Ministers advise, Prime Ministers decide?
Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, and policy making during the conflict, in the Thatcher years.

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Faculty of Humanities

2016

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ABSTRACT


This thesis focuses on Margaret Thatcher’s involvement in policy making in Northern Ireland in the period building up to the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) of November 1985. The findings in this research are surprising: that Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland, though intermittent, was much greater than has previously been appreciated, and without this involvement there could have been no AIA. Although we already know a lot from the scholarly research on Thatcher and Northern Ireland, the literatures are somewhat disconnected resulting in a distinct gap in the literature of studies looking at Thatcher’s role in Northern Ireland matters. The rolling programme of archival releases under the 30-year rule provides an opportunity to reassess, and revise, what we know already about Thatcher and Northern Ireland in light of the new empirical evidence. This thesis unveils new information which transforms our view of Thatcher and provides new answers to existing questions on Northern Ireland. It fills in the gaps from during this period by focusing on the roles of the Prime Minister and Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland in greater depth than ever before. It will make a significant contribution to our knowledge by bringing new insights into Thatcher’s relationship with the Irish Taoiseach, and her determination to do something about Northern Ireland, as well as her relationship with the Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland and key advisors such as the Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong.

The primary research question that this thesis answers is ‘To what extent was Margaret Thatcher involved in policy making in Northern Ireland, specifically from 1979 until 1985, and what was the impact of this?’ In order to answer this question, two sub-research questions will also be addressed along the way. The first sub-research question relates to Thatcher as Prime Minister and her style of leadership. For the first time we have key respondent interviews with the full archival record to deepen and enrich our understanding of the role of the key actors. This will help us to understand what sort of a leader Thatcher was – autocratic and ideological or pragmatic. The second sub-research question relates to Thatcher as Prime Minister and ministerial relations. To understand Thatcher we have to look at her Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland. We can learn about her leadership in Northern Ireland through these relationships, allowing an emerging picture of Thatcher to build up over subsequent chapters in this thesis. In order to be able to answer these questions, this thesis combines rigorous archival research, using newly released government archives under the thirty year rule, and an extensive programme of elite interviews with insights drawn from a political science literature on the core executive. This allowed me to construct a robust historical narrative informed by inter-disciplinary insights, bringing the Thatcher and Northern Ireland literature together in a way which has not been done before.
DECLARATION

I declare that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Signed …………………………………………………………………………………

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisory team – Nick Turnbull and Kevin Morgan for their continued advice, encouragement and belief. I would also like to thank my mother Angela for her unconditional love and support and my son Cillian, for whom this thesis is for. Finally, I would like to thank Graeme McSherry for his invaluable help and support towards the end.
Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis will investigate the extent to which Margaret Thatcher was involved in Northern Ireland policy, specifically in the build up to the signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement (AIA) of November 1985, and the impact of this. The findings in this research are surprising: that Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland, though intermittent, was much greater than has previously been appreciated, and without this involvement there could have been no AIA. This thesis therefore offers new insight into one of the most effective and controversial figures in recent British history, and into the operations of the core executive. But primarily, in doing so, it brings further nuance and sophistication to our understanding of the developing peace process in Northern Ireland. The thesis shows that it was Thatcher’s involvement in the AIA that set the precedent for Prime Ministerial involvement in the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993, under John Major, and the Good Friday Agreement signed by Blair in 1998.

This thesis also offers a new and detailed insight into the UK government’s Northern Ireland policy and Prime Minister (PM) Margaret Thatcher’s leadership style. This is important because even though Thatcher and Northern Ireland have been often written about, we do not have a certain hold upon her role in the early days of the negotiations, which remained secret. This thesis will investigate this central question in order to enhance our understanding of Northern Ireland policy and will reveal new insights. This thesis will tell us something new about Northern Ireland, filling in the gaps from during this period, by focusing on the roles of the Prime Minister and Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland (SSNI) in greater depth than ever before. It will make a significant contribution to our knowledge by bringing new insights into Thatcher’s relationship with the Irish Taoiseach in the build up to the AIA and her determination to do something about Northern Ireland. It will also shed light on Cunningham’s claim (2001: 74) that at the beginning of the 1980s there was some scepticism within the Conservative party about the legitimacy of the involvement of the Republic of Ireland but by the early 1990s it had become much more accepted. This is because for the first time we have key respondent interviews with the full archival record to deepen and enrich our understanding of the role of the key actors. It will also help us to understand what sort of a leader
Thatcher was – autocratic and ideological or pragmatic. This thesis therefore, offers precise details and a more nuanced analysis of Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland policy and the broader perspective of the British government. This is significant because by looking at Thatcher’s relationships with her ministers and other significant actors, we can draw conclusions about her as leader and the effect that this had on Northern Ireland policy – especially the AIA.

We already know a lot from the scholarly research relating to Margaret Thatcher as a leader and on government policy in Northern Ireland. Both are dynamic fields of research requiring continuous reassessment, not least because of the rolling programme of archival releases under the 30-year rule. Despite their strengths these literatures are somewhat disconnected. Very little research focuses on British government policy in Northern Ireland and there is a distinct gap in the literature of studies looking at Thatcher’s role in Northern Ireland matters. This thesis addresses this gap, offering an empirical contribution to knowledge using new information from the archives and elite interviews.

Research question

My fundamental research question, then, can be stated as follows: To what extent was Margaret Thatcher involved in policy making in Northern Ireland, specifically from 1979 until 1985, and what was the impact of this? In order to be able to answer this, I have combined rigorous archival research, using newly released archives under the thirty year rule, and an extensive programme of elite interviews with insights drawn from the political science literature on the core executive. This allowed me to construct a robust historical narrative informed by inter-disciplinary insights, bringing the Thatcher and Northern Ireland literature together which has not been done before in such a way.

There will also be two sub-research questions. The first sub-research question relates to Thatcher as PM and her style of leadership. The second sub-research question relates to Thatcher as PM and ministerial relations. To understand Thatcher, we have to look at her SSNI. We can therefore learn about her leadership
in Northern Ireland through her relationship with the SSNI, allowing an emerging picture of Thatcher to build up over subsequent chapters in this thesis.

**Contribution to knowledge**

This thesis updates our knowledge on the basis of fresh research and newly available sources. Although Jackson and Saunders (2012) cover Northern Ireland in the chapter by Marc Mulholland ‘Just another country?: The Irish question in the Thatcher years’. As their work covers the entire period, it lacks the important details about many of the processes and actors. Therefore, despite exciting advances in our understanding of Thatcherism, Northern Ireland remains peripheral. This thesis adds to this bigger picture by looking in detail at the impact of Thatcher on Northern Ireland the important role she played in signing the AIA – without her, there would not have been an agreement.

This thesis therefore engages critically with two distinct scholarly literatures, one on Northern Ireland and another on Thatcherism. In both cases the intricacy of these processes has meant that there remain substantial areas of scholarly debate which this thesis seeks to elucidate on the basis of new research findings. The following overview therefore summarises some of the main areas of debates within these field, beginning with Northern Ireland.

**Contribution to knowledge: Northern Ireland**

Even though the leading commentators on Northern Ireland such as Dixon (2001: 349) use archival evidence in their work, such as minutes from House of Commons committees and party manifestoes to support their claims, this thesis makes use of the thousands of documents from the Thatcher Foundation and National Archives that have been released since these literatures were produced. This thesis therefore seeks to address the methodological gaps of larger studies into British policy on Northern Ireland by looking at a smaller period of time. Even more recent works such as Dixon’s second edition of ‘Northern Ireland: The Politics of War and Peace’
(2008) are limited in their ability to include primary evidence due to the lack of archival materials available at the time. The archives that are available, relating to events during Prior’s time as SSNI, allow Dixon to make statements (2008: 185) but not go into any depth about the contents of the documents. More recent studies such as Dixon and O’Kane’s collection of seminar studies (2014: 53-64) ‘Northern Ireland Since 1969’ published in 2014 contains some of the most comprehensive use of archival materials, making use of the new releases to shed further light on events such as the AIA. Through using the archival documents, Dixon and O’Kane (2014: 64) are able to identify the actors involved in the AIA and argue that these actors approached the agreement with different agendas. Thomas Hennessey (2014) in his work ‘Hunger Strike: Margaret Thatcher’s battle with the IRA 1980-1981’ makes great use of the newly released archival material, from the national archives, to provide the most detailed account yet of Thatcher, the hunger strike and the IRA but it lacks the later archival documents, which detail the build up to the AIA. This thesis, unlike previous established literatures, has had full access to archival documents from the period, which was released under the thirty year rule annually from 2009 onwards. This allowed me to test the theories outlined in the existing literature by providing more intricate details of the Thatcher period leading up to the AIA, “the single most influential event in the 1982-1988 period” (Neumann, 2003: 145), using the newly released archival documents and evidence acquired from elite interviews. It will add to Dixon and O’Kane’s work (2014: 54) by using the archival material to examine further back, establishing where the origins of the AIA came from. I will test the extent to which actors such as Armstrong and Thatcher began the process leading to the AIA, as far back as December 1980, with an agenda which continued through to November 1985.

This thesis, using the newly released archives from the period, will assess the Conservative government’s attitude and approach to Northern Ireland from May 1979 until after the AIA in order to explain why there was a change in approach to the Republic of Ireland’s role in Northern Ireland. The significance of the cabinet will also be addressed, using the cabinet minutes from every cabinet meeting between May 1979 and December 1985 which discusses Northern Ireland, to establish the levels of opposition or hesitancy towards policy. Thatcher’s attitude towards Northern Ireland when she took office in May 1979 will be examined in the
next chapter ‘Margaret Thatcher’ to ascertain if her attitude towards Northern Ireland changed after this, over time. The effect of events such as the Brighton bomb on the governments thinking will also be examined. This is important because we currently know very little about Thatcher’s role on Northern Ireland policy. In addition, there are competing claims in the literature about British government policy in Northern Ireland and the constraints on the government itself which will need to be addressed.

Cunningham argued (2001: 74) that there was a shift between 1980 and the 1990 in the acceptance of involvement from the Irish government in Northern Ireland policy, despite significant earlier opposition in the Conservative party to this. Dixon (2001: 349-350) too identified 1980 as a significant point in Anglo-Irish relations. In May and December of 1980, Thatcher and Haughey met and agreed to establish a joint studies group. This is cited as the beginning of the Anglo-Irish process which later developed into the AIA. Brendan O’Leary (1997: 663) argued however that during the Thatcher and Major years, policy in Northern Ireland moved at an extremely slow pace either due to a succession of poor policy decisions, because the Conservative governments did not know how to handle the policy, or was a strategic decision aimed at providing a more slower and sensitive approach to Northern Ireland policy. O’Malley (1983: 238) argued in 1983 that British government policy towards Northern Ireland lacked strategy. Paul Dixon (2001: 365) agreed with Cunningham and argued that although there were ‘tactical adjustments’ in Northern Ireland policy and considerable constraints, that British government policy in Northern Ireland was relatively consistent from 1972 onwards, primarily due to the existence of bipartisanship whereby the opposition supported the policy in Northern Ireland put forward by the government in power and did not challenge it (Dixon, 2001: 340). Dixon also argued (2001: 354), as Peter Hennessy did (Hennessy, 1986: 111), that Thatcher’s approach to Northern Ireland was constrained by her cabinet. This however, seems unlikely knowing what we do about Thatcher’s style of government, the dominance that she had over her cabinet, especially from 1983 onwards, and the secrecy surrounding Northern Ireland policy. The negotiations leading up to the AIA were kept secret from the wider cabinet with only Tom King, Douglas Hurd and possibly the Defence Secretary Michael Heseltine being fully aware of the precise details. Bew argued that other members
of the cabinet did not openly oppose the agreement, even if they had doubts (2011: 40). This suggests that Thatcher was not constrained by the cabinet in Northern Ireland, especially in relation to the AIA.

One of the main contributions to knowledge that this thesis offers is the extent to which Thatcher and other actors were important in the process leading up to the AIA. Although much has been written on the role of advisors in the Thatcher government, little is known about the role of Robert Armstrong in Northern Ireland, except that he was integral to the success of the AIA. It is important to understand more about his role because his ability to persuade Thatcher adds a more nuanced understanding to our knowledge of Thatcher as a leader. Cunningham (2001: 48-49) alludes to the importance of the Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong in British and Irish negotiations leading up to the Anglo-Irish agreement as well as the lack of input that the NIO had on the direction of the AIA compared to the Cabinet Office because of their awareness of Unionist hostility to the agreement. O’Leary (1997: 668) more explicitly acknowledges the importance of Armstrong in particular and argues that Thatcher was persuaded to change direction by civil servants in the Foreign Office and Cabinet Office. Birrell (2009: 36) supports this view, noting that “Prior spoke of Thatcher’s determination to run Irish policy from Number 10”. So do Dixon and O’Kane (2014: 55) who argue that the Foreign Office and Cabinet Office were willing to go further than the NIO who scaled back the plans.

It is therefore also necessary to examine the role of the SSNI. If the NIO was less involved in the AIA, due to the Cabinet Office and Armstrong’s involvement (Cunningham, 2001: 49), was the SSNI less important too? In order to understand even more about Thatcher as a leader, her relationships with the SSNI are also examined. If Armstrong is as important as suggested in the literature, and the NIO had little input in the AIA compared to the Cabinet Office, it could suggest that the SSNI became less important.

This thesis will specifically assess the extent to which this was the case during the Prior years in the ‘Jim Prior’ chapter of this thesis because of Birrell’s claims above. Archival documents listing the individuals attending crucial Northern Ireland discussions, and the contents of the meetings, will shed some light on whether or not Prior and his team in Northern Ireland were the driving force behind
Northern Ireland policy or if it was indeed Thatcher’s team in Number 10. This claim can be further examined by separating out policy areas into domestic, security and international policy. This thesis will assess if Thatcher ran Northern Irish policy which had international implications from Number 10 as well as domestic policy. Finally, a comparative approach will be used to assess if the findings during the Prior years are consistent with the policy approach under the previous SSNI Humphrey Atkins and successive SSNI. Therefore, conclusions will be made about whether Thatcher governed Northern Ireland the same throughout her time as PM or if the Prior years were governed differently.

This thesis is also able to shed further light on Humphrey Atkins, Thatcher’s first SSNI, and address a gap in the current literature for the period covering Atkins’ time as SSNI. Cunningham (2001: 43-45) is only able to discuss Humphrey Atkins’s constitutional policy as SSNI over three pages, due to his longitudinal study of Northern Ireland policy over more than thirty years. Cunningham briefly mentions Atkins’ plans for devolution due to US pressure, including a White paper detailing plans with the parties in Northern Ireland. This thesis will test the claim that US pressure was significant during the Atkins years by analysing government documents detailing exchanges between the US White House and British government. Archival documents relating to the government row over the US’s refusal to continue to supply arms to the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) in Northern Ireland will be important as they might offer an insight into whether or not this led to more or less US pressure on Thatcher to improve the situation in Northern Ireland. In the section in his work about economic policy during the Conservative governments, Cunningham (2001: 67) outlines policies to deal with the unemployed such as Action for Community Employment (ACE) which was introduced in April 1981. Cunningham’s work is rich in detail, outlining the British government’s policies in Northern Ireland in each policy area but does not comment on the impact of the PM or SSNI on these policies. Rather than looking at Prime Ministerial involvement and the significance of the SSNI on all of these issues, this thesis will focus on the most important policy issues during the Thatcher years which Thatcher and the SSNI were involved in. This will be determined by the availability of the archival documents. In addition, this thesis will offer rare insight on Atkins as Thatcher’s first SSNI by producing an entire chapter on Atkins, an individual for
which there is very little written about. He has not been the focus of any study, merely cropping up at the beginning of the Thatcher years. Therefore, rather than outlining the policies, and examining the levels of bipartisanship and relations between the Northern Ireland parties during the Thatcher years as Cunningham does, this thesis seeks to outline Thatcher’s contribution to policy in Northern Ireland and analyse the relevance of other actors such as Atkins and the US government.

This thesis will study the relationships between Thatcher and the main actors – the SSNI, civil servants such as Armstrong and the Irish Taoiseach to assess the extent to which the incumbents matter. This will be tested in this thesis by examining if the individual SSNI were able to make more progress in Northern Ireland due to their relationship with Thatcher and whether or not the Irish Taoiseach as an individual was important to Anglo-Irish relations during this period. Cunningham’s work (2001: 158) concluded that “since the inception of direct rule there is no evidence that a new Secretary of State has engaged in a fundamental re-thinking let alone implementation of Northern Ireland policy”. Also, “the strength or otherwise of the relationship between successive Prime Ministers and Taoiseach has frequently been the subject of discussion. Yet whoever the holder of either position there has been a maintenance and deepening of the bilateral approach to Northern Ireland since 1980” (Cunningham, 2001: 158). In contrast, Brendan O’Leary (1997: 664) claimed that there was a dramatically different policy pursued by Edward Heath in 1973/74 and Thatcher in 1979 with Thatcher taking a more integrationist approach compared to Heath’s focus on devolution suggesting that PMs did individually impact on policy in Northern Ireland. Dixon (2001: 342) disagreed with O’Leary, instead agreeing with Cunningham (2001: 153), that British government policy can be characterised more by continuity and ‘tactical shifts’ than by discontinuity and that despite the personal preference of leading actors, structural constraints limit the power of agents, leaving them only with room to manoeuvre. This could explain Derek Birrell’s claims (2009: 36) that “at the point of crucial political decisions the Secretary of State’s relationship with the Prime Minister became more important”. If the actors are constrained, but not to the point in which they have no capacity to improve their scope for action as Dixon claimed (Dixon, 2001: 342), their relationships might become more significant because their ability to manoeuvre becomes more relevant.
Moreover, although O’Leary (1997: 665) identified that Thatcher pursued a
different policy to Heath, he does not believe, similarly to Cunningham, that any of
Thatcher’s SSNI engaged in a radical re-thinking of Northern Ireland policy because
they all attempted to promote the idea of a devolved assembly. What O’Leary does
concede (1997: 668) is that Thatcher was persuaded to change tack by successive
Irish Premiers and ministers within her own government such as the SSNI Douglas
Hurd. Finally, although the SSNI all followed plans for a devolved government, they
varied in their initiatives and local micro-management (O’Leary, 1997: 675).

A comparative approach across each of the SSNI during the Thatcher years
will test the extent to which these claims are true. I will focus on the extent to which
policy continued, and remained consistent, under each new SSNI. In particular,
archival documents relating to events such as the hunger strike will be examined in
dept to ascertain whether or not Jim Prior was able to engage in a fundamental re-
thinking of the situation compared to his predecessor Humphrey Atkins. It may be
that Cunningham’s claim is correct but on particular occasions, some SSNI might
have been able to make a difference in a particular area of policy. This thesis will
also examine this claim in more depth. If it is proven that no SSNI did engage in a
fundamental rethinking of policy, did the tone of policy change over time allowing
for progress to made, albeit slowly? The relevance of the holder of the position of
PM and Taoiseach will also be assessed. Thatcher remains PM for the entire period
this thesis covers but the Irish Taoiseach changes. I will examine if this is important.
If Thatcher had a better relationship with FitzGerald than Haughey or vice versa,
and achieved more progress in Northern Ireland due to this, are Cunningham and
O’Leary’s claims still true? Thatcher’s personal involvement in the AIA and the
content of the agreement will be assessed to decide if she did make significant impact
upon policy. Moreover, were the joint agreements with the Republic of Ireland
primarily as a result of improving personal relations between the Prime Minister and
Taoiseach and did this contribute significantly towards the change in approach
between 1980 and 1990? These are the questions that this thesis seeks to answer over
the course of the four empirical chapters relating to the SSNI during the Thatcher
years.

During the time Douglas Hurd was SSNI, the AIA was negotiated. We know
that the Cabinet Office was largely responsible for this but the question remains
unclear as to the role Douglas Hurd played. There is a debate in the literature about the extent to which he was an important actor. This thesis will use both elite interviews, including with Douglas Hurd himself which these bodies of literature do not have, and newly released archival materials spanning the entire time Hurd was SSNI to provide further insight into this debate.

Cunningham (2001: 158) argued that no “new Secretary of State has engaged in a fundamental re-thinking let alone implementation of Northern Ireland policy” and Birrell (2009: 36) claimed that “at the point of crucial political decisions the Secretary of State’s relationship with the Prime Minister became more important”. O’Leary (1997: 668) however, argued that Thatcher was persuaded to change tact by successive Irish Premiers and ministers within her own government, such as the SSNI Douglas Hurd. Dixon (2001: 353) gives Douglas Hurd credit for the AIA describing him as playing “an influential role”. This thesis will seek to address the inconsistencies in some of Dixon’s arguments. If the origins of the AIA lay in the 1980 discussions between Thatcher and Haughey (Dixon, 2001: 349) and the negotiations that began in 1983 were led by Robert Armstrong (Dixon and O’Kane, 2014: 54), resulting in the Cabinet Office having much more impact on the AIA than the NIO (Cunningham, 2001: 49, O’Leary, 1997: 668 and Birrell, 2009: 36), then it seems unlikely that Hurd could have influenced the AIA as much as Dixon and O’Leary suggest.

Finally, this thesis will look at the extent to which Thatcher supported the SSNI; did she overrule and marginalise them? Was this consistent across the four SSNI studied in this thesis? This will be tested by specifically analysing the white papers, available from the newly released archives, and assessing the extent to which Thatcher annotated support or opposition to plans outlined by the SSNI. Memorandum between Thatcher and her closest advisor on Northern Ireland, her Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong, will also be examined because correspondence between them often reveals if Thatcher’s office intends to support or change policy coming from the NIO. This will allow me to test the extent to which Birrell’s claim (2009: 36) that “at the point of crucial political decisions the Secretary of State’s relationship with the Prime Minister became more important” was true.
The final chapter of this thesis will seek to examine the years after the AIA was signed, from Tom King and beyond. Although we do not have the archival resources to assess this claim, due to the thirty rule restricting the availability of documents for the later Thatcher years, I will use elite interview evidence alongside well established literature to outline the details of British government policy during these years, assess to what extent it was different to the early Thatcher years and explain why. The significance of my research here is the unique insight acquired through interviews with the SSNI Tom King, Peter Brooke and Patrick Mayhew, as well as with ministers and civil servants who worked with them. This is something that the current literature lacks. Cunningham’s work (2001: 50) concluded that “the remaining years of the 1980s after the AIA witnessed little positive movement”. O’Leary agreed (1997: 663), arguing that during the Thatcher and Major years, policy in Northern Ireland moved at an extremely slow pace. This thesis will go into further detail, providing answers to the questions about why the AIA was a turning point and resulted in a change of policy. It will also allow me to examine exactly what ‘little positive movement’ means and if this was true, why this was. It is widely acknowledged, even by Thatcher herself, that she later regretted signing the AIA having miscalculated the Unionist reaction (Thatcher, 1991: 403) and this therefore resulted in a shift in attitude after 1985 even if there was a continuity in policy due to its similarities with the 1973 Sunningdale agreement (Dixon, 2001: 352).

To conclude this section of the introduction, the most recent work on Northern Ireland by Dixon and O’Kane (2014: 58), which makes use of the newly released archival materials, acknowledged that Thatcher, along with Hurd, Howe and Goodall were key players in the AIA and that Thatcher was willing to go along with an agreement with the Irish because of her desire to improve security (Mallie and McKittrick, 2001: 18) and to prevent further international embarrassment (O’Leary, 1997: 668). Dixon and O’Kane explained (2014: 64) in depth about the impact of the AIA and its creation of conditions under which the peace process emerged in the 1990s. This thesis builds on this by assessing Thatcher’s role in the AIA in the years preceding the AIA. It seeks to explain how Thatcher’s position changed from not having a policy towards Northern Ireland and finding the Irish irritating (Moore, 2013: 587) to agreeing to the AIA being signed in November 1985. Therefore, the following hypotheses from the literature will be tested in this thesis:
Was Thatcher persuaded into signing the AIA? If so, was this by Garrett FitzGerald and his team, the United States, Robert Armstrong or another actor? Or instead of being persuaded, did Thatcher allow others to do things of which in theory she disapproved of due to her willingness to seek out expert opinion, resulting in occasions when she was (willingly) persuaded?

Was Armstrong responsible for the AIA negotiations before 1983 and if so, did he have an agenda?

Did Thatcher run policy from Number 10 and exclude the NIO? Was the SSNI also excluded and were they marginalised at any other time? Did Thatcher support her SSNI or overrule and marginalise them? Was this consistent across the SSNI studied in this thesis? Did any of the SSNI radically change policy in Northern Ireland? Did Douglas Hurd really play an influential role or was the AIA dictated more by Armstrong, leaving Hurd to have a very limited role?

Did the SSNI and their ministers have a unique level of autonomy and was Northern Ireland governed differently to mainland Britain?

Was Thatcher’s approach to Northern Ireland constrained by her cabinet or other actors?

What sort of a leader was Thatcher in relation to Northern Ireland policy? What was the impact of this on Northern Ireland?

This research will test the various findings made so far by looking at the period from May 1979 – December 1985 in detail, using key cabinet minutes and interviews to add more to the story and untangle the current debates in the literature using new evidence. The significance of the findings will be that they provide new answers to existing questions on Northern Ireland. Even though we do not know about King’s time as SSNI and beyond, due to the thirty year rule and restrictions on the release of government archives, this thesis will unveil new information which transforms our view of Thatcher.

**Contribution to knowledge: Margaret Thatcher**

The main research question this thesis is concerned with is the extent to which Margaret Thatcher was involved in Northern Ireland policy. Research on Thatcher
and core executive literature suggests that she had little involvement in Northern Ireland affairs. Whilst this is true to some degree, it is not an accurate representation of her involvement or the extent of policymaking on Northern Ireland security, which has been hidden from view. Using the newly released archival government documents, along with revealing elite interviews, a more accurate picture of the Thatcher years develops, conveying that she was very much involved in the build up to the AIA. In order to fully answer this research question, two research sub-questions about Thatcher as Prime Minister will also be tested – one on her leadership style and another on ministerial relations.

