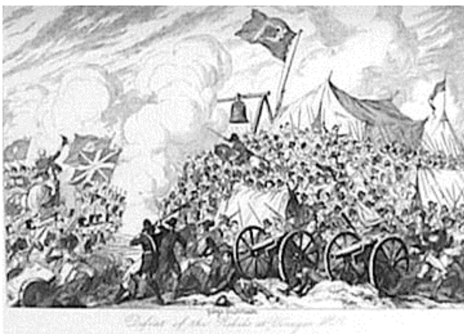
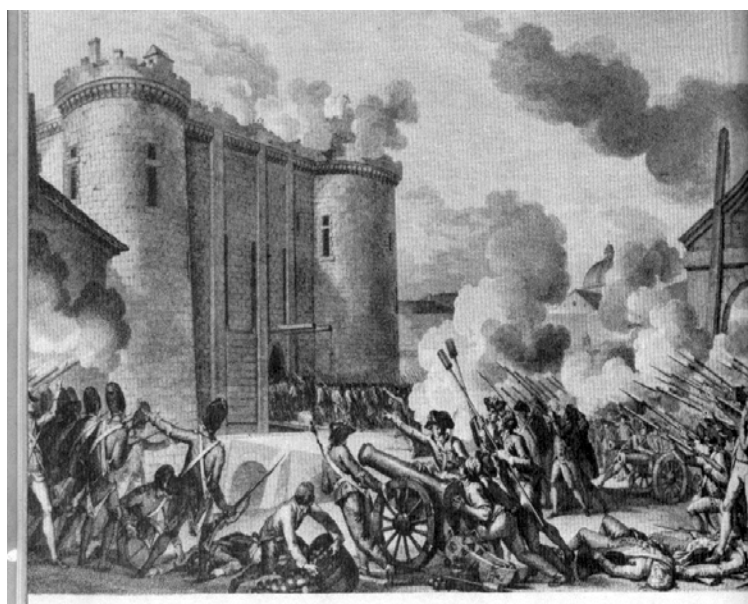
# *Irish Republicanism*



# *A Brief History*

# *1791-1803: Kindling the Flame*

*English colonialism in Ireland, and Irish resistance to that rule, date back many centuries. But it was the United Irishmen who first articulated Irish grievances and aspirations on a national scale and formulated them as a political philosophy. They were the founders of Irish republicanism. They were also part of an international revolutionary movement which extended into America and almost every nation of Europe. They introduced into Ireland the democratic and egalitarian principles that remain at the heart of republicanism today. They also showed that in order for these principles to be realised, British rule in Ireland must be ended, and the sectarianism it has sponsored overcome.*



The backdrop to the foundation of the United Irishmen was the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the French and American Revolutions. The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that saw religious and traditional ways of thinking challenged by science and rationalism. The old rule of kings and aristocrats based on tradition and inherited wealth was rejected, by thinkers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Paine and by ordinary people in the streets. The French revolutionaries proclaimed that all were equal, that everyone had certain basic rights, and that the people should have the final say in government.

Ireland at the end of the eighteenth century suffered under a double oppression. Like other European countries, power was in the hands of the king and landed aristocracy. But Ireland was also a colony of England; its king was George III of England and the aristocracy that controlled its wealth was composed of English settlers.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Ireland had been colonised. Its Gaelic civilisation was crushed, the native rulers killed or driven into exile, and its land confiscated and given over to settlers from England and Scotland. The memory of these events remained strong in the eighteenth century. Most descendants of the native Irish were Catholic, most descendants of the settlers were Protestants. Irish Catholics suffered under a repressive code called the Penal Laws that was designed to maintain power in the hands of the settlers. Among other provisions, the Penal Laws excluded Catholics from all positions of government or political power. Landlords of settler

descent, most of them members of the established (state-backed) Church of Ireland, owned over ninety per cent of Irish land – almost the only source of wealth. Many of these landlords spent much of their time in England and rarely visited their estates.

The overwhelming majority of Catholics were landless peasants who lived lives of shocking poverty. But many Protestants also had grievances against the British system. The Presbyterian community suffered legal disabilities similar to, though not as severe as, those of the Catholics. And many Protestants living in Ireland resented the fact that England treated the country as a colony which existed only to serve English interests. Ordinary Protestants suffered almost as much from English rule and the aristocratic system as did Catholics. Indeed, in 1782 a largely Protestant militia called the Volunteers, which had the support of many Catholics, forced Britain to grant greater powers to the Irish parliament. However, plans for further reform – including allowing Catholics to vote – failed because of religious divisions, and the Volunteer movement collapsed. As on many occasions in the future, religious differences were used by the British government to keep the Irish people divided and maintain imperial rule.

