

Northern Ireland

– a ‘failed state’ or democracy at work?

Nationalist and republican opinion has portrayed Northern Ireland as a ‘failed state’, oppressing the Roman Catholic minority, and separated from the rest of Ireland solely by British military might. This is not the true story of Northern Ireland – the state of Northern Ireland, and its place within the United Kingdom, is the freely and legitimately expressed wish of the people of Northern Ireland.

A British Isles Union

From the earliest times, there have been profound cultural, economic, political and population links between Ireland and the rest of the British Isles. The 1801 Act of Union recognised this – and built on the centuries-long formal political connection between Britain and Ireland – when it integrated Ireland into the United Kingdom, with Ireland represented through its elected Members in the Westminster Parliament. Beginning in the late 19th century there was a movement in southern Ireland to secede from the Union – a movement strongly resisted in the unionist north. The debate continued into the early years of the 20th century.

For extensive information on the background to the Union see the [Act of Union virtual library](#)

A founding charter

The Ulster Covenant of 1912 voiced unionist opposition to a Home Rule parliament on the grounds that it would be “destructive of our civil and religious freedom”. The drafters of the Covenant knew that a nationalist, Catholic majority, governing through a Dublin parliament without the checks and balances of the British constitution, would undermine the freedoms and prosperity of the province of Ulster. The Covenant, then, articulated unionist support for “our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom”.

The Covenant – Northern Ireland’s founding charter - stands in the great British-American constitutional tradition of preserving rights and liberties against authoritarian government.

A written and pictorial history of the Covenant can be found at the [Ulster Society's online Home Rule Exhibition](#). The Ulster Scots Agency also has a [background history](#) to the Covenant.

Extensive documentation on the Covenant has been compiled the [Public Records Office of Northern Ireland](#).

Union and secession

The creation of the state of Northern Ireland in 1920 and Eire (the Irish Free State) in 1922 was a constitutional compromise which respected the rights of the respective majorities in both parts of Ireland. It recognised the wish of a majority in the north-eastern counties to remain within the Union, while also recognising the wish of a majority of those in the southern counties of Ireland to secede from the Union with Great Britain.

Free elections

From the creation of the state of Northern Ireland in 1920, general elections to both the Stormont parliament and Westminster were held on the basis of universal suffrage. All of these elections returned a pro-union majority – the state of Northern Ireland, within the UK, existed because of the democratically-expressed wishes of the people of Northern Ireland.

The results of all [Stormont](#) and [Westminster](#) elections in Northern Ireland since 1922 are available online.

Civil rights

It would be foolish to deny that acts of discrimination against Catholics occurred in Northern Ireland's past. However, the nationalist, Catholic minority in Northern Ireland – as with other citizens - had their fundamental political and civil rights protected in the state of Northern Ireland. The Royal Ulster Constabulary, the civil service and the judiciary were open to Catholics. The Catholic Church had state funding for its schools. The Nationalist Party was free to organise, campaign and take seats it won in elections. Recognising cases of discrimination, the Unionist Government introduced a reform programme and also proposed a Bill of Rights to safeguard individual freedoms.

Nationalists also fail to recognise that there was profound discrimination against unionists in the Irish Free State. There was no recognition of unionist political identity: the new state defined itself and its institutions as anti-British and anti-unionist. In 1936, the Free State Constitution was amended to give special recognition to the Roman Catholic Church. The hostility to all things British was the prime reason for the Irish Free State refusing to stand with the United

Kingdom against fascism in World War II. As a result of this ethos, the Protestant population experienced massive decline, from 10% of the overall population in 1912 to 2% by the 1980s. In stark contrast, the Catholic population increased decade-by-decade in Northern Ireland.

The [Reform Movement](#) continues to work for constitutional change in the Irish Republic that will recognise the ethos of those who value the Union that existed between Ireland and other parts of the British Isles.

The Belfast Agreement and Northern Ireland

In 1998 the Irish Government, the SDLP and Sinn Fein pledged to accept the democratic legitimacy of Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom. All parties to the Belfast Agreement "accepted that the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, **freely exercised and legitimate**, is to maintain the Union and, accordingly, that Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom reflects and relies upon that wish; and that it would be wrong to make any change in the status of Northern Ireland save with the consent of a majority of its people".