1974, the Alliance Party leader, Robert Cooper, accepted it with the reservation that it did not even refer to the "intimidation that had taken place during the Loyalist strike, nor to the inaction of the Army and the police in the early days of the stoppage." 141

The Constitutional Convention, was called in 1975 and the Alliance Party favoured a power-sharing government, in which both the majority and the minority could share power. Besides, the leader of the Party, Oliver Napier, made a proposal to increase the seats in the Westminster for Northern Ireland from 12 to 19. Subsequently, in May 1975, the election was held for the Constitutional Convention. The purpose of this election was to "consider what provision for the Government of Northern Ireland is likely to command the most widespread acceptance throughout the community there." 142

During the election on Constitutional Convention, the Alliance Party won eight seats. It also enhanced its share of votes polled from 9.2 per cent to 9.8 per cent. For the Alliance, it was a significant victory. However, the Constitutional Convention itself did not come to grips with the reality of the Northern Ireland problem. After the politicians from both sides of the sectarian divide lavished many platitudes about trust and magnanimity at its start, it came to a futile end. Unable to overcome their basic mistrust of each other's intentions and unwilling to risk splitting the cohesion of their respective tribal monoliths, an agreement was farther away at the end of the

141. Ibid., 5 July 1974.
Convention than at its start. The Convention ended with the majority loyalist Unionist Coalition (UUUC) steamrolling its proposals through the Convention, using its numerical advantage with total disregard for any political views differing from its own. The subsequent rejection of the majority Convention Report by the three major parties at Westminster indicated that Northern Ireland was to experience another spell of political vacuum.

In the local government election held in May 1977, the Alliance Party achieved a breakthrough. It enhanced its position further, from 9.8 per cent to 14.3 per cent, emerging thus as the third largest political party in the Province after the Official Unionists and the SDLP, and ahead of the Democratic Unionist Party. This was indeed a major achievement for the Alliance. In Belfast itself, the Alliance Party became the second largest party with 13 Councillors on the 51-member strong Council. One consequence of this was the election, in June 1978, of the first ever non-Unionist Lord Mayor of Belfast, David Cook, from the Alliance Party.

In the Westminster election of May 1979, the Alliance Party contested all the 12 seats and secured 82,892 votes, the highest it had got so far. In the East Belfast constituency, the Alliance leader, Oliver Napier, came within 900 votes of winning the seat.

When the four-party conference, 7 January 24 March 1980, was called by Humphery Atkins, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Alliance Party welcomed it. At the Conference, it came out with a proposal for a partnership form of Government through Departmental Committees, under

143. See, NI, the Alliance Party, n.136, p.2.
144. Ibid.
which each Ministry would be run by an all-party committee, with a panel of Committee Chairmen allocating Departmental Budgets without Cabinet. The Alliance Party believed that in the absence of 'Irish dimension' in the proposals, the burden rested on the Unionist Parties to make a reciprocal move in the direction of power-sharing. It said that the second option, with its framework of a majority executive, balanced by a 'Council of the Assembly', and composed of the majority and the minority parties equally, did not measure up to the Government's own interpretation of partnership.

The last major electoral test in Northern Ireland was the Local Government Elections in May 1981. This election came at the worst possible time for the Alliance Party, because the Hunger Strike campaign was then in full swing and the community tension was at its height with a series of rallies organised by Ian Paisley under the guise of his Carson Trail.

The Alliance Party opposed Paisley's so-called Carson Trail, which was directed against the Anglo-Irish summit. Nonetheless, in the 1981 Council Election, it polled only 9 per cent of the total votes, indicating a waning of the popular support for it. In 1982, it showed enthusiasm for the 'rolling devolution' initiative. It contested the election held for the Assembly on 20 October 1982, polling 9 percent of the votes and winning 10 seats. Thus, the Alliance Party agreed to share power in the Northern Ireland Assembly. But its share of votes in the 1983 Westminster election fell to 8 per cent.


146. Flackes, n.18, p.32.

147. Ibid.
The continuous violence and polarisation between the Unionists and the Nationalists in the community at large had undermined the ability of the Alliance to draw votes from both the communities. As observed by Arthur and Walker, "While the Alliance Party has tended to be strongest in middle class areas, other middle-ground parties such as the Workers' Party, have specifically aimed at working class communities but with relatively little success." 148