One political movement was determined to change that. Inspired by the French and American revolutions, a group of mostly Protestant radicals founded the society of United Irishmen in Belfast in 1791. Their immediate goal was to reform the parliamentary system in the direction of greater democracy. Eighteenth-century Ireland had its own parliament, but it was made up exclusively of members of the established church. Catholics were prevented from sitting in parliament by the Penal Laws. Up to half the seats were the effective property of wealthy aristocrats who could nominate who they liked the represent them. The Irish government was appointed from England and used bribes and patronage to pass the legislation it wanted.

The United Irishmen wished to abolish the penal laws and the system of government patronage. They wanted to end the system of “rotten boroughs” that allowed landed aristocrats nominate their own appointees to parliament. They wished to see English influence over Irish affairs reduced, and agrarian reforms to improve the lives of tenant farmers. Ultimately, they hoped to establish in Ireland the kind of democratic, egalitarian republic outlined in Tom Paine’s book *The Rights of Man.*

In order to achieve these goals, the United Irishmen proposed a union of all Irish people, regardless of ancestry or religion. Whatever their differences, all people on the island had a common interest in securing the right to conduct their affairs without English interference and in building a more democratic and equal society.

At first the United Irishmen were a legal society that met openly to debate and discuss their ideas. However, the British government was determined that the principles of the French Revolution would not take hold in Ireland. It outlawed the society in 1794. The government also followed a strategy of "divide and rule". It tried to persuade ordinary Protestants they would suffer religious persecution and lose their property if the Catholic majority gained equal rights, and exploited conflicts between Protestant and Catholic tenants looking to lease the same farms. Sectarian violence flared in areas like South Ulster, as Protestant squires and magistrates sponsored sectarian gangs that drove Catholic farmers from the land. Eventually, a number of these gangs came together to form the Orange Order.

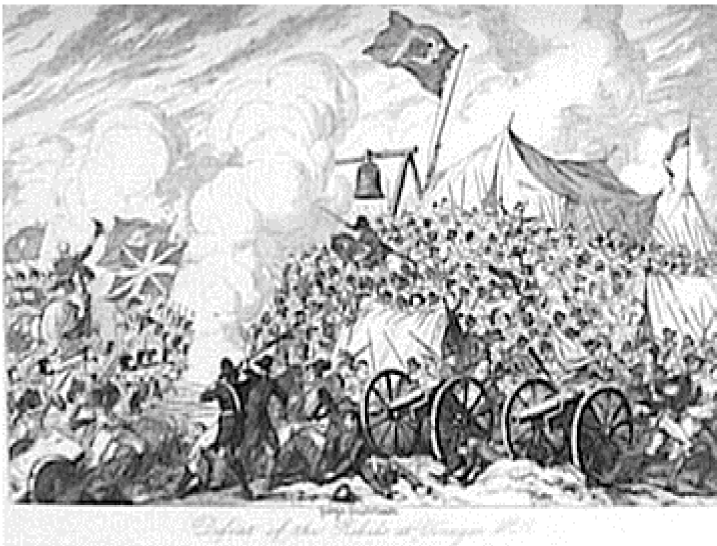
The United Irishmen were now forced underground and became a secret, revolutionary movement. It was clear that peaceful reform of the Irish political system was out of the question. The English establishment would never willingly allow a representative Irish parliament, as this would inevitably govern Ireland in its own interest rather than that of the British state. Nor would an English government allow democracy take root in Ireland, from where it could easily spread to Britain. It became clear to the United Irishmen that the connection with England had to be broken and the English establishment overthrown by revolutionary means.

Wolfe Tone, one of the founder-members of the United Irishmen, went to France to seek aid for a rebellion in Ireland. In 1796 a French expedition of 20,000 under General Lazare Hoche set sail for Ireland with Tone on board. Appalling weather conditions first scattered the ships and then prevented the flotilla which arrived off Bantry Bay in Cork from landing.

The United Irish organisation was by now spreading rapidly throughout the country. From the 1760s onwards, secret societies of both Protestant and Catholic tenants had sprung up in different parts of the country to defend their interests against the landlords. They fought against rack-rents, tithes and evictions, and when landlords tried to wall off common tillage and grazing land they responded by tearing down walls and fences. The politics of these groups – called Whiteboys, Steelboys or Rightboys – were originally fairly primitive. They protested about local issues with little sense of their place in a wider picture.

