

Four factors affecting how the Republic of Ireland deals with the legacy of the Troubles



The Northern Ireland conflict is usually analysed from the British and Northern Irish perspectives. But the Republic of Ireland was a participant too, and how the state now deals with that past is shaped by four key factors, writes [Thomas Leahy](#).

An [estimated](#) 3720 people died as a result of the Northern Ireland conflict, including 121 in the Republic of Ireland. The Irish state had a direct involvement in the conflict. Before 1998, the Irish government claimed constitutional sovereignty over Northern Ireland. They also assisted and facilitated the peace process by the 1990s. Dealing with conflict legacy therefore has to involve the Irish state.

Four primary factors help explain the Irish state's efforts towards dealing with this legacy: the state's desire to protect its reputation; the electoral and ideological rivalry between centre-right Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, and centre-left Sinn Féin; pressure from victims and survivors groups; and the Irish government's aim to improve cooperation with unionists.

Protecting the Irish state's reputation

The Irish state is an often overlooked participant in the Northern Ireland conflict. They sought unity by consent in the long-term, but power-sharing in Northern Ireland in the meantime. They also wanted to keep the violence up north if possible [to protect their own state](#). But violence seeped across the border on various occasions. In May 1974, for example, a majority of unionists and loyalists conducted a general strike in Northern Ireland against a new power-sharing government and a cross-border Council of Ireland. On 17 May, loyalist paramilitaries [allegedly](#) with the [assistance](#) of British security forces conducted various car bombings in Dublin and the border town of Monaghan. Thirty-four people died and over 300 were injured. This attack represents the greatest loss of life in the Republic of Ireland in one day since the state's formation.

An Independent Commission of Inquiry into the attacks in 2003 [concluded that](#) '[w]hen information was given to [the Irish state] suggesting that the British authorities had intelligence naming the bombers, this was not followed up'. A fear of jeopardising the Irish state's security partly explains the reluctance to fully investigate the attacks at the time. The Irish government did not even hold a day of mourning, fearing this could increase IRA sympathy. This fear was based on what happened in southern Ireland following a day of mourning after Bloody Sunday in Derry city in January 1972, when a crowd in Dublin burned down the British embassy. Patrick Cooney, the Fine Gael Justice minister in 1974, [mentioned](#) in relation to the Dublin-Monaghan independent inquiry in the early 2000s that the 'burned out British Embassy was...a stark reminder that democracy could very quickly become anarchy'. Cooney implied that the Irish government had to be careful in the 1970s not to provoke further violence. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil wanted Irish unification by consent in the long-term. But they did not want a civil war to achieve it, which could jeopardise the southern Irish state's security.

Pressure from outside groups

Prior to the 1990s, there was also no coherent victims and survivors group from these attacks pressuring the Irish state to reinvestigate the bombings. Sinn Féin also did not acquire seats in the Irish parliament between 1982 and 1997. They offered little electoral pressure to the Irish government in order to encourage them to reinvestigate the incidents.

Following the conflict's conclusion in 1998, the Irish state has cooperated with independent investigations into these attacks, and in 2008 they accepted Justice Barron's suggestion that the state failed to fully investigate them. The Irish Parliament also passed three all-party motions in 2008, 2011, and 2016 [calling on the British government](#) to release archival material related to the attacks. The Justice for the Forgotten campaign has influenced this change in approach. Since the 1990s, they have [promoted](#) inquiries and the release of documentation relating to cross-border loyalist attacks. Sinn Féin's increased vote since 1998 has also incentivised the Irish state to discuss the bombings. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil recognized a potential small electoral advantage for Sinn Féin in calling for further investigations into these attacks.

Improving cooperation with unionists

Another standout theme surrounding the Irish state's engagement with conflict legacy involves unionist allegations of Irish security force collusion with the IRA. Many unionists believe the Irish state's reluctance to re-investigate various IRA cross-border killings of British security forces and protestant civilians is suspicious. Doug Beattie of the Ulster Unionist Party [suggested in 2017](#): 'Given that the Dublin Government are not neutral in our troubled past, withholding information can only serve to protect their part in it'.

But the Irish state has investigated some unionist allegations of Irish security force collusion with the IRA. Judge Smithwick conducted a Tribunal of Inquiry into potential collusion between the Irish police and the IRA into the killings of two Royal Ulster Constabulary superintendents in south Armagh in 1989. In 2013, his [final report](#) concluded that individuals from the police colluded with the IRA, and the Irish Prime Minister [apologised](#).

Party politics

In light of the Smithwick Tribunal, it seems that the Irish state has not conducted further inquiries into other IRA collusion allegations partly because there is a lack of evidence. The British government has also repeatedly failed to act on Irish all-party motions to release files on the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. If the Irish government investigated various unionist allegations of collusion between the Irish police and IRA, without the British government cooperating with investigations into the Dublin-Monaghan bombings, the Irish state would appear weak. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil may fear Sinn Féin gaining a small electoral advantage in this scenario. With the unionist communities residing in Northern Ireland, there is also no electoral pressure on Irish political parties to reinvestigate these incidents. Nonetheless, the Smithwick tribunal also demonstrates the Irish government's willingness to address unionist concerns about the past to some extent. The aim of such investigations is partly to improve relations and trust between Ulster Unionism and the Irish state.

The Irish government's persistent engagement with conflict legacy debates is crucial if it wants to continue promoting reconciliation across the island of Ireland, and three other factors may further influence efforts towards addressing conflict legacy: British government action or inaction towards dealing with Northern Ireland's conflict legacy; Brexit; and if any governing coalition in Dublin includes Sinn Féin.

About the Author



[Thomas Leahy](#) is Lecturer in Irish and British Politics and Contemporary History at Cardiff University. He was previously an Irish Research Council Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellow at the National University of Ireland Galway. He has a forthcoming book partly based on his PhD completed at King's College London looking at the *Intelligence War Against the IRA in Northern Ireland, 1969-1998*. For a full list of publications and projects see [here](#).

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