

# Modern Ireland: Structured Essays

## PART 2:

### THE PURSUIT OF SOVEREIGNTY AND THE IMPACT OF PARTITION, 1912–49

## Structured Essay 2

### How did Anglo-Irish Relations develop during the period 1923–1949?

#### Introduction

From the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, Anglo-Irish relations were largely founded on the provisions of the Treaty (1921). As a dominion, Ireland was a member of the British Commonwealth: TDs were required to take an Oath of Allegiance to the British Crown; the office of governor-general represented the king in Ireland; and British forces remained stationed in three 'treaty' ports. Political links were complemented by strong economic ties. Between 1923 and 1949 Ireland was to progress from dominion status to a position of sovereignty, thereby realising Collins's view of the Treaty as a stepping stone to greater independence.

#### The Irish Free State and the Pursuit of an Independent Foreign Policy 1923–32

From its inception, the Cumann na nGaedheal government under Cosgrave sought to pursue an independent foreign policy: it registered the Treaty as an international agreement at the League of Nations, despite objections from the British Government which regarded the Treaty as an internal matter within the Empire; they established diplomatic links with many countries by sending representatives to the USA in 1924 and later to other states, including France and Germany.

#### Anglo-Irish Relations and the Boundary Commission

Following the establishment of the Free State, the question of partition remained a potential difficulty in Anglo-Irish relations. The Treaty had made provision for the establishment of a Boundary Commission to review the geographical limits of the border between North and South: it was assumed by Griffith and Collins that large parts of Northern Ireland would be transferred to the Free State. The Boundary Commission was set up in 1924. A leaked report of its recommendation to make minimal changes to the existing border had the potential to create a major crisis in Anglo-Irish relations, and to avoid such political controversy the British and Irish governments agreed not to publish the report and instead to leave the existing border with Northern Ireland unchanged.

#### The Irish Free State and the British Commonwealth 1923–32

One of the most significant developments in Anglo-Irish relations during the 1920s was the changing status of the Irish Free State and the other dominions within the British Commonwealth. The historian Nicholas Manseragh used the term 'restless dominion' to describe the Irish Free State in the 1920s. Although believing that Ireland's interests were best served within the Commonwealth, Cosgrave's government played a leading part in achieving greater freedom for dominions within the British Commonwealth: it sent representatives to imperial conferences and worked with other dominions towards achieving co-equality with Britain (Balfour Declaration 1926). These efforts culminated in the Statute of Westminster (1931), which took away from the Westminster Parliament the right to pass laws that were binding on

the dominions and gave dominions the right to repeal laws already passed by Britain on their behalf. Because of the significance of the Statute of Westminster, some historians regard 1931 rather than 1932 (when de Valera and Fianna Fáil came to power) as the real watershed in Anglo-Irish relations.

### **De Valera and Fianna Fáil: Dismantling the Treaty 1932–37**

Elected in 1932, the Fianna Fáil government under de Valera implemented radical changes in policy towards Britain. Committed to dismantling the treaty, de Valera used the Statute of Westminster to abolish the Oath of Allegiance, abolish the senate, and downgrade and eventually abolish the office of governor-general. De Valera used the Abdication Crisis in Britain in 1936 to bring in the External Relations Act, which removed all involvement of the King of England from the internal affairs of the Irish Free State. The following year the enactment of a new constitution made Ireland a republic in all but name.

### **Anglo-Irish Relations and the Economic War 1932–38**

The tensions in Anglo-Irish relations caused by the dismantling of the Treaty were compounded considerably by the Economic War, which began when de Valera refused to pass on the land annuities collected from the farmers to the British Government. A tariff war between Britain and the Irish Free State ensued. Eventually there were moves towards a settlement, with the conclusion of the Coal and Cattle Pact (1935) and the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1938), which brought the Economic War to an end – the return of the treaty ports under this agreement was to be crucial in enabling Irish neutrality during World War II.

### **Irish Neutrality during World War II**

Irish neutrality during World War II is regarded by many historians as the ultimate symbol of Irish sovereignty. It led to new tensions in the relationship between Britain and the Irish Free State: British leaders were critical of neutrality and de Valera had a particularly strained relationship with John Maffey, the British representative in Ireland. While publicly a policy of strict neutrality was maintained, de Valera's government gave valuable assistance to Britain during the war: co-operation between British and Irish armies; weather reports; cross-border assistance after the Belfast bombings; in addition, thousands of Irishmen joined the British armed forces. However, the low ebb in Anglo-Irish relations was reflected in Churchill's scathing criticism of Irish neutrality in a radio broadcast at the end of the war and de Valera's more measured response.

### **Anglo-Irish Relations after the War**

Neutrality resulted in Irish isolation in international affairs and consolidated partition as a result of the shared experience of war between Britain and Northern Ireland. Following the general election of 1948 the first Inter-Party Government, led by John A. Costello of Fine Gael, came to power. In economic terms, an important development was the signing of the Anglo-Irish Trade Agreement; however, the most significant development was in the political and constitutional spheres with the declaration of an Irish Republic in 1949 – Costello hoped that this would end republican violence. Britain reacted by passing the Ireland Act (1949), guaranteeing the status of Northern Ireland within the UK.

### **Conclusion**

There was continuity as well as change in Anglo-Irish relations between 1932 and 1949. During this period, the independence of Ireland's foreign policy was asserted by important landmarks such as the Statute of Westminster (1931), the dismantling of the Treaty and the new Constitution (1937), Irish neutrality, and the declaration of an Irish Republic (1949). However, there were also very significant contrasts between the period 1923–32 and the period after 1932: Cosgrave's government in the 1920s was willing to use the institutions of the Commonwealth to press for greater freedom for the dominions, but, ironically, it was to be the fruits of those efforts in the form of the Statute of Westminster that provided the basis for the more radical policies pursued by de Valera's government in the 1930s. Irish neutrality and the declaration of a republic were symbolic of Irish sovereignty, and were testament to Collins's view of the Treaty as providing the freedom to achieve freedom.