In the 1790s, however, this began to change. The United Irishmen distributed leaflets, ballads, songs and pamphlets around the country, as well as tens of thousands of copies of *The Rights of Man.* News of the French Revolution and its demands for liberty and equality trickled through even to remote villages and towns. The peasant secret societies began to demand Catholic emancipation, abolition of tithes, and a redistribution of land in addition to their traditional calls for lower rents and an end to evictions. The language and imagery of dissent became increasingly radical and revolutionary. When the United Irishmen were forced underground, they began to organise outside the cities of Dublin and Belfast, and many of the secret societies joined them en masse. By the middle of the 1790s the United Irishmen had tens of thousands of members.

The English government and its supporters in Ireland met this threat with brutal repression. The country was placed under military rule. Thousands of troops were drafted in from England and a campaign of terror was launched. Parties of military raided towns and villages for arms, torturing the inhabitants until they either handed in weapons or denounced those of their neighbours involved in the United movement. Men were tied to carts and whipped, sometimes until their entrails spilled out onto the road. Others were half-hanged and cut down while still alive, or had caps full of boiling pitch placed on their heads. In spite of this, the United Irishmen continued to gain recruits, especially in Leinster and Connaught.



Rebellion eventually broke out in May 1798, partly fuelled by the people's desperation at the savagery of the government troops. However, many of the United Irish leadership had been arrested only days before. As a result the rebellion was partial and badly co-ordinated. Nonetheless it quickly spread across Leinster and Ulster. In Wexford over 40,000 took part and rebels seized most of the county before being defeated at Vinegar Hill. After the landing of a small French force at Killala, rebellion also broke out in Connaught. Fighting went on for several months before the rebellion was crushed. Over 100,000 are believed to have died.

Government-sponsored terror continued for several years after the rebellion, with groups of English soldiers and Orange supporters allowed carte-blanche to pillage, murder and rape. The British also forced through the Act of Union in 1800, which abolished the settler-dominated Irish parliament and made Ireland and Britain into a single “United Kingdom”.

In 1803, a remnant of the United Irishmen under the leadership of Robert Emmet made a further attempt at rebellion in Dublin. The rising began prematurely after one of the rebels’ arms-dumps was discovered, and was quickly defeated. Robert Emmet was subsequently executed, and his rising is mostly remembered for his famous speech from the dock, during which he urged “when Ireland takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written.”

*Throughout the nineteenth century, a succession of movements kept the secular, republican legacy of the United Irishmen alive. Armed rebellion broke out in 1848 and again in 1867. However, with Britain the mistress of the mightiest empire on earth, and little prospect of foreign aid, a separate republic often seemed a very distant possibility. For much of the century the Irish struggle was for reform of the system to improve the lot of Catholics, and to achieve a measure of self-rule for Ireland within the British Empire. Nationwide popular movements campaigned for and won Catholic emancipation, an end to tithe payments to the Anglican Church, and security of tenure for the tenant farmers who made up the bulk of the population.*

*One of the most important of these movements was the Catholic Association, led by Daniel O'Connell, which secured Catholics the right to sit in parliament in 1829. O'Connell was a political conservative who loathed the French Revolution and everything it stood for. Unlike the United Irishmen, whose movement embraced people of every creed and whose aim was a secular republic, O'Connell championed a specifically Catholic cause and enjoyed a close association with the Catholic clergy. In return for Catholic emancipation, he happily accepted an increase in the property qualification required to vote, which disenfranchised most of his original supporters. Although O'Connell later campaigned for repeal of the Act of Union, he did not aim for national independence and was quite happy to settle for a monarchy.*

*Another important movement was the Land League, which by the middle of the 1880s had secured the beginning of the process by which Irish tenants bought out their English or Anglo-Irish landlords. However, while both Catholic Emancipation and Tenant Right were important political victories, they befitted mainly the Catholic middle class. Those who gained most were Catholic professionals who looked forward to a career in law or politics, and large farmers who were able to profit from their new landholdings. Members of these groups became the leaders of constitutional Irish nationalism, demanding Repeal of the Union in the 1830s and Home Rule in the 1880s and 90s. They wished Ireland to have a greater say in running its own affairs within the United Kingdom, but their interests did not demand complete separation or a national revolution.*

*The republicanism of the United Irishmen was democratic, internationalist and revolutionary. The outlook of nineteenth-century Irish leaders such as Parnell and O'Connell, on the other hand, was characterised by sentimental (rather than revolutionary) nationalism and a commitment to constitutional*