Firstly, I will examine Thatcher as a PM so far as her style of governance and leadership is concerned. There is a debate in the literature about the type of leader she was – either autocratic and ideological or pragmatic (Wincott, 1990: 26). Jackson and Saunders (2012: 9) argued that towards the end of her time at PM that she was increasingly autocratic. Thomas (1998: 38) however, argued that this was not always the case and that this changed over time; after the Falklands she developed more of a conviction style of politics, acting in an autocratic way, purging the opponents from her cabinet. Anthony King agreed (1985: 98), arguing also that Thatcher was a conviction politician, much more concerned with how to arrive at the right outcome than what it took to get there. In Hugo Young’s biography of Thatcher ‘One of Us’ (1991: 552), in one of his final chapters titled ‘The Last Victory’ he described Thatcher as displaying “insecurity co-existing with ever more blatant certitude”. If Thatcher was autocratic, as King and Thomas suggested, then perhaps it might be thought that she pursued a single-minded, ideological position regarding the IRA insurgents. Heffernan (2000: 39) argued, however, that Thatcher tempered her conviction when it threatened her grip on power.

As Thatcher discussed less business at cabinet level (Smith, 1999: 76) and used cabinet as a reporting session (Thomas, 1999: 17), preferring to deal with ministers directly (Thomas, 1998: 37-38), this gave her the opportunity to take a more pragmatic approach. Peter Riddell supported the view that Thatcher was a pragmatic leader, challenging the appeared coherence and strategy of policy under her government. Riddell (1991: 20) argued that the shifts that occurred in the Thatcher government were responses to changed circumstances rather than a dramatic reversal of policy and were more as a result of strategy and leadership. To
a lesser extent, Marsh et al (1996: 447) questioned the extent to which Thatcher made strategic political decisions, arguing that the Thatcher governments were less ideologically oriented than expected. Rather than pursuing a step by step approach in which all the pieces of a jigsaw came together, there was less coherence and strategy in policy making. If she was pragmatic, then it shows she was open to measures to move towards peace, even if it meant negotiating with the enemy who murdered her close ally Airey Neave and later tried to kill her in Brighton. While she revealed an autocratic style in many policy areas, this thesis finds that Thatcher was very much a pragmatist when dealing with Northern Ireland. The impact that her leadership style had on Northern Ireland policy will also be assessed. If her style was informal and presidential, did this result in erratic and uncoordinated policy as Burch suggests (Burch, 1994: 29)? Rhodes and Dunleavy (1995: 6) argued that Prime Ministerial interference can at times be ineffective, counterproductive and sporadic. Marsh and Rhodes (1992: 187) agreed with this, arguing that a confusing and contradictory policy legacy arose due to the pragmatism of the Thatcher administrations, which improvised their agenda in response to the pressures of office. O’Kane (2011: 24-25) also agreed, arguing that the AIA reflected an under-appreciated pragmatism, which was evident in Thatcher’s willingness to distinguish between formal sovereignty and practical governance on utilitarian grounds.

This thesis will assess whether indeed Thatcher was more involved in Northern Ireland policy than we would expect, whether or not Rhodes and Dunleavy’s accusation applies to Thatcher in Northern Ireland and if Thatcher’s involvement had a negative impact on policy outcomes and progress. Colin Hay (1996: 153) identified a strategy gap between what governments want to happen and what actually happens. Marsh and Rhodes described Thatcherism as “a product of rhetoric than of the reality of policy impact” (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992: 187). This thesis will test these completing claims and will seek to explain whether Thatcher was a pragmatic or autocratic leader in relation to Northern Ireland, or if this changed over time.

This debate can be seen in O’Leary’s claims (1997: 671) that Conservative government policy on Northern Ireland during this time, including during the early Thatcher years, contained many contradictory elements relating to talking to terrorists and commitment to the Union of Northern Ireland being part of Great
Britain. The archival documents will reveal whether or not this claim is true and if what Thatcher said and did were different on these particular issues. The next chapter ‘Margaret Thatcher’ analyses both Thatcher as a leader and as policymaker on Northern Ireland. Thatcher received conflicting advice from her very Unionist PPS Ian Gow and (much more sympathetic to the Irish) Robert Armstrong. This was as well as having to deal with American pressure, changing Irish Taoiseachs and a complicated relationship with Jim Prior for three years between September 1981 and September 1984. This thesis will assess whether these factors, as well as her initial weak interest in Northern Ireland combined with her dominant style of leadership all contributed to this contradictory policy.

Secondly, the thesis examines what style of Prime Minister Thatcher was in her relations with her cabinet ministers. To understand this, we have to look at her relationship with her SSNI. Accordingly, this thesis is structured around the respective SSNIs in the Thatcher administrations, allowing an emerging picture of Thatcher and Northern Ireland to build up over subsequent chapters. Although Moore argued that Thatcher used her cabinet appointments to strengthen her position, she did not have a majority of true believers in her cabinet in 1979. After 1983 this changed (Moore, 2013: 645). This thesis will examine whether or not the SSNI was one of the individuals who was one of Thatcher’s believers and the impact that this had on their relationship with Thatcher. It is well recorded in the literature that Jim Prior was a dissenter within Thatcher’s cabinet (Prior, 1986: 115). This thesis will use the archival documents and elite interviews to test whether this had a positive or negative impact on policy in Northern Ireland and more importantly whether this meant that Thatcher herself got more involved in Northern Ireland policy. Hennessy (1986: 100) noted that Thatcher dealt with her ministers directly rather than using cabinet committees. This thesis will test whether Thatcher did deal with the SSNI directly or whether they were marginalised in favour of advisors as Thomas (1998: 215) suggested did happen in some areas of policy. Jackson and Saunders (2012: 11) also supported Thomas’s view, arguing that Thatcher developed a highly personalised model of leadership and therefore relied more on outside institutional supports than any other PM did. This thesis will test these claims, assessing whether Thatcher was overly reliant on supports such as Robert Armstrong.
within the Cabinet Office and if this then meant that the SSNI was marginalised as a result.

As well as looking at Thatcher’s relationship with her ministers, this thesis examines Thatcher’s relationship with the Irish Taoiseachs Garret FitzGerald and Charles Haughey. Thatcher’s relationship with the Taoiseach, especially FitzGerald, is crucial to the success (or failure) of Anglo-Irish relations during this period. Charles Moore claimed that Thatcher was willing to concede more behind the scenes during negotiations than she disclosed in public (Moore, 2015: 329) and O’Leary claimed (1997: 668) that successive Taoiseachs were able to persuade her to change tack and agree to the development of an institutionalised Irish dimension. These claims will be tested by analysing the archival documents to ascertain if the position that Thatcher presented in public, in Parliament and in cabinet was different to what she agreed to behind the scenes.

This thesis will seek to answer the debate in the current literature about who drove Anglo-Irish relations during this period. Was it Thatcher or was she pressured by the Irish Taoiseach and the United States into the AIA? This question is important because if it was not Thatcher driving the decision, this tells us something important about her as a leader in November 1985 and her involvement in Northern Ireland policy. Marc Mulholland (2012: 189) claimed it was Garrett FitzGerald and his team, rather than Thatcher, who drove inter-governmental negotiations. This is because FitzGerald successfully convinced Thatcher that the rise of Sinn Fein was a threat to stability in Ireland, both North and South and therefore an agreement between the two countries was needed to prevent this. Cillian McGrattan agreed (2010: 117-118) with Mulholland that the AIA was a result of Thatcher’s desire for greater security but unlike Mulholland, he cited the US government, rather than the Irish government, as the driving force behind this. This thesis will look at the government documents from the PM and Taoiseach’s office to establish if Mulholland was correct in his analysis and that more of what FitzGerald wanted was included in the AIA than what Thatcher wanted. The government documents will also reveal if Thatcher was overly concerned with the rise of Sinn Fein and their ability to destabilise both the North and South in Ireland. It will also seek to address the competing claims made by Mulholland and McGrattan and establish if the US or
Irish government were more successful in convincing Thatcher to sign the AIA if they were both influential.

Another crucial set of relationships was between the Cabinet Secretaries Armstrong and Nally (Armstrong’s Irish counterpart). They were specifically chosen by Thatcher and FitzGerald to explore the AIA and were trusted to do so. This is crucial to explaining and understanding Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland policy. Similarly, the thesis will look at the importance of international pressure, especially from the United States on the British government to improve the situation in Northern Ireland. O’Leary (1997: 668) argued that the AIA reduced Britain’s international embarrassment, particularly in the US. This is one of the reasons that Thatcher involved herself in Northern Ireland policy – a response was needed at Prime Ministerial, not ministerial, level. This all adds to the current literature, providing detailed insights into Anglo-Irish relations. This thesis will test the extent to which the Armstrong and Nally talks, relating to the Irish Republic’s role in the future of Northern Ireland, started much earlier than previously thought, with Thatcher’s authorisation, because she wanted to try to make progress. Linked to this is the extent to which Robert Armstrong persuaded and manoeuvred Thatcher into signing the AIA and persuaded Thatcher to keep the talks secret. This thesis will test Charles Moore’s theory (2015: 318) that Thatcher allowed others to do things of which in theory she disapproved of and Mulholland’s claims (2012: 191) that Thatcher was willing to seek out expert opinion, resulting in occasions when she was persuaded, even if this was a gigantic struggle by many far-sighted people. This thesis will test these claims, specifically in relation to Robert Armstrong and his influence over Thatcher, by analysing memorandum between Armstrong and Thatcher. I will specifically look at documents which reveal Armstrong either trying to get Thatcher to change her mind on something or even documents which show Armstrong going against what Thatcher would have wanted. This thesis will also examine if anybody else was able to persuade Thatcher. Moreover, if it is evident that Thatcher was persuadable by Armstrong or others, it will test Mulholland’s claim that this was a ‘gigantic struggle’.

The internal hierarchy within these groups of individuals also needs to be established to help us to understand the real significance of the actors. The most important archival documents, which will enable me to do this, will be the ones
annotated on by Thatcher and her advisors such as Armstrong and Powell. Again, I will be looking for annotations which reveal changes made to policy or disagreements between their position and that of the SSNI or other government ministers. This will also reveal new information about Thatcher’s leadership style, including the extent to which she took advice from pragmatic ministers who supported negotiation over standoff. Heffernan (2003: 369) claimed that there are often internal hierarchies within the networks and the power is not pluralistic. In relation to Thatcher, the research suggests that she preferred to rely on civil servants within her own office and the Cabinet Office, such as Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong, more than general civil servants in other departments (Yong and Hazell, 2014: 23). Hennessy (1986: 122) claimed that the most important decisions during the Thatcher years were made with groups outside the usual cabinet committee structure and Thomas (1998: 215) confirms this, arguing that Thatcher’s advisors were given an ever-increasing amount of unchecked power.

Finally, this thesis will assess if the SSNI and their ministers had a unique level of autonomy and that Northern Ireland was governed differently from mainland Britain (O’Leary, 1997: 665). The Northern Ireland department and post of SSNI was established with a level of autonomy that, while it might have appeared a minor post away from the centre of Whitehall, contributed to the practice of giving ministers autonomy from Prime Ministerial domination and away from the prying eyes of the Conservative backbench, on security grounds. This thesis will assess the extent to which this uniqueness had a bearing on the way in which Northern Ireland was governed during the Thatcher years and impacted upon the extent to which Thatcher involved herself in policy. It will also test Cunningham’s claim (2001: 155) that “the British government has a large degree of autonomy in policy formulation in relation to domestic politics” by seeking to explain if this is only the case domestically or this extends to international and Anglo-Irish relations too.

**Research methods**

So far in this introductory chapter I have set out the rationale for this thesis, and provided a summary of its place within the relevant existing literature on Northern
Ireland, Thatcher and the core executive. The remainder of this introduction is dedicated to explaining my empirical approach and how this contributes towards the originality of this thesis. I will explain my use of archival research and elite interviews and how I used each of these approaches to further contribute to our understanding of Thatcher and Northern Ireland. This section will conclude by outlining the structure of the thesis and how each of the chapters contributes further towards our understanding of Thatcher and Northern Ireland.

Archival research

Recent works such as Jackson and Saunders’ ‘Making Thatcher's Britain’ (2012: 19) adopted a similar approach to this thesis of making use of the thousands of documents published annually by the Thatcher Foundation and the rolling release of official papers under the thirty year rule. This is crucial when testing the theory that Thatcher’s role in Northern Ireland policy was more significant than existing literature suggests, whilst providing unprecedented insight into policy making during the Northern Ireland conflict in the early Thatcher years. My methodology is crucial to this as existing literature was produced before the release of the government archives from the period under the thirty year rule. This enables me to use materials in this thesis which previous authors have not had access to, thus allowing me to provide new insight into this period of time and policy making. In addition, the use of elite interviews has also enabled me to provide further original insight into this area of research.

My research uses newly released, under the thirty year rule, government archives from when Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979 until the AIA was signed in November 1985. The thirty year rule meant that these records were released annually from 2009 until 2015 through the national archives. In addition, the Thatcher Foundation published thousands of documents relating to Thatcher’s time in office. During the time the research for this thesis was collated, the way in which the archives were released changed significantly. When I first started the research in 2009, I visited the Thatcher archive at Churchill College, Cambridge and made notes from the actual archives. Later, the archival material became digitised
and was made available on the national archive website www.nationalarchives.gov.uk and then later on the Margaret Thatcher archive website www.margaretthatcher.org. This made the archival research much easier and allowed me to easily identify the archives from the period of time my thesis focused on without missing any important documents.

The archival material I analysed included mainly government correspondence, memorandum and cabinet minutes which were relevant to British government policy making during the Northern Ireland conflict. I also used some archives from the Irish government archive website www.nationalarchives.ie and searched for documents in the same way. I was looking for any government correspondence between the British and Irish governments that could shed light on Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland and the Irish governments’ view on the British government’s handling of the situation during the Thatcher years. The most useful documents were those which had Thatcher’s annotated comments on as often these were very honest and depicted her views on the matter and whether or not she agreed or disagreed with her minister or advisors. The memoranda from her Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong shed significant insight into their relationship and Armstrong’s ability to persuade Thatcher even when she was unsure.

*Elite Interviews*

I used elite interviews to support the findings from the archival research. They provided original insight into political developments at the highest level of government, allowing me to complete the gaps, in the current literature and archival analysis, and answer currently unanswered questions about Thatcher’s role in Northern Ireland and governance as a whole during this time. I tried to interview a wide range of individuals in order to establish their attitudes and beliefs about British government policy making in Northern Ireland. During the interviews I followed the universities ethics procedure; all interviewees signed a statement verifying that they were happy for me to record the interview, use the findings in my thesis but that I would seek further permission if I wanted to publish the material.
I used semi-structured elite interviews with Northern Ireland ministers and civil servants in order to discover what the individual knew and could recollect about decision making surrounding Northern Ireland policy at the time. I chose semi-structured interviews so that I could amend my interview style and questions depending on how the interview was going. I asked all interviewees about who was primarily responsible for decision making in Northern Ireland, the extent to which the Prime Minister and SSNI was involved in policy, whether Northern Ireland was unique as a government department, the importance of external factors such as the Irish and American governments, opposition within cabinet and parliament and the role of civil servants in policy making. Although I used semi-structured interviews, I asked similar questions to each interviewee so that I could try to corroborate earlier findings from interviews and other sources. I was therefore able to ask further questions about what we knew already and hoped to avoid asking questions that told me what I already knew.

Using basic reference works, I compiled a list comprising every Secretary of State, Minister of State and Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland between 1972 and 2000, as well as every Permanent Secretary and further key civil servants identified through snowball sampling or Who’s Who. Historical depth is crucial to understanding the constraints and sensitivities in any particular period. It was impossible to appreciate the issues to be addressed in the AIA without reviewing the longer history of the Troubles. Although this is not the specific focus of my research question, it was crucial to my understanding of the early Thatcher years. This also allowed me to take the story beyond the AIA, despite not having access to the full archival material, in order to set the story in a longer perspective.

The SSNI were my priority to interview as these individuals were the primary focus of this research, having worked so closely with the Prime Minister and ultimately being responsible for the Northern Ireland department. However, other cabinet members were also beneficial to interview as they would be able to provide illuminating accounts of any debates that occurred during cabinet meetings. Civil servants were the vital interviewees in this research because they offered a level of continuation within the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and therefore were able to recall changes that occurred during the times of different SSNI. Civil servants that served in the NIO were able to provide me with a broader level of knowledge.
of how the department worked and was run over time. The key civil servants were Permanent Secretaries as they were the most senior civil servants at the heart of decision making. In addition, civil servants in Northern Ireland were able to offer a perspective about the day to day running of Northern Ireland by the British government during this time. So too were junior ministers who in addition could offer insight into parliamentary opposition and support. Interviewing both government ministers and civil servants provided me with a variety of opinions, which were necessary to explain competition between ministers, members of the cabinet and institutionally.

Overall, I conducted 37 interviews between March 2010 and October 2011. Due to asking standard questions, supplementary questions and variation in how much each individual told me, the interviews lasted an average of 50 minutes with the shortest being 30 minutes and the longest being nearly two hours. The longest interviews were with ministers and civil servants who had worked on Northern Ireland policy for the longest period of time. They had a number of SSNI and PMs to discuss, as well as their changing role. The shortest interviews were with individuals who worked on Northern Ireland policy for the shortest length of time or gave less developed answers to my questions. Individuals who I interviewed at their home address gave longer, more developed answers. Those in the House of Lords tended to be more restricted on time – ensuring that the interviews lasted no more than one hour. Interviews at private members’ clubs varied again, due to how much the interviewee had to tell me about their experiences. Some individuals refrained from discussing too much about security policy. If this was their main role in Northern Ireland, they were limited in what they could say to me due to the sensitivity of the subject. Each interview was recorded and then I personally transcribed the recording.

11 individuals declined to be interviewed. The reasons given for declining were mainly due to poor memory, illness, not feeling that they had anything helpful to say or because they were busy. 8 individuals did not respond to requests for an interview and two individuals agreed but then later cancelled due to work commitments. Most individuals that did not respond were involved in Northern Ireland after the period of time my research covered. Some however, were involved in Northern Ireland during the Thatcher years. This resulted in the coverage of
individuals interviewed not being comprehensive. It therefore may be possible that I do not know the full picture and that more information may come to light in the future.

**Structure of thesis**

This thesis is structured around the incumbents of the post, in chronological order, during the Thatcher years. Each chapter analyses the involvement which Thatcher had on Northern Ireland, and specifically the extent to which this increased during the Prior years once Thatcher felt more secure within her party after winning a landslide majority in the 1983 general election.

This thesis starts with a general chapter on Margaret Thatcher because her involvement in Northern Ireland is crucial to answering the research question. It begins by reviewing the literature on Thatcher, which suggests that she was not interested or involved in Northern Ireland policy. It then goes on to explain what we currently know about Thatcher as a leader, including her style of leadership and management of her government, and therefore what we would expect her to be like regarding Northern Ireland policy.

The Thatcher chapter is followed by four, empirical, chronological chapters on the first four of Thatcher’s SSNI- Humphrey Atkins, Jim Prior, Douglas Hurd and Tom King. Each of these empirical chapters comprises material primarily acquired through the newly released archival documents. Each chapter addresses the main research question of Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland as well as addressing the two sub questions of Thatcher as a leader and Thatcher’s relationships with her ministers. In particular, these empirical chapters will look at the involvement Thatcher had and the extent to which this increased during the Prior years, especially, once Thatcher felt more secure within her party after winning a landslide majority in the 1983 general election. Although Thatcher is the focus of this thesis, a chronological account of the time, focusing on each SSNI, allows us to critically analyse Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland policy at any given moment. This then allows us to see change over time, taking into account Thatcher’s relationship with the SSNI and the autonomy awarded to each of them.
The final chapter, titled ‘King and beyond’, focuses on Thatcher’s final SSNI Peter Brooke, as well as Tom King, and Brooke’s successor under John Major, Patrick Mayhew. We see that Thatcher became significantly involved in Northern Ireland policy in the build up to the AIA when policy centred round securing a deal with the Irish government in relation to the future of Northern Ireland. Once this happened, the policy direction changed and so did Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland. Thatcher regretted her involvement in the process and the concessions given to the Irish government in the AIA. She also found the Unionist hostility towards it difficult – the worst part being the resignation of her close ally Ian Gow. After November 1985, policy was centred round implementing the AIA, which Thatcher wanted no part of, and making progress with the political parties and Republicans in the North, which again Thatcher wanted no part of.

The ‘King and beyond’ chapter also explains that the timeframe of analysis in this thesis is from 1979 until 1985 because of the thirty year rule. This resulted in complete access to the government archives being unavailable from 1986 onwards. Continuing the timeframe past this point would have resulted in a vast inconsistency in the primary research as subsequent chapters would not have been able to use the same methodological approach of using newly released archival material to arrive at conclusions. Without further archival material, I did not have sufficient evidence to analyse accurately the change in Thatcher’s approach to Northern Ireland after the signing of the AIA. Without these documents, it is difficult to make a judgment about Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland policy in the final years of her time as PM; Thatcher might not have been as lacking in involvement in Northern Ireland policy as we assume. Until the full release of archives for the Thatcher years is complete, we will not know. We do know that Thatcher was surprised by the impact that the AIA had and that she did not anticipate the levels of opposition that she faced in parliament. Therefore, even without archival evidence, we can conclude that policy in Northern Ireland changed after the signing of the AIA and so did Thatcher’s willingness to make any further concessions in order to aid progress.

Finally, the ‘King and beyond’ chapter assesses how Thatcher’s involvement in the AIA, and its signing, paved the way for the progress that was made during the Major years with the ceasefire and signing of the Downing Street declaration and the Blair years with the signing of the Good Friday agreement. It draws conclusions
about the importance of Prime Ministerial involvement as a whole and speculates if Thatcher had been more committed over a longer period of time, if the Northern Ireland situation would have improved sooner.
Chapter 2: Margaret Thatcher

Existing accounts of Thatcher’s time as Prime Minister argue that policy in Northern Ireland was very slow during this period (O’Leary, 1997: 663) and lacked strategy (O’Malley, 1983: 238). Although the AIA is sighted as “the single most influential event in the 1982-1988 period” (Neumann, 2003: 145), Thatcher is not credited with this. Debates in the literature about who should take the credit for the AIA include Garrett FitzGerald and his team, (Mulholland, 2012: 189), the United States (McGrattan, 2010: 117-118), Douglas Hurd (Dixon, 2001: 353 and O’Leary, 1997: 668) and the Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong (Dixon and O’Kane, 2014: 55 and Cunningham, 2001: 49). The suggestion in the literature is that Thatcher was not very involved in Northern Ireland policy. This is backed up in the core executive literature which states “by the time Mrs Thatcher became prime minister, she did not have a policy towards Northern Ireland… She had little feel for the problem. In addition, she found the Irish, on both sides, irritating” (Moore, 2013: 587). Although the literature does not argue that Thatcher played no role in the AIA, she of course signed it, there is equally little recognition to the work that she did in the lead up it.

This thesis therefore argues something different. There were large periods of Thatcher’s premiership in which she was less involved in Northern Ireland policy, as we would expect from the literature. However, this does not tell us the whole story. Newly released government archives reveal that Thatcher became very involved in Northern Ireland policy in the build up to the signing of the AIA in November 1985. Her personal involvement and resolve to make some progress was vital to the signing of the agreement. It also set the expectation that Prime Ministerial involvement was needed if such deals in the future, such as the Downing Street Declaration in December 1993 and the Good Friday agreement of 1998, were to be successful. It is true that Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland policy was limited to this period of time and that domestically, she gave her Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland a vast amount of autonomy when running Northern Ireland on a day to day basis. Nevertheless, an in depth study of her time in office from May 1979 until the end of 1985 allows us to understand more about British government policy in Northern Ireland and Thatcher as a leader.
This chapter will focus on Margaret Thatcher as a leader in order to analyse her involvement in Northern Ireland policy. This chapter will be followed by four chronological chapters on each of the first four of Thatcher’s Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland. This chapter will review the core executive literature in order to understand what we would expect of Thatcher as a leader and her government during these years. This chapter will also look at Thatcher in government and the literature relating to this. Although this is a sub question within the thesis, looking at important issues such as Thatcher’s creation of select committees and the significance of events such as the 1983 general election can explain what sort of leader she was and therefore the significance of her involvement in Northern Ireland policy in the build up to the AIA. One of the most important pieces of literature in this respect is Charles Moore’s two books about Thatcher which provide the most comprehensive account of the Thatcher years. However, even Moore’s two books on Thatcher, which are the richest in detail and contain both newly released archival material and elite interviews, can only tell us so much about Thatcher and Northern Ireland because the books cover every aspect of Thatcher and her governance during this time. In this thesis I will add further depth and nuance to existing readings and demonstrate that Thatcher was more personally involved in the AIA than either she or Moore have been willing to acknowledge. I will also show the need to reassess the assumption in some of the core executive literature that Thatcher was not interested or involved in Northern Ireland policy. It is with this literature that the discussion here begins.

**Thatcher’s views on Northern Ireland**

Thatcher’s lack of interest and attitude towards Northern Ireland is explained by Lord Gowrie, the Northern Ireland Minister when he describes Thatcher as having “little feel for the problem and her husband Denis even less, believing impatiently that if the Irish wanted to kill each other it was their business” (Interview with Lord Gowrie in Moore, 2013: 587). David Goodall, a civil servant who worked for Thatcher throughout the two-year period of the AIA negotiations, wrote about Thatcher in his 2009 essay ‘Edging towards Peace’ describing Thatcher as a self-proclaimed unionist, believing that the North was British territory, decided by a clear
majority of the population. Thatcher once said that Northern Ireland should be treated as being as British as her constituency of Finchley (Goodall, 2009). Despite this, Thatcher still described the Unionist population of Northern Ireland as ‘them’ rather than ‘us’ (Moore, 2013: 587).

Initially, Thatcher showed little interest or involvement in Northern Ireland policy when she became Prime Minister in May 1979 and Northern Ireland lacked direction (Moore, 2013: 591). Not only was Thatcher busy with other policy areas once she became Prime Minister, but her interest was diminished further with her general distaste towards individuals who had contributed towards the death of her friend Airey Neave (Interview with Philip Goodhart). Thatcher’s lack of sympathy for Irish nationalism had been fuelled by the assassination of Airey Neave, a personal friend and mentor (Goodall, 2009) by the Irish National Liberation Army in March 1979 in a House of Commons car park.

