3 The Cross-Border Relationship, 1972–95

The imposition of Direct Rule heralded a new era in the cross-border relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Although it was meant to be a temporary measure (Kenny, 1986, p. 29), laying the basis for acceptable devolved government (Bloomfield, 1986, p. 176), Direct Rule provided the context for the Irish/Northern Irish cross-border relationship from its imposition to the present date. Since 1972, the government of Northern Ireland has been ‘carried out largely through the office of the Secretary of State presiding through the NIO’ (Northern Ireland Office) (O’Leary and McGarry, 1993, p. 184). The Secretary of State is drawn from the British Cabinet and has always been an MP from one of the main British parties, thus, ‘the imposition of Direct Rule in March 1972 removed all vestiges of power from the majority community’ (Arthur, 1986, p. 171) in Northern Ireland. While policy implementation and policy advice were still carried out by the Belfast civil service, the removal of Northern Irish policy-making power altered the framework of Northern Irish politics. Gradually, Anglo-Irish intergovernmentalism characterised British policy towards Northern Ireland.

Thus, since 1972, formal, intergovernmental cross-border initiatives have occurred not between Irish and Northern Irish governments, as in 1965, but between British and Irish governments. In this chapter, the key Anglo-Irish initiatives which have had potential implications for the Irish/Northern Irish relationship are examined. Overall, it is shown how the cross-border relationship has increasingly become part of Anglo-Irish policy towards Northern Ireland, that is, of the intergovernmental approach to resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland.

In the first part of this chapter, the meaning of intergovernmentalism and the reasons for its prominence are examined. This examination is followed by a discussion of three main intergovernmental/Anglo-Irish initiatives of relevance to the cross-border relationship: the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973, the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 and the Joint Framework Document of 1995. In the last part of the chapter the relevance of these initiatives to the cross-border relationship is addressed and the differences between cross-border cooperation under Direct Rule and cross-border cooperation under Stormont rule are identified.
I INTERGOVERNMENTALISM

Anglo-Irish intergovernmentalism refers to the cooperative relationship between the British and Irish governments to resolve the conflict in Northern Ireland. It reflects the existence of a common basic interest between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland: ‘the suppression or at least containment of political violence’ (Keatinge, 1986, p. 152). Instead, violence is argued to be ‘the product of actions taken by the British and Irish states’ (ibid.), where both governments were ‘badly informed and policies were formulated on an ad hoc basis’ (Keatinge, op. cit., p. 155). For example, the Irish state-building process which excluded Protestant and unionist identities hindered the attainment of peace in Northern Ireland (see Chapter 2). Similarly, British policy, by devolving substantial powers to the Northern Irish government, was able to ignore the deteriorating position of the minority Catholic community, contributing to the upsurge of violence in 1968: ‘the settlement of 1921–22 freed the British political parties from fifty years of full-time preoccupation with the Irish question’ (Boyle and Hadden, 1985, p. 12). Intergovernmentalism was the proposed remedy for these past mistakes.

The rationale for the intergovernmentalist approach is that, while the British government is formally responsible for Northern Ireland, the Irish government is perceived, by nationalists, to be responsible for the nationalist minority in Northern Ireland. The Irish government should be the guardian of the nationalist minority, a safeguard against violations of that community’s rights. The Irish government should then be in contact with its British counterpart about British policy towards Northern Ireland. On the basis of these arguments, the prescription is that Anglo-Irish cooperation and a coherent Anglo-Irish strategy is essential to achieve reconciliation and peace in Northern Ireland. An ‘Irish dimension’ will allow the Catholic minority to have faith in constitutional politics and will remove their sense of abandonment:

Nationalists have a fundamental interest in equality which is blocked not just by unionist resistance, but by British unwillingness to act, while unionists have a fundamental interest in security, which is threatened not only by Northern nationalists, but by the proximity of an unreconstructed Republic (O’Leary and McGarry, 1995, p. 329).

Overall, it is argued that increased Anglo-Irish cooperation will address the problems of both Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland (ibid.).