*politics. Even the largely middle-class Young Irelanders were more concerned with literary heroics than the planning of rebellion. The movement which carried the torch of revolutionary republicanism into the twentieth century was the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), more commonly known as the Fenians. A secret revolutionary society, it drew its greatest support from the artisan classes in the cities and from small farmers and labourers in the Irish countryside. Its founders, John O'Mahony and James Stephens, drew many of their ideas from the underground revolutionary groups with which they came into contact while in exile in Paris in 1848. The IRB continued to work underground for the establishment of an Irish republic even after the failure of its rebellion in 1867. By the early twentieth century, it had a membership of only a few thousand, but nonetheless exerted a powerful influence on Irish life.*

# *1913-23: The Unfinished Revolution*

*The years 1916-23 witnessed both revolution and counter-revolution in Ireland. They followed a time of social and cultural ferment in the early twentieth century that led to a major revival of national consciousness. The egalitarian element in Irish republicanism was strengthened by the influence of socialism, and greater emphasis was laid on the cultural dimensions of Irishness. A phase of armed insurrection began in 1916. When it ended the twenty-six southern counties had achieved partial independence, but the six north-eastern counties continued under British and Unionist domination and the social ideals of the 1916 proclamation remained unfulfilled. The Irish revolution therefore remains unfinished business.*

Just like the 1790s, the early years of the twentieth century were ones in which radical and revolutionary movements were growing in strength internationally. Small nations across Europe struggled to throw off age-old, monarchical empires like those of the Turks or Austrians; socialist parties were making major advances; trades unions were battling to win decent conditions for workers. In several countries, women were demanding the vote, while in Europe's African and Asian empires, the first stirrings of revolt against colonialism could be heard.

Just as in the 1790s, Ireland did not stand apart from these developments. A cultural-nationalist movement, which included the Gaelic League and the GAA, encouraged people to re-discover the Gaelic past and take pride in their Irishness. James Connolly and James Larkin founded the ITGWU and during the 1913 lockout engaged in an epic battle with Dublin employers determined to break the emerging labour movement. Women like Countess Markievicz and Maud Gonne were asserting their right to play an equal role in the national and social struggles alongside men. The agricultural co-operative movement was organising farmers across Ireland to market and sell their own produce, making them independent of big business. A number of nationalist clubs or parties were founded. One of them, launched by Arthur Griffith in 1905, was called Sinn Fein. Griffith suggested that instead of taking their seats at Westminster, where every measure they proposed was voted down, the Irish members of parliament should set up their own assembly in Dublin.

In the last third of the nineteenth century, the dominant political issue in Ireland was Home Rule – the demand for self-government for Ireland within the British Empire. Again and again, an overwhelming majority of Irish voters chose candidates who supported Home Rule. The British Liberal party, dependent on Irish votes in the House of Commons, promised its support. Liberal governments brought in a number of Home Rule Bills. But all were vetoed by the House of Lords.

In 1910-12 a political crisis in Britain led to the Lords' veto over legislation being abolished. With a Liberal government in power, it seemed Ireland would finally get Home Rule. However, the Home Rule Bill introduced was a disappointment. It gave the proposed Irish parliament the powers of a glorified county council.

Even this, however, was too much for the Unionists. Urged on by elements within the British establishment, they prepared to block the introduction of Home Rule by force. In the North the Ulster Volunteer Force was established in 1912 and soon had 100,000 members. The British Conservative Party egged them on. British army officers stationed at the Curragh stated they would not move against unionists if ordered to do so. The same groups who never tired of proclaiming their allegiance to the British constitution were preparing to use force to overturn a law passed by a majority of parliament and prevent Ireland gaining Home Rule.

In response, Irish nationalists formed their own force, the Irish Volunteers, which soon had 500,000 members. Many of its leaders were also members of the IRB.

At this point, the First World War broke out and the British government postponed the introduction of Home Rule until the conflict was over. Despite their breach of faith, John Redmond, the Home Rule leader, urged Irishmen to join the British army to show goodwill to Britain. Many answered his call; 60,000 of them never came back.

Redmond's decision led to a split in the Irish Volunteers. A majority followed the Home Rule leader. Those who rejected Redmond's call to enlist retained the name of Irish Volunteers. These believed that Home Rule would never be introduced and argued that it would in any case give Ireland scarcely the ghost of independence. They began to prepare for a rising while Britain was occupied with the European war.

Irish Citizen Army outside Liberty Hall

On Easter Monday 1916 members of the IRB, Irish Volunteers, and James Connolly's Irish Citizen Army took up positions around Dublin. An Irish Republic was proclaimed and a provisional government established with Patrick Pearse as President.