The Thatcher government’s policy towards Northern Ireland died with Airey Neave. Thatcher had not considered anybody else for the role as nobody else in the government knew Northern Ireland like Neave did (Moore, 2013: 587). This meant that when Humphrey Atkins was appointed SSNI, and knew nothing about Northern Ireland, it was Thatcher, not Atkins, who would need to take the lead on Northern Ireland (Moore, 2013: 587). This was problematic for two reasons. Firstly, Thatcher knew little about the subject herself and secondly, she had no interest in the subject. She found the Irish politicians’ preference for cultural politics over economic debate irritating and once remarked in private “You don’t expect anything decent (in a debate in Westminster) to come from an Irishman” (Moore, 2013: 587-588). Her position hardened further due to the long IRA terrorist campaign, which was still at its height in 1983, and had resulted in increased tensions between the British government and the Republicans after the hunger strikes (Goodall, 2009).

Nevertheless, Thatcher was concerned about the high loss of life during the conflict and believed that these were lives for which the British government was responsible (Goodall, 2009) but Thatcher did not know what to do. Moore explains that the situation upset her. Her memoirs however, are dominated by a tone of exasperation and crossness. Despite this, Thatcher treated Northern Ireland with care and attention, as she would any area of important policy (Moore, 2013: 588). This
thesis will support this claim of Moore’s but will assess this from May 1979 until just after the signing of the AIA. It will reveal that Thatcher did not always treat Northern Ireland policy with care and attention but Thatcher did much more than is currently acknowledged, especially in the build up to the AIA.

The assassination of Lord Mountbatten, and the murder of eighteen British soldiers at Warrenpoint, by the IRA on 27th August 1979 had a significant impact on Thatcher’s thinking towards Northern Ireland. Thatcher’s conviction to strengthen security measures increased and she resolved to pressurise the Republic of Ireland into preventing terrorism (McGrattan, 2010: 117-118), describing the Republic as “harbouring known murderers”. Thatcher visited Northern Ireland to boost morale and was the first Prime Minister to write personalised letters to the families of the eighteen soldiers. After August 1979 she was eager to make cross-border security co-operation between the army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary work (Moore, 2013: 591).

Many individuals on the British side including Geoffrey Howe recognised that peace would only be possible with some sort of a compromise with Irish and nationalist demands (Dixon and O’Kane, 2014: 58). Thatcher found this recognition hard to accept and this helps to explain why her attitude to the negotiations leading up to the AIA and its eventual signing fluctuated in the way it did (Marc Mulholland in Jackson and Saunders, 2012: 191). Thatcher was suspicious of the political parties in the Republic of Ireland. She believed that they shared the same aim with the IRA, as reflected in Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution, to incorporate the North into the “national territory” of a united Ireland. In addition, she felt that the then Taoiseach, Charles Haughey’s opposition to the Falklands war was a ‘stab in the back’ when Britain needed the support of its so-called allies (Goodall, 2009). Negotiation with the Irish government and the signing of the AIA was the only option for the British government in November 1985. The Unionists in Northern Ireland had refused to contemplate any settlement which included an “Irish dimension” for fear that it would eventually lead to a united Ireland and the SDLP refused to accept any settlement which did not include an Irish dimension (Goodall, 2009). Therefore, if Thatcher wanted anything to change in Northern Ireland she knew that she would have to become more involved and negotiate with the Irish government – this is what she did and this is why the AIA was signed. Her attitude
towards Northern Ireland before, her lack of sympathy towards the Nationalist cause and her reluctance to negotiate with the Irish government explains why Thatcher, once the AIA was signed, felt that she had gone too far and became less involved again (Thatcher, 1991: 403).

**Core executive**

The core executive literature needs to be examined alongside Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland to provide an insight into the workings of the British government in a much wider context. Rhodes and Dunleavy (1995: 12), along with Martin Smith, suggested that the core executive should be the focus of study when researching the British government. The term the core executive refers to “all those organisations and procedures which coordinate central government policies, and act as final arbiters of conflict between different parts of the government machine”. Rhodes and Dunleavy (1995: 2) have argued that much current research on the British government leaves too many questions unanswered. A solution to this is to focus the research on the core executive. This way everything that controls central government policy, such as organisations and procedures, can be examined within different parts of the government machine. By examining the larger picture of government, more answers can be provided than has been the case in previously published literature.

As mentioned in the introduction, examining the core executive literature can provide answers to help establish factors that resulted in Thatcher becoming more involved in Northern Ireland policy than we would expect. These factors include the desire of Thatcher to have control over policy and to solve the issue; the saliency of issue at the time; Northern Ireland as a foreign policy issue and pressure from international influences such as the United States; the lack of elite interest group dominance; internal power relations within the core executive in the Northern Ireland Office; key interest groups and the pluralism of power; changing perceptions; and the aims of the loyalists and the Irish Taoiseach. However, dramatic changes to the British core executive can more importantly account for Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland policy and the policy making power and
independence that the Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland had. The centralisation of power in the 1980’s, the new public management approach of governance, changing conceptualisation of the nation state, the effect of Europeanisation and the different conceptualisation of the British state and Presidentialism of the Prime Minister all gave Northern Ireland policy a different scope for how it was developed and controlled and by whom during this time.

This body of literature on the core executive and relating to Thatcher and her time in government will provide further understanding about Thatcher’s style of leadership and her contribution to Northern Ireland policy. The thesis supports Rhodes and Dunleavy’s argument (1995: 6) that Prime Ministerial interference at times could be ineffective, counterproductive and sporadic. There were many occasions, even including the build up to the AIA, when Thatcher’s involvement slowed the process down and caused further problems. However, Thatcher’s involvement in the AIA was ultimately positive, and without her involvement the agreement would not have been signed. This thesis will also support the contention to be found in the Northern Ireland literature that policy was slow during the Thatcher years but it will add further depth to this by demonstrating how conscious policy decisions were made to avoid further crisis. Any sudden policy changes could have alienated both the Nationalist or Loyalist groups and both sides needed to be kept on side if peace was ever going to prevail.

_Thatcher as a leader_

Thatcher was the first female Prime Minister in Great Britain and became the first to win three successive general elections since Lord Liverpool at the beginning of the nineteenth century. She dominated British politics in the 1980s, not just due to being leader of the country but through the dominant leadership style which can be described as autocratic, ideological or pragmatic (Wincott, 1990: 26). Thatcher developed a ‘presidential’ style of leadership which involved the devaluation of the cabinet and a very informal style which proved effective in terms of getting things done. At times, however, this led to very erratic and uncoordinated policy (Burch, 1994: 29). Thatcher’s preference for making decisions in small groups was a feature
of her time as Prime Minister during which ministers and the cabinet were bypassed and outnumbered by officials and advisors. This put an ever-increasing amount of power in hands of Thatcher and her advisors who could not be held accountable for their actions (Thomas, 1998: 215).

Thatcher had pledged to run government differently to that of her predecessors before even entering into office. In an interview with the Observer newspaper on 25th February 1979 she said “it’s my job to put forward what I believe and try to get people to agree with me”. Thatcher was also clear that she preferred a cabinet filled with supporters rather than different factions of the party as she did not want to waste time with internal arguments (Thomas: 1998: 34-35). Between 1979-1981 Thatcher’s cabinet did contain a large number of ‘wets’ (those who opposed her economic policy) and was one of the most divided and unhappy Conservative cabinets ever (Young, 1990: 138). After the Falklands war Thatcher faced fewer constraints upon a conviction style of politics and was able to purge and sideline her opponents from her cabinet (Thomas, 1998: 38).

Anthony King (1985: 98) argues that Thatcher was distinctive as a Prime Minister for two reasons. First, Thatcher was an isolated figure, in the minority, not representing a broad consensus of opinion within the Conservative party (Moore, 2013: 645). Second, Thatcher had her own clear policy agenda which consisted of her broad set of views and priorities rather than those belonging to her party. Due to this, Thatcher separated herself from her government, frequently referring to ‘them and her’ (Young, 1990: 138). Thatcher was much more concerned with how to arrive at the right outcome than what it took to get there (King, 1985: 98). This helps to explain why Thatcher was not continuously involved in Northern Ireland but why she persevered in reaching an agreement with the Irish government over the AIA. Ultimately, Thatcher wanted the situation in Northern Ireland to improve because this would create fewer problems for her government, but she was less concerned with the process.
Prime Ministerial dominance

Although Prime Ministers can make and make crucial policy decisions, they are not all powerful. The structure and institutions around the office prevent and constrain Prime Ministers in some decision making (Smith, 1999: 78). Even when Prime Ministers are at their most powerful, they are not the only element within the core executive that can make decisions (Heffernan, 2003: 347). Prime Ministers never have a monopoly of power (Heffernan, 2003: 368) and they face the same restrictions as other ministers, such as lack of expertise, information and time (Heffernan, 2003: 367). This can help to explain why there was so little progress made in Northern Ireland, not only during the Thatcher years but also before and after. Although this thesis depicts that Thatcher was more involved in Northern Ireland policy than is currently acknowledged in the literature, her involvement was not consistent. In certain periods this prevented progress being made in Northern Ireland, especially as the sensitivity of the relationships between the actors involved required more consistent and committed involvement from the Prime Minister over a longer period of time.

What changes a Prime Minister’s power is the way in which they deploy and use the resources available to them and the way in which they can change these resources. What made Thatcher powerful was the way in which she used resources to re-define what a Prime Minister could do (Smith, 1999: 105). The authority of the Prime Minister, at times, means that ministers readily accept the Prime Minister’s intervention into departmental policy (Smith, 1999, 76-77). Thatcher took this to a completely different level during her time as Prime Minister. On the surface this is not what the Northern Ireland literature suggests but it is true even within Northern Ireland policy. This thesis examines Thatcher’s involvement and the autonomy, domestically, of the SSNI. Although the next chapter will argue that the role of the SSNI was largely path dependent since its creation in 1972, and they always had a unique level of autonomy in governing Northern Ireland on a day to day basis (O’Leary, 1997: 665), Thatcher’s dominance could have changed this (Thomas, 1998: 215). She did not intervene on a day to day basis but she did intervene in the AIA more than current literature on Northern Ireland acknowledges.
Like Smith, Rhodes and Dunleavy, Richard Heffernan (2003: 347) in his work ‘Prime Ministerial predominance? Core Executive politics in the UK’ also says that the more resources a Prime Minister has the more predominant and powerful they are. Likewise, the fewer resources a Prime Minister has the less predominant and powerful he or she will be. Heffernan (2003: 369) agrees with Smith’s argument that resources are the key to identifying Prime Ministerial predominance. What Heffernan adds to the current debates put forward by Smith, Rhodes and Dunleavy is the point that Prime Ministers, at times, do not instruct policy, but can only direct it, due to the collective networks within the core executive and the interdependent resources exchanging between actors). A vital contribution that Heffernan (2003: 369) brings to the debate is that not all institutions and actors within the networks are equal. There are often internal hierarchies within the networks and the power is not pluralistic. We shall find this strongly confirmed when we examine the core executive in the build up to the AIA. Robert Armstrong, the Cabinet Secretary, was the one who persuaded Thatcher to persevere with the negotiations with the Irish government and secure a deal, even if it meant giving away a number of concessions. This was despite other advisors, such as Thatcher’s foreign policy advisor Charles Powell who was warning her against giving away too much, and her PPS Ian Gow, who vehemently opposed it. There is evidence that there were internal hierarchies and some individuals had more ability to persuade Thatcher than others (Interview with Ken Bloomfield).

Cabinet

In relation to the cabinet, the new evidence presented in this thesis broadly supports the view in the existing literature that the cabinet was not used by Thatcher for policy making, in this case in relation to Northern Ireland. Subsequent chapters reveal the cabinet were kept in the dark until the very last minute when their approval was needed to authorise a policy. When discussions did take place in cabinet there was little opportunity for discussion; and when there was, the cabinet were guided into what they should think and vote.
Thatcher changed the structure of cabinet and government as soon as she became Prime Minister in 1979. The cabinet met less frequently, fewer formal papers were discussed (Smith, 1999: 76), and meetings consisted of Thatcher directly dealing with ministers (Thomas, 1998: 37-38), preferably in small groups. In addition, there were fewer cabinet committees. The most important decisions were made with groups outside the usual cabinet committee structure (Hennessy, 1986: 122). In Thatcher’s early years she operated through the cabinet committee system but quickly moved to governing in small groups, dominated by her supporters. This allowed her to keep cabinet colleagues, who did not support her, on the outside (Prior, 1986: 133).

1983 marked a critical point in Thatcher’s premiership as Prime Minister and saw British government change dramatically. Even before Thatcher became the first Conservative Prime Minister since Salisbury to win two general elections in a row, she was exuding dominance over her government ministers. As early as the summer of 1982 Thatcher was relishing in winning battles both home and abroad, claiming during the Conservative party conference in October 1982 that “already we have done more to roll back the frontiers of socialism than any previous Conservative government” (8/10/82 Conservative party conference speech). The most telling part of the speech is when Thatcher states “We will not disguise our purpose, nor betray our principles. We will do what must be done” (8/10/82 Conservative party conference speech). This is an indication of Thatcher’s new dominance. David Goodall confirmed this, observing in 1982 “Mrs Thatcher’s authority seemed absolute…Peter Carrington by that time had resigned, and her other male colleagues seemed uncertain how to disagree with her without provoking rebuke” (Goodall in Moore, 2015: 4).

After winning a landslide victory at the 1983 general election, the majority Thatcher had put her in an extremely strong position to re-shuffle the cabinet into one of allies and to dominate government even more. In previous years Thatcher had been restrained, to an extent, by her inexperience and weakness of her own political position. After the 1983, these restraints were lessened (Moore, 2015: 5). Thatcher used the election result to establish a period of dominance, in the electorate and within the cabinet and party. The overwhelming result gave Thatcher a huge mandate as she no longer had to worry as much about her party. This also had an
impact on Northern Ireland. With Thatcher secure, opponents such as Jim Prior were no longer seen as a credible threat; the Conservative government had the opportunity to fully dominate the House of Commons. Thatcher was able to continue exploiting the weakness of the Labour party, who received their lowest number of seats since 1935, even further (Prior, 1986: 153). The impact of this on Jim Prior as Secretary of State will be examined in more detail in the Jim Prior chapter of this thesis.

When Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979, her first cabinet featured only two individuals who had voted for her in the secret ballot for the leadership election (Young, 1990: 138). The cabinet, in 1979, was also very much balanced in favour of the moderates within the Conservative party who had worked together in the shadow cabinet to prevent Thatcher from pursuing her “more extreme ideas” (Prior, 1986: 114). Jim Prior, along with Michael Heseltine and Peter Walker, were much more willing to explicitly outline their hesitancy towards Thatcher’s policy in cabinet meetings than other cabinet colleagues (Hennessy, 1986: 105). There were a clear group of dissenters in Thatcher’s cabinet which as well as Prior (Secretary of State for Employment) included Lord Carrington (Foreign Secretary), Peter Walker (Minister for Agriculture), Mark Carlisle (Secretary of State for Education), Michael Heseltine (Secretary of State for the Environment), Norman St John-Stevas (Leader of the House of Commons) and Ian Gilmour (Lord Privy Seal) (Prior, 1986: 115).

The winning of a successive general election, in 1983 after 1979, was an opportunity for Thatcher to change the structure and ideology of her cabinet or to demand more loyalty from those she kept who had previously been unsupportive of her ideas. Thatcher noted that “choosing a cabinet is undoubtedly one of the most important ways in which a Prime Minister can exercise power over the whole conduct of government” (Thatcher, 1993: 25). Thatcher had already started this in her September 1981 reshuffle when she successfully moved and demoted the grandee Jim Prior to Northern Ireland and included new enthusiastic supporters in Lawson, Tebbit and Parkinson. Although Thatcher did not have a majority of true believers in her cabinet, she was definitely strengthening her position (Moore, 2013: 645). A second general election victory would allow her to go even further. After the general election of 1983 Thatcher was able to become even more powerful. Her own team of advisors increased in the Number 10 Policy Unit. These advisors were
to serve Thatcher and provide her with advice, rather than the whole cabinet. Thatcher also abolished the think tank which was intended to assist with cabinet decision making but under her leadership had become increasingly under the influence of the permanent civil service (Prior, 1986: 137). With the new parliament in 1983, Thatcher had achieved exactly what she wanted: a cabinet containing supporters and like-minded individuals.

Martin Smith argues that Thatcher’s dominance over policy as a Prime Minister can be seen with the cabinet becoming more of a rubber stamp almost immediately. Instead, Thatcher preferred to rely on civil servants within her own office and the Cabinet Office, such as Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong, more than general civil servants in other departments (Yong and Hazell, 2014: 23). Under Thatcher the amount of business discussed at cabinet level declined heavily (Smith, 1999: 76). For example, important policy decisions, such as the 1980 and 1981 budgets, were not discussed at cabinet level. Instead, Thatcher used cabinet as a way to report decisions to colleagues which had already been taken by herself and the relevant minister or with the help of her advisors. Thatcher’s distinctive practice was to get the minister in charge to prepare the relevant paper for her rather than for the cabinet. The minister and their team would then have to defend the policy to her and her team from the No. 10 Policy Unit and Cabinet Office. If the minister and policy survived this, Thatcher would support the policy in cabinet which was usually enough to ensure its success (Thomas, 1998: 37-38). This happened in respect of Northern Ireland too, especially in relation to the AIA. Thatcher therefore, used her cabinet not as a discussion forum or policy making institution but a reporting session for decisions which had already been taken (Thomas, 1998: 17). Even this declined after the 1983 general election. In 1983 there were 38 full cabinet meetings and Northern Ireland was only on the agenda four times.

Simon James, in his chapter in Rhodes and Dunleavy’s book *Prime Minister, Cabinet and the core executive*, explains that since 1963 there had been a significant increase in decision making at the cabinet committee level and that the full cabinet were used more when making policy decisions (James, 1995: 86). This allowed for the Prime Minister to control more decisions and outcomes. Thomas supports the view that the cabinet as a whole became less important under Thatcher; she would have no more than one cabinet meeting a week and the number of cabinet papers
produced was significantly reduced. Thomas disagrees with James however and argues that Thatcher also reduced the number of cabinet committees (Thomas, 1998: 17). One of the few that remained was the ‘e-committee’, Thatcher’s version of Callaghan’s economic seminar. Here again Thatcher was able to fill it with her supporters such as Keith Joseph, Geoffrey Howe and John Biffen. On the other hand, she also put her most powerful critic, Jim Prior, on the committee, and he remained there after being appointed as SSNI; but he was too tied down with departmental responsibilities to pay too much attention to economic issues. Thatcher preferred to govern in small groups to avoid hostile leaks and these groups became even smaller over time (Thomas, 1998: 39).

As Thomas has rightly maintained, there was not an official cabinet committee for Northern Ireland. Despite this, a distinct group of individuals can be identified as consistently contributing to Northern Ireland policy in a similar way to a cabinet committee. By analysing the memoranda and papers between the participants, it is now possible using archival research methods to see exactly what was discussed and decided. By not having an official cabinet committee for Northern Ireland, Thatcher was able to keep policy secret from the rest of the cabinet. Nevertheless, the day to day running of Northern Ireland was rarely discussed here – that was left up to the SSNI and their ministers or Robert Armstrong when the AIA negotiations begun.

Thatcher had made it clear when she became Prime Minister that she was going to deal with her ministers directly rather than using cabinet committees (Hennessy, 1986: 100). One motivation might have been that it was even easier to control a minister directly than a small group of cabinet ministers in a cabinet committee. Thatcher was not in a secure position in 1979 and had many members in her cabinet who were better described as Heathites than Thatcherites. The main committees which existed were Thatcher’s version of the economic seminar committee - the e-committee and the economic strategy committee, which was less important and met straights afterwards. These groups had fluid membership. For example, Willie Whitelaw was sometimes invited if the cabinet needed convincing to support an idea. The committees tended to deal with particular issues rather than an approach. In addition, ad hoc groups could be created to look at certain issues, such as the inner cities group in September 1981 (Hennessy, 1986: 101-103).
Thatcher’s style of leadership prevailed because, due to lack of time and resources, ministers rarely interfered in each other’s departments if it had no implication for their own department (Smith, 1999, 76-77). Thatcher ensured that this was the case. Ministers were only involved in the informal cabinet committee if they were directly involved in the relevant policy. This was particularly to be found with the Northern Ireland department as the Northern Ireland conflict had less of a direct impact on other departments than other issues. The Northern Ireland conflict primarily involved the Northern Ireland Secretary, the Home Secretary due to the nature of terror, and the Foreign Secretary due to dealings with the Republic of Ireland and the United States in relation to the conflict. David Howell (Secretary of State for Energy from May 1979-September 1981 and Secretary of State for Transport September 1981-June 1983) noted that a very inner kind of government was needed when concerning extremely sensitive issues. Control is necessary to prevent leaks (Howell in Hennessy, 1986: 104). This could go a long way in explaining why Thatcher governed Northern Ireland as she did and why she kept Northern Ireland policy both a secret from the cabinet and at times even allowed policy to be kept a secret from herself by allowing deputies such as Armstrong to Goodall to get on with it.

Northern Ireland department

Rhodes acknowledges that power and resources of a Prime Minister are forever changing and this can lead to differences in power relations and policy decision making within departments. Therefore, some departments have the capability to make important policy decisions with little or no reference to and interference from the Prime Minister or cabinet (Rhodes, 1995: 11). The following chapters will reveal that the SSNI had the scope and capacity to make policy decisions relating to Northern Ireland on a day to day basis more extensively than cabinet ministers in other departments. When Thatcher was less involved in Northern Ireland, at the beginning and the end of her premiership, this extended to more important issues. This was one of the reasons why Northern Ireland was seen as a unique department. It was created in 1972 to deal with the Troubles. The role of the SSNI was to govern it on a day to day basis like a Governor General – a role unlike that of any other
cabinet minister. Logistically, Northern Ireland ministers were far away from the centre of government in Westminster and had one of the worst conflicts in British history to try to resolve. In addition, ministers had a civil service from Britain and a Northern Ireland civil service to deal with. This was always going to make Northern Ireland unique and allow the Secretary of State a great amount of autonomy. At the beginning of the Thatcher years, this was even more noticeable. The next chapter will show that Thatcher had very little involvement in Northern Ireland when she first came to power. This confirms the prevailing view that Thatcher was not interested in the issue and chose to focus on other areas of policy and resulted in the Secretary of State having more responsibility. However, this did not remain the case for the entire period of the Thatcher governments.

Ministerial autonomy

There was not only a variation of power between different government departments but between the different incumbents in a single department. Some Secretary of States, such as Jim Prior, were awarded significantly more autonomy than others – Prior was even allowed to pick his own ministerial team. In order to fully understand Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland policy it is therefore necessary to examine the role of her Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland. The power balance between ministers and the Prime Minister and amount of autonomy awarded can provide an insight into both where power ultimately lies and the character and extent of Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland. This is why in this thesis each of the Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland is examined in turn. This chapter is followed by four chapters about Thatcher’s Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland.

Rhodes and Dunleavy identify variables that restrict ministers’ ability to develop policy in contrast to the Prime Minister. This thesis reveals that constraints on ministers are much more complex and that some variables have significantly more impact than others. Moreover, not all ministers are subject to the same constraints despite being in the same role and serving under the same Prime Minister. Rhodes and Dunleavy argue that ministers face a number of constraints in policy making. Firstly, they can have lack of information, expertise and time in the post.
The career profiles at the beginning of each of the chapters on the SSNI will come in useful in identifying how much experience, skill and expertise the Northern Ireland Secretaries had when they took on the role and how this helped or hindered them. Secondly, ministers face pressure internationally. In relation to Northern Ireland, this is one of the most significant constraints placed on the Secretary of State. International pressure and the need for Prime Ministerial involvement at the highest level when negotiating with the Irish government is one the main reasons why Thatcher became involved in Northern Ireland policy. Although pressure from the United States was a factor, Thatcher herself was needed to negotiate directly with the Irish Taoiseach about the AIA. Without Prime Ministerial involvement it would not have been signed. The involvement of the PM was indispensable in later years under Major with the Downing Street declaration and under Blair who was significantly personally involved in the GFA.

This was also why the SSNI was allowed greater autonomy over the day to day running of Northern Ireland in periods where there was little international pressure or need for Prime Ministerial involvement. The third constraint that ministers face is from powerful political rivals. This thesis will examine challenges to the SSNI including other cabinet ministers such as the Home Secretary, especially during Atkins’ time in office, and the Foreign Secretary, especially during Hurd’s time in office. In addition, Prior’s main political rival came not from the cabinet but from the cabinet office, either in the form of Robert Armstrong, who was in charge of the talks with the Irish government over the AIA, or from Thatcher’s PPS Ian Gow who rallied parliamentary opposition against Prior even before he was SSNI. A fourth constraint is that policy networks of bureaucratic and organised interests can affect ministerial power. The SSNI had to be especially careful about any underlying affiliation to either the loyalist or nationalist groups in Northern Ireland. Ultimately, Hurd’s pro-Unionist stance resulted in Thatcher marginalising him from key talks with the Irish government before the signing of the AIA in favour of the Foreign Secretary. Despite the autonomy awarded to the SSNI, they needed to maintain cabinet support. Jim Prior faced opposition from the cabinet over his plans for a Northern Ireland assembly. This nearly resulted in him being removed from the cabinet. The Prime Minister’s ability to hire and fire will always be a constraint and a threat to ministers. A fifth possible constraint is that ministers face the risk,
uncertainty and pressure of events which can constrain them from policy making (Rhodes and Dunleavy: 1995: 5-6). This was especially relevant in Northern Ireland because the changing saliency of the conflict was continuous. The SSNI faced a number of issues as a result of the conflict, including the hunger strikes. Thatcher’s lack of involvement initially in Northern Ireland policy and the inexperience of Humphrey Atkins, her first SSNI, explains why this issue was so slow to be resolved. Aside from all of these constraints listed above, Rhodes and Dunleavy also argue that Prime Ministerial interference at times could be ineffective, counterproductive and sporadic (Rhodes and Dunleavy, 1995: 6). This was most definitely the case with Northern Ireland. Although Thatcher’s involvement in the AIA was ultimately positive, and without her involvement it would not have been signed, there were many occasions, even including the build up to the AIA, when Thatcher’s involvement slowed the process down and caused further problems.

