

Margaret  
Thatcher,  
the Conservative  
Party and the  
Northern Ireland  
Conflict,  
1975—1990

Stephen  
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B L O O M S B U R Y

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Stephen Kelly

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*To 'The Derry Four': Stephen Crumlish, Gerry Kelly,  
Gerry McGowan and Michael Toner  
and  
In memory of Professor Ronan Fanning (1941–2017)*



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## Note on Capitals and Formal Titles

Readers should note that, in general, this study has followed the *Irish Historical Studies* rules for capital letters and punctuations. The use of a capital U for Unionists or Unionism denotes organized unionism, such as the Ulster Unionist Party; the use of lower case, unionist opinion and the like, refers to those citizens of Northern Ireland who wished to maintain the Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Likewise, a capital N for Nationalists refers to organized nationalism, such as the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP); the use of lower case, nationalist opinion and the like, refers to the nationalist population of Northern Ireland who opposed the partition of Ireland.

The use of lower case is, likewise, used to refer to political/government positions associated with politicians and civil servants – for example, lower case is used when referring to ‘prime minister’ and ‘taoiseach’. The use of capitals is employed to refer to government departments – for example, ‘the Cabinet Office’ and ‘the Department of the Taoiseach’.

For consistency, in general, this study has refrained from using formal titles such as ‘Baroness’, ‘Lady’, ‘Lord’ and ‘Sir’, except for the first reference to an individual. For example, Lady Thatcher (later Baroness Thatcher of Kesteven) is referred to as Margaret Thatcher, Sir Robert Armstrong (later Lord Armstrong of Ilminster) is referred to as Robert Armstrong and Sir Geoffrey Howe (later Lord Howe of Aberavon) is referred to as Geoffrey Howe.

Lastly, for consistency, Thatcher is referred to as ‘British prime minister’ rather than the prime minister of the UK (i.e. the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland).

# Note on Sources: Primary and Secondary

## Primary sources

Margaret Thatcher had a remarkable capacity for hard work, often working late into the night. She was a master of detail. In the more than a million pages of documents that crossed her desk during her leadership of the Conservative Party, the ink from her fountain pen is constantly to be found. She was the last generation of political leaders to operate in the pre-email era and as a result, her political thoughts can be found scribbled on the margins of thousands of papers. Indeed, while naturally cautious and often secretive – Thatcher, for example, never kept a diary – she has left to the historian a vast amount of archival material, available in public and private form.

This book has benefited greatly from the availability of such an extensive array of primary source material never before correlated into a single study vis-à-vis Thatcher, the Conservative Party and the Northern Ireland conflict, 1975 to 1990. Access to several archival institutions located in the UK and the Republic of Ireland has been particularly invaluable.

The Churchill Archives Centre (CAC), Churchill College (CC), University of Cambridge (UC), holds the collection of papers of Baroness Thatcher (THCR). The archive contains over 1 million documents in nearly three thousand archive boxes, which date from Thatcher's childhood to the end of her life and include tens of thousands of photographs as well as a vast collection of press cuttings and many audio and video tapes of public and private events. The bulk of the collection relates to Thatcher's period as leader of the Conservative Party from 1975 to 1990 and her time as British prime minister from 1979 to 1990.<sup>1</sup>

The CAC also holds the personal papers of several prominent Conservative Party figures who worked alongside Thatcher, including Enoch Powell (POLL), Lord (Julian) Amery (AMEJ) and Lord Hailsham (HLSM). This archive also houses Sir David Goodall's unpublished manuscript (Misc. 74), which included a 'personal account' of the negotiations leading to the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) of 1985.<sup>2</sup>

The Conservative Party Archives (CPA), Bodleian Libraries (BL), University of Oxford (UO), is a treasure trove of archival material, comprising several collections relevant to this project. They include the Leader's Consultative Committee (LCC) and the Conservative Research Department (CRD), specifically, (1) minutes of the Conservative Party Parliamentary Northern Ireland Committee (CPPNIC), (2) minutes of the 'fact-finding' subcommittee of the CPPNIC and (3) lastly, letter books of Alistair Cooke, CRD desk officer for Northern Ireland, 1977–83.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, the National Archives of the UK (TNA) contain a wealth of archival material related to this project, specifically during Thatcher's premiership from 1979

to 1990. Significantly, due to the British government's decision in 2013 to introduce a new 'twenty-year rule' policy, this book has accessed archival departmental files from the 1970s to 1990, including files from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Cabinet Office (CAB), Prime Minister's Office (PREM) and Northern Ireland Office (CJ).<sup>4</sup>

The opportunity to utilize the personal papers of Airey Neave (AN), housed at the Parliamentary Archives (PA), House of Commons, has also added to the originality of this project, providing a first-hand account of Neave's period as Thatcher's shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland from 1975 to 1979.<sup>5</sup>

On the island of Ireland, this project benefited greatly from access to several additional archival institutions. In Northern Ireland, the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) houses the files of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), the Northern Ireland Information Service (INF) and Central Secretariat and Northern Ireland Office files.<sup>6</sup> The Linen Hall Library (LHL), Belfast, contains the Northern Ireland Political Collection (NIPC), which includes archival material related to Irish Republicanism, including the 1980 and 1981 Irish Republican hunger-strikes.<sup>7</sup>

Under the Irish government's current 'thirty-year rule', departmental government files from the National Archives of Ireland (NAI), specifically, the Department of the Taoiseach (DT) and Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) have proved invaluable during the research stages of this project.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the University College Dublin Archives (UCDA)<sup>9</sup> contain several important collections, including the Garret FitzGerald Papers (P215 – minister for foreign affairs),<sup>10</sup> the Patrick Cosgrave Papers (P233), the Fianna Fáil Party Papers (P176) and the John Whyte Oral Archive of British-Irish and Northern Irish negotiations, 1972–2006 (P171).<sup>11</sup>

Despite the abundance of archival material available to historians, readers should be aware that sizable amounts of British government departmental files, housed at the TNA and related to the Northern Ireland conflict, remain closed to the public for the near future. For instance, several departmental files related to the 1981 Irish Republican hunger-strike will not be available for public consultation until the 2070s.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, several departmental files related to the Stevens Inquiry (which investigated alleged collusion between elements of British state and Loyalist paramilitaries) remain closed until 2075<sup>13</sup> and a further file related to 'The Andersonstown Murders' in 1988 remain closed until 2076.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, several files related to the Haughey-Thatcher relationship during the 1980s remain closed until 2051.<sup>15</sup> In fact, some classified British government department files remain closed indefinitely. For example, at least eight files related to 'Operation Flavius' (i.e. the murder of the 'Gibraltar Three' in 1988) remain closed indefinitely.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, during the writing stages of this project, this author made several unsuccessful Freedom of Information requests. For example, despite 'consultation' taking place between the TNA and the British Cabinet Office to make available classified government files related to Anglo-Irish relations in 1989, this request was declined.<sup>17</sup> The reason provided was that the files contained 'information that could prejudice bilateral relations with the Irish government ... Given the delicate state of UK/Irish relations over the UK exit from the EU [Brexit], the material is significantly more sensitive now than it was when it was first closed.'<sup>18</sup>



On the subject of digital archives, three platforms have been of particular benefit to this project. The Margaret Thatcher Foundation website run by its founder and editor Chris Collins, provides access to thousands of historical documents relating to the Thatcher period, in digital format.<sup>19</sup> The Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN) web service 'conflict and politics in Northern Ireland' contains information and source material on the Northern Ireland conflict from 1968 to present, including archival departmental government files and a chronological list of deaths.<sup>20</sup> Lastly, the Miller Center Oral Archive houses a collection of digitized interviews with prominent US politicians directly involved in the Northern Ireland conflict.<sup>21</sup>

The availability of autobiographies has also benefited this project. Although the historian must always tread lightly when assessing the accuracy of such sources, they nonetheless often provide a fascinating first-hand account of central events. Of course, this project has benefited greatly due to the publication of Thatcher's own series of memoirs during the mid-1990s.<sup>22</sup> The publication of memoirs and diaries amongst many of Thatcher's contemporaries from within the Conservative Party,<sup>23</sup> together with those of world leaders who worked alongside her during her leadership, have also been extremely useful to this project.<sup>24</sup>

Lastly, interviews with influential figures directly related to this book were of great benefit, helping to underpin some central arguments offered by this research. I interviewed and corresponded with several prominent personalities that worked closely with Thatcher during her premiership, including the late Lord Armstrong of Ilminster, Lord Brooke of Sutton Mandeville, Sir Henry Bellingham, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, Lord King of Bridgwater, Lord Patten of Barnes and James Pawsey. On the Irish side, I was also fortunate to interview and correspond with former taoiseach, the late Garret FitzGerald, Gerry Adams and several prominent Irish civil servants, including Seán Donlon, Noel Dorris, Walter Kirwan, Michael Lillis and David Neligan.