The Easter Proclamation set out the democratic, egalitarian and non-sectarian ideals upon which the Republic would be based. The Headquarters of the Rising was the GPO. Against massive odds the rebels held their positions for a week. At the end of that time, Pearse gave the order to surrender to avoid civilian casualties. Over the following days and weeks, the seven members of the provisional government and a further nine rebel leaders were tired before military tribunals and executed by firing squad. 2000 Irish nationalists were interned.

The executions had a massive effect on Irish public opinion. When the internees began to be released in 1917, they returned to find themselves heroes. They set to work to reorganise the Volunteers – now also known as the IRA – and Sinn Fein, which adopted a fully republican platform. In 1918, Sinn Fein won 73 out of 105 Irish seats in the British parliament. This was the last all-Ireland election. In it, the people voted overwhelmingly for Irish unity and for independence from Britain.

The Sinn Fein members elected refused to take their seats in the British parliament. Instead, they met in the Mansion House in Dublin in January 1919, declared themselves the Irish parliament – Dail Eireann – and issued a proclamation of independence. They also issued a document – the Democratic Program – which set out the kind of republic they wished to see: an egalitarian republic in which the resources of the country were used for the benefit of all the people.

The British response was to declare the Dail an illegal assembly. Its members were forced to go on the run. British law in Ireland could now only be enforced by armed might. Already in 1917 and 1918, nationalist demonstrations were broken up, meetings disrupted, prominent figures arrested, flags and emblems torn down. Now state repression was redoubled. The Irish people had voted overwhelmingly for an independent republic, but Britain met their call with violence and repression.

Against this background, the IRA began first raiding for arms and then attacking police barracks and military patrols in the countryside. Their aim was to weaken British control and make the country ungovernable. In large areas they succeeded. The British response was to unleash a wave of naked terrorism. A force of ex-British soldiers, the Black and Tans, was despatched from England in 1920 to support the army and police. As part of their attempt to break support for the IRA, they shot unarmed civilians, burned down the homes of republican sympathisers, and terrorised the population. Towns and villages were routinely ransacked after the IRA had carried out a successful ambush on British forces nearby. The most notorious incident of this kind was the burning of much of the city centre of Cork by British forces on 11th December 1920.

In 1920 the British parliament passed the Government of Ireland Act, which partitioned the country and established a unionist government at Stormont. The measure was passed without consultation with the Irish people and against their will. The Unionist security forces proceeded to secure a six-county statelet through a series of pogroms in which hundreds of Catholics were killed. This ensured that when the British government finally came to negotiate with representatives of Dail Eireann, partition already existed as a fact on the ground.

The Anglo-Irish War lasted from 1919 to 1921. In summer of that year a Truce was declared and a delegation from Dail Eireann was dispatched to London to negotiate a treaty with Britain. The Treaty copper-fastened partition and gave the twenty six counties dominion status – i.e., a form of independence within the British Empire. This was not the republic declared in 1916, and for which so many Irish men and women had suffered and died in the years after. Sinn Fein and the IRA split and civil war followed between republicans, who opposed the Treaty, and supporters of the new Free State government. It ended with the defeat of republican forces in 1923.

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Why was the Irish revolution only partially successful? One reason lies in the use Britain made of unionism to retain a foothold on the island. Another is that several of the leaders of the independence movement from 1919-21 were less than fully committed to the republic declared in 1916, and particularly to its democratic and egalitarian ideals. Earlier we noted how the propertied classes were the strongest supporters of constitutional nationalism. It was they who provided the bedrock of support for the Treaty after 1921. Their interests could be met in a partitioned Ireland that remained within the British Empire. The Republican side in the Civil War gained its strongest support from the urban working classes and from small farmers in the West and South who hoped for a redistribution of land.

The Irish Free State which emerged from the Civil War was dominated by the Catholic professional and business class, which had no interest in seeing the revolutionary potential of the 1916 Proclamation or the Democratic Program realised. Two conservative, partitionist states now divided Ireland between them. The years 1922-23 were a period of counter-revolution on both parts of the island. The revolution which started in 1916 remained unfinished business, its ideals unrealised. It remains unfinished business to this day.

