4 The Phoney Peace, May 1967–March 1968

Few issues in the past have shown a greater capacity to divert and dissipate the reforming energy of left-wing British Governments than deep embroilment in Irish affairs.

Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, during a rare House of Commons debate on Northern Ireland in October 1967

The eruption of violence in Londonderry on 5 October 1968 effectively began ‘The Troubles’, which continued until the first IRA cease-fire of September 1994. Yet during the previous 18 months, despite the warnings, internal and external, outlined in the previous chapter, the British government appeared less concerned with events in the province than at any other time since Labour came to power, pledged to reform, in October 1964.

The series of crises, political and economic, which afflicted the Wilson administration at this time partly explains the indifference. Devaluation and a wave of hostility to the government demoralised ministers, not least the man who was to become responsible for Northern Ireland in December 1967, James Callaghan. Wilson himself feared moves to oust him, from within his own Cabinet, orchestrated by dark forces outside. Yet, as suggested earlier, intervention from Westminster to speed up reform might have prevented the violence that was to engulf the province within two years.

A remarkable opinion poll carried out by Professor Richard Rose in the spring and summer of 1968 (though not published until 1971) suggested that Catholics were almost evenly split on what Rose called the ‘British connection’. The key question that was put to Catholics was: ‘There has always been a lot of controversy about the constitutional position of Northern Ireland. On balance do you approve of it or disapprove of it?’ The result showed that 33 per cent totally supported the constitution, 34 per cent totally disapproved and 32 per cent said that they did not know. Professor Rose’s analysis of these results was very cautious. He wrote: ‘The aggregate profile of opinion in the country is profoundly ambiguous. One can say that as much as

P. Rose, How the Troubles Came to Northern Ireland
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54 per cent of the people support the constitution or than only 54 per cent support the constitution." However, in Paul Bew’s view, the poll was evidence that O’Neill’s policies aimed at reconciling the two communities ‘need not necessarily have failed’.

What follows is an examination of the period between May 1967 and March 1968, which saw the policy of non-intervention emphatically confirmed by the Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, to the dismay of Labour backbenchers in the CDU, and Jenkins’ replacement in November 1967, by Callaghan. Callaghan’s personal attitude towards the problems of Northern Ireland is considered and the relevance of the deep unpopularity of the British Government, as shown by local elections and by-elections during these months, is taken into account. Finally, at the time when O’Neill was celebrating five years in office, Wilson’s fatal miscalculation of the Ulster premier’s capacity for reform is analysed. First, however, the ambiguous policy of The Times, during this period, is considered in some detail because the paper was taken very seriously by politicians and civil servants in London. One of those civil servants, in a senior post at the time, recalled:

Although as always people said that it was a not what it used to be it was still looked on as the most authoritative of papers, it still attempted to be a journal of record and reading it was compulsory.

At a time when most of the media was ignoring Northern Ireland, the paper, under its new Editor, William Rees-Mogg, began to take an interest in events in the province. However, domestic ‘in-house’ considerations prevented the paper pressing more vigorously, as he would have wished, for an end to discrimination against Catholics in the province.

Only ten days after The Times had revealed serious discrimination, a leading article ‘The Trials of Ulster’ warned the Wilson government on no account ‘to wade in’. It may seem difficult to reconcile this caution with the malpractice that the paper had itself only just uncovered. However, this apparent contradiction reflected a significant disagreement on Northern Ireland policy right at the top of The Times. The Editor, William Rees-Mogg, and his Chief Leader Writer, Owen Hickey (described by Rees-Mogg as ‘the two main influences on The Times’ policy on Northern Ireland’, the other being himself) disagreed