## Secondary sources

Although in recent years Marc Mulholland<sup>25</sup> and Graham Goodlad<sup>26</sup> have each provided insightful introductory chapters on Thatcher and Northern Ireland and Stephen Kelly<sup>27</sup> and Thomas Hennessy<sup>28</sup> consider certain aspects of Thatcher's Northern Ireland policy during her premiership, *no* single published study, until now, has been produced.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, within the relevant historiography there has been a persistent failure to adequately examine Thatcher's relationship with Dublin,<sup>30</sup> Washington<sup>31</sup> and the major political forces in Northern Ireland, including the SDLP, Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Indeed, while some perceptive works have been published on the subject of the Conservative Party and Northern Ireland,<sup>32</sup> modern British-Irish relations<sup>33</sup> and more generally Thatcher's foreign policy<sup>34</sup> as well as her contribution to policy development in relation to Northern Ireland have more or less been ignored. Likewise, within the literature dealing with Ulster Unionism and Northern Ireland politics, Thatcher's role is understudied.<sup>35</sup>

Although a wealth of secondary biographical material has been published concerning Thatcher, these studies, in general, have neglected to adequately assess

the Thatcher governments' relationship with the Irish government, the mainstream Northern Ireland political parties and the US administrations during the timescale of this proposed monograph.<sup>36</sup> The only exception is Charles Moore's outstanding authorized three-volume biography on Thatcher. Despite Moore's insightful analysis, particularly in relation to the second Irish Republican hunger strikes in 1981 and the AIA of 1985,<sup>37</sup> major gaps in the knowledge remain in relation to Thatcher's attitude to the political forces of Ulster Unionism during the 1980s and her contribution to the early stages of the peace process in Northern Ireland, to name just two examples.<sup>38</sup>

# Abbreviations

AIA	Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985)
AIIC	Anglo-Irish intergovernmental council
AMEJ	Lord (Julian) Amery Papers
AN	Airey Neave Papers
ASU	Active Service Units
BIIC	British-Irish intergovernmental conference
BL	Bodleian Libraries
CAC	Churchill Archives Centre
CAIN	Conflict Archive on the Internet
CC	Churchill College
CJ	Northern Ireland Files
CPA	Conservative Party Archives
CPCO	Conservative Party Central Office
CPPNIC	Conservative Party Parliamentary Northern Ireland Committee
CPS	Centre for Policy Studies
CRD	Conservative Research Department
DE	Dáil Éireann, official debates
DFA	Department of Foreign Affairs
DT	Department of the Taoiseach
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
ECHR	European Commission of Human Rights
ECST	European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism
EEC	European Economic Community
EMS	European Monetary System
ERM	Exchange Rate Mechanism
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
FOI	The Friends of Ireland
FRU	Force Research Unit
GCHQ	Government Communications Headquarters
HA	Home Affairs
HLSM	Lord Hailsham Papers
HMSU	Headquarters Mobile Support Unit
HO	Home Office
ICJP	International Commission for Justice and Peace ICRC International Commission of the Red Cross
INC	Irish National Caucus
INF	Northern Ireland Information Service
INLA	Irish National Liberation Army

IRA	Irish Republican Army
IRSP	Irish Republic Socialist Party
LCC	Leader's Consultative Committee
LHL	Linen Hall Library
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NATO	Northern Atlantic Treaty Organization
NICC	Northern Ireland Constitution Convention
NIF	New Ireland Forum
NIPC	Northern Ireland Political Collection
NLI	National Library of Ireland, Dublin
NORAIID	Irish Northern Aid Committee
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
PA	Parliamentary Archives
PIRA	Provisional Irish Republican Army
POLL	Enoch Powell Papers
PREM	Prime Minister's Office
PRONI	Public Records Office of Northern Ireland
PSBR	Public Sector Borrowing Requirements
RAF	Republican Action Force
RPI	Retail Price Index
RSF	Republican Sinn Féin
RTÉ	Raidió Teilifís Éireann
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
SAS	British Special Air Forces
SDI	Strategic Defence Initiative
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
TA	Territorial Army
THCR	Baroness Thatcher Papers
TNA	The National Archives of the UK
UC	University of Cambridge
UCDA	University College Dublin Archives
UDA	Ulster Defence Association
UDR	Ulster Defence Regiment
UFF	Ulster Freedom Fighters
UN	United Nations
UUAC	Ulster Unionist Action Council
UUC	Ulster Unionist Council
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party
UUUC	United Ulster Unionist Coalition
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force
WR	War Office





# Introduction

## ‘No surrender’: Margaret Thatcher and Northern Ireland

Margaret Thatcher remains one of the most divisive figures in British political history in the twentieth century, attracting praise and ridicule in equal measure. To her admirers, Thatcher has acquired an almost saint-like quality, eulogized for saving the UK from an impending economic abyss. She is remembered by her supporters as a conviction politician with an insatiable appetite for hard work, a domineering personality and an outstanding intellect. To her detractors, Thatcher was an egotistical narcissist, a political leader devoid of a social conscience, indifferent to the poor and disadvantaged. For many on the Left, she remains the embodiment of ruthless monetarism, a politician who was fixated with curtailing public borrowing and spending, generally at the expense of working-class communities across the UK.

Whether loved or loathed, Thatcher was a political icon. She was the first woman to lead a major political party and the first female prime minister of the UK (i.e. the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland).<sup>1</sup> She was the leader of the Conservative Party for over fifteen years, 1975–90 and British prime minister for over eleven years, 1979–90, making her the longest-serving party leader and the longest-serving British prime minister of the last century.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, she was the first British prime minister since Lord Liverpool, 1812–27, to win three British general elections in a row.<sup>3</sup>

In Northern Ireland, Thatcher’s legacy continues to cast a long shadow. In popular memory in Irish Republican areas of the Bogside in Derry,<sup>4</sup> South Armagh and West Belfast she is remembered as a callous British prime minister, who through her ‘war policy’, to quote former Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams,<sup>5</sup> ‘entrenched sectarian divisions ... and subverted basic human rights’.<sup>6</sup> For the Ulster unionist community of Northern Ireland, Thatcher’s legacy is nuanced. She was greatly admired for her ‘no surrender’ attitude during the height of the 1981 Irish Republican hunger-strike and as ‘one of the greatest political figures of post-war Britain’<sup>7</sup> to borrow former first minister of Northern Ireland Peter Robinson’s description.<sup>8</sup> Many Northern Protestants, however, refuse to forgive Thatcher for allegedly undermining Northern Ireland’s constitutional integrity within the UK, by signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) in 1985.

Thatcher’s attitude to Northern Ireland was a powerful blend of reactionary policies and personal indifference. Indeed, for the many policy success stories during Thatcher’s

political career, Northern Ireland cannot be counted alongside them (with the notable exception of her decision to sign the AIA). Far too often she demonstrated a certain naivety (or what Sir David Goodall described as 'primitiveness')<sup>9</sup> towards Northern Ireland, regularly overwhelmed by the complexities of the subject that confronted her. Although Thatcher's great-grandmother was born in Co. Kerry in the Republic of Ireland,<sup>10</sup> Thatcher admitted a general ignorance of Irish affairs, 'But what British politician will ever fully understand Northern Ireland?', she later conceded in her memoir, *The Downing Street years*.<sup>11</sup>

Having read thousands of government departmental papers, together with analysing Thatcher's personal papers, it is evident that Northern Ireland always felt like an annoying distraction, a mere sideshow to more urgent socio-economic issues, including her obsession with reducing rampant inflation and how to temper the power of the trade unions. In as much as Thatcher had little interest in agriculture, the arts, sports and transport, Northern Ireland was not an area of party or government policy that she was naturally drawn towards. As a result, the subject rarely featured high on *her* list of political priorities nor was it a topic which she ever truly understood.