# 1969-Present: Towards Ireland Free

*In 1969 the Unionist dominated six-county state collapsed as a result of its own contradictions. Nationalist demands for civil rights were met with state repression and a popular uprising commenced. The British government intervened to prop up the unionist state. Republicans were demonised and excluded from the political process, and as a result Ireland was locked into thirty years of conflict. The growing political strength of Sinn Fein and the peace strategy adopted by the republican leadership eventually created the conditions in which the political log-jam could be broken. Republicanism witnessed a rapid and sustained growth in support across the island, so that the establishment of a 32-county republic, based on the ideals of the 1916 proclamation, is now an achievable prospect.*

Unionism in its modern form dates from the 1880s. In response to the rising demand for Home Rule, the British establishment of that period began to stoke sectarian fears among Protestants in the North. In every part of Ireland there were empire loyalists, mainly landowners with close ties to the British military and businessmen engaged in trade with the British Empire. The interests of these people were served by the Union, and they had no desire to see the introduction of Home Rule. However, they were a tiny minority everywhere in the country outside the six north-eastern counties.

To strengthen their hand, Irish unionists like James Carson (who was from Dublin), and British Conservative leaders like Sir Randolph Churchill and Bonar Law, worked on the fears of Protestants in the North. They told them Home Rule would mean domination by Catholics, the loss of their civil liberties and the destruction of their industrial economy. The unionist leaders were landlords and industrialists. But their manipulation of sectarian fears persuaded Protestant workers, who shared the same terrible living conditions as their Catholic counterparts, to support their reactionary agenda. The aim was that Ulster unionism would prove strong enough to block self-determination for the whole of Ireland. In the end, however, the twenty-six southern counties broke away to form the Irish Free State. Only the six counties of north-eastern Ulster were saved for the British Empire.

The six-county state established by partition was an artificial and inherently unstable entity. It was established by force and the threat of force, on the part of unionism and the British. It represented no historic division of the island of Ireland – not even the ancient province of Ulster, since three of Ulster's counties were excluded. Its borders

were drawn to give unionists the largest possible area of territory in which they were a majority. This meant that large numbers of nationalists were incorporated against their will into a unionist state.

Such an entity could only be maintained by force. Besides the British garrison in Ireland, the unionist state had at its disposal an armed paramilitary police force, the RUC, and an armed paramilitary reserve, the B-specials. Both forces were almost exclusively Protestant. The state also had a barrage of repressive laws at its disposal. One prime minister of apartheid South Africa said he would give all the repressive legislation of the apartheid regime for a single clause of the North's special powers act.

The six-county state was exclusively a Protestant state for a Protestant people. The Ulster Unionist party governed it as a virtual one-party state from 1920 until 1972. Nationalist politicians were in a permanent minority and were excluded from government. Nationalists faced discrimination in jobs, housing and state investment. Local authority wards were gerrymandered to maintain unionist control of local government. In Derry, a city with a large nationalist majority, unionists controlled the local council. Nationalists were treated as second class citizens in their own country. It was even illegal to fly the Irish national flag, the tricolour.

The 1960s saw the emergence of the black civil rights movement in America and a wave of protest across Europe. Inspired by these events, nationalists in the north founded their own civil rights movement to campaign for one man, one vote, and equal access to housing and employment. Marches and protests were held across the six counties.

The reaction of the Unionist state was an attempt to crush the civil rights movement by force. Peaceful marchers were repeatedly attacked by baton-wielding police and Paisleyite mobs. The climate of growing tension climaxed in August 1969, when RUC and B-specials attacked a civil rights march in Derry and then tried to force their way into the nationalist bogside. They were repelled with barricades and petrol bombs. The police retaliated with tear gas and rubber bullets, and the ensuing Battle of the Bogside raged for days before the police eventually retreated.

Violence spread across the North. In Belfast, loyalist mobs, assisted by the police, invaded nationalist areas. Whole streets were burnt to the ground and nationalists fled their homes in what was the biggest forced movement of population in Europe since the Second World War. Nationalist areas of the six counties were in a state of revolt, and the unionist government was on the brink of collapse.

The IRA at this time had substantially wound down. In the 1960s the republican movement downgraded the demand for Irish re-unification and came under the influence of a clique of doctrinaire Marxists. When nationalist areas of the North came under attack, the IRA had no guns to defend them. Graffitti chalked up in nationalist areas spelled "IRA – I ran away". This failure of the Dublin leadership led to a split in the IRA and the emergence of the Provisionals to defend nationalist areas under attack and continue the historic fight for Irish freedom. A similar split occurred in Sinn Fein.

