2
Turning Points in the Troubles, 1968–71

Critical choices

This chapter begins the process of charting how historical decisions exacerbated inter-communal rivalries, political polarisation and entrenchment. It explores the argument that policy choices and historical interventions had a downstream impact – certain choices carried through to constrain and shape later options; and the act of making decisions ruled out once-plausible alternatives, which became evermore remote. Which choices actually carried through? Which events, if any, set in motion the process of escalating polarisation and inexorable division? This chapter’s central claim is that once-viable alternatives to maximalism and entrenchment were discarded in 1971 and that, from that date, Northern Ireland’s political parties pursued divergent policy paths, making rapprochement increasingly unlikely.

Certainly, the conflict between the PIRA and the British army had been gathering strength from late 1969, and from 1968 even moderate, middle-class Catholic opinion was becoming further alienated from the Northern state. However, the decisions made by the main nationalist and unionist political actors in 1971 effectively established a political framework that lasted for over a quarter of a century. On the one hand, the prioritisation of an Irish dimension over and above power-sharing remained a central aim of SDLP policy articulation, frustrating dialogue during the 1970s and the 1980s. On the other hand, unionist opposition to executive power-sharing and to the idea of Dublin involvement hindered the emergence of accommodative proposals. In short, despite the violent conflict, the choices of the politicians did little to prevent inter-communal division but, on the contrary, encouraged long-term entrenchment. Later chapters focus on the implications of these choices;
but first this chapter examines what those choices were and why they persisted. The choices made were twofold: the SDLP’s walkout from the Stormont system in July 1971; and Faulkner's decision to acquiesce in a cross-border project in September of that year.

Although these two decisions in the summer of 1971 may have foreclosed any possibility of alternatives being at the very least initiated, the fact that alternatives were effectively ignored meant that the implications of the early choices went unchallenged. As such, an omission also occurred in that the Stormont government did not seriously entertain alternatives to either of the proposals on the table, namely, an offer of policy committee seats for nationalists or the SDLP’s principal proposal of fully-fledged executive power-sharing. A second point relates to the fact that inter-communal tensions pre-existed, and were heightened by, the emergence of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s. This, together with the military struggle between the PIRA and the British army, suggests that political alternatives to the onset of violence were never likely to succeed. While this may be true, the existence of such alternatives prior to the prorogation and imposition of direct rule – that is, prior to the radical intervention of the British state in 1972 – implies that the movement away from constitutionalism and political dialogue did not occur decisively until 1971.

Was ’68 (all that) important?

Conventional accounts of the origins of the Northern Ireland conflict tend to stress an inexorable slide into violence dating from the rise of the civil rights campaign in 1968. Broadly, the narrative runs as follows. The growing ethnic divisions, evidenced by the rise to prominence of Ian Paisley in the mid-1960s, began to spiral out of control following the attack by the police on civil rights marchers in Derry in October 1968. These clashes radicalised Northern Catholic opinion and turned a constitutional mobilisation into a nationalistic one. By the time that British troops arrived to restore order on the streets in August 1969, the province was lurching away from civil rights protests and towards an older style of politics in the form of inter-communal conflict.

Within this basic framework, two variations have emerged. In an influential analytical history, Brendan O’Leary and John McGarry argue that the outbreak of sectarian conflict in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the result of the fracturing of what they call unionist ‘hegemonic control’. In this narrative, Catholics ended their uneasy acquiescence in