For example, Thatcher always found the Irish border and the prospect of repartition a puzzle. She regularly proposed adjusting the Irish border, including the transfer of Northern Catholics into the Republic of Ireland, in order, as she herself phrased it, to 'relieve' the taxpayer of the 'expense of paying social security to people who did not want to belong to the United Kingdom anyway'.<sup>12</sup> According to Charles Powell, Thatcher's private secretary for foreign affairs, 1983–90, on one occasion she suggested that she wanted the Irish border redrawn: 'she thought that if we had a straight line border, not one with all those kinks and wiggles in it, it would be easier to defend'.<sup>13</sup> Repeatedly, she had to be reminded by her somewhat baffled ministers and civil servants alike that there was no tidy dividing line between the intertwining Catholic and Protestant communities, including in Belfast and Londonderry.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, Thatcher's legacy concerning Northern Ireland is associated most with personal experiences of loss, a sense of hopelessness and perpetual paramilitary violence. On the eve of entering government in 1979, she suffered the devastating loss of Airey Neave,<sup>15</sup> her shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland, murdered by the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) in March of that year. Five years later, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) came within inches of assassinating Thatcher at the Conservative Party conference in Brighton in October of 1984. In July of 1989, Thatcher experienced further tragedy and personal loss following the assassination by the PIRA of her close friend and political ally Ian Gow.<sup>16</sup>

Thatcher's sympathies were generally kept for the hundreds of British soldiers and members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and associated security forces who lost their lives during her time in office. In her own words, she despaired having to send 'young boys over [to Northern Ireland] to their deaths'.<sup>17</sup> Shortly after entering government, following the murder of eighteen British soldiers at Warrenpoint, Co. Down, on 27 August 1979, Thatcher commenced a custom, which she was to maintain, of producing handwritten letters to the families of deceased members of the British Armed Forces. 'No prime minister', according to Thatcher's authorized biographer Charles Moore, 'had ever thought of doing this before'.<sup>18</sup> Staggeringly, during Thatcher's

almost eleven years as British prime minister, approximately 180 members of the British Armed Forces and 280 members of the RUC and associated security forces lost their lives during the Northern Ireland conflict.<sup>19</sup> The murder of those close to her, together with the heavy loss of members of the British security forces, certainly 'left deep psychological scars' on Thatcher's 'Irish outlook', to quote Eamonn Kennedy, Irish ambassador in London, 1978–83.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, it should come as little surprise that security always remained the single most important policy in relation to Thatcher's stance on Northern Ireland. She was obsessed with terrorism, channelling much of her energy and thinking on how to tackle paramilitary violence, chiefly Irish Republican terrorism. It is partly because of her prioritizing security policy over political initiatives for Northern Ireland that she quickly gained a reputation as an inflexible militarist. Her 'no surrender' attitude was confirmed by her refusal to concede 'political status' during the 1981 Irish Republican hunger-strike, during which time Bobby Sands and a further nine prisoners died. 'From this time forward', to use Thatcher's words, 'I became the [P]IRA's top target for assassination.'<sup>21</sup>

Despite her fixation with security related matters, declassified British government papers provide compelling new evidence that Thatcher showed a remarkable capacity to adapt and modify her Northern Ireland policy. For example, although she stipulated that her government would never negotiate with Irish Republican paramilitaries, recently published findings demonstrate that Thatcher *personally* authorized top-secret negotiations with Irish Republican paramilitaries in the hope of ending the second Irish Republican hunger-strike in 1981.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in the months preceding Thatcher's political downfall in 1990, she allegedly sanctioned the reopening up of a secret line of communication between the British government, via MI5 and the Irish Republican movement, in the hope of securing a PIRA ceasefire.<sup>23</sup>

Thatcher's evolving attitude to the Irish government is a further example of her ability to modify her Northern Ireland strategy during her more than fifteen years as Conservative Party leader. As official leader of the opposition from 1975 to 1979, Thatcher supported the Labour government's refusal to permit the Irish government's direct involvement in the affairs of Northern Ireland. Although she was eager to improve Anglo-Irish relations, specifically in the fields of cross-border security and extradition, she supported the argument that Northern Ireland was an integral part of the UK and therefore was not to be discussed with a foreign government, including Dublin.<sup>24</sup> Thatcher adhered to this policy stance on her appointment as British prime minister in May 1979. The maintenance of the union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, she consistently declared, was non-negotiable and thus Dublin had no right to interfere in the internal affairs of the UK.<sup>25</sup>

During the early years of her premiership, however, a slow metamorphosis occurred regarding Thatcher's opposition to providing the Irish government with a formal role in the affairs of Northern Ireland. Her political conversion commenced in December 1980 following her meeting with the taoiseach (Irish prime minister) Charles Haughey.<sup>26</sup> At their Anglo-Irish summit meeting held in Dublin, the two premiers agreed to commence a series of Anglo-Irish joint studies based on the 'unique relationship' that existed between the two countries.<sup>27</sup> Her conversion was completed five years later, following prolonged and intensive negotiations between

her government and the Garret FitzGerald-led administration in Dublin,<sup>28</sup> with the signing of the AIA in November 1985. Significantly, the AIA bestowed upon the Irish government a 'consultative' role in the affairs of Northern Ireland.<sup>29</sup>

One point, however, is clear. On no occasion did Thatcher ever concede providing the Irish government with a constitutional role in the affairs of Northern Ireland. This stance was forcefully demonstrated following the publication of the *New Ireland Forum Report* in May 1984. The forum's final report advocated three potential policies that its members argued would help facilitate a lasting and peaceful settlement for Northern Ireland: (1) a unitary solution, (2) a confederal/federal model or (3) a joint authority. Thatcher, however, emphatically rejected all three proposals, claiming that they presented a 'derogation from sovereignty'.<sup>30</sup>

At heart, Thatcher was instinctively a unionist. For this reason, she found it almost impossible to acknowledge that many Catholics in Northern Ireland felt a stronger allegiance to the Republic of Ireland rather than to the UK. Northern Ireland was British as much so as the Falklands, Gibraltar or Hong Kong, she reasoned. Therefore, she could not fathom why many of the Catholic population rejected a British identity and nationality. Thatcher's prejudices were certainly shaped by her detest for Irish Republican violence and her opposition to a united Ireland, which threatened to tear apart the union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Consequently, throughout her leadership of the Conservative Party, she never wavered in her commitment to maintaining Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the UK.

Yet, one must tread cautiously when prescribing the label 'unionist' to Thatcher. On an emotional level, Thatcher was primarily an English unionist. As with Scottish and Welsh unionism, she had a limited and defective understanding of Ulster unionism. To paraphrase Richard Finlay, for such a 'committed unionist', Thatcher had a poor understanding of Scottish, Welsh and Irish unionism, failing to grasp the complex historical dynamics that had characterized the development of unionism in these three countries.<sup>31</sup> This stance was particularly true in relation to Northern Ireland. Thatcher never developed a 'feel' for Northern Ireland, including its distinctive culture, history and socio-economic foundations.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, in as much as Thatcher knew little about the manufacturing cities and industrial centres of the North of England, Scotland and Wales, Northern Ireland remained an alien place. As such, to borrow David Cannadine's astute description, Thatcher was 'only prime minister of the south-east of England and the rural constituencies'.<sup>33</sup>

By the time Thatcher entered No. 10 Downing Street in May 1979, she had already acquired a certain dislike for many Ulster Unionist politicians, including James Molyneux<sup>34</sup> and Presbyterian firebrand and founder of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the Rev. Ian Paisley.<sup>35</sup> She found many Ulster Unionists to be bigoted and insufferable and always found it 'uphill work' discussing Irish matters with them.<sup>36</sup> In fact, the more Thatcher saw of Ulster Unionist politicians during her time in office 'the less she liked them', to quote John Campbell.<sup>37</sup>

Thatcher's opinion of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), the leading Nationalist Party in Northern Ireland during the 1980s, was equally dismissive. She resented their dual demands for the restoration of a power-sharing devolved government and that the Irish government be permitted a 'legitimate' role in the affairs

of Northern Ireland, to quote Robert Armstrong, Thatcher's cabinet secretary, 1979–86.<sup>38</sup> Of politicians in the Republic of Ireland, she concluded that they were obsessed with cultural politics over the more clear-cut economic debates.<sup>39</sup> In fact, throughout her political life she continued to harbour a deep aversion regarding Ireland's decision to remain neutral during the Second World War. 'The Irish', she purportedly said, 'were worse than neutral – their neutrality had effectively given comfort to the Germans.'<sup>40</sup>

### 'Ireland is a ghastly subject': The Conservative Party elite and Northern Ireland

Thatcher's general ignorance towards Northern Ireland was not uncommon amongst her Conservative Party MPs. The average British politician knew very little about Northern Ireland and, in many cases, simply did not care about the conflict unless it affected them personally. Indeed, to millions of average British citizens, Northern Ireland was an 'alien and violent place'.<sup>41</sup> This was particularly true of senior Conservative Party figures, many of whom, to use William (Willie) Whitelaw's description, found the 'Irish mentality almost impossible to understand' and resented their 'constant determination to be governed by their preoccupations of the past rather than face up to the problems of the present and the future'.<sup>42</sup>

Reflecting on his career as a historian and journalist, Patrick Cosgrave recalled the extent of such ignorance during his time as an employee of the Conservative Research Department (CRD) in the early 1970s. According to Cosgrave, British home secretary, 1970–2, Reginald Maudling<sup>43</sup> said, 'Patrick ... I am told you were brought up a Catholic in Southern Ireland.' Cosgrave affirmed that this was so. 'Then for God's sake, will you please tell me why those buggers go around killing one another because of religion?'<sup>44</sup> Thatcher's husband, Denis, summed up the mood amongst many of his like-minded contemporaries when he once conceded that 'If the Irish want to kill each other that does seem to me to be their business'.<sup>45</sup>

