THE IRISH QUESTION

The reasons for the conflicting situation in Ireland are deep-rooted in religion and history: the Irish are descended from the **Celtic people** who originally inhabited the island, and they are traditionally **Catholic**, while the Protestant minority is descended from the English, and represents the nation that occupied Ireland and made it a colony. The Irish have always felt exploited by England, and have regarded it as responsible for their economic plight.

**Orangemen** - After the **Cromwellian war in Ireland** (1649–53) – a tragic event that the British can never remember and the Irish can never forget – in 1689 the Irish welcomed the Catholic James II when he landed an army in Ireland, but they were defeated by **William of Orange** at the **Battle of the Boyne** (1690). William wanted to subdue the Catholics, and barred them from owning land or voting; it was in that period that the Irish Protestants became known as **Orangemen**. Result: most rich landowners were English, while the natives were poor (1729: J. Swift’s “A Modest Proposal”)

**Act of Union** - In 1801 the **Act of Union** stated that Ireland was part of the United Kingdom. The **Anglican Church** became the **official Irish Church**, and Catholics were not allowed to sit in **Parliament**, even if 88% of the Irish were Catholic.

**Irish potato famine** - The failure of the potato crop in 1845-46 led to famine; a million people died, and two million were compelled to emigrate to America. The English were blamed for the disaster and **Home Rule** - self-government - was invoked.

**The Easter Rising** - In 1886 a bill granting Home Rule - that is, full political independence - to Ireland was defeated in the British Parliament: the bill had been promoted by the joint efforts of **Charles Parnell**, the father of Irish independence, and the Liberal British Prime Minister, **William Gladstone**. In 1914, another bill was finally going to be passed but with the outbreak of World War I England **postponed the issue of Home Rule till the end of the war**. Outraged at such a decision, in 1916 in **April 1916** a group of extreme Irish Republicans organized a revolt known as the Dublin **Easter Rising**. The uprising was ruthlessly repressed by the British Army. Despite its failure, the Easter Rising was the real beginning of Irish independence. With the end of the war the Irish Question rose again.

**The Irish War of Independence** - In the 1918 election **Sinn Fein** party (meaning in Gaelic "Ourselves Alone", founded in 1905) won throughout Ireland - except in the predominantly Protestant Ulster - and declared themselves the elected assembly of the Irish people. A key figure was **Eamon de Valera**, Sinn Fein's leader. The nationalists started organising their own army, the **Irish Republican Army (IRA)**, which mostly used guerrilla tactics. The **War of Independence** began in 1919, led by the IRA (Irish Republican Army) and Sinn Fein; it ended in **1921** with the establishment of the **Irish Free State** (an independent Ireland **within the British Commonwealth**). Only Ulster, or Northern Ireland, remained united with Britain.

**The Irish Republic** - The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, however, was not satisfactory, since it still recognised the sovereignty of the British Crown. This led to a **Civil War (1922-23)**. In the end the IRA surrendered their arms but the work towards independence went on until 1949, when the **Republic of Ireland** (Eire, the Gaelic name for Ireland) was finally officially proclaimed.

**Critical situation in Northern Ireland** - By the mid-1960s a clear Protestant dominance (Unionists, i.e. wanting to maintain the union with the UK) over the Catholic minority had been established: the Protestants received better jobs and better housing, and the Catholics felt discriminated against. This enabled the IRA to gain supporters and set up a campaign of violence and bombings both in Ireland and in Britain. In August 1969 British troops were ordered into Northern Ireland. This policy caused a wave of resentment, and the attitude of the IRA hardened, especially after a Catholic march in Londonderry ended with the British Army killing 13 unarmed civilians (**Bloody Sunday, 1972**).

**Good Friday Agreement** - In 1998 greater autonomy was granted to both Catholics and Protestants in Ulster (Good Friday Agreement). One of its clauses states that the sovereignty of Northern Ireland will be
decided on the basis of a popular referendum.