Smith argues that the study of the personality and ministers is not enough to explain the power relations at work within the core executive. There are many actors within the core executive and extremely complex power relations are at play. Power is everywhere and is not static because everyone controls some resources and these resources need to be exchanged between many actors (Smith, 1999). The constraints identified by Rhodes and Dunleavy help to explain where, and why, power lies in the core executive and that the incumbent of the role does not necessarily change this.

*The Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee*

Select committees were introduced in 1979 by the Thatcher government to monitor the administration, policy and expenditure of government departments. The new leader of the House of Commons, Norman St-John Stevas, ensured that the committee structure was almost symmetrical to the departments of Whitehall. The only exceptions to this were the Lord Chancellor’s department and the Northern Ireland Office (Laugharne, 2007: 225). The Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee was not established until 1994, two years after one was established for Scotland. It was thought that select committees for Scotland and Northern Ireland
were less necessary than other departments because the Secretary of State could deal with matters they are responsible for (HC Deb 25 June 1979 vol 969 cc33-251, col. 89). In addition, the hope was that once an elected assembly was set up in Northern Ireland, elected officials would be the best people to scrutinise policy, not a Westminster select committee (HC Deb 25 June 1979 vol. 969 cc33-251, col. 40).

Instead, the standing committee on Northern Ireland, which had met in the last Parliament from time to time when needed, continued. Those arrangements were not affected by the new permanent select committee system (HC Deb 25 June 1979 vol. 969 cc33-251, col. 50). Powell was glad that the Northern Ireland committee could continue to exist in this way (HC Deb 25 June 1979 vol. 969 cc33-251, col. 91). This pleased some MPs such as the Unionist MP for South Down, Enoch Powell, who was concerned about the lack of a Northern Ireland committee. Others such as the previous SSNI Merlyn Rees argued that if a select committee could not be established for Northern Ireland then perhaps a Grand Committee could be, as this would be vital for Northern Ireland. Rees argued that if there was ever a part of the UK which needed special treatment, of some sort, it was Northern Ireland (HC Deb 25 June 1979 vol. 969 cc33-251, col. 51). This did not happen.

Although the Northern Ireland standing committee, which existed in the parliament before Thatcher became Prime Minister in May 1979, continues to exist, the extent to which it remains in its original form can be questioned. Thatcher’s style of government undoubtedly changed the character of many institutions which predated her. As this thesis will convey, there was not an official Northern Ireland cabinet committee or an official Northern Ireland select committee during the early Thatcher years. Through archival research, however, there is clearly a core group of regular individuals who were responsible for taking decisions in Northern Ireland. This makes the pre 1979 Northern Ireland committee effectively redundant.

**Advisors**

During the Thatcher years, many of the key actors within the core executive were her special advisors, rather than ministers (Yong and Hazell, 2014: 23). These individuals affected the power and autonomy of both ministers and even the Prime
Minister herself. In Northern Ireland, the key player in the build up to the AIA was without doubt the Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong, who alongside his Irish counterpart Dermot Nally, negotiated the AIA. Charles Powell, Thatcher’s Foreign policy advisor, was also significant. Thatcher allowed her advisors, especially Armstrong, to have an unprecedented amount of autonomy over the AIA negotiations because she trusted him (Dixon and O’Kane, 2014: 54). Therefore, although the SSNI was granted a vast amount of autonomy over domestic policy in Northern Ireland, as soon as the issue became international (McGrattan, 2010: 117-118), Thatcher did not grant them the same autonomy. Instead, they and the NIO were marginalised, to some extent, at the expense of her advisors in No. 10 Downing Street (Cunningham, 2001: 49).

However, the number of special advisors actually decreased in the Thatcher years. Thatcher was not interested in issues relating to the machinery of government or special advisors. Thatcher reduced the Policy Unit’s special advisory staff by half, to just 14. In 1983 Thatcher abolished the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS) due to a damaging leak. This leak was a great opportunity as Thatcher had been keen to abolish the CPRS due to the fact that it served the cabinet as a whole. Thatcher preferred to rely on civil servants within her own office and the Cabinet Office, such as Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong, more than general civil servants in other departments (Yong and Hazell, 2014: 23). However, she did appoint advisors to help her, such as Alan Walters as an economic advisor 1981-1984 and 1989 and Sir Percy Cradock 1984-1992 as her foreign policy advisor. The Policy Unit also grew over time. Its purpose changed however, to provide intellectual justification for Conservative policies and as a means for Thatcher to test the work of her departments (Yong and Hazell, 2014: 24).

These important individuals helped to persuade Thatcher in her decision making, not only in relation to the AIA but also during the Prior years, over the devolved assembly, and the Atkins years over the row with the US government about supplying arms to the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Persuading Thatcher was the key to success in Northern Ireland and this is often underplayed in existing accounts. Thatcher allowed herself to be persuaded into making decisions in relation to Northern Ireland that she should not have otherwise done. The Irish Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald commented that it was not a negotiation, ultimately the question
was how to persuade Thatcher that something should be done (FitzGerald in Moore, 2015: 341). Thatcher’s Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe described “it took a gigantic struggle by many far sighted people to persuade her; but although her head was persuaded, her heart was not” (Howe, 1995: 427). One of Thatcher’s skills, although she would never admit this, was to allow others to do things of which in theory she disapproved of (Moore, 2015: 318). This is what she allowed Armstrong, amongst others, to do in Northern Ireland. In this sense, Thatcher’s acceptance of this is an indication that she was more involved in Northern Ireland policy than is currently recognised. Even though she herself did not have the ideas and act, allowing others to act and listening to their advice is very different to what we would expect Thatcher to be like in relation to Northern Ireland policy.

In the lead up to the agreement and immediately after it was signed, however, Thatcher had allowed herself to be persuaded. Her resolve was noted as ‘impressive’ by Michael Lillis (Moore, 2015: 338). Thatcher, although hated admitting when she was wrong in case it was seen as a sign of weakness that her male colleagues would seize upon, recognised that she had gone too far after the infamous ‘out, out, out’ speech following the November 1984 Anglo-Irish summit meeting at Chequers (discussed in more detail in the ‘Douglas Hurd’ chapter). After this, Thatcher was never so strident on the subject again and was more willing to go along with the AIA (Moore, 2015: 325). Charles Powell sums up Thatcher’s attitude towards the process and signing of the AIA when he states that “she was reluctant but not deluded…she knew what it was about” (Powell in Moore, 2015: 342). Thatcher was concerned about three things, prior to the signing of the agreement. First, in June 1985 Thatcher shared her concerns with Douglas Hurd about how dangerous it would be to get locked into an agreement that later began to function badly. Second, Thatcher was worried about the Unionist reaction to them being deliberately excluded from the process. Thatcher however, was not worried enough, according to Charles Powell, to take the Unionists into her confidence. Third, Thatcher became increasingly concerned about conceding any judicial or security power to the Republic (Moore, 2015: 326-327). Sovereignty was always Thatcher’s biggest worry and it was the one thing that troubled her the most many years after the agreement had been signed. As Anglo-Irish negotiations intensified and continued, expectations were rising and it made it significantly more difficult for Thatcher to break the process of Anglo-
Irish negotiation (Moore, 2015: 325). In addition, before the AIA was signed, Thatcher’s relationship with the Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald (leader of Fine Gael) was at its strongest. Before this time, their relationship had been intermittent due to a change in Irish government and the appointment of Charles Haughey (leader of Fianna Fail) as Taoiseach who was less sympathetic to the British cause and favoured a united Ireland. By the time Douglas Hurd became SSNI in September 1984, Thatcher had developed a stronger relationship with FitzGerald, even if this was not always a positive one. When FitzGerald had returned as Taoiseach in December 1982, it was an opportunity for Thatcher to pick up where she and FitzGerald had left in attempting to improve Anglo-Irish relations (Thatcher, 1993: 395).

What makes Thatcher allow herself to be persuaded in Northern Ireland but no other policy area is that the situation in Northern Ireland was unique in two ways. First, it seemed essential that something had to be done. This became even more necessary to avoid further international embarrassment, particularly in the US (O’Leary, 1997: 668). Second, Thatcher did not have the knowledge to provide an alternative to what she was persuaded to sign (Moore, 2015: 342). Similar to the hunger strike situation, Thatcher was willing to concede more behind the scenes during negotiations than she disclosed in public (Moore, 2015: 329). This again suggests that Thatcher allowed herself to be persuaded in private and was involved in Northern Ireland policy more than we would expect. As time went on though, Thatcher viewed the AIA more unfavourably. She felt that she had agreed to something which went against one of her most important principles - British sovereignty (Moore, 2015: 340). The signing of the AIA was therefore a watershed moment; Thatcher from this point retreated, feeling that too many concessions were made to the Irish government, and this is the main reason why this provides the cut off point for this thesis.

Conclusion: Thatcher, Northern Ireland and the Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland

Thatcher’s relationships with each of her Secretaries of State varied and the core executive relationships were complex during this period of time. Her relationship
with Jim Prior was more positive on occasion than the current literature suggests. Other important individuals however, such as the Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong, impact upon Thatcher’s relationship with the SSNI (Cunningham, 2001: 49). As Armstrong increasingly had the ability to persuade Thatcher, the SSNI becomes less important in the process, especially during the later Hurd years.

The core executive literature would expect that Thatcher’s dominance would extend to Northern Ireland policy and that she would let her ministers do very little. The Northern Ireland literature examined in the previous chapter challenges this. The autonomy awarded to the SSNI allowed them to make an important contribution and difference to relations between the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland during the Thatcher years. There was a change in rhetoric and approach rather than policy under each of the SSNI and that was significant. “Policy making might be a strong term to use but the British government had to proceed, during this period, by a series of ad hoc decisions reacting to events, not necessarily to crisis” (Interview with Brian Cubbon). The temperament and personality of each incumbent undoubtedly had an impact upon how these events were reacted to and what decisions were made and by whom (Interview with Ken Bloomfield). Humphrey Atkins began talks with the Northern Ireland parties and helped reduce tensions between Thatcher and the US. Jim Prior had the vision and drive to push forward the devolved administration. This will be seen in depth in the next chapters.

It was also the view of the civil service throughout the Thatcher years that policy did not really change since the Callaghan days and that no individual SSNI really altered this. This is despite attempts to change policy in the late Callaghan days, as seen by the Permanent Secretary Brian Cubbon’s position paper on Northern Ireland policy that was distributed to both the Northern Ireland Office and the Foreign Office at the time. This view, held by the civil service, supports the general view of the NIO at the time that policy defined by the previous administration was simply de facto unionist policy. By 1979 this view was being challenged as the British government had their hand forced by the Irish government who were growing increasingly hostile towards UK policy and its unionist leanings. Ken Stowe, the Permanent Secretary for Northern Ireland who took over from Brian Cubbon in 1979, acknowledged that the government under Thatcher needed a new direction and a consensus to widen the policy framework. Part of this consensus and extended
framework resulted in every SSNI during the Thatcher years believing that some sort of devolved administration was needed (O’Leary, 1997: 665). Prime Ministerial, as well as SSNI, involvement was also needed to deal with the pressure from the US (McGrattan, 2010: 117-118) and the Irish government (Mulholland, 2012: 189).

This thesis therefore seeks to explain the extent to which Thatcher recognised that Prime Ministerial involvement was necessary due to the saliency of the issue and international pressure. The subsequent chapters of this thesis will convey that there were times when Thatcher listened to her SSNI during this period and even more to her Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong who was the architect behind the AIA. Furthermore, these chapters will convey that the SSNI had a significant amount of autonomy in Northern Ireland in relation to domestic policy compared to their cabinet counterparts. The following chapter on Humphrey Atkins outlines why Northern Ireland was seen as such a unique department. This is important to remember when reviewing the core executive literature; this is because the assumptions do not always hold true about Thatcher’s governance of Northern Ireland. This thesis is therefore able to offer an alternative perspective about the core executive during the Thatcher years.
Chapter 3: Humphrey Atkins: Secretary of State for Northern Ireland May 1979-September 1981

This chapter seeks to examine Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland policy in the first couple of years after she becomes PM, whilst Humphrey Atkins is SSNI. It is widely known that Thatcher had very little involvement in Northern Ireland policy at first in May 1979. In the previous chapter on Margaret Thatcher we saw that this was partly because she had no idea what to do in Northern Ireland, except not to make the situation worse, and partly because she had no desire to get involved after Airey Neave, her shadow SSNI was murdered by the Irish National Liberation Army in March 1979 (Moore, 2013: 591).. Thatcher had even less inclination to get involved in Northern Ireland policy after Lord Mountbatten was murdered too in August 1979.

This chapter assesses how Thatcher and Atkins deal with key events during the Thatcher years including the discussions over a devolved assembly, the hunger strikes (a group of prisoners in the Maze prison in Northern Ireland who went on hunger strike to protest at not being treated as ‘special category’ political prisoners rather than criminals) and the secret talks with PIRA. It also examines the international aspect and impact on Northern Ireland policy, including pressure from the US. It examines how Thatcher and Atkins deal with the US refusal to supply arms to the RUC and their criticism of the British government position on the hunger strike. The hunger strike is a key theme in this chapter as it characterised Atkins’ time as SSNI and results in his removal from the post in September 1981. The hunger strike resulted in the Labour opposition questioning the Conservative government’s policy, which is significant given the levels of bipartisanship which existed at the time. Thatcher’s cabinet also raised questions about the handling of the strike, which leads to discussions about whether or not the British should remain involved in Northern Ireland.

This chapter will show that Thatcher was more involved in Northern Ireland policy than has hitherto been appreciated. Her involvement is subtle but crucial and conveys that Thatcher did give Northern Ireland more consideration than is currently recognised. Thatcher’s attitude towards Northern Ireland policy changes over the course of these years and she recognises that improving relations with the Republic
of Ireland was crucial if the situation in Northern Ireland was to improve and the violence decrease. This required Thatcher to become personally involved. Thatcher therefore, refused to get involved in political matters in Northern Ireland, relating to Northern Ireland parties and politicians, but became the first PM to take a British government delegation to Dublin, to meet with the Irish government, since partition, in 1921. Likewise, Thatcher was a lot less wary than Atkins when dealing with the hunger strikers. Although it is true that Thatcher and Atkins could have ended the hunger strike much earlier if they were less rigid in their refusal to meet any of the hunger strikers demands, Thatcher was willing to explore radical solutions such as passing messages to and from the hunger strikers through the Provisional IRA. Thatcher allowed British officials to communicate with the PIRA but kept this a secret from all but a very small group of individuals.

This chapter identifies individuals who were crucial to Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland policy in later years. Thatcher’s Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong was already able to persuade Thatcher into allowing him to lead the talks with Irish government officials, even though Thatcher was very much against the idea. The Atkins years also revealed how Thatcher’s approach to governance changed throughout her time as PM. At the beginning of her tenure, Thatcher was willing to use the civil servants and seek advice. The Northern Ireland Permanent Secretary Philip Woodfield was crucial in communicating with the PIRA. Over time, these individuals were marginalised in favour of Thatcher’s own advisors, such as Robert Armstrong, in the Cabinet Office. This chapter reveals that Robert Armstrong’s involvement and influence began much earlier than is currently thought.

This chapter examines this relationship and also looks at the history of the role of SSNI and the uniqueness of the Northern Ireland department. Due to the way in which the Northern Ireland department was created in 1972, the SSNI gained a vast amount of autonomy in the domestic running of Northern Ireland but was less involved during high level international relations. This, therefore, can make the PM appear like they are less involved, if they decide not to involve themselves in domestic policy or with the Northern Ireland political parties. Once you examine Prime Ministerial relations with the Irish Taoiseach and United States, the involvement of the PM is more evident and the SSNI becomes less significant and,
in the later Thatcher years, almost marginalised. As soon as Thatcher recognises this she becomes more involved in policy. Two factors prohibit more progress being made during the Atkins years. First, the changing Irish government prevents Thatcher from building up relations with one specific Taoiseach. Second, and more significant, is the 1981 hunger strike which puts the British position at odds with that of both the Irish and American governments. Nevertheless, Thatcher begins to build relations with the Irish government during the Atkins years and this paves the way for future progress which leads eventually to the AIA.

This chapter will be divided into three sections. The first section will start by examining Humphrey Atkins as SSNI and the background of the Northern Ireland department and role of SSNI. This will help to explain the path dependency of the position and why, to a large extent, the incumbent has such limited scope to make a strong personal impression. As a result of this, and bipartisanship, we are able to explain why Thatcher would have found it difficult in May 1979 to do anything new in Northern Ireland. The second section will look at key actors. This will offer new insight into the operations of the core executive during the first few years Thatcher was PM. Important individuals such as Robert Armstrong are identified and explained and Thatcher’s decreasing reliance on the civil servants in the Northern Ireland Office is revealed. It finishes by examining Thatcher’s relationship with the Irish Taoiseach and conveys how this is crucial to her subtle but important involvement in Northern Ireland. The final section of this chapter examines the Thatcher and Atkins relationship. How Thatcher and Atkins deal with the key issues during the period sheds light on Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland. Although Thatcher did not get involved in Atkins’ talks with the Northern Ireland parties, she intervened by withholding important information from Atkins about a promise Airey Neave had made, which resulted in his plans for all-party talks and a devolved assembly to collapse. We therefore see Thatcher became involved in the outcome of Northern Ireland policy in a much subtler way. This chapter will finally conclude that two key findings reveal that Thatcher was more involved in Northern Ireland policy than we currently expect. First, Thatcher personally authorised secret talks with PIRA during, and before, the 1981 hunger strike. Secondly, Thatcher, due to realising that relations with the Republic of Ireland were crucial to resolving the issues in Northern Ireland, began regularly meeting with the Irish Taoiseach, both in
Dublin and London. This paved the way for the eventual signing of the AIA in November 1985. The other key finding is the significance of Robert Armstrong at such an early stage in the Thatcher years and his strategic planning, and persuasion of Thatcher, in dealing with the Irish government. This again, paved the way for the AIA.

Section I: Humphrey Atkins and background to the NIO

Humphrey Atkins unexpectedly became SSNI in 1979. The plan had always been for Airey Neave to take that role in Thatcher’s first government. Unfortunately, Neave’s death shortly before the 1979 general election left Thatcher with a dilemma of who to put in the post. Thatcher had not considered anybody else for the role as nobody else in the government knew Northern Ireland like Neave did (Moore, 2013: 587). It is not widely known but Atkins did not want to go to Northern Ireland. He had been Thatcher’s Chief Whip in opposition and wanted to be in a role where he was closer to her and could help her more. He was eventually convinced to go and take up the position of SSNI (Interview with Joe Pilling).

As we saw in the last chapter, it is well documented that Thatcher had her favourite ministers and surrounded herself by a small intimate group of advisors. Although Atkins was not in this select group, Thatcher did show some level of partiality towards Atkins (Bloomfield, 2007: 53) and trusted him enough not to proceed with any radical policy that she would oppose. Therefore, she did not feel the need to involve herself with day to day policy as much as she did in other departments. As newly released archives confirm, Thatcher allowed Atkins to get on and direct his ministerial team and for her to only get involved in the big issues when necessary (Interview with Hugh Rossi). Thatcher also allowed Atkins to select one of his ministerial team in Northern Ireland, Hugh Rossi; an Italian Catholic who had previously worked with Atkins in the Whips office (Interview with Hugh Rossi).

Although Thatcher let Atkins get on with the day to day running of Northern Ireland, Atkins knew little of Northern Ireland and did not want the job. It was therefore decided that Thatcher, not Atkins, would take the lead on Northern Ireland policy. Thatcher however, knew little about the subject herself (Moore, 2013: 587).
The death of Airey Neave had made her even more uninterested and she was occupied with other Prime Ministerial business after May 1979. This initially affected the pace at which policy could move forward. Atkins was appointed with very little knowledge or interest in Northern Ireland in 1979 and as such he did not have any specific views or ideas about what to do. Atkins followed on from Airey Neave who was described as a famously secretive man. Some individuals around him described him as a convinced integrationist, believing that Northern Ireland should be governed exactly the same as the rest of the UK, going against the 1921 partition of Ireland and the bipartisan policy that had previously been followed by both Conservative and Labour governments. Other people thought that Neave was more pragmatic, cautiously responding to events after the collapse of the 1973 Sunningdale agreement (Moore, 2013: 388). This made it difficult for Atkins to follow in Neave’s footsteps.

Due to their inexperience, Atkins and his ministers had to rely heavily on the civil service for advice and had to quickly become accustomed to the role and deal with the day to day problems (Interview with Philip Goodhart). This was to be expected though. Unless ministers have been shadowing a job in opposition it is very unlikely that they will bring with them a fully worked out vision (Interview with David Brooker). From the start, Atkins was a very hands-on Secretary of State with regards to his ministers. If one of his ministers had policy ideas within their area of jurisdiction, Atkins would listen to them and arrange to meet, with the minister’s officials, a week later to try to implement it (Mitchell, 2008: 170). Atkins was very much aware of what was going on in the wider Northern Ireland department.

Bipartisanship continues during the Thatcher years and both the structure of the NIO and bipartisan policy made it easier for Atkins to take over the reins from the previous SSNI in the Labour government, Roy Mason. In 1979 when Atkins took over from Mason, there was for this reason no dramatic shift in policy direction. In fact, throughout the years which followed the creation of the NIO and role of the SSNI, policy remained stable as the policy that was followed was that which was originally established in the 1970s when the department was created. Policy, therefore, remained path dependent and there were only incremental changes. The fundamental principles had been decided in 1972, therefore, there was no need for new policy or even policy at all; the ideas were already established (Interview with
Jonathan Stephens). These involved establishing, and continuing, talks between the main parties in Northern Ireland. Government policy on security was also clear; the IRA was a banned organisation, and although still in operation, and the army were in the province to ensure law and order. There was absolutely no question of the government talking to the IRA (Interview with John Marshall). Each SSNI inherited these principles and tried to achieve them or simply kept Northern Ireland ticking over. This was the situation in 1979 when Humphrey Atkins became SSNI and for the subsequent Secretaries of States that followed him.

Bipartisanship was able to work when a new government or SSNI came in. Throughout long periods of governance by the Conservative party in the 1980s and 1990s, because both the Conservative and Labour governments knew what the long term goal was, policy was unlikely to be change. Bipartisanship was also able to work successfully as ministers were extremely well briefed (Interview with Jonathan Stephens) when there was a change in government and the civil service kept the continuation between governments; the civil servants were the bedrock of progress between the Conservative and Labour parties (Interview with Jeremy Hanley). Archival evidence, discussed in detail later in this chapter, also shows Thatcher and opposition leader Michael Foot had secret meetings with ministers present about Northern Ireland. Foot broadly agreed with the government’s position but asked if some demands could be given in to the hunger strikers. Thatcher was not happy about this but bipartisanship continued and Labour and Foot supported Thatcher and her government’s decisions.

Atkins found it easy to continue with Mason’s approach to Northern Ireland because by 1978, the Labour government were not really trying to do anything new in Northern Ireland. The objective was not to do or say anything radical or embarrassing before the general election. There was no drive from the centre of government to get the Northern Ireland Office to be more active than they were being. The main policy of the time was ‘normalisation’ which attempted to demonstrate locally that things were getting better in Northern Ireland. If Callaghan had wanted to do something in Northern Ireland he would not have appointed Roy Mason as Secretary of State. Mason was not dissatisfied with the situation in Northern Ireland and had no desire to ‘make his mark’ on it (Interview with Joe Pilling). Furthermore, Callaghan had the opportunity to do unseemly deals with
parties in Northern Ireland to keep Labour in power in 1979 but he refused (Interviews with Joe Pilling and Ray Carter). This also helped with bipartisanship and the change over from Mason to Atkins in 1979.

What made the change in 1979 from Mason to Atkins so smooth was because Roy Mason and the Conservatives shared a very similar approach to Northern Ireland. Mason was security focused and sympathetic to the Unionists like the Conservatives, Thatcher and Atkins. This allowed Atkins to take over and carry on with the ideas and approach that Mason had taken. The only thing that changed was the allocation of ministerial portfolios. Under Mason, Don Concannon was in charge of security, including prisons and the department of commerce. After the election in May 1979, Atkins gave Michael Alison Security and Finance, the whole Treasury role, rather than commerce. This was the only thing that really changed (Interview with David Brooker).

The existence of bipartisan policy in this way characterised the uniqueness of the Northern Ireland department, and was responsible to a large extent for the direction of policy. Bipartisanship meant that Northern Ireland policy was treated in a unique way. There was significantly less opposition in Parliament from the opposition and backbenchers than other areas of policy and it escaped, to a large extent although not completely, from party politics. Whether lack of opposition in Parliament symbolises bipartisanship can be debated but Northern Ireland as a policy issue was definitely less likely to be attacked by opposition parties than other issues (Ken Bloomfield).

*The uniqueness of the Northern Ireland Office*

Northern Ireland was unique and was governed differently to other departments for a number of reasons, one of which was bipartisanship. Other reasons include the haste at which the Northern Ireland department was formed in 1972 and the role of the SSNI. Due to the history, culture and situation in Northern Ireland in 1972 it needed to be unique and governed differently to other government departments. For example, there was always one minister appointed to the Northern Ireland
department who was a Catholic (Interview with Lord Lyell) to ensure balance in the ministerial team (Interview with Philip Goodhart). The Catholic minister would be expected to meet with the Cardinals if they needed to approach the government (Interview with Hugh Rossi). It was also unique and unprecedented to set up an entirely new government department in this way.

An almost ‘miniature’ government was formed within the department as it required the governance of the whole of Northern Ireland as the return of direct rule meant that everything had to be run by the British government. The SSNI was in a very unique position as a government minister as they were in charge of one of the largest departments in government, although it was not viewed in this way by everybody in Whitehall. The Secretary of State had an almost ‘Governor General’ type role and was in the unique position of having both civil servants from the UK in the Northern Ireland Office and civil servants in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland civil service, to assist them. The SSNI was in effect the PM of Northern Ireland as they were responsible for overseeing everything from security policy through to health, agriculture and education (Interview with Richard Needham). Virtually every decision the Secretary of State took had a wider connotation. No other ministerial portfolio had the global, political and security reach that Northern Ireland did (Interview with David Brooker).