There were those within the higher echelons of the Conservative Party who simply could not hide their deep-rooted prejudices and contempt for Northern Ireland's 'perceived political obscurantism'.<sup>46</sup> Conservative Party MP and diarist Alan Clark,<sup>47</sup> for example, dispassionately wrote that having visited Northern Ireland he felt that the place was 'unbelievably nasty. Grey, damp, cold ... overlaid with the oppression of terror'.<sup>48</sup> 'Ireland', he protested, 'is a ghastly subject. Intractable. Insoluble. For centuries it has blighted English domestic politics, wrecked the careers of good men.'<sup>49</sup> The impression that the conflict in Northern Ireland would continue indefinitely was a common belief held amongst the Conservative Party hierarchy. John Major<sup>50</sup> recalled with melancholy that throughout the 1970s and 1980s, before the peace process, Northern Ireland was 'generally regarded as an intractable issue best left to the security forces and the Northern Ireland Secretary, whose job was seen as worthy, necessary and thankless'.<sup>51</sup>

This book also provides a unique insight into the workings of the Conservative Party Parliamentary Northern Ireland Committee (CPPNIC).<sup>52</sup> This committee, which operated throughout Thatcher's almost fifteen years as leader of the Conservative Party, convened regularly to debate – and occasionally coordinate – the Conservative Party's

official Northern Ireland policy. The CPPNIC and its accompanying fact-finding subcommittee reached its zenith during Thatcher's five years as the official leader of the opposition. Under the chairpersonship of John Biggs-Davison,<sup>53</sup> deputy shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland, 1976–8, the CPPNIC, operating closely with the CRD, was effectively responsible for devising the Conservative Party's Northern Ireland policy while in opposition. Working alongside Airey Neave, Biggs-Davison and other CPPNIC members devised a wide range of Northern Ireland policies, which were included in the Conservative Party's 1976 policy booklet, *The right approach: a statement of Conservative aims*.<sup>54</sup>

During Thatcher's early years in government, the CPPNIC's influence gradually waned (as did the role of the CRD) with Thatcher instead utilizing the Whitehall Civil Service machine vis-à-vis her government's Northern Ireland policy. In fact, by the early 1980s the CPPNIC became a leading opponent of Thatcher's Northern Ireland policy, specifically concerning the region's constitutional future. A cabal of pro-integrationist Conservative Party MPs, led by Biggs-Davison, Harold Julian Amery, Ivor Stanbrook and George (Barry) Porter, regularly attacked the British government's support for the restoration of a devolved government in Northern Ireland at the expense of the region's integration into the rest of the UK.<sup>55</sup>

More generally, prominent CPPNIC members were vocal critics of Thatcher's relationship with the Irish government, including her willingness to accommodate Dublin's request for a 'consultative' role in the affairs of Northern Ireland. In the aftermath of the signing of the AIA, for example, several CPPNIC members, including Amery, Biggs-Davison and Kevin Harvey Proctor voted against the AIA.<sup>56</sup> In fact, of the forty-seven members of the House of Commons who voted against the AIA, approximately twenty-one were members of the Conservative parliamentary party.

This book also reassesses Thatcher's relationship with the Whitehall Civil Service. It reveals that there always remained a suspicion within the Civil Service that Thatcher simply did not appreciate the complexities of the British government's Northern Ireland policy.<sup>57</sup> This was certainly the view amongst Whitehall officialdom on her appointment as British prime minister. Because she never held a senior post in government and had 'no first-hand experience of high-level diplomacy', the argument was put forward that she lacked the political experience and judgement necessary to deal with the politically sensitive subject of Northern Ireland.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, she was often poorly equipped for the intellectual battle in relation to policy formation vis-à-vis Northern Ireland. Consequently, she quickly got into a habit of encouraging those close to her to influence her thinking – chiefly Robert Armstrong and subsequently Charles Powell – rather than develop her own ideas.

## Study overview, 1975–90

### Part 1: Official leader of the opposition, 1975–9

On her appointment as leader of the Conservative Party in 1975, Thatcher knew almost nothing about Northern Ireland. Although the topic had been a major preoccupation

for the Edward Heath government from 1970 to 1974, as secretary for education 1970–4, Thatcher had ‘played little or no role’ in the formulation of the government’s Northern Ireland policy.<sup>59</sup> She had no say in Heath’s decision to shut down the Northern Ireland parliament and introduce direct rule in 1972. Nor was she involved in the abortive Sunningdale Agreement of 1973, which had been an attempt to help establish a power-sharing devolved government in Northern Ireland.

During Thatcher’s initial period as the official leader of the opposition, Northern Ireland was a minor footnote to more pressing economic matters, with the result that she allocated little energy, thinking or time to the subject. When she did address the matter of Northern Ireland, her focus was generally on security related issues, primarily her obsession with how to defeat Irish Republican paramilitaries.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, almost two years into Thatcher’s leadership of the Conservative Party, Airey Neave privately conceded that Northern Ireland was ‘not discussed in any detail or indeed at any length at Shadow Cabinet meetings’.<sup>61</sup>

Despite Thatcher’s own acknowledged ignorance of Northern Ireland’s affairs, together with her often naive and sometimes contradictory approach to the subject (particularly concerning her political stance vis-à-vis power-sharing or majority-rule), during her five years as the official leader of the opposition she adhered to several central policies in the fields of security and politics. These policies included her opposition to the withdrawal of the British Army from Northern Ireland<sup>62</sup> and a fundamental commitment that Northern Ireland would remain an integral part of the UK.<sup>63</sup> Most importantly in Thatcher’s thinking was her commitment to defeat Irish Republican paramilitaries, the so-called ‘Godfathers of Terrorism’.<sup>64</sup> For Thatcher, security and political policies were interwoven. In retirement, she was at pains to emphasize that it was ‘impossible’, as she wrote, to separate security policy, required to ‘prevent terrorist outrages ... from the wider political’ arena in relation to Northern Ireland.<sup>65</sup> In adhering to the above principles, Thatcher committed to continue to support the bipartisan policy on Northern Ireland on behalf of the Conservative Party and the Labour government, as first adopted by her predecessor Heath.

## **Part 2: First-term in office, 1979–83**

There were more pressing domestic issues apart from Northern Ireland that confronted Thatcher on becoming British prime minister in May 1979, not least economic policy, specifically how to confront growing inflation and to rein in public spending. This partially explains why her arrival at No. 10 Downing Street did not herald an immediate or major shift in the British government’s Northern Ireland policy. Instead, Thatcher was satisfied to follow in the footsteps of the previous Labour-led government by prioritizing security matters ahead of ending direct rule.

However, the murders by the PIRA of Lord Mountbatten and three members of his party, together with eighteen British soldiers in separate terrorist attacks in late August 1979 forced Northern Ireland to the top of Thatcher’s political agenda. Thereafter, her central security objective was the defeat of Irish Republican paramilitarism. If this was not a realistic objective, in the short to medium term, Thatcher was nonetheless resolved to crack down on PIRA and associated Irish Republican violence. Placed within this



context, Thatcher concluded that it was essential to improve cross-border North-South security cooperation and intelligence-sharing between the British and Irish governments.

To win cross-border security concessions from Dublin, Thatcher dangled the prospect of London agreeing to kick-start a 'new political initiative' on Northern Ireland, which included abandoning her previous support for Airey Neave's Regional Council model of so-called 'compromise integration', in favour of a devolved government in Northern Ireland.<sup>66</sup>

Despite taking a keener interest in Northern Ireland, the truth remained that as her first term as British prime minister drew to a close Thatcher resented that so much of her time was consumed by events in Ireland. Indeed, Thatcher's willingness to appoint men who knew almost nothing about Northern Ireland to the portfolio of the secretary of state for Northern Ireland was evidence of her government's general antipathy for the subject.

With the notable exception of Peter Brooke,<sup>67</sup> 1989–92, each of Thatcher's five secretaries of state for Northern Ireland took up their new post with very little – if any – experience or understanding of Irish affairs. In the words of Humphrey Atkins,<sup>68</sup> Thatcher's first secretary of state for Northern Ireland, 1979–81, '[I] had a lot to learn about Northern Ireland.'<sup>69</sup> Atkins's successor in the Northern Ireland portfolio, Jim Prior,<sup>70</sup> 1981–4, privately conceded his 'complete state of ignorance' regarding Northern Ireland affairs on taking up his new ministerial position.<sup>71</sup> Likewise, on his appointment to this post in 1984, Douglas Hurd,<sup>72</sup> 1984–5, confessed that he 'knew little more about the Province than any other conscientious follower of public events.'<sup>73</sup> In fact, one of the central criteria for appointing Atkins and Prior to the Northern Ireland portfolio was to get them out of 'the Prime Minister's hair', to paraphrase Sir Geoffrey Howe.<sup>74</sup> Feelings of personal animosity were a common feature of the Atkins-Thatcher and Prior-Thatcher relationships during this period.

