The only solution – direct rule from London – will of course never materialise …

O’Neill, December 1968, four months before his resignation

This chapter describes the final collapse of O’Neillism and with it the last vestiges of the Labour government’s Northern Ireland policy. After the Londonderry riot on 5 October 1968, the Unionist leadership, pressed by Wilson, promised at last to bring in reform and a remarkable television appeal by O’Neill seemed briefly to succeed with large sections of both communities. It proved a false dawn and four months later he was gone. However, it is now known that at least six months before O’Neill’s sudden departure, the British government had begun to think the unthinkable and plan for the possibility of intervention to prevent civil war in the province. These crucial developments will be covered in the final chapter. The present chapter considers the last, and doomed, attempts by politicians and public officials on both sides of the Irish Sea to find a solution after Londonderry. As Roy Lilley, Belfast Telegraph political correspondent, put it: ‘By 1969 Northern Ireland was a major issue on the political agenda in London.’

The following account of the last days of O’Neill begins with demands by Wilson and Callaghan, in the aftermath of Londonderry, that Stormont introduce major reforms at once. The fear at the heart of government that, despite O’Neill’s acquiescence, these measures would turn out to be inadequate is revealed 26 years later in a remarkable document written only recently by a retired civil servant who held a senior post in Whitehall at the time (see below). O’Neill’s unsuccessful bid to confront his Unionist enemies, first by his television appeal then by an ill-fated general election, is considered. The reaction to these events in Westminster, including the possibility of withdrawing financial support from the province, is examined, partly with the aid of material, some of it unpublished, from the Crossman
diaries. There is, finally, an account of the dramatic events of April 1969, which began with the bombing of installations in the province, included the election and extraordinary maiden speech of the militant young civil rights campaigner, Bernadette Devlin, and ended with O’Neill’s sudden resignation.

What specific advice Callaghan received from his senior officials immediately after the Londonderry violence will not be known until the papers become available in 2000 and possibly not even then if key documents are considered still too sensitive for publication. However, an invaluable insight into what was going on in the minds of the top policy-makers in Whitehall has been provided, nearly 30 years after Londonderry, by a senior civil servant, now retired, who has asked not to be named. To help the research for this project he agreed to write the kind of memorandum he would have drafted for the Home Secretary, James Callaghan, after the Londonderry riots if so requested by Callaghan. He marked it ‘Totally Fictitious’ to make it clear that it was not literally a Home Office memorandum of 1968 nor even based on a genuine paper. Nevertheless, he was thus able to give a valid account of the thinking, and the attitude of Whitehall, as the crisis deepened. He began by admitting that the recent violence gave cause for real concern:

I know that rioting has become fashionable and is going on all round the world; but it seems to me that there is something special about these troubles and that we are at risk [sic] of the Irish question, which bedevilled politics here for so long raising its ugly head again.

He then admitted that it was surprising that the constitutional arrangements for Ulster had lasted so long:

It has always seemed slightly comical to have the full array of Governor, Parliament, Prime Minister and Cabinet for a province of 1½ million, and although there have been some very talented Ulstermen, it is asking a lot to expect the Protestant element of such a small total to produce enough people of quality.

The tradition had grown up that Whitehall did not interfere (apart from helping with the public expenditure). But despite the tiny staff at the Home Office involved with Northern Ireland, ‘we can claim to