As one senior civil servant, who worked in the Northern Ireland Office for many years noted, this all required a unique policy approach (Interview with Joe Pilling). A balance was needed between making a personal contribution and giving people the scope to do things themselves. Ministers had more autonomy in Northern Ireland than any other department (apart from other regional departments such as Scotland) especially in areas such as the economy. This was less the case with the Minister of State for Security who had no control over the army or police. It was made difficult too for the SSNI who “ran Northern Ireland with one hand tied behind their back” in the Thatcher years because Defence controlled the army in Northern Ireland and the Foreign Office controlled relations with Dublin and the United States. It wasn’t until later under Brooke and Mayhew that this changed (Interview with Richard Needham).
In general, however, ministers could gain lots of experience and have freedom. This was because ministers had a lot to do in Northern Ireland and had many areas to ‘govern’ so they had to rely more on their permanent secretary to direct them and had to trust their civil servants more to decide what was important and what was not important for the minister to focus their time on (Interview with Jeremy Hanley). The Secretary of State was responsible for security and politics whilst ministers ran local government and Northern Ireland. In a governance sense, the Northern Ireland department was unlike other government departments which are collegiate and rely upon each other as issues cross over departments. This was much less the case in the Northern Ireland department; it had more autonomy, reported back less to Whitehall and was discussed less in cabinet. It therefore required a close working department. Senior civil servants met the Secretary of State every morning. If the Secretary of State was in Belfast the meetings would take place in his office in Stormont Castle if not, they would take place in the video conferencing room. Events changed on a day to day basis to everybody needed to know what was going on (Interview with Ken Bloomfield) The Northern Ireland department also had an extremely large turnover of ministers, more so than other departments, and was sometimes viewed as a punishment post. This was because the proximity of the post meant that ministers were logistically away from the centre of government in Whitehall (Interview with John Marshall). This required ministers to be brought up to date and briefed regularly.

It was this situation, in 1979, which would make it strategically difficult to have a select committee for Northern Ireland affairs when the other select committees were established. In addition, domestic policy issues were overshadowed by the political situation. It was this that needed resolving first. MPs in Westminster on a select committee could not scrutinise these political and security decisions due to the secrecy and sensitivity surrounding them. It was also argued that a select committee, as a form of scrutinising policy, was not needed as the bipartisanship between the Conservative and Labour parties meant that there was already some intrinsic scrutiny and cross party consensus taking place.

Due to the uniqueness of Northern Ireland, policy was more difficult to change than it was in other policy areas. Thatcher could not impose Thatcherism on Northern Ireland and nor would this have resolved the security situation and
relationship with the Republic. It was in the earlier years of Thatcher’s premiership that commentators began to speak already of a distinct political project or ideology which they dubbed Thatcherism. Although some of its most familiar aspects, like the privatisation programme, developed fully only in Thatcher’s second term of office, already these were prefigured in an anti-statist rhetoric and policy developments like council house sales, Northern Ireland, however, was less exposed.

Whilst the rest of the United Kingdom was being privatised, Northern Ireland was nationalised – water and the buses became publicly owned. The Minister in charge of the economy in Northern Ireland, Richard Needham, could follow economic policy which was very different to that being implemented by Thatcher’s government elsewhere (Interview with Richard Needham). This was even more noticeable when Jim Prior, regarded as an economic ‘wet’ by Thatcher, was SSNI (Interview with Ken Bloomfield). There was an argument to suggest that the British government, both during the Labour years under Callaghan and the Conservative years under Thatcher, had to avoid uniting the powerful middle class against the British government. Therefore, popular policies such as the 11+ exam, religiously segregated schools and bans on abortion remained in Northern Ireland (Interview with Lord Melchett). This ideological path of compassionate, more liberal, conservatism continued under both Douglas Hurd and Tom King’s time as SSNI (Interview with Ken Bloomfield).

Bipartisanship also made it difficult, for either the PM or SSNI to deviate from policy, although in reality this never prevented Thatcher or her SSNI from pursuing a particular direction of policy (Interview with Douglas Hurd). It can be argued however, that the creation of the NIO and the role of SSNI made it even more difficult for Thatcher and her Secretaries of State to make progress policy-wise in Northern Ireland.

*The creation of the NIO: a path to path dependant policy?*

The structure and institutions around the PM and ministers can undoubtedly prevent and constrain them in some decision making (Smith, 1999: 78). The way in which the role of the SSNI was created in 1972, and the structure of the Northern Ireland
Office can affect the extent to which the individual in the post can develop, make and change policy independently within the core executive. Therefore, in order to evaluate Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland policy, the role of her SSNI and the governance of Northern Ireland during the Thatcher years, it is necessary to look back at the creation of the NIO and SSNI.

The structure and institutions around the PM and ministers can undoubtedly prevent and constrain them in some decision making (Smith, 1999: 78). Both the way in which the role of the SSNI was conceived in 1972, and the structure of the Northern Ireland Office therefore influence profoundly how far the individual in the post could develop, make and change policy independently within the core executive. It had initially been a difficult to decision as to how best to respond to such a multi-faceted problem in Northern Ireland. The situation had become so bad in September 1971 that an emergency meeting had to take place between the PM Edward Heath, the Taoiseach Jack Lynch and the Northern Ireland PM Brian Faulkner to discuss what to do (Whitelaw, 1989: 99-101). The then Home Secretary Reggie Maudling suggested that, after Bloody Sunday on 30th January 1972 which saw thirteen people killed by British troops during unrest at a civil rights demonstration and led to extensive violence and unrest both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, law and order administrative powers would need to be restored to the UK on a temporary basis. He believed that the UK should break with the past and exercise direct responsibility for Northern Ireland, in the short term, if political stability was to be restored to Northern Ireland (CAB128/48: 2/3/1972).

The role of the SSNI was to deal with the increasing political violence and to promote and secure lasting peace in Northern Ireland. The role of the NIO was to support the SSNI and be responsible for Northern Ireland’s security and constitutional issues such as political affairs, law and order, policing and criminal justice. The Northern Ireland ministers elected in the Northern Ireland executive were responsible for social and economic matters (Northern Ireland Office, 2007). This meant that the first SSNI Willie Whitelaw and his ministers got on with policy very independently from the PM and Whitehall - this continued under successive SSNI. Although, dealing with the problems in Northern Ireland also involved many people from departments such as the Home Office, Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office. The creation of the NIO as an institution, including the size of it and
where its people came from, also had an impact on its future culture. Many ministers came from the Foreign Office or Home Office. Those from the foreign office tended to be ‘greener’ and more in favour of a united Ireland (Interview with Michael Ancram). The policy areas that each Northern Ireland minister was in charge of was decided upon its creation in 1972 by the newly appointed Permanent Secretary William Neild and the SSNI Willie Whitelaw (Interview with Lord Howell). These roles continued and would ensure that ministers within the Northern Ireland department were in charge of large areas of policy thereafter.

Finally, the very fact that the British government chose to create an entirely new department and role in 1972 to deal with ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland, three years after the start of the troubles, meant that is was a very unique department (Interview with Lord Howell). Rather than creating a new formal institution to work within the core executive, the British government could have created an office containing specialists providing an advisory role only. They chose not to. It was also decided in 1972 that the new institution was located very close to central government and was not on the periphery of the core executive due to its important policy making role.

Atkins and Thatcher in Northern Ireland – no change in policy?

When Humphrey Atkins became SSNI in May 1979 he faced the same problems of his predecessors. One of the main difficulties of the NIO was that it was created at short notice, out of nothing. It was a small department compared to Whitehall, and all the better for it, but within the NIO ministers came across quite extreme difficulties. Atkins and his team faced the resentment of the Northern Ireland civil service who opposed the idea of British officials being brought in to tell the people of Northern Ireland how to run their affairs. The NIO were also resentful of the ministers who were sent to try to improve the situation (Interview with John Ledlie).

As a result of the history of both the conflict and the NIO, when Humphrey Atkins became SSNI he faced a tough time. The Conservatives had been out of government and during this time the violence in Northern Ireland had continued to
increase. There was still annoyance at the Conservatives for not securing the Sunningdale agreement during Heath’s government. Very quickly, Atkins was faced with new problems too such as the hunger strike. The nature of Northern Ireland politics meant that you could not simply dip in and out of it (Interview with Lord Howell). Both Atkins and Thatcher learnt this from May 1979 onwards.

The next section of this chapter will look at Humphrey Atkins’ time as SSNI and Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland. The previous chapter outlined Thatcher’s attitude towards Northern Ireland when she became PM in May 1979. This chapter will show how over the course of Atkins’ tenure that Thatcher’s attitude towards Northern Ireland changes. Existing accounts of Thatcher’s time as PM argue that she was not very involved in Northern Ireland policy and that policy was very slow, in relation to Northern Ireland, during her time as leader. Although this thesis, as a whole, argues something different, during the Atkins years, this is a relatively accurate reflection. What this chapter reveals is the change in approach towards Northern Ireland during these years which provides the basis for further involvement from Thatcher during the Prior and Hurd years.

Section II: Key actors

The archives from Humphrey Atkins’ time as SSNI reveal much about governance in Northern Ireland during the early Thatcher years. Thatcher was known for being a dominant PM but when she first becomes PM in May 1979 she was not in a strong position; her position was not consolidated until after the Atkins years, after the 1983 general election. During her first couple of years in office Thatcher was reliant upon support from her cabinet, party and parliament. This changed considerably in the next couple of chapters when Thatcher’s position was more secure.

Governance in Northern Ireland during the Atkins years was characterised by three things. First, the inherited set up of the NIO which meant that some of the key actors remained the same. Secondly, Thatcher’s dominant style of leadership and preference for bilateral meetings which meant that throughout the Thatcher years there became an increasingly reliance on advisors rather than ministers. During the Atkins years this manifested itself in the Cabinet Office whose members, who
worked directed for Thatcher, increasingly marginalised the SSNI and the NIO. Thirdly, Thatcher and Atkins’ lack of knowledge about Northern Ireland and initial lack of desire to do much about it. This meant that Thatcher was more willing to listen to advice from those around her about how best to proceed.

*Key government ministers: a cabinet committee in all but name*

Throughout the Atkins years, archival documents reveal a core group of individuals present at meetings who were involved in Northern Ireland policy. This group comprised Thatcher, Atkins (SSNI), Willie Whitelaw (Home Secretary), Francis Pym (Secretary of State for Defence), Philip Woodfield (Northern Ireland Permanent Secretary who took over from Ken Stowe in 1981), Ian Gilmour (Lord Privy Seal) and an unidentified person who is likely to be the Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong. There were six key ministers, including the SSNI, who were crucial to decision making. The Chancellor would only be present if there had to be a negotiation as part of a wider negotiation about the funding of Northern Ireland (Interview with David Brooker). This was where the broad parameters of policy were determined, not just by the SSNI (Interview with Ken Bloomfield).

Thatcher had inherited a kind of cabinet committee for Northern Ireland which included the Secretary of State for Defence, the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary, the Attorney General and the Chancellor. These were the same individuals who had always been involved since 1972 (Interview with David Brooker). It has been denied in numerous elite interviews than an official cabinet committee for Northern Ireland existed during the Thatcher years (Interview with Lord Cope) unlike cabinet committees which regularly met for defence and overseas development (Interview with Robert Andrew). Even senior Northern Ireland ministers were unaware of the existence of an official cabinet committee for Northern Ireland until during the Major years when Patrick Mayhew was SSNI (Interview with Richard Needham). Nevertheless, there was clearly a core group of individual ministers, the same as during the Callaghan years before, who were involved in Northern Ireland policy. This unofficial cabinet committee for Northern Ireland was another example of policy continuation from the previous Labour
government. During Roy Mason’s time as SSNI, in Callaghan’s Labour government, a similar cabinet committee for Northern Ireland existed that would be in charge of reviewing policy in Northern Ireland every Wednesday morning. This was made up more of Permanent Secretaries (for Northern Ireland and Defence, sometimes for Foreign Affairs) rather than the cabinet ministers we saw during Thatcher and Atkins’ time (Interview with Brian Cubbon). The cabinet committee continued to have a great deal of influence over policy in Northern Ireland though; throughout Thatcher’s time as PM, until the late 1980s when Peter Brooke became SSNI. This shows that in the early years of Thatcher’s premiership, and certainly during the time Humphrey Atkins was first SSNI, senior cabinet ministers were involved in discussing key events in Northern Ireland (Interview with Hugh Rossi) rather than being marginalised in favour of officials. Thatcher may well have been getting advice from non-governmental sources but she did involve key government ministers at the heart of big decisions. As the Atkins years progressed, this changed.

After the Cabinet Office took over from the Foreign Office in leading the joint studies, to be discussed in more detail later, a ministerial group was created to oversee the project on the British side which was a sub-committee of the Overseas and Defence policy committee. Lord Carrington did not want to chair the group for fear of the foreign office being associated with a sovereignty ‘sell out’ like they had been accused of in Rhodesia and the Falklands at the time. The logical option to chair the group was the Home Secretary Willie Whitelaw but the Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong did not want him to chair the group either as he was associated with the failure of the 1973 Sunningdale agreement. Thatcher suggested Douglas Hurd, who she later appointed as SSNI, should chair it (PREM19/507 f79). Ian Gilmour, the Lord Privy Seal, ended up chairing it (Moore, 2013: 606). What was agreed was that the group should comprise of, if chaired by Whitelaw, the Lord Privy Seal, SSNI, Secretary of State for Trade and Energy, the Chief Secretary, Treasury and the Paymaster General. The Lord President could be added too, when needed, and other ministers on an ad-hoc basis (PREM19/507 f79). The existence of such groups, to deal with the important aspects of Northern Ireland policy, meant that during the Thatcher years that the Northern Ireland cabinet committee became redundant. It met but it was no longer where policy was decided.
There was also a downside to this for the SSNI because he did not have full authority over policy. The Foreign Office and Foreign Secretary determined relationships between the Irish government and the US government. The Foreign Office had a great deal of influence and were the dominant force in determining relations internationally. The Secretary of State for Defence had control over the army in Northern Ireland which were responsible for carrying out day to day security. The SSNI was not even consulted about which regiments were sent to Northern Ireland. After December 1980, the Cabinet Office led by Robert Armstrong got significantly more involved too (PREM19/507 f79). This meant that at times the SSNI was running Northern Ireland with two hands tied behind his back (Interview with Richard Needham).

Civil servants advise, ministers decide?

Within all of this, the Permanent Under-Secretary for Northern Ireland, the (British) civil service head of department in Northern Ireland, was in effect running the department (Northern Ireland Office) and making sure that the department was set up to deliver what ministers needed to be delivered. Kenneth Stowe (1979-1981), Philip Woodfield (1981-1983) and Robert Andrew (1984-1987) were the three that served under the years leading up to the AIA. Woodfield was a key player in the Whitehall machinery, especially during the hunger strikes during the latter part of Atkins’ time as SSNI. The Permanent Secretary would try to ensure that the Secretary of State’s dealings with the Treasury were effective and that the Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence were making all the necessary deals. In addition, the Permanent Secretary would help the NIO to be successful as a corporate entity within the Whitehall system. The Permanent Secretary was crucially needed to support the SSNI during big moments and when they needed advice. Atkins relied heavily upon Stowe and Woodfield from the moment he became SSNI due to his lack of knowledge and need for support over key issues such as the hunger strikes. Woodfield, especially, would come in and provide wise council for Atkins. Woodfield had been a Private Secretary to three PMs so was able to give advice that
was slightly out of the mainstream. It allowed Atkins to call upon a wisdom and experience, when required, and Atkins did (Interview with David Brooker).

Philip Woodfield’s role was most significant in 1981 during the second hunger strike. As detailed later in this chapter, archival documents confirm Woodfield’s involvement and knowledge of a channel and a link which was used by British officials to communicate with members of the provisional IRA. As Woodfield was the Permanent Secretary for Northern Ireland, it is to be expected that he would know about key decisions in Northern Ireland, such as using a channel or link to communicate messages to the Provisionals. What the archival evidence makes clearer than even before is the continuous influence which Woodfield exercised on British government policy in Northern Ireland and his communication with Sinn Fein.

Woodfield supervised the NIO’s move to Stormont in and became one of the two deputy secretaries at the new NIO in 1972. He was one of the British team, with Willie Whitelaw, Paul Channon and Frank Steele, that met with Sinn Fein in June 1972. He then returned to the Northern Ireland department in 1981 and was one of the few people who had knowledge and was involved in communicating messages to the Provisionals. The continued influence of such a key individual in the NIO contributed towards the continuation of British government policy in Northern Ireland during the years of the Troubles. In addition, his involvement in the original talks with Sinn Fein in 1972 could very well have played a part in the decision by Thatcher and Atkins to use the channel to communicate messages to the Provisionals (Interview with David Brooker). Although Woodfield is significantly influential during the second hunger strike, he is very much marginalised by Armstrong once the Cabinet Office takes control of the joint studies.

Atkins was not the only one to call upon the wisdom of civil servants soon after May 1979. Thatcher visited Northern Ireland not long after she became PM. Whilst in Northern Ireland, Thatcher was told by the army that if they had the tools for the job, more troops, weaponry and martial law, they could deal with the situation. On her return, Thatcher sought advice from the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Defence, Frank Cooper, who had been Permanent Secretary for Northern Ireland, in 1973-1976, and during the last Conservative government.
Cooper advised Thatcher that more troops, weaponry and martial law were not a good idea and suggested the alternative of sending a security co-ordinator to Northern Ireland instead. Maurice Oldfield, ex Head of MI6, was coaxed out of retirement to lead a security team comprising of two civil servants (one was the Permanent Secretaries deputy secretary for Belfast), two members of the army and two members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). The team went to Northern Ireland straight away and were there for nearly two years. The team were charged with trying to deal with the tension between the army and the RUC rather than ordering the policy and the army. It was a short term policy issue so in reality it had little impact upon the governance of Northern Ireland, the SSNI or civil servants within the Northern Ireland department (Interview with John Ledlie). Thatcher and Atkins had inherited this problem from Roy Mason. The tension between the RUC and the Chief Constable was one of the biggest problems in 1979. Mason did not want to deal with it and thought that Brian Cubbon, the Permanent Secretary, should. Atkins, to his credit, had identified the issues immediately in May 1979 but had not got very far when Thatcher sent Maurice Oldfield and his security team in to deal with it (Interview with Joe Pilling).

Although it could be viewed that Thatcher is being controlling and not allowing the SSNI to deal with this, Thatcher did this to allow the security team to take some pressure off Atkins by getting them to deal with it directly (Interview with Joe Pilling). This is also interesting because Thatcher is relying more on civil servants than ministers when the latter are learning the ropes. In addition, the security aspect might offset the lack of interest Thatcher would otherwise have shown in Northern Ireland. This reveals much about governance in Northern Ireland from an early stage in Thatcher’s government and Thatcher’s attitude towards Northern Ireland. Thatcher is immediately keen to do something about the situation she has inherited in Northern Ireland and seeks advice from an experienced civil servant she can trust. Atkins is not involved in this discussion but at this point it is questionable how much advice Atkins would have been able to offer due to his inexperience in Northern Ireland matters. This is more involvement from Thatcher than we would expect but it is unsurprising that Thatcher’s first action is to deal with the security issues in Northern Ireland. Initially, Thatcher was always keener to do this rather than deal with Dublin or the political parties.
The security team sent to Northern Ireland were very much an independent team that did not report to anybody, including Atkins as SSNI. This did cause some resentment within the Northern Ireland department, which was not helped by the Northern Ireland civil service top officials being excluded from top security meetings and sensitive documents (Interview with John Ledlie). It was not until much later in Thatcher’s governments that this changed. Even as the AIA was moving towards being signed, Robert Andrew was involved but was not allowed to involve the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service Ken Bloomfield. Although Andrew wanted to involve Bloomfield, the NIO by this point in time was not listened to by big beasts in the Cabinet Office such as Robert Armstrong and others in the ministry of defence and the foreign office (Interview with Ken Bloomfield).

The lack of clear direction for Northern Ireland in May 1979, from both Thatcher and Atkins, meant that Atkins and his ministers had to rely heavily on the civil service for advice (Interview with Philip Goodhart). This was to be expected though. Unless ministers have been shadowing a job in opposition it is very unlikely that they would bring with them a fully worked out vision (Interview with David Brooker). Atkins did not have any specific views or ideas about what to do in Northern Ireland and the Conservative party’s 1979 manifesto did not provide much guidance. In total, 107 words were dedicated to Northern Ireland in the 1979 Conservative party manifesto. No clear idea on Northern Ireland was put forward as Airey Neave had deliberately ensured that the wording was vague and non-committal in order to keep the Unionists within the Conservative party happy (Moore, 2013: 589). It simply stated that in the absence of devolved government that a Conservative government would seek to establish regional councils with powers over local services and would continue to support industry. The only other aspect mentioned was to maintain the Union and focus on restoring law and order and defeating terrorism (1979 Conservative Party General Election Manifesto). This initially affected the pace in which policy could move forward and Atkins had to quickly become accustomed to the role and deal with the day to day problems (Interview with Philip Goodhart). Atkins focused directly on the security aspect as this is what Thatcher and the Conservative government manifesto prioritised (Interview with David Brooker). This is also reflected in one of Thatcher’s first notes about Northern Ireland on 8th June 1979 in response to a member of the public.
Thatcher vowed that the government had to take seriously the accusation that troops in Northern Ireland were not adequately equipped (PREM 19/80).

Although Thatcher and Atkins had no clear idea what to do in Northern Ireland and therefore needed advice from civil servants and officials, Thatcher and her ministers were particular about who they sought advice from and what sort of advice they wanted. The civil service, particularly the Northern Ireland civil service rather than the NIO (the British civil service) felt particularly alienated at the start of Thatcher’s premiership. When the head of the Northern Ireland civil service met with ministers in the Northern Ireland department, he was told “We don’t want to hear that sort of thing” (Interview with Ken Bloomfield). This was partly due to Thatcher falling out with the civil service shortly after entering office. The civil service told Thatcher that a new initiative, from what had been outlined in the manifesto, was needed as expectations were high in Dublin and the United States. Thatcher did not like the idea that this implied some form of power sharing with Dublin (Moore, 2013: 589). The Foreign Office became less involved after the Cabinet Office took over the joint studies in December 1980 (PREM19/507 f79) and after Ken Stowe left the Northern Ireland Office in 1981, Robert Armstrong worked hard to exclude the NIO from key policy decisions and go behind their back (Moore, 2013: 604).

The significance of Robert Armstrong

Thatcher’s Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong was undoubtedly the key individual in Northern Ireland policy in the lead up to the November 1985 AIA. Even as early as December 1980, Thatcher was unhappy when Armstrong suggests that he and the Cabinet Office take over from the Foreign Office in leading the joint studies but Thatcher allowed him to and allowed him to get her more involved in the process too. Archival evidence from December 1980 reveals that even at this point, Thatcher was more involved in Northern Ireland policy than we would expect, largely due to Robert Armstrong. What is significant is that this was Thatcher becoming more involved in Northern Ireland policy in relation to the Republic. This is something that Thatcher was not keen on doing. She was happy to direct policy relating to
security but this is the first time we see her being coaxed into becoming more involved in Anglo-Irish relations – Armstrong was instrumental in this.

Armstrong’s background and association with the Irish question is important because it explains why he was so determined to ensure that an agreement was reached and the AIA was signed in November 1985. Archives reveal that Armstrong had an agenda from December 1980, when he suggested to Thatcher that the Cabinet Office which he ran should lead the joint studies on the British side rather than the Foreign Office when dealing with the Republic of Ireland. It also reveals Armstrong’s determination to get Thatcher on board. The very fact that Armstrong was able to personally ensure that an agreement was reached and manoeuvre Thatcher, not just early in her career in December 1980 but also after 1983 when her position was more consolidated and she was more powerful, is significant. Ken Bloomfield described Armstrong as a “very very capable but sometimes manipulative bureaucrat” who gently gently pushed this lady who didn’t think that anyone could ever push her (Interview with Ken Bloomfield). This gives us a very different impression of Thatcher. Not only was she not fully in control but she was being persuaded to be much more involved in Northern Ireland and dealing with the Republic than she perhaps wanted to be. Although Armstrong was careful to protect Thatcher and offer her the best advice, he was gently trying to push her towards a view of Ireland with which she did not like (Moore, 2013: 604).

Armstrong sought to take control of the joint studies in December 1980 due to a personal interest in Northern Ireland and the Irish question. As Ted Heath’s principal private secretary, he played an important role in the Sunningdale agreement of 1973 and established a good relationship with Dermot Nally during this time. Armstrong saw the future of Northern Ireland with some sort of power-sharing and Irish dimension. Rather than allow the people of Northern Ireland, including the political parties there, to decide what happened, Armstrong thought it was better to turn the Irish question into an intergovernmental affair (Moore, 2013: 604). This was why he persuaded Thatcher in December 1980 to put him and the Cabinet Office in charge of the joint studies (PREM19/507 f79). Armstrong personally preferred a united Ireland and wanted to keep the Unionists at bay (Moore, 2013: 604). This explains why he was so adamant during the build up to the AIA that Thatcher kept the Unionists in the dark over the deal.
Armstrong used an opportunity in December 1980, when Thatcher was annoyed with the NIO Permanent Secretary Ken Stowe, to take control of the joint studies and therefore a significant aspect of Northern Ireland policy. Thatcher was annoyed over the details in the communique from the December 1980 Anglo-Irish summit meeting between herself and the Taoiseach Charles Haughey. Thatcher was unhappy that Ken Stowe, who wrote the communique, did not warn her how the contents could be interpreted. Thatcher was also convinced that no deal could be reached with the Taoiseach Charles Haughey after his minister Brian Lenihan had publicly stated that a federal structure for the whole of Ireland might emerge after from the Anglo-Irish discussions (PREM19/507 f138). After this, officials were nervous as they did not know how Thatcher wanted to proceed with Northern Ireland policy (Moore, 2013: 603).