The events of 1969 were a natural consequence of partition. The civil rights movement had sought to reform the 6-county state, not to achieve a united Ireland. But a state whose sole reason for existence was the maintenance of unionist supremacy could never let itself be reformed. In retrospect it is no surprise that nationalist demands for civil rights and equality were met with violence, since they threatened the very survival of the artificial entity that is "Northern Ireland". State repression and the violence of loyalist mobs in turn sparked off a nationalist revolt, igniting thirty years of conflict.

At the end of 1969 the British army was sent onto the streets of the six counties to bolster unionist rule. At this stage in the conflict, violence was almost exclusively emanating from loyalist mobs and the locally-raised security forces and directed against the nationalist population. Indeed, the first civilian to die in the conflict was shot by the RUC, and the first British soldier died at the hands of loyalists. But it was almost exclusively against nationalists that the British army directed arms-searches, raids and curfews. Nationalist residents,

who had originally welcomed the soldiers' presence in the belief they would be protected from loyalist attack, soon changed their minds. An important stage in this process was the Falls Road curfew in 1970. For five days the nationalist Falls Road was placed under curfew while British soldiers ransacked its houses in search of weapons. Residents could not leave their homes even to go to the shops for food. The curfew was broken only when hundreds of nationalist women entered the area pushing prams filled with food.

The government of the twenty-six counties abandoned the nationalist people of the north. Instead of coming to the defence of Irish citizens enduring state repression and loyalist pogroms, it chose to collaborate with the British in targeting republicans. In was in the interest of the southern establishment to maintain partition. Ruling over a society scarred by poverty, emigration and inequality, it was gripped by fear that the conflict in the north could prove the catalyst for radical social change throughout the island. Over the next three decades of conflict, successive governments in the south would faithfully play the role of Britain's policeman, making every effort to repress republicanism and dissent. Under section 31 of the Broadcasting Act (which was not repealed until 1994) Sinn Féin spokespersons could not even appear on radio or television.

In 1971 the British introduced internment in an effort to break the IRA. Within a few days, hundreds of Irish people were imprisoned without trial. British intelligence was faulty and most of those arrested either had no connection to republicanism or had long ceased to be active. Although loyalist gangs were murdering nationalists on an almost weekly basis, not a single unionist was interned. Many of those arrested were subjected to beatings and torture.

The following year, British paratroopers opened fire on unarmed civilians attending a peaceful civil rights march in Derry. Thirteen people died that day and one died afterwards from his wounds. Bloody Sunday and internment completed the alienation of nationalists from the state and solidified their determination to resist British rule.

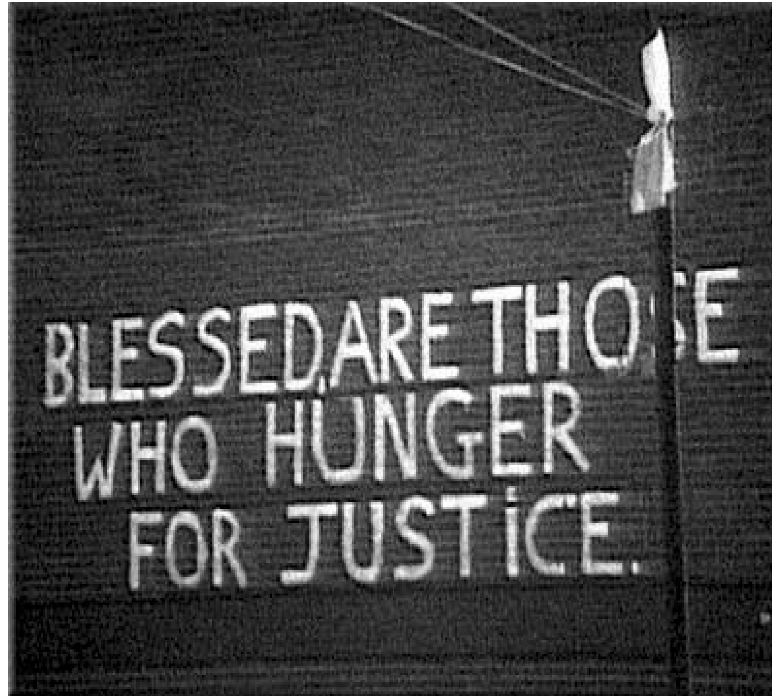
It now became clear to the British government that single-party Unionist rule was no longer feasible. In 1972, the Stormont government was replaced by direct rule from Westminster. However, attempts to reach a political settlement to replace Stormont – which were in any case fundamentally flawed because they excluded republicans – broke down. A power-sharing agreement between the SDLP and the Unionist Party reached at Sunningdale in 1973 collapsed within weeks due to unionist resistance.