### **Part 3: Second-term in office, 1983–7**

Thatcher's second term in office, 1983–7, coincided with a major shift in the British government's Northern Ireland policy. Following the Conservative Party's landslide victory at the 1983 British general election, Thatcher decided, in her own words, to do 'something about Ireland'.<sup>75</sup> Her wish to do 'something about Ireland' was confirmed following the signing of the AIA in 1985 on behalf of the British and Irish governments. Under the terms of this accord, and to the irritation of Ulster Unionists, Dublin was granted a 'consultative' role in the affairs of Northern Ireland. Although Thatcher regretted signing the AIA,<sup>76</sup> her decision to put pen to paper was arguably one of her finest diplomatic achievements, ranking up there alongside Zimbabwe. The establishment of a new Anglo-Irish intergovernmental conference, under the terms of the AIA, provided a 'two-way channel of communication' between Dublin and London, including issues related to Northern Ireland, which only a few years previously seemed unimaginable.<sup>77</sup>

A key factor in Thatcher's decision to sign the AIA was the pressure she experienced from those closest to her, notably Howe and a cabal of senior civil servants under the authority of Robert Armstrong. In relation to the British government's Northern



Ireland policy, Howe's appointment as secretary of state for foreign and commonwealth affairs, 1983–9, was a revelation. No other Conservative Party MP, apart perhaps from William Whitelaw<sup>78</sup> during the early 1980s, had a bigger influence over Thatcher's thinking on Northern Ireland during her premiership. It was Howe, with the aid of Douglas Hurd, who ultimately convinced Thatcher to permit the Irish government with a 'consultative' role in the affairs of Northern Ireland.<sup>79</sup>

Comparisons can be drawn here between his ability to persuade Thatcher to develop links with the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, 1985–91, and her Ireland policy. In both cases, Thatcher had to be persuaded by Howe of the merits of opening new channels of dialogue, irrespective of her preference for retaining the status quo. Thus, in the end, she was won over by the forcefulness of the argument in support of the AIA.

Arguably, it was the tireless and usually unrecognized hard work of a small group of senior British civil servants that had the greatest influence over Thatcher's thinking on Northern Ireland. Despite her long-held suspicions towards the Civil Service, chiefly the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Thatcher respected the advice she received from Robert Armstrong and a handful of additional Whitehall officials, including Charles Powell and David Goodall. In the months, indeed years, leading to the signing of the AIA, Armstrong and those mentioned above routinely petitioned their prime minister to provide the Irish government with a 'palpable presence' in the affairs of Northern Ireland in the hope that the violence might be ended, to quote Goodall.<sup>80</sup>

#### **Part 4: Third-term in office, 1987–90**

An examination of Thatcher's third and final term in office, 1987–90, brings this book to its conclusion. As Thatcher's political career came to a dramatic close following her decision not to contest a second ballot during the Conservative Party leadership contest in November 1990, the genesis of the Northern Ireland peace process commenced. During her last term as British prime minister, Northern Ireland was never far from her political thinking. From her continued frustration with the Irish government regarding cross-border security measures to controversial allegations of a British state sponsored 'shoot to kill' policy and well-founded accusations of collusion between the British state and Loyalist paramilitaries, Northern Ireland remained a constant irritation and occasionally an embarrassment for the Thatcher government.

Although it was not widely known at the time, Thatcher prepared the ground for an initiative that led to the Northern Ireland peace process during the 1990s and ultimately the signing of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in 1998, which witnessed the restoration of a power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland. During the winter of 1990, with Thatcher's agreement,<sup>81</sup> the British government reactivated a secret line of communication with the PIRA. Soon after, Peter Brooke, secretary of state for Northern Ireland, delivered a landmark speech in which he announced that the British government had 'no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland'.<sup>82</sup> The PIRA made a direct response to Brooke's speech, declaring a three-day ceasefire over Christmas 1990.

However, Thatcher never got the opportunity to reap the rewards of this secret policy. On 22 November 1990, following an appeal on behalf of her cabinet colleagues, Thatcher announced her decision not to contest a second ballot for the leadership of the Conservative Party, only staying on as British prime minister until the party elected her successor as leader. In the second ballot contest, five days later, John Major handsomely defeated his rivals and was duly elected the leader of the Conservative Party. The following day, 28 November, Major was appointed British prime minister. His appointment signalled Thatcher's departure from the political main stage ending more than fifteen years as Conservative Party leader and eleven years as British prime minister.

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From the time the 'Irish question' first entered modern British political discourse in 1844, during a nine-hour debate in the House of Commons,<sup>83</sup> to the signing of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in 1998, British parliamentarians were intermediately consumed by events in Ireland.<sup>84</sup> Between these years, an array of issues related to Ireland including land, religion, education, Home Rule, Irish independence and the Northern Ireland conflict were debated and squabbled by the Westminster class.<sup>85</sup>

The outbreak of the conflict in Northern Ireland in 1969 transplanted the old 'Irish question' to a new 'Northern Ireland question'. During the previous half a century, as Ulster Unionists consolidated their control over Northern Ireland, consecutive British governments under Stanley Baldwin<sup>86</sup> during the 1920s and 1930s through to the respective premierships of Harold Macmillan<sup>87</sup> and his successor Sir Alec Douglas Home<sup>88</sup> ignored events across the Irish sea, reluctant to talk about Ireland, never mind actively engage with the subject. In the words of former British prime minister Winston Churchill,<sup>89</sup> 'For generations' successive British governments 'have been wandering and floundering in the Irish bog'.<sup>90</sup>

The outbreak of widespread violence in Northern Ireland in the summer of 1969, soon after followed by the deployment of British soldiers on the streets of Londonderry, Belfast and elsewhere, forced a British government under the prime minister Harold Wilson<sup>91</sup> to reluctantly reenter the 'Irish bog'. Thereafter, each of Wilson's successors in No. 10 Downing Street, from Edward Heath, James Callaghan,<sup>92</sup> Margaret Thatcher, John Major to Tony Blair,<sup>93</sup> were regularly consumed by day-to-day events in Northern Ireland, including wanton acts of violence, sectarian murders and political assassinations. As is examined, despite her sense of indifference, Thatcher was never immune to events in Ireland. In fact, a startling feature of Thatcher's premiership is how much of her energy and time was redirected to Northern Ireland, irrespective of her distaste of the subject.

## Part One

# Official leader of the opposition, 1975–9



## Thatcher and the Conservative Party's Northern Ireland policy, 1975–9

‘[A]t this time I can see no solution to the problems in Northern Ireland ...’: The genesis of Thatcher's Northern Ireland policy

The Conservative Party's defeat at the second British general election of 1974 (the first general election was held in February of that year, the second in October) came as a bitter disappointment to Margaret Thatcher. Although easily retaining her seat in her Finchley constituency, with a majority of almost 4,000 votes, the Conservative Party managed to secure only 277 seats, compared to the Labour Party's 319 seats. Therefore, to the dismay of the Conservative Party leadership and rank-and-file supporters, alike, the ageing and increasingly volatile Harold Wilson, leader of the Labour Party, was provided with the opportunity to form a new administration under his premiership.

The loss of the general election was a political disaster for Edward Heath. This was his third general election defeat since his appointment as leader of the Conservative Party in 1965. Privately, like many of her senior Conservative Party colleagues, Thatcher now arrived at the conclusion that Heath must step aside as party leader. ‘I had no doubt’, she recalled in *The path to power*, ‘that Ted now ought to go.’<sup>1</sup> As soon as the general election was over, in the words of John Campbell, the struggle for the leadership of the Conservative Party was ‘unofficially on.’<sup>2</sup> The question, was, however, who should succeed Heath?

Initially, a cabal of anti-Heath Conservative Party MPs were spoken of as possible contenders. The main candidates to succeed Heath included William Whitelaw, chairperson of the Conservative Party; Keith Joseph, a founding member of the Conservative Party's Centre for Policy Studies (CPS);<sup>3</sup> Sir Edward Du Cann, chairperson of the Conservative Party's 1922 Committee;<sup>4</sup> and lastly, Ian Gilmour, chairperson of the CRD.<sup>5</sup>

If Thatcher's own account of the leadership contest is to be believed, she initially ruled herself out of the running, instead favouring Keith Joseph for the position.<sup>6</sup> Her recollections, however, do not paint a full picture. Although Thatcher saw Joseph as the main contender, by the winter of 1974, she did think of herself as a possible candidate for the leadership of the Conservative Party. On the general election campaign trail, between September and early October 1974, for instance, Thatcher had taken

centre stage, canvassing combatively, 'strongly promoting the middle-class interests,' including the aspiration for home ownership.<sup>7</sup> As a result, her national profile had steadily grown, with more and more people becoming aware of her abilities; a useful bonus in the event of a future leadership contest.