Due to fearing Thatcher’s displeasure on how officials would proceed next. Armstrong displayed a “masterly piece of mandarin handling” (Moore, 2013: 603), by taking the opportunity to write to Thatcher on 18th December 1980 stating that the foreign office did not want to be part of the joint studies. This was unprecedented as the foreign office would normally be in charge of discussions with a foreign country. Armstrong explained that the foreign secretary Lord Carrington was worried that his department would be associated with the Irish question and accused of a ‘sell out’ like over Rhodesia and the Falkland Islands, which had recently ignited a debate over possible sovereignty being ceded to Argentina. Armstrong explained to Thatcher that the Taoiseach’s Office run by Dermot Nally, Armstrong’s Irish counterpart, was dealing with the joint studies in Dublin, not the Irish Foreign Ministry. Armstrong therefore suggested that for the sake of symmetry that the joint studies should be run by the Cabinet Office, which Armstrong was in charge of. Armstrong informed Thatcher that no problems would arise from this as both the Foreign Secretary and SSNI were happy for the Cabinet Office to do this and promised to support them (PREM19/507 f79).

Thatcher was not happy about Armstrong’s suggestion and the implications of the Cabinet Office, rather than the Foreign Office, leading the joint studies. She wrote back to Armstrong stating that “the FO must take the lead – otherwise the relationship with the Republic will be being treated in a wholly different way from other EEC bilaterals”. Thatcher also told Armstrong that it is “not a very practical
idea” for the No.10 press office to be in charge of press enquiries relating to the joint studies, as Armstrong suggested. Armstrong advised Thatcher that this would be necessary if the joint studies was run by the cabinet office. Thatcher also annotated on the top of the document angrily “I am very unhappy these proposals” in response to Armstrong suggesting that she would be “personally overseeing the exercise in a much closer way than would normally be the case” and would preside over a ministerial group created to oversee the Cabinet Office leading the joint studies. Armstrong hoped that he would be able to inform the Taoiseach that the Cabinet Office was taking over the joint studies before Christmas. This meant that Armstrong wanted to do this within the week (PREM19/507 f79). Despite Thatcher’s clear opposition to the proposals, she wrote on top of the document that Armstrong should see her on Monday to discuss matters further and she allowed Armstrong’s plans to go ahead.

Here we see, at the end of 1980, Robert Armstrong starting to lead the talks with the Irish and the Taoiseach’s department and not the foreign office. Effectively, this was the start of the build up to the AIA as it emerged from the joint studies. We also see as early as December 1980 Thatcher becoming more involved in Northern Ireland policy and being manoeuvred and persuaded by Armstrong to commit to ideas that she herself opposed in order to try to improve the situation in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the fact that Armstrong gave Thatcher less than one week to decide to accept these proposals and allow him to put them into practice conveys that policy at the time was moving at a fast pace rather than the accusations levelled in the Northern Ireland literature that policy was slow moving during these years. The precise format of the joint studies remained vague, and secretive, but the purpose was to lay the ground for a more formal relationship between the British and Irish governments in the future (Moore, 2013: 605).

Although Thatcher allowed Armstrong and the Cabinet Office to take control of the joint studies and liaise with their counterparts in Dublin, Thatcher’s reluctance to do so resulted in it being inevitable that she would be unhappy with the way in which the talks would progress.

Armstrong sent his deputy Robert Wade-Gery, who was also in charge of drafting the joint studies reports, to Dublin for secret meetings in the Taoiseach’s
office. These talks were the start of the AIA. Some of the talks even began before the joint studies itself started. Thatcher would have allowed such talks but she was not aware of all of the content that Wade-Gery discussed in Dublin. Wade-Gery described Thatcher as anti-Irish and not at all reasonable. He described the process of persuading her as ‘long’ but worth it (Moore, 2013: 604-605). Thatcher described the talks as “moving faster than she contemplated” in response to Wade-Gery’s March 1981 joint studies report which suggested establishing an Anglo-Irish council and a joint parliamentary forum which would lead to a federal Ireland. Thatcher described the report as “the most alarming set of papers on the UK/Irish situation I have read”. Thatcher repeatedly wrote “no” next to the suggestions and annotated that the suggestion of Irish citizens sitting on juries and holding elected office in Northern Ireland as “monstrous” (PREM19/508 f311). Thatcher demanded a re-draft and negotiations were paused in preparation for the Irish general election and the British government dealt with the start of the second hunger strike. Nevertheless, Armstrong remains one of the most significant individuals regarding Northern Ireland policy, especially in relation to Thatcher’s relationship with the Republic and the Taoiseach, and singlehandedly ensures that Thatcher agrees to the AIA.

Two premiers: Thatcher and the Taoiseach

Throughout the Thatcher years, Thatcher’s relationship with the Irish Taoiseach was complicated by the fact that Thatcher had to deal with three different individuals as Irish Taoiseach before even the AIA was signed. It would be inaccurate to say that Thatcher’s relationship with any of them was continuously positive. Each relationship was complex and whenever things were looking positive, something happened to disrupt the progress which had previously been made. This is a pattern throughout the Thatcher years. It also wasn’t helped by the fact that on occasion when Thatcher met the Irish Taoiseach, that at the beginning of the meeting the discussion went back to where it had been at the previous meeting (Interview with Robert Andrew). Robert Armstrong was crucial in keeping Thatcher on track in trying to build positive relations with the Taoiseach during the build up to the AIA. Earlier in her premiership this was more difficult and even Humphrey Atkins
attempted to get Thatcher to improve relations with the Taoiseach. Thatcher wanted a solution to Northern Ireland but saw the answer to this as security rather than cooperation with the Republic. As Thatcher allowed this view to change and relations with the Irish Taoiseach improve, so did progress in terms of Northern Ireland.

Although it is widely thought that the first foreign Head of Government to meet with Thatcher once she became PM was Helmut Schmidt from Germany, it was actually the Irish Taoiseach Jack Lynch (Moore, 2013: 589). He paid Thatcher a courtesy visit on 10th May 1979. Although Thatcher put forward no opinion in the meeting on Northern Ireland except to state that there would be no instant solutions to the Northern Ireland problem, Lynch came with an agenda. He warned Thatcher not to pursue the idea put forward by Airey Neave, and in the Conservative party 1979 manifesto, about creating regional councils as it would lead to discrimination in housing matters and therefore undo the goodwill which had been created between the British and Irish governments (PREM 19/79).

There is no archival record of Thatcher’s response but there are records detailing when Thatcher met Lynch for a second time to coincide with Lynch attending Lord Mountbatten’s funeral in London in September 1979; the meeting did not go well (Moore, 2013: 592). Thatcher behaved how you would have expected from the literature. She goes against advice from Atkins, her SSNI, and refuses to make any attempt to come to an agreement with the Irish government. Thatcher and Atkins disagreed about how Thatcher should open the meeting. Atkins wanted Thatcher to promise Lynch political progress whereas Thatcher did not. She thought this was going too far and treating Northern Ireland as a colony rather than part of the UK. Thatcher conceded that she would discuss preparing for effective local government. During the meeting however, Thatcher focused on Lynch’s need to improve security. This lead to increased difficulties between the two premiers as Lynch hoped to arrive at a political solution between the two governments. Thatcher responded by stating that “it would help if people stopped talking about a united Ireland”. Relations worsened when Thatcher pursued security. She told Lynch directly that she would be unable to restrain public opinion in the UK if the British and Irish governments failed to arrive at a new security solution (PREM 19/79). The Irish deputy PM, Tánaiste George Colley, argued back, informing Thatcher that
there was some sympathy for the ‘men of violence’. Thatcher had to be held back, furious at this remark, and asked Colley if he was condoning murder (Moore, 2013: 592).

Charles Haughey took over from Lynch as Taoiseach in December 1979. Thatcher resisted meeting him to discuss Northern Ireland at a European Council meeting in Brussels, despite the Foreign Secretary Peter Carrington, Atkins and Stowe’s advice that it would be a good idea. Thatcher, after her experiences with Lynch, was not inclined to meet with another Taoiseach to discuss Northern Ireland.

Although Thatcher herself did not become more interested in dealing with Dublin during the first six months of 1980, others in the British government did. Thatcher’s denial of knowing about a promise that Airey Neave had made to the Unionists about not pursuing a devolved parliament in Northern Ireland (to be discussed in more detail later) allowed important conversations to take place between British and Officials and the Taoiseach’s office (Moore, 2013: 595) in order to ascertain the position and intention of the British government. This was the start of important dialogue between British and Irish officials which would lead to improved relations between the British PM Thatcher and Irish Taoiseach.

Thatcher eventually met Haughey on 21st May, having invited him to lunch at Downing Street (Moore, 2013: 595). The focus of the meeting was to discuss an initiative relating to the relationship between the UK, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland (Moore, 2013: 596, 602). The meeting was much better than Thatcher’s meetings with the previous Taoiseach Jack Lynch. The May 1980 meeting between Thatcher and Haughey was helped because Haughey had brought Thatcher an antique silver teapot as a gift (Interview with John Marshall). It had the prayer, which Thatcher used in her first ever speech as PM, by St Francis of Assisi engraved on it. Although the meeting went well on personal terms, Thatcher was not prepared to concede anything to Haughey (Moore, 2013: 595). Nevertheless, Thatcher was much more reasonable with Haughey after the meeting (Interview with John Marshall). The failure of Atkins’ Round Table conference in 1980, discussed later in this chapter, meant that Northern Ireland policy focused more on Dublin rather than Belfast and the Northern Ireland parties thereafter. Due to this, Thatcher
and the Taoiseach had to find a way forward and concessions had to be made on both sides if any progress was to be made.

These concessions came in the form of a number of joint studies being commissioned after Thatcher and Haughey met in December 1980 (THCR 3/2/45 85) and later, the creation of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council (AIIC) also referred to as the British-Irish Intergovernmental Council (BIIC) (Aughey, 2005: 92). The AIIC was officially created as a result of the AIA and was then renamed the BIIC after the 1998 GFA. When it was first formed, it was of a direct result of the joint studies, which came about after the May and December 1980 meetings between Thatcher and Haughey. It marked the start of the process of improving Anglo-Irish relations. Later, during the time Jim Prior is SSNI, these joint studies were put into practice. During a summit meeting in November 1981 between Thatcher and then Irish Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald, it was decided that the Steering committee of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council (AIIC) should be established, which the British Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong and his Irish counterpart Dermot Nally would chair. It was a series of intergovernmental contacts at various levels, and the non-governmental Anglo-Irish Encounter, primarily concerned with cultural and social issues. This provided a starting point for the dramatic improvement in Anglo-Irish relations which took place during the Prior years and paved the way for the Armstrong and Nally relationship to develop into talks and their partnership become established. This was imperative during the Prior years.

This improvement of Anglo-Irish relations came about as a result of the slowly improving relationship between the PM and the Irish Taoiseach during the Thatcher and Haughey years and then the even better Thatcher and FitzGerald relationship. The relationship between Thatcher and Garret FitzGerald, who took over from Charles Haughey as Taoiseach, was crucial in paving the way for the 1985 AIA. The intergovernmental relationship was embodied in the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council. In effect, from December 1980 onwards, meetings between the two heads of government were formalised and were later assisted by the steering committee comprising officials from both Britain and Ireland, led by the two Cabinet Secretaries- Armstrong and Nally (Goodall, 2013). The steering committee was
reactivated again, on the initiative of the Irish cabinet secretary Dermot Nally, directly after Thatcher’s success in the 1983 election.

The start of this improving relationship between the premiers was when Thatcher had met Haughey in May 1980 and they had agreed to have ‘regular’ meetings. The first of these meetings took place on 8th December 1980 at Dublin Castle. Thatcher knew in advance of the Anglo-Irish summit meeting that Haughey was going to suggest creating an inter-governmental conference which would consider the future of Northern Ireland in a wider framework (PREM19/507 f211). Thatcher agreed to the idea of joint studies, which might develop into new structures of co-operation but she ruled out a conference, arguing that it was too soon (Moore, 2013: 602). Although Thatcher had ruled out the AIIC initially, it was later created. The meeting was a success for Anglo-Irish relations and shows for the first time in Thatcher’s premiership that she was willing to compromise with the Irish government in order to improve the situation in Northern Ireland. The summit meeting was also significant as it was the first PM led bilateral delegation of British ministers to Dublin since Partition in 1921. Thatcher was joined by Atkins as well as the foreign secretary Lord Carrington and the Chancellor Geoffrey Howe. Thatcher took such a high-powered delegation to remind the Irish government that she wanted to discuss European business as well as Northern Ireland matters. It was her request that Howe attended. This reveals that Thatcher was willing to consider liaising with the Republic, over the future of Northern Ireland, as early as December 1980 even if she ensured that EEC business was discussed too.

Anglo-Irish relations deteriorate

The factor that halted the progress of Anglo-Irish relations during the Atkins years was the hunger strikes. The initial progress, as a result of the Thatcher and Haughey initiative in December 1980, was over-shadowed by the hunger strikes at the Maze prison. The British government turned their attention to dealing with this issue during the Atkins years. The first hunger strike was coming to an end in December 1980 when Thatcher met Haughey but the British government’s dealings with the
hunger strikers, especially during the second strike, caused new friction between the British and Irish government in 1981 and during the Prior years.

It was not just the hunger strikes which stalled the improvement of Anglo-Irish relations. Northern Ireland policy during the Thatcher years was characterised by a catalogue of setbacks and one of the first was the aftermath of the December 1980 summit meeting between Thatcher and Haughey. Although the meeting itself was successful, Thatcher was unhappy with some details in the communique (summary of the meeting) which followed. Her officials, including the Northern Ireland Permanent Secretary Ken Stowe, wrote up a summary of the meeting which announced that Thatcher and Haughey had accordingly decided to devote their next meeting in London, in 1981, to special consideration of the totality of relationships within these islands. The communique also stated that Thatcher and Haughey, for this purpose, commissioned joint studies, covering a range of issues including possible new institutional structures, citizenship rights, security matters, economic co-operation and measures to encourage mutual understanding (THCR 3/2/45 85). This led to uproar from the Unionists (Moore, 2013: 602). Thatcher had to respond in a letter to Ian Paisley, reassuring him that Northern Ireland Unionists had nothing to fear from the development of relations between the British and Irish governments and the establishment of the joint studies. Thatcher also reassured Paisley that Northern Ireland would remain part of the UK and that she had made that clear both inside and outside the House of Commons. (THCR 3/2/45 85). Thatcher blamed herself for not checking the draft communique thoroughly enough or considering how the phrase could have been interpreted by the Unionists. After this, Thatcher stated that she was ‘wary’ (Moore, 2013: 602). This could have been wary to make further concessions to the Republic or wary of trusting the Northern Ireland Permanent Secretary Ken Stowe to put together a record of her meetings. There was a suggestion that Stowe had not warned her how the communique could have been interpreted because he supported the version he produced.

Thatcher’s belief that she could ever reach an agreement with Haughey was completely destroyed after his foreign minister, Brian Lenihan, had publicly stated, in March 1981, that a federal structure for the whole of Ireland might emerge after from the Anglo-Irish discussions. Thatcher got Lord Carrington to write to Haughey asking him to make clear to the press in future, leaving no room for interpretation,
that such suggestions were off the table, back in December 1980 (PREM19/507 f138). When Thatcher met Haughey at the European Council meeting in Maastricht she told Haughey that Lenihan might have “undone everything”. Haughey agreed that the situation was a mess. The process however, was not destroyed (Moore, 2013: 603). The December 1980 summit meeting ensured that the joint studies happened and that the British officials, Armstrong and Nally, set up the steering committee which led to regular communication between the British government and Taoiseach’s office.

Section III: The Thatcher – Atkins relationship

During Atkins’ time as SSNI he had to start the talks with the political parties in Northern Ireland, undertake secret talks with the Irish government and deal with the Hunger Strikes. There is evidence in the archives suggesting that Thatcher gave Atkins a great deal of freedom and autonomy to develop policy in Northern Ireland during his time in office. Despite this, when big issues that Thatcher feels strongly about arose, such as the arms to the RUC, the balance of power and the relationship between Thatcher and Atkins changed and Thatcher became more involved. What cannot be clear at this stage is how much of this was due to a lack of Thatcher’s interest and how much of it was due to the independence of the SSNI. Even when it appeared that Atkins is in charge of policy, Thatcher was behind the scenes controlling it. This was what had been agreed though, in May 1979. Due to Atkins’ lack of knowledge about Northern Ireland (Interview with Philip Goodhart) and unwillingness to take up the position, it had been decided that Thatcher would take the lead on Northern Ireland policy (Interview with Joe Pilling).

Archives reveal that when Thatcher was due to make a major speech in Northern Ireland in February 1981, Atkins approved the speeches before they were given (PREM19/500 f207). Given what we know about Thatcher, it is unlikely that if Atkins wanted her to change something substantial that she would have changed her speech based on his opinion. However, it is still interesting to see how involved Atkins was, even during Prime Ministerial events, and how much Thatcher seeks advice on Northern Ireland. This challenges some perceptions of Thatcher, as
examined in the previous chapter, which would suggest that she marginalised her ministers and excluded them. Here we see Humphrey Atkins being very much included at this time in February 1981. Thatcher did like Atkins though, having previously been her Chief Whip, and at this stage in her career she could not govern in the same way that she did after the 1983 general election. Furthermore, although it had been agreed that Thatcher would take the lead on Northern Ireland policy, this still required her to work closely with the SSNI. In reality though, Thatcher chose to marginalise Atkins, when it suited her, from the very beginning. This can be seen in Thatcher appearing to support Atkins’ idea to hold talks with the parties in Northern Ireland whilst at the same time withholding key information from Atkins and agreeing to bypass him in favour of her officials.

Atkins’ first action as SSNI was in October 1979 when he announced a plan to set up talks with the parties in Northern Ireland in an attempt to bring about devolution (Moore, 2013: 592). Thatcher was initially supportive of the idea when Atkins suggested it on 4th July 1979 because Willie Whitelaw, the Home Secretary and first ever SSNI, suggested it first. It is evident however, that Thatcher was only supportive of the idea of Atkins holding the talks so long as she did not have to be involved. Thatcher allowed Atkins to invite the main parties in Northern Ireland to a conference at Stormont and chair the meetings without any assistance from her (Campaign Guide 1983: Preparing for Political Progress). Atkins, who also led the later talks, asked Thatcher to also get involved, requesting that she speak with Cardinal Hume, the Archbishop of Westminster. Thatcher refused, telling Atkins that she has already done so and that she found Cardinal Hume to be naive about the situation. Atkins pressed Thatcher; urging her to try again as his recent talks in Dublin had gone well and that the Irish acknowledged their bad behaviour over the situation (Archive T48/79T) but Thatcher refused. This is exactly how we would expect Thatcher to behave in 1979 – reluctant to get involved in Northern Ireland policy and unwilling to change her position.

Thatcher was happy for Atkins to hold the talks so long as she did not have to be involved but another reason that Thatcher agreed to Atkins pursuing this policy was because it gave her something to tell President Carter when he asked what the new government was planning to do in Northern Ireland. Thatcher told the US President, when he asked her in a letter, that she and the Conservative party intended
to follow the strategy of undertaking persistent and patient talks with the parties in Northern Ireland. Thatcher informed Carter that this was believed by Atkins, and agreed by Thatcher, to be the best way to make progress (Archive T48/79T). The wording in the archive is significant. Thatcher refused to attach the policy to herself in case it is not successful. She made it clear that the talks were Atkins’ idea, which she has authorised.

This was because there was a history of these talks failing, talks with the Northern Ireland parties had been tried before by the previous SSNI Roy Mason who sought to introduce a form of power-sharing through his interim devolution scheme of 1977. This was based on the idea of a devolved non-legislating 78-seat assembly from which sub-committees would be drawn to deal with non-contentious issues such as health, social services and transport. Mason’s plans were a development of his predecessor Merlyn Rees’ White Paper in July 1974 which outlined a plan for a Constitutional Convention. The United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC) and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) took 46 and 17 seats respectively in the subsequent election but the convention expired in 1975 after voting to return to the Stormont system after the convention disagreed on a devolved form of government. The Mason talks were unsuccessful, and lasted a number of months whilst attracting little support. History was set to repeat itself throughout the Thatcher years with Atkins’ similar Round Table Conference in 1980 and later in 1982 when SSNI Jim Prior attempts a ‘rolling devolution’ scheme.

It was not just history that made Thatcher believe that the talks would be unsuccessful and were not worth her involvement. Senior ministers and officials privately told Thatcher that they were sceptical that Atkins’ plans did not go far enough. They were concerned about the recent favourable publicity given to Pope John Paul II who had visited the Republic of Ireland in September and pleaded for a bigger political initiative to end the violence (Moore, 2013: 593). The Cabinet Secretary John Hunt, who was later in 1979 replaced by Robert Armstrong) advised Thatcher, on 16th October 1979, to bypass Atkins in favour of creating a working group, comprising of individuals from the Cabinet Office and the Foreign Office, which should produce a consultation document. He argued that less attention should be given to the parties in Northern Ireland and more attention should be given to the Republic (PREM 19/82). This was the start of a shift in Northern Ireland policy and
the focus towards a deal between the British and Irish governments. Although at this stage Thatcher is not involving herself as much in Northern Ireland policy as we see later on, and is not seeking to make a deal with the Republic, this is when Thatcher first realises that there will be no improvement in Northern Ireland without the Republic’s involvement and this will involve action from her, not the SSNI. Thatcher is happy however to get involved and lead Northern Ireland policy, overriding Atkins, when she deems it necessary.

*Thatcher keeps Atkins in the dark*

In March 1980 Thatcher amended Atkins’ proposals for plans in Northern Ireland in order to take into account unionist sensitivities (Thatcher, 1993: 387). At first it could appear that this is due to Thatcher’s sympathy for the Unionists, believing that support for the union should be a Conservative party policy and part of the party’s ideology (Thatcher, 1993: 385). It was actually because the more moderate Unionist party, the Official Unionists, refused to partake in Atkins’ talks as they saw the plans as anti-integrationist. The significance of this is that Thatcher kept secret from Atkins and her civil servants a promise that Airey Neave had made to the Unionists.

Archives reveal that the MP Ian Gow, who often communicated between the Unionists and the government, wrote to Thatcher informing her that Atkins’ policy of a devolved parliament would fail and was disastrously wrong because it went against previous promises made by Airey Neave, the shadow SSNI (PREM19/83 f24). Gow informed Thatcher than Jim Molyneaux, leader of the Ulster Unionist party, was told in a letter by Neave in March 1979 that elected regional councils would be set up if the Conservatives won the general election in 1979 (PREM 19/82). Thatcher had not told anybody else about this promise and did not tell Atkins. Although this was mentioned in the Conservative party manifesto, Airey Neave had deliberately ensured that the wording was vague and non-committal in order to keep the Unionists within the Conservative party happy (Moore, 2013: 589). It simply stated that, in the absence of devolved government, a Conservative government would seek to establish regional councils with powers over local services and would continue to support industry. The only other aspect mentioned was to maintain the
Union and focus on restoring law and order and defeating terrorism (1979 Conservative Party General Election Manifesto). This led to embarrassment when the Permanent Secretary for Northern Ireland, Ken Stowe, found out as he and Atkins had vehemently denied that such a promise had been made by Neave to the Unionists; Thatcher had never told them (Moore, 2013: 594). Enoch Powell confirmed in a later meeting that the SSNI was not aware of such a promise but that the PM was. Thatcher was still having to explain the government’s decision to not honour or act upon Neave’s promise to Powell in February 1981 (PREM19/498 f40). Moreover, Thatcher denied knowledge of such a promise by Neave in a meeting with Stowe, Atkins and Gow in March 1980 (Moore, 2013: 594). Despite Powell’s opposition, and in the absence of Neave to verify such promises, Thatcher and her colleagues decided to continue with the Atkins plan. Thatcher never told Atkins the whole story and kept him in the dark whilst he continued with the party talks. This reveals much about Thatcher’s style of governance in her first year as PM. We see Thatcher already willing to marginalise ministers and keep information from them.

The issues surrounding the Neave promise caused irreparable damage between Thatcher and the Unionists. Some believed that she was purposefully deceiving them whilst others thought that she was simply not in control of policy in Northern Ireland. As a result of Thatcher’s lack of knowledge of the Neave promise, whether this was in fact true, progress in Northern Ireland was able to be made between the British and Irish governments. Thatcher allowed important conversations between British officials and the Taoiseach’s office (Moore, 2013: 595). This wouldn’t have been able to happen if Neave’s promise had been supported or acknowledged by Thatcher. The talks between officials were crucial and paved the way for the future Armstrong and Nally talks during the Prior years which led to the AIA. Furthermore, the AIA was able to come about because relations between Thatcher and the Unionists were already so bad. Thatcher had nothing to lose by keeping them in the dark once more.

Atkins’ plans for all-party talks were further undermined by Thatcher’s refusal to make too many concessions to Irish opinion, therefore alienating the SDLP and their leader John Hume. Haughey had told Hume that Thatcher had told him at a European Council meeting in June 1980 that she did not expect the Atkins initiative to get anywhere. Thatcher had meant that she did not expect the initiative to get
anywhere before summer recess but the damage was done to Atkins’ plans. When parliament returned after the 1980 summer break, no agreement had been made by the political parties in Northern Ireland and therefore, the Atkins initiative stalled (Moore, 2013: 597). The hunger strike dominated the remainder of Atkins’ time as SSNI and Thatcher took the advice of her Cabinet Secretary and paid more attention to the Republic (PREM 19/82) and improving Anglo-Irish relations.

**Hunger strikes**

The two hunger strikes not only characterised Humphrey Atkins’ time as SSNI but also Thatcher’s time as PM. These new findings matter because of the better understanding of the nuances of the key interrelationships within the core executive. The newly released archives reveal two new findings which have only previously been suspected. First, that Atkins was much more cautious than Thatcher in dealing with the problems in Northern Ireland and secondly, that Thatcher did negotiate with the hunger strikers and did know about the existence of a ‘back channel’ despite writing extensively in her biography about Northern Ireland and her ‘refusal to negotiate with terrorists’ (Thatcher, 1993).