Britain now adopted a policy of Ulsterisation, criminalisation and normalisation. It sought to present the conflict in the North as a sectarian struggle between two tribes, with the British as a neutral mediator, rather than an anti-colonial struggle for independence. Republicans were demonised and depicted as criminals addicted to violence. As in other colonial situations – Kenya, Malaya, Aden – the British portrayed counter-insurgency as a policing rather than a military problem. Forces raised locally in the six counties – the RUC and the Ulster Defence Regiment – were given a higher profile, and the role of the British army in the conflict was down-played. This period also saw the origins of the "dirty war", with British intelligence arming, training and directing loyalist paramilitaries. Unionist death squads targeted both republican activists and – with much greater frequency and success – ordinary Catholics and nationalists. The aim was to weaken nationalist morale and commitment to sustain the struggle. In the 1980s, the British developed the policy of "shoot to kill", using the SAS in covert actions against the IRA. The most notorious example occurred in 1988 at Gibraltar, when three unarmed volunteers were shot dead by undercover soldiers.

Negotiations with republicans were ruled out, even though the ability of the IRA to sustain a decades-long war proved it had substantial support from the population. Instead of seeking a political solution that would address the causes of the conflict, the British aimed for a military solution through the defeat of the IRA. Since defeating the IRA proved impossible, British policy effectively condemned Ireland to thirty years of conflict. The war would continue until the political rise of Sinn Fein and the Peace Strategy initiated by the Republican leadership eventually broke the logjam.

One aspect of the policy of criminalisation was the withdrawal of privileges from political prisoners. These were now treated as criminals, forced to wear prison uniform and do prison work. Republican prisoners insisted on their right to be treated as prisoners of war. In the late seventies they started the "blanket protest", refusing to wear prison uniform, and the "dirty protest", refusing to slop out their cells. The prison struggle gradually escalated, culminating in the Hunger Strike of 1981 when 10 republican prisoners died.

The election of Bobby Sands as MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone while on Hunger Strike represented a political breakthrough for republicanism. In the subsequent local elections Sinn Fein had councillors elected across the North, and in 1983 Gerry Adams was elected MP for West Belfast. The Sinn Fein vote continued to grow throughout the 1980s. It was obvious the policy of demonising and excluding republicans would not succeed.



At the beginning of the 1990s, the IRA took the war to the enemy, targeting London in a series of spectacular and successful attacks. Billions of pounds worth of damage was done to the city's financial district. Many of the multinational corporations with bases in the City began to consider leaving unless the security situation was resolved. It started to dawn on the British government that the cost of their continued refusal to negotiate with republicans might be too high to pay.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes contacts were underway between the leaderships of Sinn Fein and the SDLP and Dublin government. These were aimed at agreeing a common nationalist position which could be put to the British government in all-party talks. These negotiations became public as the Hume/Adams talks in 1992.

The conditions for inclusive negotiations were now coming into place: a recognition that republicans could not be defeated, that they had to be part of any solution to the conflict, and an end to the failed policies of demonisation and marginalisation. In 1994 the IRA declared a ceasefire, in order to create a climate in which the potential for political progress which now existed might be realised. The procrastination of the British government under John Major meant it took another four years and a brief return to war before the Good Friday Agreement was signed.

The Agreement set out a framework for peace based upon power-sharing between nationalist and unionist communities, the establishment of a strong all-Ireland dimension with potential for development towards Irish unity, and a declaration by the British government of neutrality regarding a united Ireland. It was a document which required painful compromises on all sides. Nevertheless, it was accepted by republicans as a basis on which they could move towards the achievement of their goals. Sinn Fein has been pushing for the full implementation of the Agreement ever since.

In the 1990s the political growth of Sinn Fein accelerated, and has continued to do so into the new millennium. Sinn Fein is now within a few thousand votes of being the largest party in the North, and its rise continues to be the story of every election in the South. This advance is taking place against a backdrop in which the demographic and economic forces making for Irish unity are stronger than ever, and a mood for change is gripping the people of the entire island. Nationalists now make up almost 45% of the North's population. Many unionists admit the advantages of an all-Ireland economy. And in an Ireland more prosperous, but also more unequal, than ever before, growing numbers of people are demanding an alternative to the corrupt and exhausted politics of the establishment parties.

Today, republicans believe we stand at the twilight of British rule. This generation has the potential to reunify the island and establish a republic rooted in the democratic and egalitarian ideals that have been at the heart of republicanism throughout its history. More than two centuries on, the dream of the United Irishmen continues to motivate republicans today – and our generation has the opportunity to make that dream a reality.