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# FROM PROTEST TO PRAGMATISM

## The Unionist Government and North-South Relations from 1959-72

David McCann

# From Protest to Pragmatism

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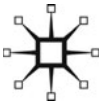


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*To the memory of my late grandmother, Mary-Ann Fitzpatrick.*

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# Contents





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# Note on Terminology

The term 'cross-border' refers to the various co-operation initiatives conducted between the two governments whereas 'North-South relations' is meant to refer to wider political relations between the two states. Where the terms 'Unionist', 'Northern Ireland' and 'Stormont government' appear, they are used either as a reference to the variety of descriptions of that time, or to allow the author to use a range of different descriptions within the thesis. Similarly, the terms 'Southern' or 'Irish government' are meant as a direct reference to the governments headed by Seán Lemass (1959–66) and Jack Lynch (1966–1973).

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# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AIFTA | Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement |
| BBC | British Broadcasting Corporation |
| BTA | British Tourism Authority |
| CIE | Coras Iompair Éireann |
| EEC | European Economic Community |
| EFTA | European Free Trade Association |
| ESB | Electricity Supply Board |
| IRA | Irish Republican Army |
| MP | Member of Parliament |
| NICRA | Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association |
| NIE | Northern Ireland Electricity |
| NILP | Northern Ireland Labour Party |
| NITB | Northern Ireland Tourist Board |
| PIRA | Provisional Irish Republican Army |
| RTE | Raidió Teilifís Éireann |
| RUC | Royal Ulster Constabulary |
| SDLP | Social Democratic and Labour Party |
| TD | Teachta Dála |
| UCD | University College Dublin |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| UN | United Nations |
| UTA | Ulster Transport Authority |
| UTV | Ulster Television |
| UVF | Ulster Volunteer Force |


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# Summary

Why are not just North-South relations but more particularly the Unionist government worthy of further examination? Until the late nineteen-nineties, it was impossible to conduct any proper analysis due to the lack of archival material available for scholars to examine. The work conducted by academics, such as Kennedy and Craig, has helped shed new light on the various aspects of how relations between the two Irish states evolved since partition to the outbreak of the Troubles. However, since this piece of work has been completed, new material has been released which can allow academics to conceptualise in a more informed way the rationale and motivations of key political actors as to why they sought an improved relationship and where it ultimately went wrong. In addition to this, with access now available to the state archives in Belfast, London and Dublin, an examination can be taken up to the introduction of Direct Rule in March 1972. All of this new material creates a powerful case for a re-examination of the North-South relations and the Unionist government's role in developing that relationship. This book aims to bridge the gap that exists within the current literature by focusing on a much more defined period of time and government to tell the story about why the drive to improve relations occurred, what initiatives came out of it and where it all went wrong. This is the story of what happened.

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# Introduction

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What do we really know about the development of relations between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic during the nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies? The key events like the O'Neill/Lemass summits in 1965 and the public declarations of constitutional integrity are well known, but little is ever recorded about the views and policy-making processes that took place within the Unionist government over this issue. Where examinations have been conducted on the Northern Ireland government during this period, the focus tends to be on the internal dynamics of Unionism, its relationship with the British government or its inability to broaden its base to include significant Catholic support for the Northern Ireland state. Yet, there is an interesting story to be told about how Unionism dealt with their counterparts in the Irish government during one of the most politically tumultuous decades in Irish history.

Where studies of Unionism have been conducted during this period, there is a tendency to make contextual references to the North-South relationship, but very few go into any in-depth analysis of just what policy positions were adopted and why. There is useful material from works such as Mulholland's Unionism in the O'Neill years and Patterson and Kaufmanns Unionism and Orangeism since 1945 on the internal dynamics that were ongoing within Unionism with disagreements over modernisation and overall policy direction of the government. The presidential style of leadership adopted by Terence O'Neill and the ensuing destabilisation that events like the summit with Seán Lemass caused is noted within the research. This book will add to the current level of literature by examining solely the relationship that the Unionist government had with their Irish counterparts and will analyse why relations improved and then ultimately declined again from the perspective of the Northern Ireland government.

The first important event of this story comes about with not a change in Belfast, but Dublin. The rise of Seán Lemass to the position of Taoiseach in June 1959 represented a departure from the old anti-partitionist rhetoric that had been commonplace in the Irish government since the partition of the island. A shift away from emphasising constitutional change to economic co-operation became the new mantra in Dublin. However, the Unionist government under Lord Brookeborough responded to Lemass' attempts to improve relations with intense suspicion, as Mulholland highlights that politics in the province was reduced to an almost exclusive focus on the border. The mistrust between the two governments was

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compounded by the Irish Republican Army's border campaign (1956–62).[1] The effect of the IRA campaign was to expose the feebleness of militant republicanism, whilst bolstering the confidence of the Unionist government which had successfully seen off the organisation. However, under Brookeborough, the cabinet followed a policy of non-co-operation with the Irish government, until it took tougher action against the IRA and removed its constitutional claim on Northern Ireland.

The continuing decline of Northern Ireland's staple industries, leading to rising unemployment, put real pressure on Brookeborough's cross-border co-operation policy. As Lemass began dismantling protectionism, pressure began emanating from Northern industrialists for a more pro-active approach in dealing with the Irish government. The inability of Brookeborough to deal with Northern Ireland's worsening economic position led to his resignation as Prime Minister in March 1963 and to his being succeeded by Terence O'Neill. In literature, O'Neill is generally regarded as being the most moderate of all the Unionist leaders in dealing with the Irish Republic.[2] Yet, as this book will argue, O'Neill did not depart from the approach established by his predecessor. During the first 22 months of O'Neill's administration, he persisted with the same policy of linking progress on cross-border co-operation to border security and constitutional recognition. The real driving force behind the attempt to change this policy came from within Unionism, the media and the British government.

When the new period of formal co-operation (1965–8) emerged in the aftermath of the O'Neill/Lemass summit of 1965, both Premiers sought from the outset to limit the scope and focus of cross-border co-operation. This approach of pursuing a narrow policy was illustrated in the communiqué that followed their summit, which placed an emphasis on what the two Premiers did not talk about.[3] The ministerial and official discussions led primarily by Brian Faulkner and Erskine Childers, that did the bulk of the detailed work on co-operation, over issues such as electricity and tourism, effectively operated without any coherent agenda to follow. Co-operation during this period was essentially ad hoc and subject to political scrutiny, forcing ministers such as Brian Faulkner who were pro-active on this issue to consistently follow an limited approach of 'this far and no further' when trying to get proposals through an often sceptical cabinet. An already rudderless co-operation process was made worse, as sectarian trouble began to escalate in Northern Ireland throughout 1966, destabilising O'Neill's position as the Unionist leader.

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