**Background to the ‘back channel’ or ‘link’**

Secret talks, referred to as either the ‘link’ or ‘channel’, had been conducted, with gaps, by British officials and key people in Northern Ireland since 1972 (Interview with John Chilcot). James Allan from the Northern Ireland Office and Michael Oatley from the British Secret Intelligence Service had been in contact with the PIRA since the ceasefire of 1972 (McGrattan, 2010: 115). Interviews with key civil servants from the time corroborate this and reveal that the channel was maintained by the political organisation of the Northern Ireland Office, which was a very small number of people. Few, if any, politicians in London were aware of its existence (Interview with John Chilcot). More details of this link are discussed in *The Ulster*
Tales. John Deverell (Northern Ireland’s former Director and Co-ordinator of Intelligence) writes a chapter called ‘The Spook’s Tale’ in which he discusses the British governments’ secret talks with the Provisional IRA despite publicly stating that they refuse to talk to terrorists. Deverell confirms that this secret ‘link’ had been active since 1972 in Londonderry. The Republican end the Link was led by Brendan Duddy who was a Catholic fish and chip shop owner. Brendan Duddy was the Republican that made the connection to Rory O’Brady President of PIRA and David O’Connell IRA Chief of Staff. Deverell knows this because although he did not establish the link himself, he was responsible for maintaining it in the early 1990s. Duddy was also a close contact of Martin McGuinness, the then commander of the IRA brigade in Londonderry.

Deverell notes “The first public evidence of the existence of links to the IRA had come when Willie Whitelaw the then Northern Ireland Secretary met in London some PIRA leaders in the large centrally placed Cheyne Walk flat of the Conservative millionaire Paul Channon...It had been set up by an MI6 officer Frank Steele...no further talks took place under that Conservative government” (Deverell in Wilsey, 2011: 146-149). The talks were conducted as a backdrop to the 1972 IRA ceasefire (English, 2004: 157). This is corroborated in other literature. Sean MacStiofain discusses in Eyewitness to Irish History, that he was one of the members of Sinn Fein that met with Willie Whitelaw, Paul Channon, Frank Steele (MI6) and the Northern Ireland Office civil servant Philip Woodfield (who was the Northern Ireland Permanent Secretary in 1981-1983 during the second hunger strike and when the secret channel/ link was used again) (MacStiofain in Berresford Ellis: 2007: 289). Again, this is verified in elite interviews by other senior civil servants who were involved in the Northern Ireland department at this time. Woodfield was especially influential in the talks (Interview with Joe Pilling). He had been a crucial part of the establishment of the Northern Ireland department in 1972. Having been running the Northern Ireland department at the Home Office for two years before 1972, he supervised the Northern Ireland Office’s move to Stormont and became one of the two deputy secretaries at the new Northern Ireland Office (Obituary in the Telegraph).

Earlier that year in 1972, on 13th March, Harold Wilson, leader of the opposition Labour party, and Merlyn Rees, the shadow SSNI, had met with leading
IRA officials in Dublin (English, 2004: 156). This was continued by the Labour party when they returned to government in 1974. “In 1974 under conditions of even greater secrecy, such that Merlyn Rees, the Labour government’s then Northern Ireland Secretary, was unaware of them, PM Harold Wilson authorised the same back channel using Frank Steele’s successor Michael Oatley” (Wilsey, 2011: 146-149). Oatley obtained the agreement of Harold Wilson to pursue the initiative and the so called Christmas ceasefire of 1974 was negotiated using the link through Duddy and Oatley. Merlyn Rees, the Labour SSNI between 1974-1976 conducted secret talks with a republican ‘contact’ and a ‘provisional priest’ in order to assess what the PIRA wanted and to try to find a way forward. Discreet contacts were also taking place, during this time, in The Netherlands, between the paramilitary leaderships, to discuss their respective cooperative ventures. In fact, the ceasefire at the end of 1974 emerged as a direct result from secret talks conducted in Derry and meetings with Church leaders in Feakle, Co.Clare (McGrattan, 2010: 115). After the PIRA broke off the ceasefire in 1975, Roy Mason the then Secretary of State, ordered all contact with Duddy and any other go between to be ended. Oatley left the Province in 1975 but kept privately in touch with Duddy.

1980: the first hunger strike and use of the ‘link’

The first hunger strike concerning prisoners in Northern Ireland came in October 1980 and ended in December that year. Hunger strikes had been used before 1980 by the Republicans as a tool to negotiate with the prison authorities and British government for better conditions. In 1972 there had been protests at Belfast jail and in 1977 in Dublin at the Portlaoise prison. Between 1976 and 1978 there was a ‘Blanket’ protest at the Maze prison, just outside Belfast (previously called Long Kesh prison). This was followed in 1978 by the ‘Dirty’ protest. It was this which developed into the 1980 hunger strike. The protest in October 1980 started with the decision to move political prisoners from compounds to new cells in the new maze prison. Prisoners who had previously in the early 1970s been awarded special status for being prisoners due to terrorist convictions and other political offences had been allowed to wear their own clothes and have other privileges (18/7/81). Although this
had been phased out and it was the case that no prisoners were entitled to such status, the move of the prisoners was seen as a final straw and protests began over the previous loss of special status including dirty protests and hunger strikes (Bloomfield, 2007: 53).

At first, there were no attempts made to negotiate with the hunger strikers. Nor was there any use of the channel or link to communicate with the PIRA. Blelloch was the only Northern Ireland Office official to visit the Maze to deliver a press statement, about prisoner conditions and how the government would approach a post-hunger strike situation, which Humphrey Atkins had put together in early December 1980 (O’Malley, 2009). The first time any suggestion was put forward about talking to the hunger strikers through another means was when Charles Haughey, during the December 1980 summit meeting, advised Thatcher that her government talk ‘quietly and unobtrusively’ to the strikers though the prison chaplains. What Haughey and Blelloch did not know was that simultaneously, British officials were talking ‘quietly and unobtrusively’ to Republicans in Northern Ireland and Thatcher was aware of this (Moore, 2013: 599).

Brendan Duddy reactivated the link briefly in December 1980 after informing a British SIS officer that Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams, the Vice-President of Sinn Fein, wanted the hunger strike stopped in exchange for British gestures of goodwill rather than a deal (Moore, 2013: 599). The SIS Officer informed Frank Cooper (the previous Permanent Secretary for Northern Ireland but now working at the Ministry of Defence) who then informed Ken Stowe. Stowe decided that Thatcher’s permission was necessary due to the political danger and risk of kidnapping of the SIS officer. Thatcher agreed to the officer’s mission to deal with Sinn Fein in order to try to end the hunger strike. Rather than ‘talking to terrorists’, Thatcher simply saw this as inheriting a contact and allowing officials to make use of it. This hunger strike was ended on 18th December 1980 by the strike leader Darkie Hughes when one of the strikers was so near death he had to be moved to an outside hospital, at the request of his sister. The first hunger strike however, had two lasting consequences. First, Sinn Fein knew that Thatcher and her government were prepared to effectively negotiate with them. Secondly, that ‘humanitarian concessions’ promised by the British government were not going to be enough to win over the hunger strikers in the long term (Moore, 2013: 600).
resulted in a second hunger strike beginning only a matter of months later. This particular link was briefly used in December 1980 but then remained dormant until 1991 (Wilsey, 2011: 149).

1981: the second hunger strike

On 1st March 1981 the second hunger strike began when ten republican prisoners began starving themselves (Bloomfield, 2007: 53). Bobby Sands, the Provisional IRA’s Officer Commanding in the Maze, had re-started the hunger strike. He had not been one of the original seven hunger strikers but refused to eat until five specific demands were met by the British government, awarding the prisoners ‘political status’. These demands were: the right not to wear prison uniform; the right not to do prison work; the right to associate freely with whom they liked; the right to one weekly visit, letter in and out and one weekly food parcel; the restoration of all remission lost as the result of the protest action (Wilsey, 2011: 111). Thatcher would not back down and refused to give the prisoners back the special political status that they had received in the 1970s and refused the request of the Irish MPs to meet with them to discuss the matter (PREM19/503 f7). Thatcher saw any move to negotiate as giving in (Young, 1990: 467), and refused to do so even after Bobby Sands died on 5th May 1981 (Thatcher, 1993: 391). Thatcher and Atkins even tried to prevent him from becoming an MP before he died, after standing in a by-election but were unable to prevent his election to office (PREM19/504 f210).

In the days leading up to Sands’ death, Thatcher apologised to Atkins for having to spend Easter in this way and acknowledged that he was having a “very difficult time”. Atkins hoped to stop the rest of the hunger strikers continuing as it “doesn’t look very attractive” if more die (PREM19/504 f218) but the strike showed no signs of ending as there was seen to be too much of a gulf between the prisoners’ five demands and the government’s own stated position (O’Malley, 2009). However, as the hunger strike continued, relations between Thatcher and Atkins worsened and after Atkins urged a new approach in July 1981 Thatcher marginalised him when she sent the Minister of State, Michael Alison, to deal with the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace. Holding that, a change in policy was needed before more
prisoners died, Atkins had on 2 July advised Thatcher that there were three options – to continue to stand firm and allow more deaths; to call in an outside body such as the International Committee of the Red Cross; or to improve prison conditions. This could be done through negotiations with the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace (ICJP) (PREM19/505 f15). Atkins advised Thatcher to stand firm, believing that the protest would collapse and leave the PIRA humiliated (PREM19/506 f291).

Thatcher decided that the ICJP should be allowed to see the strikers, as the Irish Taoiseach FitzGerald had previously suggested but that “no concession could be made to the hunger strikers in any way” (PREM19/506 f332). Blelloch (seconded to the Northern Ireland Office as deputy secretary during the hunger strikes), who had assisted Atkins during the first hunger strike, was to be the official who liaised with the ICJP (O’Malley, 2009) and Michael Alison, the Prison’s Minister, would be the government official rather than Atkins (PREM19/506 f330). The aim was to stop the hunger strike and then the 400 protestors (PREM19/506 f317). The meetings however, were to be kept a secret unless the ICJP decided to publish them (PREM19/506 f282).

Thatcher ensured that Alison understood, when dealing with the ICJP, that “control and security must remain with HM (Her Majesty’s government)” and “let it be absolutely firmly understood that we do not have a moral obligation to give in to the five demands” (PREM19/506 f320). Thatcher, however, showed a softer side in a telephone conversation to Alison about the ICJP. Thatcher acknowledged that Alison had “a terrible time” and that he was “doing a super job”. After Alison told Thatcher “I don’t mind it, I’m quite happy to do it. I’m used to it now. I think it’s all part of the process”. Thatcher responded “I think you are marvellous and I am very grateful to you” (PREM19/506 f317). Here we saw Thatcher show real warmth and understanding to the difficulties faced by Michael Alison. A different side to her is in evidence here as she showed genuine appreciation for Alison’s efforts.
As the hunger strike continued in July 1981, the situation became so desperate that Thatcher and Atkins resorted to communicating messages to the PIRA, who were heavily influencing, and possibly controlling, the hunger strikers. What is significant is that Thatcher was aware of this communication and authorised it, even though it involved communicating with Sinn Fein, the political wing of the PIRA. As Thatcher was not having to communicate directly with Sinn Fein, she allowed it to happen (Moore, 2013: 600). The hundreds of archival documents available from July 1981 also reveal how fast the situation in Northern Ireland was changing and how much was being done to try to find a solution to the hunger strike.

An archival document from 4th July 1981 summarises a telephone conversation between a British government official or member of MI6 and a source from the PIRA in Northern Ireland. The details reveal they were debating which side was winning the hunger strike – the PIRA or the British government. It is evidence of the first such communication during the second hunger strike (PREM19/506 f316). At this point, Thatcher does not appear to have been aware of this telephone conversation and link to the PIRA. The first she heard of it was when Atkins suggested to Thatcher that they should listen to messages from a third party, trusted by the top provisional leadership, who had approached the British government. Atkins reassured Thatcher that no negotiations had taken place so far but at this critical stage the PIRA should be listened to (PREM19/506 f291). It is clear from this archive and the one preceding it that the SSNI and Minister of State for Northern Ireland were told about secret messages between a British official and member of the PIRA before Thatcher - the PM.

Before deciding to respond, Thatcher widened the circle of those involved to take advice beyond Atkins and the Northern Ireland department. Atkins was present at a meeting alongside Thatcher, Willie Whitelaw (Home Secretary), Francis Pym (Secretary of State for Defence), Philip Woodfield (Northern Ireland Permanent Secretary) and Ian Gilmour (Lord Privy Seal) to discuss showing a statement to the PIRA, before publicly releasing it, in the hope that they would call the hunger strike off. It was planned that if the PIRA rejected it, the government could deny all
knowledge of it or say it is in response to the ICJP statement. Thatcher told Atkins that he had to clear his draft statement with her before showing it to the PIRA later that evening (PREM19/506 f279). Thatcher’s willingness to communicate with the PIRA, and lie about it if it was leaked, was why she widened the circle of individuals involved. It was too big a decision not to have important members of the cabinet involved. Atkins was still involved though and trusted to write the statement, rather than a government official. The statement was sent to the PIRA on 6th July and Thatcher demanded a satisfactory response by 9am the following day or the government would deny that the message had been sent (PREM19/506 f313).

After receiving an unsatisfactory response and “that particular channel of activity… no longer active”, (PREM19/506 f282). Thatcher met with Atkins and Woodfield. It was suggested to Thatcher that another revised statement should be sent to the PIRA including more concessions on work but not association. Thatcher agreed and authorised that Atkins should issue another statement re-iterating the one of 30th June if this did not end the hunger strike (PREM19/506 f275). This clear evidence that Thatcher, contrary to what she always maintained, did negotiate with the PIRA and the hunger strikers.

Thatcher sought advice from the Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington, who advised Thatcher to bring in the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and investigate the legality of putting glucose in the prisoner’s water (PREM19/506 f234). Thatcher agreed and asked Atkins to release a statement indicating that the ICRC will visit the Northern Ireland prisons, assess the conditions and make recommendations (PREM19/506 f223). Thatcher was furious when the ICRC released their report on 30th July suggesting compromises between the British government’s position and that of the hunger strikers stating "This is serious - the ICRC was not asked to act as arbitrator" (PREM19/506 f150). Thatcher had a few days earlier rejected the suggestion that the government should try to put forward a ‘friendly’ agreement to the ICRC. Thatcher replied by saying “We are not going to make a friendly agreement with those people”. Thatcher refused to listen after that. She wholeheartedly refused to compromise or consider an agreement with the ICRC (Interview with John Marshall).
With Thatcher refusing to work with the ICRC, Thatcher’s final solution to the hunger strikes during the Atkins years was to re-open the channel to communicate with the PIRA. Thatcher contemplated authorising for the channel to be re-opened on 18th July 1981 after Woodfield informed Thatcher that the PIRA had asked a British official to meet the hunger strikers. She agreed to the re-opening of the channel and to the official visiting the hunger strikers. This was due to being “less concerned about the situation in Dublin than in North America” who were putting pressure on the British government do stop the hunger strike. Before Thatcher agreed though, she spoke to Atkins who tried to convince Thatcher against her decision warning her that the decision could leak. Thatcher listened and changed her mind but the channel was re-opened anyway, without Thatcher’s authorisation (Moore, 2013: 614). When Thatcher learnt this on the morning of the 19th July that ‘the channel’ had been activated, Atkins then changed his mind, deciding that more use should be made of it. Atkins thought that as the channel has already been opened that a substantive message should be sent in order to elicit more detail from the PIRA. Thatcher decided that the official could only repeat the government’s message and go no further. Thatcher made some handwritten notes saying that the channel should be informed as it may help if they know in advance. “Ensure that the channel’s chums are not all in same room. Blelloch will work on Mondays statement- very similar to ‘the channel’ but more precise”. Thatcher finished by re-iterating “no secret deals- once I have said it, it will become public” (PREM19/506 f196). This again shows Thatcher’s use of the ‘channel’ and negotiations with the PIRA. However, when no useful reply came on the evening of 20th July, Atkins gave instructions that the channel should be closed indefinitely (PREM19/506 f190).

Here we see that it was Atkins, not Thatcher, decided to close the channel because he felt that the PIRA had not responded positively. Thatcher seemed much more willing to use resources such as the channel in order to end the hunger strike but it was Atkins who was more cautious. Later in this archive the reason for Atkins’ decision is revealed. The archive shows that a message is passed through the channel from the PIRA dictating that the hunger strikers would only be prepared to listen to the Northern Ireland Office official, John Blelloch, who was outlining the government’s position, if the provisional member MacFarlane is also present. The channel also told the government that the PIRA were not willing to accept the prison
conditions and that the hunger strikers were not giving up. In response, Atkins released a statement on 19th July making four points- that they will not negotiate with the hunger strikers, that the government will clarify to the prisoners what will happen if their strike ends, that they are committed to improving prison conditions and that the red cross is currently investigating prison conditions on a humanitarian basis (PREM19/506 f190). The hunger strike was not resolved during the Atkins years and caused Thatcher considerable difficulties, especially internationally. As mentioned before, Thatcher was “less concerned about the situation in Dublin than in North America” (Moore, 2013: 614).

International aspect: pressure from the United States

International pressure, especially US involvement in the Northern Ireland conflict, was an important consideration when policy in Northern Ireland was decided during the Atkins years. As soon as Thatcher took office in May 1979, US President Jimmy Carter urged Thatcher to pursue a political solution more vigorously due to the increased pressure placed on him from the Irish-American lobby, especially from the Speaker of the House, Tip O’Neill. Thatcher’s response was not what either O’Neill or President Carter hoped for, it was tough on security and as cautious about politics as possible (Moore, 2013: 589-590). This set the tone for Anglo-American relations during the Atkins years. Even at the beginning, Thatcher was unwilling to bow to pressure from the US. She was going to determine the policy which her government would follow in Northern Ireland and refused to be pressurised into doing anything to the contrary.

One of the most significant Anglo-American issues during the Atkins years was on 20th July 1979 when the US decided to refuse to supply arms to the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) in Northern Ireland in order to defend the British army against the Provisional IRA. Thatcher was furious and told Atkins that arms could be built in Britain instead. Atkins and Thatcher fall out over this with Atkins telling Thatcher that it would be too expensive and take too long (Archive T48/79T). When Thatcher met with President Carter in December 1979 she berated him for the decision, arguing that the weapon which the US prevented from being used by the
RUC was much better than those which the RUC currently used; she knew this as she had handled both weapons personally. Thatcher explained to Carter that she had no idea that there would have been an issue with the completion of the order and demanded to know whether the difficulty was due to principle or timing. Carter assured Thatcher that the issue was caused by timing; he had recently lost the leadership of Congress and did not want to be defeated by Congress over this issue (Moore, 2013: 590).

Building arms in the UK was not the only issue that Thatcher and Atkins disagreed on with regards to policy in Northern Ireland and the US interference. Transcripts between Thatcher and Atkins on 23rd August 1979 reveal a distinct difference of opinion on how to deal with the issue of discussing Northern Ireland with the US Governor of New York Hugh Carey. Atkins wanted to hold discussions with Carey. Thatcher decided, based upon recent disputes with the US over arms to the RUC, that the British government should refuse to discuss anything with the US relating to Northern Ireland. She told an annoyed Atkins to put forward a statement explaining that neither she nor Atkins would be visiting the US to discuss Northern Ireland (Archive T48/79T).

Anglo-American relations remain frosty into 1981 during the hunger strike under the new US President Ronald Reagan. Thirty-seven members of the Senate and House of Representatives wrote to Thatcher saying “We are concerned about the apparent lack of commitment by your government to reach the earliest possible settlement of the strike...It is the responsibility of the British Government to seek every possible means to end the strike before any additional deaths occur” (PREM19/506 f213). The reason that Thatcher and Atkins considered using the channel to communicate messages with the PIRA was due to US pressure. Atkins told Thatcher in July 1981 that “a further effort to end the hunger strike was needed” due to the situation in the Irish Republic and North America. Thatcher replied that she was more concerned about America than Ireland but agreed that further action was needed to explain the situation to the hunger strikers. Thatcher goes on to say that she is more concerned with doing the right thing than being occupied with international opinion. Atkins replied that if this was the case, and international opinion could be disregarded, that he would “rather do nothing” from a Northern Ireland perspective. Thatcher told Atkins that the dangers of taking such an initiative
would be so great in Northern Ireland that she was not prepared to take them (PREM19/506 f213). Throughout the hunger strike, Thatcher seemed keener than Atkins to do something whilst Atkins continued to maintain that no new initiatives were necessary (PREM19/506 f134).

Thatcher became increasingly irritated at Atkins’ position, describing it as “irresponsible” (PREM19/506 f134), and at both the American and Irish governments after the Irish Taoiseach FitzGerald approached the new US President Ronald Reagan about the hunger strike. Thatcher noted that “it is regrettable that the Taoiseach should have chosen to react as emotionally as he has” (PREM19/506 f154). The hunger strike continued to cause Thatcher difficulties internationally for the remainder of the time that Atkins is SSNI and it also began to cause Thatcher problems in Parliament and in her cabinet.

Cabinet

Within Thatcher’s 1979 cabinet, everybody except the Lord Chancellor, Lord Hailsham, were committed to the Republic of Ireland having a greater role in the affairs of Northern Ireland and, therefore, some version of power sharing (Moore, 2013: 590-591). This meant that Thatcher faced very little opposition in her cabinet in relation to Northern Ireland until July 1981 when the issue of the hunger strike was raised. Although Thatcher faced little opposition, either from her own cabinet and party and the opposition Labour government, as international pressure increased, pressure was put on Thatcher to do something more.

Concerns were raised about the erosion of international confidence in British policy about the hunger strike in the Maze prison, after a formal cabinet meeting on 2\textsuperscript{nd} July 1981. Cabinet argued that there was concern internationally and in Parliament that the government’s view was seen as being inflexible. Particular concern was raised about what Jim Callaghan, the previous PM, would say in Parliament as his views carried great. Privately Callaghan had already indicated that he thought the British “guarantee” (to remain in Northern Ireland for as long as the people wish) should apply to not the territory of Northern Ireland but its inhabitants.
There was a view that the territory should be independent and financial help from the UK should be given for a limited time and those inhabitants who wish to remain British citizens. The question raised in cabinet was whether Britain should continue to be involved in Northern Ireland if it was a struggle. In addition, force feeding the prisoners in hunger strike should be considered. Thatcher agreed that all considerations relating to Northern Ireland should be considered, however difficult or unpalatable (CAB 128/72). This reveals how grave the situation in Northern Ireland had become at this point.

Opposition

The government’s position on the hunger strike also resulted in the Labour opposition questioning Conservative policy in Northern Ireland. Although it is true that bipartisanship continued throughout the Thatcher years and the Labour party never actively opposed the Conservative government’s policies, the hunger strike was the closest that the two parties got in disagreeing what to do in Northern Ireland when Foot suggested to Thatcher that the British government should give in to some demands made by the hunger strikers in order to end the strike.

Thatcher met with Michael Foot on 14th May 1981 to discuss the hunger strike. Both Thatcher and Foot agreed that the contents of the meeting should be kept private. Foot agreed that political status should not be given to prisoners but asked if one or two of the demands could be met. Although the PIRA would claim victory, the British government could actually claim victory due to not giving in to the rest of the demands. Thatcher argued that the hunger strikers could call an end to the strike at any time but Foot argued that this view should be put to the hunger strikers and that the present situation was dangerous. Thatcher was “amazed” by what Foot was saying and said that the government has gone further and implemented the Human Rights commission’s recommendations. Foot re-iterated that his party had supported, not criticised, the government but Foot thought that the hunger strike needed to be brought to an end even if that involved some concessions (PREM19/504 f86). The fact that Thatcher met with Foot directly, rather than allowing Atkins and his counterpart to discuss these issues, tells us more about
Thatcher’s role in Northern Ireland. Here we see bipartisan path dependency, which arguably prevented Thatcher from previously needing to involve herself in Northern Ireland, threatened. On this occasion we see Thatcher more willing to get involved in decisions when a crisis develops which threatens the bipartisan approach and the support of the shadow Labour government. This impacts upon Atkins’ role as he is not involved in the discussions between the two party leaders.

*Atkins’ demise as SSNI*

The pressure placed on Thatcher, both internationally and in Parliament, over the government’s handling of the hunger strike ultimately contributed towards the demise of Atkins as SSNI. Throughout Atkins’ time as SSNI, he maintained that no new initiative was necessary despite increasing US and Irish pressure. On 5th August 1981 a hand written note from an official stated that “You will have seen telegrams from Dublin and Washington suggesting that we should restate our position more clearly”. Atkins, however, stood firm and concludes that no initiatives are necessary. Thatcher annotated in response “this view seems totally irresponsible” (PREM19/506 f134).

This is one of the last available archives on the hunger strike involving Atkins as SSNI and reveals why Thatcher decided to move Atkins from Northern Ireland in September 1981. Even as early as June 1981, Robert Armstrong had suggested that Thatcher should consider appointing a new SSNI (PREM19/499 f78). In September 1981 there was an extensive cabinet re-shuffle. Atkins was moved to the role as Lord Privy Seal, and replaced Ian Gilmour. Gilmour had at times been involved in the Northern Ireland discussions; perhaps Thatcher was happy for Atkins to still be involved in Northern Ireland to some extent, and offer necessary advice based on his experience as SSNI.

Atkins’s successor Jim Prior was ‘exiled’ to Northern Ireland; in return he used his free hand to surround himself with a loyal team of ministers. The freedom and autonomy Prior got meant that he had a much freer hand than Atkins and he
used this to solve the problems that Atkins could not relating to the hunger strike and devolved assembly.