On 21 November 1974 – the same day as the Birmingham Pub bombings, in which the PIRA murdered twenty-one people and injured a further 182 – the Executive of the Conservative Party's 1922 Committee was informed that Thatcher would contest the post of leader of the Conservative Party (a position that technically did not exist as Heath continued to cling to power).<sup>8</sup> Her decision to stand was greeted by a mixture of surprise and condescension amongst the higher echelons of the Conservative Party. Peter Walker,<sup>9</sup> who served at ministerial level under Heath, summoned up the mood of the majority of senior Conservative Party figures regarding Thatcher's chances of success: 'Supporters could not believe that a woman who had never been anything other than Minister of Education could defeat the current male leader who had just been Prime Minister.'<sup>10</sup>

Despite garnering support from Keith Joseph and Humphrey Atkins, a perception prevailed that Thatcher's decision to stand for the leadership of the Conservative Party was 'nothing more than a chance to prepare the ground for a challenge by someone more serious'.<sup>11</sup> To her many critics, in the words of Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders, 'Thatcher was a suburban housewife with no experience of high office, who seemed neither willing nor able to expand the party's constituency'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, given her sex and social background (the daughter of a shop grocer), Thatcher was seen as 'something of an outsider in the Tories' high circles'.<sup>13</sup>

To the disbelief of many within the Conservative Party, however, Thatcher pulled off a staggering leadership victory. With the support of Airey Neave, who acted as her campaign manager during the latter stages of the leadership contest, Thatcher was appointed the leader of the Conservative Party on 11 February 1975. Not only did she beat Heath in the first ballot on 4 February (Thatcher, 130 votes; Heath, 119; and Sir Hugh Fraser,<sup>14</sup> 16), but following Heath's resignation as party leader, she also won outright against Whitelaw, in the second ballot on 11 February (Thatcher, 146 votes; Whitelaw, 79), with the result that she did not need the third ballot.<sup>15</sup> Thus, at 49 years of age, Thatcher became the first women leader of a major British political party.

Thatcher fondly remembered first receiving news of her victory. She recalled Neave opening the door to his office and saying, 'so quietly', 'I have to tell you, you are the new Leader of the Opposition'.<sup>16</sup> Following her election victory, she immediately tried to rally the Conservative parliamentary party, chiefly her rivals for the leadership behind her cause. 'It is important to me', she informed a press conference following her victory, '[that] this prize has been won in an open electoral contest with four other potential leaders. I know they will be disappointed, but I hope we shall soon be back working together as colleagues for the nation in which we all believe'.<sup>17</sup>

The final line-up of Thatcher's new shadow cabinet was confirmed on 18 February 1975, less than a week after her election as leader of the Conservative Party. Whilst Heath declined a portfolio in Thatcher's shadow cabinet, many of her previous rivals for the leadership of the Conservative Party quickly fell in behind her. In fact, former colleagues of Heath dominated her new shadow cabinet. Whitelaw duly accepted the post of deputy party leader. Sir Geoffrey Howe became shadow chancellor. Keith

Joseph agreed to take over the responsibility for policy and research. Jim Prior was given employment. Francis Pym<sup>18</sup> accepted agriculture (although he gave up the post following a nervous breakdown a few weeks later). Reginald (Reggie) Maudling<sup>19</sup> came back to the frontbench to take on the role as shadow foreign secretary. Ian Gilmour was promoted to shadow home secretary (having briefly held the shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland portfolio under Heath).

At his personal request, Neave, 59 years old, was appointed shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland. *The Times* welcomed Neave's appointment as the man charged with leading 'the Tory attack on Ulster policy'.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, Thatcher also made him titular head of her private office. In practice, however, Richard Ryder<sup>21</sup> ran Thatcher's office day to day, while Neave devoted himself to Northern Ireland policy. Neave confessed at the time that one of the reasons Thatcher decided to appoint him as titular head of the leader's private office was to guarantee that Northern Ireland policy was kept 'close to Mrs. Thatcher'.<sup>22</sup>

Personally, Neave and Thatcher were relatively close to one another (their relationship, in the words of Robin Harris, 'was built on mutual respect and obligation rather than personal affection').<sup>23</sup> Even before Neave agreed to manage Thatcher campaign for the leadership of the Conservative Party, they had known one another for several years. As barristers, they had shared the same chambers and had been neighbours at Westminster Gardens. During Thatcher's period as the official opposition spokesperson for social security, she had helped Neave with his Bill to make provision for pensions for the over-eighties.<sup>24</sup> A known critic of Heath (whom Neave 'greatly disliked'),<sup>25</sup> in March 1974, Neave was elected to the anti-Heath Conservative Party 1922 Committee Executive.<sup>26</sup>

As the new official leader of the opposition, Thatcher wasted little time in conducting a root and branch review of the Conservative Party's policies. On the day of her election, she told *ITN News*, 'You don't exist as a party unless you have a clear philosophy and a clear message'.<sup>27</sup> She immediately set out a radical new path, a path designed to 'save Britain from ever-worsening decline', to quote Jim Tomlinson.<sup>28</sup>

Thereafter, Thatcher's central political objective – arguably obsession – was to rid Britain of the 'basic immorality' of Socialism, as she phrased it.<sup>29</sup> First in her sights was to secure Britain from an impending economic abyss, described by Thatcher as a 'catastrophic national decline'.<sup>30</sup> As noted below, five major economic problems dominated the shadow cabinet's economic strategy during Thatcher's initial years as the official leader of the opposition. These economic objectives would later form part of what many commentators have described as the economic 'monetarist' platform of 'Thatcherism'.<sup>31</sup> These five economic preoccupations were

- (a) how to deduce rampant inflation;
- (b) how to tackle inefficiencies and poor productivity in the bloated public sector;
- (c) how to reduce public spending and borrowing and tackle imbalances in monetary policy (stemming from the enormous public sector deficits);
- (d) how to reduce unemployment, and lastly;
- (e) how to temper the power of trade unions and the reform of collective bargaining.<sup>32</sup>

However, as Thatcher accustomed herself to her new role as leader of the Conservative Party, struggling to impose her authority on a divided party, her economic plan was far from clear-cut. While she may have been determined to remodel the Conservative Party's economic strategy, during her period as the official leader of the opposition, she was poorly equipped for the intellectual battle in relation to policy formation. Rather than developing ideas of her own, she encouraged those close to her to influence her thinking. In this way, Thatcher was not necessarily an intellectual thinker or theorist, but 'a woman of beliefs,' to quote Charles Moore, Thatcher's authorized biographer.<sup>33</sup> These leadership qualities, of foresight, of a sense of destiny and the conviction of her thoughts, 'created the space for ideas to come forward.'<sup>34</sup> Therefore, from the outset of her leadership, Thatcher placed her trust in Keith Joseph to guide her on economic matters.

Given her obsession with economic policy, Thatcher allocated little energy, thinking or time to Northern Ireland during her five years as the official leader of the opposition. Although she realized that her appointment as leader of the Conservative Party made her a central target for Irish Republican paramilitaries, with the result that she was provided with police protection for the first time,<sup>35</sup> Northern Ireland remained an irritating distraction to more pressing economic matters. Privately, she conceded that during her period as the official leader of the opposition she deliberately 'avoided' talking about the perennial problem of Northern Ireland.<sup>36</sup> The Irish government soon noticed Thatcher's 'cautious' approach vis-à-vis the Conservative Party's Northern Ireland policy. Neither in public nor in private, a secret Irish political profile of Thatcher reported, did she give 'very much indication' of her attitude to Northern Ireland.<sup>37</sup>

The archival records confirm this assessment. During Thatcher's first six months as the official leader of the opposition, Northern Ireland policy was demoted to the political doldrums. The topic was seldom broached at weekly meetings of the Leader's Consultative Committee (LCC) (i.e. the shadow cabinet), which were personally chaired by Thatcher.<sup>38</sup> For instance, at a half-day meeting of the LCC, on 28 July 1975, at which twenty items were placed on the agenda (including 'Welsh policy group reports'), Northern Ireland was not mentioned.<sup>39</sup> By November 1976, Airey Neave privately conceded that Northern Ireland was 'not discussed in any detail or indeed at any length at Shadow Cabinet meetings'.<sup>40</sup> Michael Heseltine,<sup>41</sup> shadow secretary of state for industry, likewise, confirmed that Northern Ireland rarely made it onto the weekly agenda of the LCC meetings.<sup>42</sup>

At the annual Conservative Party Conference in Blackpool, from 7 to 10 October 1975 (Thatcher's first party conference as leader of the Conservative Party), Northern Ireland policy was deliberately submerged beneath the political undergrowth by the party hierarchy. Although six motions on Northern Ireland had been submitted by constituency associations and appeared on the conference agenda, none was selected for debate.<sup>43</sup> The subject, likewise, was not selected as a topic for debate by those attendees who had an opportunity to ballot for resolutions that they wished to see slotted into two vacant spaces in the timetable. Indeed, at a press conference, on the eve of the gathering, Sir John Taylor, chairman of the National Union Executive of the



Conservative Party, refused to answer a query from assembled journalists on whether the party intended to define its Northern Ireland policy at the conference.<sup>44</sup>

As Thatcher got down to the business of leading the Conservative Party in opposition, she gave Neave, her shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland, an almost free hand in the formulation of the party's Northern Ireland policy.<sup>45</sup> She later recalled that he 'was extraordinarily painstaking and diligent'. 'As a politician, he had not an ounce of flamboyance, yet he was a master of his craft, with a wry, dry humour that missed nothing.'<sup>46</sup> While she was aware that he was not a particularly good parliamentarian in the traditional sense, she realized that the man who had helped her win the leadership battle for the Conservative Party was one of the 'most gifted parliamentary conspirators of the day', to quote Graham Goodlad.<sup>47</sup> As she later wrote, albeit with a hint of nostalgia, 'I'd never thought of anyone else for Northern Ireland ... He understood the "Irish factor". He'd studied it.'<sup>48</sup> Indeed, if Keith Joseph was usually the first person that Thatcher came to for advice on economic matters, it was Neave that she turned to for guidance on Northern Ireland.