The analysis above shows that the attitudes to the problem adopted by various political parties of Northern Ireland were quite complex. The new situation brought about radical changes in the importance of various established parties to the province. Under the impact of the Civil Rights Movement, the dominant position of the Unionist Party in the politics and administration of the province received the worst jolt ever. The imposition of Direct Rule from Westminster had a shattering effect on the Unionist Party so much so that it got split into a number of new political entities and started pulling in different directions. This was particularly notable, when the reformation programme got under way. Indeed, the resultant competition between the OUP and the DUP for the leadership of the Protestant population in the province caused substantial erosion of their position in the politics of the Province. Yet, between them the OUP maintained its edge over the DUP in popularity, as was clear from the results of the October 1982 elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly in which the OUP won 26 seats against 21 won by the DUP. This showed that a larger number of Protestants still supported the traditional Unionists and their policies, whereas some others (not the DUP) moved away to a centrist position, hoping to play a bridge role between the two communities. Yet, although they pulled themselves in different directions in the politics of the Province, their

positions vis-a-vis the basic problem of the future of Northern Ireland varied only from the continued union of the Province with the United Kingdom, with the old Stormont-type administrations, to an independent Northern Ireland, if the situation so demanded. And, notably none of them even remotely expressed its willingness to accept the union of the Province with the Irish Republic. A large number of Unionists were also against the reform programmes and even power-sharing, because they feared that these would gradually undermine their dominant position in the Province. In tune with that approach, they expressed their opposition to the Direct Rule in the Province. The DUP refused to attend the All-Party Conference held at Darlington as well.

It is clear from the analysis above, that the major factions of the Unionists were opposed to power-sharing mechanism and also to the proposal for the creation of the umbrella body, the Council of Ireland, or any involvement of Ireland, for that matter, in finding a solution. Barring a minority of moderates, the Unionists opposed, by and large, every conciliatory move, which was aimed at a rapprochement between the Protestants and the Catholics. On the other hand, they showed readiness to accept any measure such as internment, which had the potentiality to be used largely against the Catholic minority. Of course, the DUP opposed 'internment', but that was for different reasons. This basic attitude to the major factions of the Unionists remains a major stumbling block in the way of progress towards any amicable solution to the problem of Northern Ireland. Indeed, their attitude had marginalised the impact of the readiness shown by the Unionist faction led by William Craig, the Vanguard, to forge a voluntary coalition with the SDLP. Another dimension of the schism within the Unionists was the contrast between those who favoured devolution and others who favoured total integration with the United Kingdom. However, the fact remains that all these vertical and horizontal splits left
the Unionists as an incoherent and confused lot, incapable of playing any constructive and meaningful role in finding an amicable and lasting solution to the problem.

This schism and the consequent split among the Unionists were matched by a similar process among the non-Unionists, which gave birth to new political groups, ranging from moderates like the SDLP to the extremists like the Provisional IRA. The process also witnessed the demise of the Nationalist Party, which was replaced by the SDLP as the main voice of the Catholic minority, though the latter professed a non-sectarian approach. However, the emergence of the SDLP as a moderate group in the non-Unionist camp could be viewed as a silver lining to the otherwise dark cloud of the non-Unionist politics in the Province. Indeed, though subscribing to the ultimate goal of the union of Ireland from the very beginning the SDLP adopted a conciliatory approach and, in tune with that, it accepted the position that there would be no change in the constitutional position of the Province without the consent of the majority in Northern Ireland. It accepted thus the efficacy of democratic means for any change in the status of Northern Ireland. It banked perhaps on the hope to gradually win the confidence of a sizable section of the Protestant community and promote reconciliation between the two communities. The readiness of the bi-confessional Alliance Party to work with it in the Power-Sharing Executive was viewed as an encouraging development. But their joint efforts in this direction were thwarted by the combined onslaught of the hardliners from the Unionists and non-Unionists, who wanted to keep the communal divide in the Province as sharp as possible. As a result, the efforts of these parties to promote moderation in the Province could not make much headway.

The other non-Unionists like the Sinn Fein and the IRA are obviously not in a position to play any constructive
role in finding a solution to the problem, as they chose to stay away from the political mainstream of the Province. Moreover, they too underwent splits. One of the groups, which emerged from these splits -- the Provisional IRA -- took to terrorism to integrate the Province with Ireland by making the Province ungovernable and killing the will of the Westminster to hold on to Northern Ireland because of the heavy costs in terms of resources and human lives. The IRA activists escalated their terrorist operations to the mainland England too. Therefore, they remain outside the constitutional process. Their role on the whole seems to be negative. It triggered, off instant emergence of a similar extremist group from among the Unionists, which too resorted to counter-violence, making life in the Province unsafe. The refusal of the SDLP and the Sinn Fein to take their seats in the newly constituted Assembly in 1982 was also seen as a blow to the efforts towards normalisation in the Province.

What is conspicuous among the local parties of Northern Ireland is the absence of a realistic perspective of how to advance towards a commonly accepted solution to the problem, a solution acceptable to the vast majority, if not to everyone of both the communities, in the Province. In fact, to an observer, they present themselves as prisoners of their past and outdated perceptions, which are not conducive to a satisfactory solution. Therefore, they not only grope in the dark but also seem to be unable to provide any political leadership in the face of the terrorist activities of the IRA and the Ulster Volunteer Force. As political groups, they also seem to be working at cross-purposes.