The Sunningdale Agreement and the Power-sharing Executive 1973-74
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August 1971: Internment
- Introduced by Brian Faulkner (last PM of N Ireland)
- Nationalist alienation
- Pressure on Faulkner from Heath to ‘broaden his Cabinet’

30 Jan 1972: Bloody Sunday
- Thirteen shot dead
- ‘It’s a united Ireland or nothing’- John Hume on northern nationalist reaction

24 March 1972: Heath suspended Stormont
- Direct Rule under William Whitelaw (Sec of State)
- 1972: Worst year of the Troubles- 470 killed; 10,600 bombings

March 1973: British Govt published White Paper on N. Ireland:
- It proposed:
  o An Assembly elected by PR (abolished in 1929),
  o Power-sharing and a Council of Ireland as ‘a useful working mechanism in North/South relations’
- Faulkner did not reject the proposals but there were serious Unionist misgivings (William Craig leads opposition)

June 1973: PR elections held to new NI Assembly (78 seats)
- Unionism split between Faulknerites (‘Pledged’) and ‘Unpledged’ (opposed to power-sharing and the Irish dimension)
  o Faulknerites win 22 seats
  o SDLP 19
  o Alliance- 8
  o Anti-Faulkner Unionists (including Paisley, Taylor)-26 seats.

Sept 1973: Secret talks between Faulkner and Irish Government
- On future role of Council of Ireland
- Held at Faulkner’s home in Co Down
IRA and Loyalist Violence escalates during 1973

October 1973: Power-sharing Executive
- Faulkner joins with SDLP and Alliance to form a power-sharing Executive:
- Faulkner’s position within Unionism weakening
  - UUC endorsed power-sharing by only 10 votes on 20 November 1973
  - SDLP demands reform of RUC but were persuaded by Whitelaw that Faulkner ‘could not deliver more’

22nd November 1973: Executive announced
- Brian Faulkner Chief Executive;
- Gerry Fitt (SDLP) Deputy Chief Executive;
- John Hume: Commerce;
- Austin Currie: Housing;
- Paddy Devlin: Health;

Loyalists outraged
- DUP describing Faulkner’s action as ‘the greatest betrayal since Lundy’
- William Craig (Vanguard leader) declared that Loyalist Assembly members ‘will make the Executive unworkable’
- 28 November 1973- first meeting of Assembly degenerates into violent assault as Paisleyites shout ‘Traitors out’ at Faulkner and his supporters
- This sets the tone for 1974.

6th – 9th December 1973: Sunningdale Talks
- Power-sharing parties and the Irish and British Governments met at Sunningdale in Berkshire to negotiate the Council of Ireland amidst bitter Unionist and Republican opposition at home:
  - Faulkner expects Dublin to end its territorial claim (Articles 2 and 3 of de Valera’s 1937 Constitution)
  - SDLP demanded the end of internment and reform of the police
- The astute Whitelaw was replaced by the uninitiated Francis Pym at this sensitive moment
- ‘Unpledged Unionists’ formed a new alliance, the UUUC under Harry West
  - It includes DUP, Vanguard and extreme Unionists

Agreement on Council of Ireland
- Faulkner, pressurised by Heath, hoped for ‘recognition’ by South and extradition of terrorist suspects.
- 27 Dec 1973: A leading German industrialist, Thomas Niedermayer, abducted by the IRA from his Belfast home.
He died of a heart attack and was secretly buried
IRA used the abduction to demand the return of the Price Sisters (IRA bombers) from British jails

1 Jan 1974: NI Executive met and declared 1974 ‘Year of Reconciliation’-cordial relations develop between Faulkner and SDLP/Alliance and progress on basis of ‘Cabinet responsibility’

Unionism turning against Faulkner

4 January 1974: Executive suffered a crushing blow when Ulster Unionist Council rejected Council of Ireland, prompting Faulkner’s resignation as Unionist leader
Pym warned the British Cabinet: ‘He (Faulkner) did not enjoy wide popularity and in view of his political history, many Protestants were disinclined to trust him publicly’
Faulkner was now increasingly isolated within Unionism and was, Pym noted, ‘closer to his SDLP colleagues than his fellow Unionist Ministers’
Heath saw Faulkner’s new-found position as involving ‘grave risks’

1 Feb 1974: Joint North/South Cabinet Meeting at Hillsborough

The meeting was dominated by Faulkner’s concerns over status/security and the role of the Council of Ireland
He claimed that the South’s recognition of NI was ambiguous as highlighted by the High Court’s view of the Boland Case
Liam Cosgrave (Taoiseach) told him: ‘We recognise you as you are’ and Conor Cruise O’Brien warned that a referendum in the Republic would place the Irish Coalition in ‘political jeopardy’
On the Council of Ireland Faulkner warned Dublin: ‘Too hasty or too grandiose a scheme could destroy power-sharing.’