In fact, prior to Thatcher's appointment as leader of the Conservative Party in 1975, Northern Ireland had never registered on her political radar. In the words of Howe, during her early years in the House of Commons, she never cast her eyes 'across the Irish Sea'.<sup>49</sup> This is even more interesting considering that Northern Ireland had been a major preoccupation for the Heath government from 1970 to 1974. Yet, as secretary for education, Thatcher 'played little or no role' in the formulation of the government's Northern Ireland policy.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, she had no say in Heath's decision to shut down the Northern Ireland parliament and introduce direct rule in 1972. Nor was she involved in the abortive Sunningdale Agreement of 1973, which had been an attempt to help establish a power-sharing devolved government in Northern Ireland.

Jim Prior,<sup>51</sup> secretary of state for Northern Ireland, 1981–4, later accused Thatcher of 'never really' understanding the Northern Ireland problem.<sup>52</sup> Thatcher, herself, admitted a general ignorance of Irish affairs on taking up her new post as the official leader of the opposition. 'But what British politician will ever fully understand Northern Ireland?', she recalled.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, on a visit to Texas in the United States, in September 1977, Thatcher conceded that 'at this time I can see no solution to the problems in Northern Ireland ... in all honesty there isn't a solution at this time'.<sup>54</sup>

This should not suggest, however, that Thatcher did not have a Northern Ireland policy as the official leader of the opposition.<sup>55</sup> Although the subject ranked low on her list of political priorities and her views were confused, often naive and sometimes contradictory, she did hold firm to several guiding principles, which can be broken down under two subheadings: (1) *Security* and (2) *Political*.

For Thatcher, both policies were interwoven. In retirement, she was at pains to emphasize that it was 'impossible', as she wrote, to separate entirely security policy, required to 'prevent terrorist outrages ... from the wider political' arena.<sup>56</sup> Above all else, however, in her mind, security factors always took priority over political initiatives. 'My policy towards Northern Ireland', she recalled, 'was always one aimed above all at upholding democracy and the law: it was always therefore determined by whatever I considered at a particular time would help bring better security'.<sup>57</sup>

In adhering to the above principles, Thatcher made a commitment to continue to support the bipartisan policy on Northern Ireland on behalf of the Conservative Party and the Labour government, as first adopted by her predecessor Heath.<sup>58</sup> She confirmed this policy on a visit to Washington in September 1975. The Labour government and the Conservative Party in opposition, she informed assembled reporters, agreed on a bipartisan Northern Ireland policy, irrespective of any differences each party might have regarding Northern Ireland's constitutional future.<sup>59</sup>

### **(1) Security**

Having analysed many of Thatcher's speeches, private conversations and Conservative Party policy documents, the basis of her Northern Ireland security policy from 1975 to 1979 can be broadly defined under the below headings:

- (a) opposition of the withdrawal of British Army from Northern Ireland;<sup>60</sup>
- (b) commitment to militarily defeating Irish Republican paramilitaries;<sup>61</sup>
- (c) refusal to negotiate with Irish Republican or Loyalist paramilitaries;<sup>62</sup>
- (d) improvement of intelligence and security vis-à-vis the activities of paramilitaries operating in Northern Ireland and mainland Great Britain;<sup>63</sup>
- (e) commitment to uphold law and order in Northern Ireland;<sup>64</sup>
- (f) support of the Labour government's decision to withdraw 'special category status' for new prisoners convicted of terrorist related activities (after 1 March 1976);<sup>65</sup> and lastly,
- (g) improvement of Anglo-Irish relations, specifically in the fields of cross-border security and extradition.<sup>66</sup>

For example, regarding a possible withdrawal of the British Army from Northern Ireland, as the official leader of the opposition, Thatcher regularly expressed her disapproval to this proposal. During this period, particularly within Irish government circles,<sup>67</sup> there was a genuine worry that the Labour-led government in Britain was contemplating withdrawing from Northern Ireland. Such concerns were well grounded. British cabinet papers from 1974 reveal that following the Labour government's return to power in early 1974, Harold Wilson directed that the option of British withdrawal be examined and in May of that year had drafted his own 'Doomsday Scenario' for Northern Ireland.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, according to Bernard Donoughue's account of this period (Donoughue was senior policy advisor to Wilson) Wilson had favoured the option of British withdrawal, in conjunction with an attempted negotiated independence for Northern Ireland as a dominion of the Commonwealth, 'until it was finally rejected by the Cabinet Committee on Northern Ireland on 11 November 1975'.<sup>69</sup>

For Thatcher, British withdrawal would have been a disaster, leading to widespread bloodshed and civil war in Northern Ireland. Although she later admitted that she had discussed with Airey Neave the possibility of withdrawing the British Army from Northern Ireland, she quickly rejected this policy.<sup>70</sup> Thatcher made this point abundantly clear during a meeting with Wilson in September 1975. 'People unfortunately did not

realize that the result of a pull out [from Northern Ireland]', she implored, 'would be much greater carnage.'<sup>71</sup>

## **(2) Political**

The basis of Thatcher's political outlook in relation to Northern Ireland rested on one fundamental principle: Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK. Above all else, to quote Sir Robert Armstrong, Thatcher's cabinet secretary, 1979–87, when it came to Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the UK, Thatcher's 'rock was sovereignty'.<sup>72</sup>

Although Thatcher preferred to avoid 'talking about the political aspects of Northern Ireland', instead confining herself to 'security matters',<sup>73</sup> broadly speaking she remained loyal to four key political principles:

- (a) fundamental commitment that Northern Ireland would remain an integral part of the UK;<sup>74</sup>
- (b) opposition to the long-term maintenance of direct rule;<sup>75</sup>
- (c) opposition to a federal agreement as a long-term solution to the Northern Ireland conflict;<sup>76</sup> and lastly,
- (d) support of an increase in the number of Westminster seats in Northern Ireland from twelve to seventeen (subsequently eighteen).<sup>77</sup>

Despite Thatcher's commitment to the above principles – primarily Northern Ireland remaining an integral part of the UK – confusion remains regarding her attitude towards Northern Ireland's long-term political status during her period as the official leader of the opposition. Specifically, whether Thatcher supported the restoration of a devolved government in Northern Ireland (based on either majority-rule or power-sharing). Alternatively, whether she endorsed what Graham Walker has labelled 'compromise integration', which advocated reform of local government in Northern Ireland, with the establishment of one or more Regional Councils.<sup>78</sup>

As is examined in further detail later in this chapter, although Thatcher's personal preference had always been for the restoration of a devolved government in Northern Ireland based on 'a system of majority-rule',<sup>79</sup> the archival records reveal that her attitude to this politically sensitive subject gradually changed during her period as the official leader of the opposition. Addressing rank and file supporters at the Conservative Party Conference in Blackpool, in October 1975, for example, Thatcher was deliberately evasive on whether she preferred majority-rule or a power-sharing model for Northern Ireland.<sup>80</sup>

By at least October 1976, however, Thatcher shelved her support for a return to a majority-rule administration in Northern Ireland. Given the strength of opposition to the majority-rule model, particularly within the Nationalist community of Northern Ireland, she conceded that this policy was unworkable in the short to medium term.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, she placed her support behind the Labour government's calls for the restoration of a devolved government in Northern Ireland based on a power-sharing model. As she informed Fianna Fáil leader Jack Lynch<sup>82</sup> in October 1977, not only

did she support the restoration of a power-sharing Executive in Northern Ireland, but noted that 'it was our [the Conservative Party's] initiative'.<sup>83</sup>

Significantly, the available evidence reveals that by April 1978 Thatcher *abandoned* her support for devolved government in Northern Ireland, based on either majority-rule or a power-sharing model, in the medium term. Instead, with the encouragement of Airey Neave, Thatcher placed on record the Conservative Party's support of – as an interim measure – the reform of local government in Northern Ireland, with the establishment of one or more Regional Councils.<sup>84</sup>

The establishment of such a Regional Council or Councils, as its supporters promoted, would fill the gap between the twenty-six District Councils in Northern Ireland and the Parliament at Westminster by overseeing a large range of 'Macrory' functions in the region. Possible 'Macrory' functions mentioned included town and county planning, roads, streets, car parks, water, sewerage, education, libraries, housing and rating<sup>85</sup> (Thatcher's attitude to the Conservative Party's support for the establishment of one or more Regional Councils in Northern Ireland is examined in further detail in Chapter 2).

