

# Northern Ireland: outside devolution

By Annette Groth

**History's burden.** The unionists in Northern Ireland are fierce defenders of the United Kingdom. To defend the union with Great Britain against a united Ireland is for many of them their *raison d'être*. But if you meet them abroad and ask them what nationality they are, you may get the answer: "I am Irish".



Annette Groth is a journalist with the Norwegian national broadcast NRK. Previously a correspondent in London, Groth has published extensively on issues of British and Irish politics.

This is one of the many historical paradoxes in Northern Ireland. Another one is that the green island was divided at all. When you travel around you notice the small differences between Ireland and Northern Ireland. But geography and culture still give the impression of one country, and the division is hardly clear on the surface.

Northern Ireland was created with a pencil on a map. And when borders are created in this way, trouble will usually follow. The unionists today call their country Ulster, but if Northern Ireland was to comprise the whole of Ulster, there wouldn't have been a Protestant majority. And accommodating the Protestants in Ireland was a main target for the British when the island of Ireland was divided in the 1920s.

So they cut off the three counties Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan and kept the other six counties, which became Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. With a

narrow Protestant majority. And as we all know - the Troubles came.

Last December I stopped a few days in Belfast, where I have been many a time, especially during the Troubles. There is now a cease-fire and The Good Friday Agreement is still holding. But in Sandy Row, a Protestant enclave in the city centre, nothing has changed. There are Union Jacks everywhere, and the edge of the pavement is painted red, white and blue. The 12th of July is the year's greatest day for the people here. Then they march to remember the battle of the Boyne on this day in 1690, where the Protestant king William beat the Catholic king James. The night before is bonfire night. And in Belfast Sandy Row would always have the biggest bonfire. Everyone in Sandy Row, grown-ups and children, will gather in the streets when the fire is lit at midnight.

They call themselves loyalists, as if the word unionist is not strong enough. They are loyal to the British government and the Queen and their battle-cry is "No surrender".

Northern Ireland has been a disputed territory since the division of the 1920s, with the last thirty years marking the heyday of the Troubles. It has been the dream of a united Ireland *versus* the dream of a status quo, on a backdrop of overwhelming power on the unionist side.

To Britain, Northern Ireland has been nothing but a problem. Billions of pounds

have been poured into this British province. Tens of thousands of British soldiers have done their duty here. The IRA and other paramilitary groups on both sides of the divide have wreaked havoc both in Northern Ireland and in mainland Britain and on the European continent. More than 3,000 people have been killed. Every poll taken in Britain about the status of Northern Ireland shows that a majority of the British want Britain to let Northern Ireland go. But British governments have said that the majority should be able to decide - and there is still a narrow unionist majority in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland has still got its Good Friday Agreement. The local politicians, with their arms twisted behind their

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backs by the British and Irish governments, in 1998 agreed to cooperate and rule themselves. It didn't last long, and still the province is ruled directly from London.

At the moment they are trying for political solutions again. The British and Irish governments have threatened to dissolve the local parliament and take the generous wages away from the politicians. Whatever momentum this may bring to the process, Northern Ireland is today miles away from the devolution process of Scotland and Wales. With a constitutional status always disputed, it is very difficult indeed to see a consensus arriving as to what Northern Ireland should be or where it should constitutionally belong in the future.

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