

Ireland: Topic 3 The Pursuit of Sovereignty and the Impact of Partition, 1912-1949 | Sample answer

How did Anglo-Irish relations develop during the period 1923-1949?

The period 1923 to 1949 saw significant and rapid change in Anglo-Irish relations. With the War of Independence long ceased and the Anglo-Irish Treaty ratified, tensions between the countries were played out in the diplomatic arena rather than the battlefields. Under Cumann na nGaedheal, the Boundary Commission, the Balfour Declaration and the Statute of Westminster all saw shifts in the dynamic between the country. Under De Valera and Fianna Fáil, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was slowly dismantled and an Economic War was waged. Finally, a republic was declared by the First-Inter Party government in 1948.

Under Article 12 of the Anglo Irish Treaty, a Boundary Commission was to be set up to establish the border between north and south. It was delayed by the Civil War but finally began its work in November 1924. The three-man board consisted of Eoin MacNeill, JR Fisher and Richard Feetham, a South African lawyer. Free State ministers had hoped the transfer of land from North to South would make the former unworkable. However, Feetham's pro-Commonwealth beliefs ensured there was little chance of that. Fisher eventually leaked that there would be few changes made. Cosgrave panicked at this development and MacNeill soon resigned. Cosgrave met Ramsay MacDonald and agreed the report be suppressed and Ireland's war debt dropped. The whole incident was an embarrassment to he and his government. While there was no change to the border from the commission, the incident did change somewhat the relationship between the countries.

The most important incident of the 1920's came at the 1926 Imperial Conference, a meeting of all Commonwealth countries where Ireland played a prominent part. That year, Kevin O'Higgins and the rest of the Irish delegates met with Canadian and South African representatives and together they forced the chairman of the conference into a significant speech. Arthur Balfour described dominions as "autonomous communities" within the British Empire that were equal in status with Britain. This became known as the Balfour Declaration and is recognised as a key moment in the push towards sovereignty for many nations across the world. It was the standout success of CnG's foreign policy and represented a significant change in Anglo-Irish relations.

It also helped to pave the way for the Statute of Westminster. In December 1931, the British parliament enacted the statute of Westminster, a ground-breaking piece of legislation which essentially gave dominions full control of their own affairs. It said that no law made by Britain would extend to the dominions other than at their request and with their permission. It also allowed these countries to repeal previous laws and make laws in relation to foreign policy. Cosgrave, in an unpopular move, chose to honour the Anglo-Irish treaty. This only served to strengthen support for Fianna Fail and, as promised in the election, De Valera used the Statute to push the nation towards full independence upon taking power.

De Valera and FF campaigned on the promise of dismantling the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The 1931 Statute of Westminster allowed dominions to repeal old laws but WT Cosgrave and Cumann na nGaedheal had refused to do so. Within weeks of taking office, de Valera informed the British the “unbearable burden on the people” that was the Oath of Allegiance. The Removal of Oath Act passed on April 20th 1932 did so. The Crown’s representative, the Governor General was also soon removed after some clever manoeuvring by de Valera. He reminded the Prime Minister of his duty to take his cabinet’s advice which in this case was to remove the sitting Governor General, James MacNeill, from office. He was duly replaced by a FF choice who delegitimised the role and it was soon abolished. De Valera had quickly fulfilled his promise of dismantling the Treaty and this was clearly a success.

For much of the 1930’s, Anglo-Irish relations were dominated by a single issue, The Economic War. Land annuities to the British government agreed to by Cosgrave in 1926 were highly controversial and De Valera declared before the 1932 election he would withhold payments if he came to power. In July of that year, he announced he would not be paying the annuities for the first half of that year. The British imposed a 20% customs duty on Irish imports and later increased this further. De Valera replied with similar penalties and the ensuing Economic War only came to an end in 1938 following the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The financial side of the agreement saw the payment of land annuities end with a one-off £10 million payment and the lifting of all trade tariffs. The defence agreement saw the so called Treaty Ports of Lough Swilly, Berehaven and Cobh returned to Irish control. This was a seismic shift in Anglo-Irish relations.

The next major development in Anglo-Irish relations saw him further distance Ireland from Britain. A constitutional crisis in Britain that emerged when King Edward VII tried to get a divorce allowed de Valera to strike. The Constitutional Amendment Act of 1936 deleted all mention of the King and his representative from the constitution. The External Relations Bill

later that year then reduced the role of the King declared Ireland was only associated with the commonwealth rather than being a member. These actions paved way for de Valera to write a new constitution in 1937 that increased the divide between the two countries further still.

FF were replaced by the First-Inter Party government in 1948. By now, the country was a republic in all but name. The return of the Treaty Ports was a signal to most that Ireland was now completely independent, but the government aimed to make it official. Tánaiste William Norton said in Canada in September that his country intended to leave the Commonwealth. The Republic of Ireland Act was passed in December and it established the country as a Republic on Easter Monday 1949. Irish sovereignty was now “beyond dispute” according to Taoiseach John Costello.

Despite the fact no battles were waged in the period 1923-49, it was arguably one of the most significant periods in the history of Anglo-Irish relations. In 1923, the Irish Free State was a dominion very closely tied to Britain. By 1949, the country was now a republic with its own constitution. A number of significant events led to this rapid change in the relationship between the countries.