British General Election 1974

28 Feb 1974: Heath called general election on the issue of ‘Who governs Britain?’
UUUC won 51% of the vote and 11 of the 12 NI Westminster seats on the slogan, ‘Dublin is only a Sunningdale away’
- Massive blow to Faulkner and the embryonic institutions
- Faulkner, ‘badly shaken’ (according to NIO), sought to place Council of Ireland on ‘long finger’ but SDLP was unsympathetic: ‘Wee Brian is losing his nerve’ (Fitt to NIO)

March 1974: Upsurge in IRA and Loyalist violence seen by Faulkner as ‘attempt by the men of violence on both sides to kill off the Executive’
Fitt saw Faulkner’s difficulty but warned that Council of Ireland was essential if nationalists were to identify with the RUC.

Final Sequence: Fall of Executive:

- 14 May 1974: Executive had lost its mandate - rejection of Loyalist motion against Sunningdale at Stormont by 44 votes to 28
  - Ulster Workers Council (UWC) responded by reducing electricity output
    - UWC: an alliance of UDA, UVF and anti-Sunningdale politicians
  - 15 May: UWC called for a general work stoppage - power cuts, factory and school closures; paramilitary roadblocks - Paisley meets NIO Minister accompanied by ‘armed observers’
- 17 May: 33 persons die in Dublin and Monaghan bombings
  - Two of the three cars were stolen in North.
- 22 May: As crisis escalates, SDLP agree to a phased in Council of Ireland
- 23 May: Meeting in emergency session the NI Executive noted that ‘UWC grip is tightening’
  - UWC was, it noted, under ‘intelligent direction’ - Faulkner feared a ‘Vietnam-type situation’ as the crisis spread
- 24 May: PM Wilson held crisis talks at Chequers with Faulkner, Fitt and Napier:
  - Faulkner told Wilson that the issue was ‘an independent, neo-Fascist NI Ireland, not Sunningdale’ and pressed for use of troops in power-stations to break the strike
  - Wilson was sympathetic but a secret intelligence report warned of Protestant violence if troops were used in power-stations
- 25 May: Wilson’s disastrous ‘spongers’ speech on TV hardened Protestant opinion
- 26 May: Wilson and Rees discussed Direct Rule and concluded that the Executive was doomed
  - ‘While the NI Executive remains in being there can be no real movement. But the situation changes if they go. From our point of view the most desirable outcome is that they should go of their own accord.’ (Merlyn Rees to Wilson, 26 May 1974)
- 28 May 1974: Faulkner and the Unionist Ministers resigned, effectively collapsing the Executive:
  - ‘It is apparent to us from the extent of support for the present stoppage that the degree of support needed to sustain the Executive does not at present exist.’

Restoration of Direct Rule

- Dec 1974- Feakle Talks resulted in 6-month IRA ceasefire
- August 1975-Escalation of violence once more
1975- Constitutional Convention

- UUUC dominated it and produced majority report in favour of Unionist majority rule
  - Craig’s proposals for ‘Voluntary Coalition’ rejected by Unionism
- Convention dissolved 1976 – vacuum developed-
  - Dublin fear of ‘Doomsday Scenario’/civil war engulfing the whole island
- March 1977-Death of Brian (now Lord) Faulkner in a riding accident

Comments of Protagonists:

- Brian Faulkner in a personal letter, 1976:
  - ‘The real objection was to the sharing of power. The Council of Ireland was only a useful red herring. I will grieve to my dying day that we did not succeed’.
- Liam Cosgrave told Stan Orme (British Minister) in July 1974:
  - ‘The main problem had been the failure to implement the Sunningdale Agreement in full. No one was to blame’
- Seamus Mallon, former SDLP Deputy First Minister:
  - He famously described the Good Friday Agreement (1998) as ‘Sunningdale for slow learners’.

Bibliography:


Paddy Devlin, *The Fall of the NI Executive* (1975)