### The right approach? The CPPNIC and accompanying fact-finding subcommittee, 1975–9

The single most important avenue for the development of the Conservative Party's Northern Ireland policy during Thatcher's period as leader of the official opposition fell under the auspices of the CPPNIC.<sup>86</sup> Over the preceding years, the CPPNIC, which usually met on a fortnightly basis when parliament was in session, provided senior Conservative Party MPs, party backbenchers and invited guests a platform to debate – and occasionally determine – the party's Northern Ireland policy.

The CPPNIC was composed of a mixture of established Conservative Party parliamentarians and a new generation of up and coming MPs. Of the older generation the most prominent included Lord Belstead (John Ganzani, 2nd Baron Belstead);<sup>87</sup> John Arnold Farr;<sup>88</sup> Sir Nigel Fisher;<sup>89</sup> Philip Goodhart<sup>90</sup> and Carrickfergus-born Norman Miscampbell.<sup>91</sup> Most prominent amongst the younger Conservative Party MPs were Michael Mates;<sup>92</sup> Ian Gow (who was murdered by the PIRA in July 1990); and future secretary of state for Northern Ireland Patrick Mayhew.<sup>93</sup> Three further members of the CPPNIC held the most influence vis-à-vis the Conservative Party's Northern Ireland policy during Thatcher's period as official leader of the opposition. They were Thatcher's shadow spokespersons on Northern Ireland, Airey Neave, John Biggs-Davison and Sir William van Straubenzee.<sup>94</sup>

From the moment Neave was appointed as shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland, he carved out a reputation as an industrious and vocal contributor, regularly using the CPPNIC as a sounding board to test out potential policies. By the standards of the day, Neave was a remarkable individual. On the one hand, he was a public figure: war-hero, writer, barrister and politician. He had escaped from the clutches of the Nazis during the Second World War, was the author of five semi-autobiographical

books and had established a practice at the bar. On the other hand, he was an elusive and secretive individual, retaining close links to the British Secret Intelligence Service throughout his adult life. During the Second World War, he worked for MI9, a subsidiary of MI6, later holding the rank of commanding officer of the Intelligence School 9 (TA).<sup>95</sup>

Neave's greatest contribution to political life came in the autumn of his career, following his promotion to Thatcher's shadow cabinet in February 1975. From the moment he took up his new portfolio as shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland, until his murder by the INLA in March 1979, Neave's 'first priority', as he privately noted to a Conservative Party activist in 1978, was to defeat Irish Republican terrorism.<sup>96</sup> Although often preoccupied with security related issues, as is examined in the next chapter, it is incorrect to suggest that Neave took little interest in the political fortunes of Northern Ireland (Neave's important contribution to the Conservative Party's Northern Ireland policy, 1975–9, is examined in further detail in Chapter 2).

Like Neave, Biggs-Davison was an active contributor on the CPPNIC. As chairperson of the committee since November 1974, he had already established himself as an 'expert' on Northern Ireland<sup>97</sup> and promoted his image as 'an argumentative and committed Catholic Ulster Unionist', to quote Patrick Cosgrave.<sup>98</sup> Several years earlier, Biggs-Davison published a book tracing the history of Ireland, *The hand is red*, in which he claimed that Trotskyites and Communists had infiltrated the PIRA.<sup>99</sup> In January 1976, following Thatcher's reshuffle of her shadow cabinet, he was appointed as Neave's deputy shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland; a post he retained until his resignation in 1978.<sup>100</sup>

Following the introduction of direct rule to Northern Ireland in 1972, Biggs-Davison had opposed Edward Heath's efforts to institute a power-sharing Executive in Northern Ireland.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, in March of that year, he opposed the suspension of Stormont, voting against the second and third readings of the Northern Ireland (Provisions) Bill.<sup>102</sup> During the mid-1970s, he regularly spoke against his party aligning itself too closely to the power-sharing model, instead encouraging a more flexible attitude to devolution, which included the possibility of restoring a majority-rule government in Northern Ireland.<sup>103</sup> His appointment as Neave's number two, in the words of the *Irish Times*, meant that there was 'no moderate influence on Tory policy' on Northern Ireland.<sup>104</sup>

Despite the forewarnings from the *Irish Times*, the appointment of van Straubenzee<sup>105</sup> as a third member of Neave's team ensured there was a 'moderate' voice within the Conservative Party's Northern Ireland team. A close friend to Heath, who was minister of state in the new Northern Ireland Office (NIO) from 1972 to 1974, van Straubenzee had won the respect of Catholics in Northern Ireland because of his support for devolved government based on a power-sharing assembly. He was also understood to have disliked many within the Ulster Unionist camp, arguing strongly against offering them the whip in the aftermath of the Conservative Party general election defeat in February 1974.<sup>106</sup> Like Biggs-Davison, since at least 1973, he was also a member of the CPPNIC, becoming a vice-chairman by the time Thatcher was appointed the official leader of the opposition.<sup>107</sup>

From February 1975 to May 1979 (prior to the Conservative Party's entry to government), the CPPNIC met on approximately thirty-eight occasions. In a demonstration of her lacklustre attitude to Northern Ireland, Thatcher never attended a meeting of the CPPNIC during her period as official leader of the opposition.<sup>108</sup> Over this five-year period, a range of topics was discussed and policies agreed by CPPNIC members. Topics that were debated included how to tackle American financial support of the PIRA,<sup>109</sup> the possibility of running Conservative Party candidates in Northern Ireland<sup>110</sup> and expressions of 'anxieties' regarding the economic viability of the car manufacturer DeLorean, which operated from west Belfast.<sup>111</sup> Invited guests also regularly attended meetings of the CPPNIC during this period. They included James Molyneux, leader of the UUP in the House of Commons; Gerry Fitt, a prominent Northern Nationalist;<sup>112</sup> Anne Dickson, a moderate voice within Ulster Unionism;<sup>113</sup> and Conor Cruise O'Brien, Ulster Unionist sympathizer, former Irish government minister and Irish senator.<sup>114</sup>

During the first year of Thatcher's leadership of the Conservative Party, from February to December 1975, alone, the CPPNIC met on fifteen occasions. The records show that it was a busy period, with Neave and his fellow CPPNIC members immersing themselves in the practical details of policy development in relation to Northern Ireland. A range of issues were discussed at meetings of this body, including a report dealing with British-Irish relations following Neave's meeting with the taoiseach Liam Cosgrave<sup>115</sup> in Dublin during mid-May 1975;<sup>116</sup> a discussion regarding a recent visit by Neave and Biggs-Davison to Londonderry<sup>117</sup> as well as a debate regarding talks between the British government and the PIRA, which were described as having 'discredited democratic politicians'.<sup>118</sup>

The most significant issue considered by CPPNIC members during 1975 was a decision, taken on 15 May, to establish a so-called 'fact-finding' subcommittee under the auspices of the CPPNIC. This new fact-finding subcommittee was assigned the task, as the minutes phrase it, to 'reassess the policy in the Ulster Situation'. The decision to use the term 'fact-finding', rather than the word 'policy', in the title of this new subcommittee was a deliberate ploy by Neave to 'avoid speculation that a right-wing policy switch was imminent'.<sup>119</sup> As such, this new fact-finding subcommittee was tasked with reviewing and updating the Conservative Party's Northern Ireland policy considering recent developments, including the decision of the PIRA to renew its ceasefire in February 1975 and the ongoing Northern Ireland Constitution Convention (NICC) talks which had commenced in May of that year (the subject of the NICC talks is discussed below).

Agreement was reached that membership of the fact-finding subcommittee would be 'flexible' and sourced from current members of the CPPNIC. Significantly, CPPNIC members also agreed that the fact-finding subcommittee would be responsible for devising a 'final' policy paper on Northern Ireland, which would be presented to the LCC in July 1975 (in fact, it was not until the following year, in July 1976, that Neave submitted this requested policy paper on Northern Ireland to the shadow cabinet for consideration).<sup>120</sup>

The fact-finding subcommittee first convened 17 June 1975 (thereafter, it continued to meet, usually monthly, until at least July 1977).<sup>121</sup> It was composed of approximately