Conclusion

During the first couple of years with Atkins as SSNI Thatcher’s attitude towards Northern Ireland changed. Existing accounts of Thatcher’s time as PM suggest that she was not very involved in Northern Ireland policy and that policy changes in respect to Northern Ireland was very slow. This is definitely true at times during the Atkins years, especially when Thatcher refused to participate in the all-party talks even when Atkins asked her to. This chapter reveals however, that even very early into her premiership, Thatcher realises that she needed to concentrate on improving relations with the Republic of Ireland if the Northern Ireland Troubles were to ease. Thatcher, therefore, involved herself in Northern Ireland policy by meeting with the Irish Taoiseach and improving relations with Charles Haughey. Although relations with the Republic were not consistently positive; not helped by the change in Taoiseach or attitude towards the British government during the hunger strike, Thatcher’s desire to improve Anglo-Irish relations during the Atkins years provides the basis for further involvement from Thatcher during the Prior and Hurd years; leading to the AIA. This chapter also shows that the influence of the Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong begins much earlier than previously thought. It also depicts how strategic Armstrong was in ensuring that he was in charge of talks with officials in the Irish government and the extent to which he could persuade Thatcher.

Another indication of Thatcher being more involved in Northern Ireland policy than we would expect was during the hunger strike. The extent to which Thatcher authorised contacts with the PIRA, via both the intelligence services and senior civil servants, is a significant finding in the government archives. What is more significant however, is that it was Atkins rather than Thatcher who was reluctant to take any action during the hunger strike. Some ministers in the Northern Ireland department at the time believed that if Atkins had been able to persuade Thatcher to be more sensitive, that the situation in Northern Ireland would have been better (Interview with Richard Needham). Some civil servants agreed, believing that
if Thatcher had not been so fixed upon the idea of not talking to ‘the other side’ that there would have been more scope for policy (Interview with John Marshall). Progress during the hunger strike was difficult because Atkins was not strong enough to persuade Thatcher of the benefits of any new initiatives. Thatcher and Atkins were both personally against negotiating with the hunger strikers at any cost because of their links with the provisional IRA, and so was The Conservative Party as a whole. At this point in 1981, Thatcher’s position as PM was still not secure and she could not afford to get her party off side. This changed after the 1983 general election and Thatcher was able to negotiate the AIA without pressure from her party. The hunger strike dominated the Atkins years and prevented progress being made in Northern Ireland or with the Irish government.

Thatcher’s relationship with Atkins during these years is also interesting and sheds further light on governance during the Thatcher years. Atkins was not one of Thatcher’s closest ministers but, due to being her previous Chief Whip in opposition, was very much involved in policy relating to all areas of the Northern Ireland conflict. Despite this, Atkins was marginalised during the discussions about a devolved assembly and Thatcher, based on advice from her advisors, allowed his plans to fail. Thatcher was more willing to listen to her advisors from the beginning and this increased further during the Thatcher years as she consolidated her position and was able to marginalise her ministers further.

The next chapter looks at Jim Prior’s time as SSNI; many of the same themes continue. Robert Armstrong remained significant and his talks with Irish officials began to shape the start of the AIA. Prior faced the same difficulties as Atkins, relating to the hunger strike and a devolved Northern Ireland assembly. Unlike Atkins however, Prior was not close to Thatcher and was sent to Northern Ireland as a punishment post. His ideological differences and autonomy when governing Northern Ireland play out differently to what has been seen in this chapter during Atkins time as SSNI. The most significant difference in the Prior years is that Thatcher’s position changed after the 1983 general election landslide victory. This had implications both on governance and Northern Ireland policy.
Chapter 4: Jim Prior: Secretary of State for Northern Ireland September 1981- September 1984

During Thatcher’s first years as PM, whilst Atkins was SSNI, we saw her attitude change significantly from not wanting to be involved in Northern Ireland policy and not knowing what to do, to becoming the first PM since partition to lead a British delegation of ministers in Dublin and arrange regular meetings with the Irish Taoiseach. During these years, Thatcher was also less reluctant that Atkins to use more controversial methods, such as the channel to communicate with the PIRA during the hunger strike. Thatcher was more involved in Northern Ireland policy than is acknowledged but her refusal to compromise on the hunger strike meant that this was still on-going when Jim Prior took over from Atkins as SSNI in September 1981.

If the Atkins years showed Thatcher’s attitude towards Northern Ireland change, this chapter marks her most significant involvement in her entire premiership. It was here that the groundwork for the AIA took place and Thatcher was at the centre of this, even if not directly. During Jim Prior’s time as SSNI, many of the same themes continue from the Atkins years. Robert Armstrong remains significant and his talks with Irish officials, which he orchestrated in December 1980, begin to shape the start of the AIA. Prior also faces the same difficulties as Atkins, regarding the hunger strike and a devolved Northern Ireland assembly. Unlike Atkins, however, Prior was not close to Thatcher and was sent to Northern Ireland as a punishment posting. This is important and has implications for the Prior years. Prior’s ideological differences and autonomy when governing Northern Ireland played out differently to what had been seen in the previous chapter during Atkins’ time as SSNI. The most significant difference in the Prior years was that Thatcher’s position changed after the 1983 general election landslide victory. This had implications both for governance and Northern Ireland policy. Thatcher’s leadership style changed as her position became more consolidated. But rather than this resulting in Prior becoming more marginalised, relations between Thatcher and Prior were more positive. Thatcher as PM and her relationships with her ministers help to explain further her governance in Northern Ireland.
This chapter seeks to examine Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland policy from September 1981 until September 1984, whilst Jim Prior is SSNI. It seeks to build on the argument put forward in the previous chapter that Thatcher was more involved in Northern Ireland than is acknowledged. The main focus of the chapter is the development of Anglo-Irish relations. During the Prior years, Thatcher becomes increasingly willing to involve the Irish government in her thinking. This was a departure from her previous position, as seen in the previous chapter. It explains that when Thatcher met with the Irish Taoiseach Charles Haughey they agreed to have regular meetings in the future. During the Prior years, Anglo-Irish relations improved further. The Thatcher and FitzGerald relationship was crucial to the progress that was made during these years. In addition, Robert Armstrong, who we saw manipulate and persuade Thatcher in December 1980 into allowing him to lead the talks with Irish officials, became an even more significant player. Although we saw Thatcher become more dominant overall in regard to Northern Ireland, this chapter will show that she slowly ceded control to Armstrong. Whether she realised this or not is unknown. He continued to persuade Thatcher into going along with his thinking and ensured that a deal with the Irish was made.

Whilst Armstrong was developing key relations with his Irish counterpart Dermot Nally, Prior was getting on with running Northern Ireland in an even more autonomous way than his predecessors, because of his relationship with Thatcher. Here we see an insight into governance during the Thatcher years which is different to that which we would expect. Not only was Prior allowed to select his own ministerial team but he also took Thatcher on in the House of Commons over Northern Ireland policy. This is not what we would expect from Thatcher’s cabinet ministers from September 1981 onwards when Thatcher was seen to dominate her ministers and government, removing those individuals who were against her. The complicated Prior-Thatcher relationship helps to explain further the Prime Minister’s involvement in Northern Ireland. Thatcher became very engaged in Northern Ireland policy in order to scupper Prior’s plans for a devolved assembly. Thatcher’s attempts to kill Prior’s bill fail and this reveals that Prior’s time as SSNI and Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland policy during these years is far from what we expect. It was widely known that Thatcher and Prior did not get on but this chapter provides an insight which reveals that their relationship was more complex.
In fact, when dealing with significant issues, Thatcher and Prior worked well together on policy in Northern Ireland and at times, Thatcher very much included Prior in her discussions.

This chapter will focus on the broad research question of Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland and will discuss how she becomes significantly more involved through developing Anglo-Irish relations and by attempting to stop Prior’s legislation for a devolved assembly. However, at the same time, Thatcher is outmanoeuvred and persuaded by her Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong on what to do. This required Thatcher’s involvement but in a subtle way, revealing that she was not the one fully in control of decision making. This chapter will also address the sub-question of Thatcher as PM, examining how her leadership style changes throughout this period, especially after the 1983 general election with the role of key individuals such as Armstrong. Finally, it will focus on Thatcher’s relationships with her ministers, in this case Jim Prior, in order to learn more about Thatcher as PM and the negotiations relating to Northern Ireland.

The first section will start by examining Prior’s background as this provides context to the complicated Thatcher and Prior relationship, which helps to explain governance in Northern Ireland during these years – why Prior is exiled to Northern Ireland in September 1981 and given so much autonomy. Within this section, Thatcher’s governance throughout this period is examined and it can be seen how the cabinet, as we would expect, becomes less significant as Thatcher’s position becomes more secure. The second section will look at key actors. Although this chapter will show that the key actors remain the same as during the Atkins years – the informal cabinet committee continues and Robert Armstrong remains significant, we see the influence of Armstrong increase and his persuasion over Thatcher grow. Within this section, Anglo-Irish relations, specifically Thatcher’s relationship with the Taoiseach, is focused upon because this is where Thatcher becomes more involved. The final section of this chapter examines the Thatcher-Prior relationship. It shows how their relationship developed over time, starting with Thatcher attempting to stop Prior’s Northern Ireland Assembly bill. It also outlines opposition that Thatcher faced from within her own party. This is examined further in the next chapter when the AIA is signed.
Section I: Jim Prior, his background and the significance of the 1983 election

Prior believed he was an integral part of the Conservative party. His sense of his own grandeur within the party started after the Conservatives won the 1970 general election. Prior had told the Chief Whip Willie Whitelaw that he was unwilling to accept a junior post in government; he wanted to be in cabinet (Prior, 1986: 65-66). Since that time, Prior remained an important figure in the Conservative party. In the Heath administration (Young, 1990: 108) he was one of a recognisable inner cabinet (Thomas, 1998: 28) which was deliberately small, cohesive and involved (Prior, 1986: 66). When she became party leader, Prior openly criticised Thatcher for not following this model of cabinet government. He objected to being excluded from cabinet decisions and to Thatcher making all of the decisions herself (Prior, 1986: 66).

Thatcher and Prior both represented very different wings of the Conservative party. This difference was first seen in March 1974 when, after failing to win the general election outright, Heath and his closest allies in cabinet, Peter Carrington and Prior, suggested that a deal be done with the Liberals. Thatcher spoke out in protest and the cabinet overruled Heath, Carrington and Prior, resulting in Labour forming a government (Moore, 2013: 248). Thatcher and Prior’s ideological differences continued in the shadow cabinet, after Thatcher had been appointed party leader, beating Prior by 146 votes to 19 (Young, 1990: 98). Prior was one of only a few individuals who were willing to object to Thatcher’s policy in shadow cabinet meetings with Thatcher noting “since Prior objected on principle to ideas, he was ill-equipped to have many of his own” (Moore, 2013: 341). During the shadow cabinet years, Thatcher and Prior disagreed over a number of issues including the 1978 ‘Stepping Stones’ trade union reform and proportional representation (Moore, 2013: 391).

Thatcher ignored requests from her advisors John Hoskyns and Norman Strauss to remove Prior from the shadow cabinet (Moore, 2013: 363). She ensured that he was included in her first cabinet in 1979 for a number of reasons. First, it was believed that the key individuals from the Heath years were needed for their political ‘weight’ (Young, 1990: 102). Second, the left side of the party needed to be represented, whether Thatcher liked this or not, which meant that Prior could not be
excluded (Moore, 2013: 354). Third, he carried significant support from a variety of quarters (Young, 1990: 139). Prior had been a powerful member of the Conservative party during the years in opposition (Prior, 1986: 156). If Thatcher wanted to maintain party unity, Prior could not be marginalised.

Jim Prior’s first post in Thatcher’s government, as Secretary of State for Employment, meant that he was the only appointee to an economic post in the 1979 cabinet who was not a Thatcherite. Having previously served as the party’s front bench spokesman on Employment and Industrial relations (Prior, 1986: 171), a change from this would have meant a dramatic shift in policy (Prior, 1986: 115). Although Prior did join the important E committee of the cabinet (Thomas, 1998: 39) he was excluded from a secret Thursday breakfast club that Thatcher held with others in economic posts including Geoffrey Howe, Keith Joseph, John Nott and John Biffen. Thatcher also appointed Patrick Mayhew (who John Major later appointed as SSNI in 1992) as Prior’s deputy, reportedly noting “I’m determined to have someone with backbone in your department” (Prior, 1986: 114). This set the tone for future relations between Prior and Thatcher. Prior vastly underestimated her absolute determination to push through her ideas. In opposition, Thatcher had been careful to keep her colleagues onside so as to not frighten them off, but once elected, Thatcher used this to argue that strong government was what was needed and was determined to deliver it (Prior, 1986: 118-119). Prior came close to resigning from cabinet after Thatcher attempted to toughen up his Employment bill at the last minute, and over his public opposition to spending cuts in Spring 1981 (Moore, 2013: 526-528). But he even survived Thatcher’s cabinet re-shuffle of January 1981, remaining as Secretary of State for Employment, when she tried to shift the cabinet more in her favour (Moore, 2013: 536), but was moved to Northern Ireland in September 1981.

Although Prior and Thatcher had clashed in the shadow government and when Prior was Secretary of State for Employment, his first post in Thatcher’s government, Thatcher could not marginalise him from cabinet completely due to his significant standing within the Conservative party. The need for Thatcher to include Prior in her cabinet, despite being able to remove all her other opponents, including those who disagreed with her economic policies, explains why Prior was allowed more autonomy as SSNI than Atkins before him and Hurd who followed him. Prior
was allowed to pursue a different ideological focus – particularly economically which interested him the most – to the monetarist basis of policy on the British mainland (Interview with John Marshall). Unlike policy in the rest of the UK, Prior followed a more compassionate form of Conservatism in Northern Ireland (Interview with Ken Bloomfield). No thought was given to introducing the poll tax in Northern Ireland and grammar schools were allowed to continue (Interview with Joe Pilling). This allowed for bipartisanship to continue much more effectively in Northern Ireland (Interview with Ken Bloomfield).

Although Thatcher needed Prior in her cabinet, by September 1981 a reshuffle to Northern Ireland was imminent (Moore, 2013: 609). Thatcher’s Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong regarded the Prior move as the most important move in her cabinet reshuffle: Prior was a threat, so he needed to be moved (Thomas, 1998: 84). And by this point, Thatcher was in a strong enough position to do this. Thatcher saw the re-shuffle as an opportunity to ‘exile’ Prior to Northern Ireland and away from the centre of government (Interview with Ken Bloomfield) after the disagreements had with her over employment (Interview with Richard Needham). As Prior was moved to Northern Ireland, Atkins moved to the Foreign Office (Moore, 2013: 643).

Prior had not expected to remain Secretary of State for Employment due to his increasingly tense relations with Thatcher. But he was surprised to be completely exiled from Employment, at the centre of government, to Northern Ireland (Riddell, 1991: 10). He had anticipated a move to industry, as he had been opposition spokesman on Employment and Industrial relations while in opposition (Prior, 1986: 171). But Thatcher decided to react to a comment made by Richard Needham, one of Prior’s close friends and supporters in the House of Commons, that Prior would resign if he were offered the post of SSNI (Prior, 1986: 171). This was seen as a direct challenge to her authority and implied that Prior thought that Northern Ireland was unimportant. This, coupled with Prior’s caution over the trade unions, cemented Thatcher’s decision to move him to Northern Ireland (Moore, 2013: 644). Prior knew that the sole intention of the change was to remove him from the centre of government and to exclude him from the centre of economic affairs (Prior, 1986: 171). He made it clear that he would have preferred a job around Whitehall (Interview with David Brooker) as this would have allowed him to remain involved
in the main economic deliberation in the cabinet and the cabinet committees, which was what really interested him and where he could make a difference (Interview with Ken Bloomfield).

When Prior heard that Thatcher planned to shift him from Employment to Northern Ireland he resisted, even going as far as to give the Daily Mail an interview titled ‘I’ll fight like hell’ (Moore, 2013: 643). Prior’s experience and standing within the Conservative party meant that he was not going to accept a position in government, especially a position like SSNI, unless he had some sort of discretion. He was a political heavyweight, more so than Humphrey Atkins, and Thatcher could not afford to completely lose the support of Prior’s wing of the Conservative party at this stage. Therefore, she gave Prior a free hand in his new job and promised him full support, along with that of Willie Whitelaw (Prior, 1986: 172). This placed Prior in a strong position to shape his role and earn concessions from Thatcher. In this unique situation, while he may have taken a role that he did desire and accepted a move away from the centre of government and economic policy in particular, he would nonetheless be able to influence policy in his jurisdiction with an unprecedented level of autonomy.

Prior’s tenure as SSNI: unprecedented autonomy

Jim Prior became SSNI in September 1981, after taking over from Humphrey Atkins. He was always going to be very different from his predecessor due to his ideological position which, was at odds with Thatcher and her government and the discretion and autonomy that Thatcher awarded him. Prior had more scope for manoeuvre than Atkins and this helped to clarify decision-making in Northern Ireland (Moore, 2013: 615) against a backdrop of policy which had lacked direction for the first months of Thatcher’s period in office (Moore, 2013: 591).

After the 1983 general election, with Thatcher’s position even more secure, opponents such as Prior were no longer seen as a credible threat. This allowed Thatcher to grant Prior an even larger mandate domestically, on issues in which she had no interest. But it also meant that she no longer had to appease him. This became
more evident towards the end of the Prior years. In addition, Thatcher was able to use her large majority in the House of Commons to dominate the issue of Northern Ireland and dominate bipartisanship due to the weak Labour opposition. This autonomy was not however, unlimited in all spheres of policy making. Although Prior had freedom domestically, he lost this freedom as soon as the issue became international. Throughout the period, a pattern began to emerge of broader concerns relating to the Foreign Office and Anglo-Irish relations and, therefore, Prior is less involved.

Prior had the bargaining tools in order to persuade Thatcher to give him an unprecedented amount of freedom and independence in the NIO (Young, 1990: 467). This included appointing his own team and making decisions the way that he saw fit (Bloomfield, 2007: 54). Never before had a minister in Thatcher’s government had the power to appoint their own staff (Prior, 1986: 190). He used this ‘free hand’ to appoint ministers who shared his vision for Northern Ireland, with Lord Grey Gowrie being the most sympathetic to the Irish government (Interview with George Fergusson). Gowrie was a Southern Irish Protestant with a great knowledge of the History of Ireland and a real sympathy for the situation (Prior, 1986: 179). Prior had previously worked with Lord Gowrie who served as his deputy in the Department for Employment (Moore, 2013: 508). Ian Gow, Thatcher’s Parliamentary Private Secretary, tried to convince her to remove Gowrie from the NIO, arguing “I think that the present combination of Prior and Gowrie is doing great damage to Ulster” (THCR 2/6/2/117 part 3 f8) but Thatcher declined. Prior also requested to have the ultra-Wet junior minister Nick Scott in his team. Scott was another Thatcher rebel, like Prior, who had been banished to the backbenches in 1975 when Thatcher became leader of the party. Prior also selected Fred Silvester to continue to be his Parliamentary Private Secretary. Prior believed Silvester was one of the cleverest and most astute members of the House of Commons. Finally, Prior asked to keep Adam Butler, John Patten and David Mitchell, who were already serving in the NIO (Prior, 1986: 190). Prior selected these individuals not as a swipe to Thatcher, to put her opponents into governmental positions, but to build up the best team possible. Prior commented that in September 1981 the Northern Ireland department had the strongest ministerial team since 1972 when direct rule was introduced (Prior, 1986: 190). Prior was happy to allow his ministers to get on with
their relevant local areas in Northern Ireland to allow him to address the bigger issues (Mitchell, 2008: 170). Prior was determined that even though he had been sent to Northern Ireland against his wishes, he was going to make the most of it and do the best job possible.

In addition, in an attempt to remain at the centre of government and the heart of economic policy which most interested Prior, he demanded to remain on the influential cabinet E committee (Moore, 2013: 644). This was agreed. Later however, this Economic Strategy committee lost importance as it was denied all consideration of nationalised pay and industries (Prior, 1986: 172). Prior might have remained on the committee but the it changed and he was moved further away from the centre of economic policymaking.

Nevertheless, the freedom and concessions awarded to Prior in September 1981 were in direct contrast to the position he was in when Thatcher selected her cabinet in 1979. Then, when Prior was appointed Secretary of State for Employment, he asked for Barney Hayhoe, his deputy during the opposition years, to accompany him. Thatcher refused and said that she needed Hayhoe to go to Northern Ireland as he was Catholic (Prior, 1986: 113); a Catholic minister was always needed in the Northern Ireland team.

Throughout Prior’s time as SSNI, the selection of his ministerial team remained in his control. He was able to appoint his House of Commons ally Richard Needham as his Parliamentary Private Secretary on 1st July 1983 (Needham, 1998: 17). Similarly, when Ian Gow (Thatcher’s Parliamentary Private Secretary) wrote to Thatcher in August 1982 suggesting which ministers might be moved in the next cabinet re-shuffle, the NIO has only one comment next to it; it notes that John Patten would like a change. There are no suggestions made for any other ministers to move either in or out of the Northern Ireland department (THCR 2/7/3/1 f29) – unlike for many other departments – further confirming Prior’s influence over his team.

Prior used his position and autonomy in Northern Ireland not just to maintain control over the selection of his ministerial team, but also over his own position. In the 1983 cabinet reshuffle, Prior made it known to Thatcher that he wanted to remain in his role as SSNI so that he could complete a term of three years (Prior, 1986: 224). Thatcher accepted his request and allowed him to remain in Northern Ireland. Prior
even survived after the escape of Republican prisoners from the Maze prison on 25th September 1983. Thatcher described the escape as "even worse than one thought" (PREM19/1069 f236) and faced calls from the Unionists to sack Prior. She chose not to sack him though; Thatcher did not want him moved to another cabinet position, and he was too much of an influential member of the Conservative party not to be in cabinet at all (Interview with David Brooker).

*Prior’s tenure as SSNI comes to an end*

When Prior left the cabinet in September 1984, he had completed the three-year term that he had wanted (Prior, 1986: 224). He believed three years was necessary to allow him the time to make a difference, followed by another move into one of the major departments of State. It was, however, made clear to Prior by Thatcher that she had no intention of offering him any such posts. Prior was disappointed that Thatcher had not offered him Trade and Industry in the autumn of 1983, having instead appointed Norman Tebbit (Prior, 1986: 238). Prior’s willingness to move to the post of Trade and Industry suggest that perhaps his motives for wanting to remain in Northern Ireland for three years were more about remaining in cabinet rather than any desire to remain in the specific post of SSNI. After the 1983 general election, Thatcher was in an extremely strong position. Prior knew that he was safe as a cabinet minister so long as he remained in Northern Ireland, but also that Thatcher would not let him stay there forever. Prior therefore accepted a position at the General Electric Company (GEC) when they approached him in the Spring of 1984, with the intention of starting the position once his three years in Northern Ireland were up.

In the months leading up to Prior’s exit from government, there was considerable pressure placed upon Thatcher, by members of the Conservative party, to try to change her mind and fight to keep Prior in her cabinet but Thatcher made no attempt though to convince Prior to stay (Prior, 1986: 242). It gave Thatcher a way out as it meant that Prior was neither demoted nor promoted from his position as SSNI. Prior was able to leave Thatcher’s cabinet and government without losing his strong standing within the Conservative party and the House of Commons.
Prior’s tenure as SSNI: the significance of the 1983 general election

During the Prior years, it was not an event in Northern Ireland which changed the political landscape but an event on the mainland – the 1983 general election. That year marked a critical point in Thatcher’s premiership as Prime Minister and saw British government change dramatically. Thatcher used the election result to establish a period of dominance within the cabinet and party. But even before Thatcher became the first Conservative Prime Minister since Salisbury to win two general elections in a row, she was exerting dominance over her government ministers. As early as the summer of 1982, Thatcher was relishing winning battles both home and abroad, claiming during the Conservative party conference in October 1982 that “already we have done more...than any previous Conservative government” (8/10/82 Conservative party conference speech). David Goodall, who worked in the Cabinet Office at the time and was instrumental in the AIA, observed in cabinet in 1982 that “Mrs Thatcher’s authority seemed absolute” (Goodall in Moore, 2015: 4).

The winning of a successive general election, in 1983 after 1979, was an opportunity for her to change the structure and ideology of her cabinet and to demand more loyalty from those she retained, who had previously been unsupportive of her ideas. Thatcher had already started to use cabinet re-shuffles as a means to exercise power over the whole government (Thatcher, 1993: 25), creating a cabinet of supporters and like-minded individuals to strengthen her position (Moore, 2013: 645). With Thatcher secure, opponents such as Jim Prior were no longer seen as a credible threat. In the space of four years, Thatcher had transformed her cabinet – from one which featured only two individuals who had voted for her in the secret ballot for the leadership election (Young, 1990: 138) and filled with those on the left of the Conservative party, who had worked together in the shadow cabinet to prevent her from pursuing her more extreme ideas (Prior, 1986: 114) – to one dominated by supporters. In August 1982 Ian Gow told Thatcher that, as a worst case scenario, she had a majority of 12 to 10 in her favour in cabinet, her strongest position so far, even if not as strong as Thatcher would have liked (THCR 2/7/3/1 f29).
Thatcher used the June 1983 cabinet re-shuffle to great effect, placing her opponents in insignificant posts. Prior however, remained in Northern Ireland at his request. An archive from the time notes “Jim Prior has said he wants to stay at NIO which helps” (THCR 1/11/15 f27). Many others remained in similar positions, suggesting that Thatcher was not actually doing Prior a favour by letting him stay. George Younger and Nicholas Edwards remained in their positions of Secretary of State for Scotland and Wales, while Lord Halisham and Michael Heseltine both remained in their respective positions of Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Defence (THCR 1/11/15 f6). Norman Tebbit also remained in Employment to help deal with the unions (THCR 1/11/15 f31).

After the 1983 general election, there is a change in Thatcher’s style of government. Having proved herself as leader and Prime Minister, she could forge ahead with her policies and dominant style of government without needing to worry about the party or constraints that she had previously faced (Moore, 2015: 5). She used this opportunity to increase the number of her own team of advisors in the Number 10 Policy Unit, the purpose of which was to serve Thatcher and provide advice to only her, rather than the whole cabinet (Prior, 1986: 137). In addition, on the issue of Northern Ireland, British and Irish civil servants Robert Armstrong and Dermot Nally become even more significant in developing new policy options, which resulted in the further marginalisation of the cabinet (Dixon and Kane, 2014: 54).

The number and length of cabinet meetings declined rapidly throughout the Thatcher years and the meetings that did happen generally involved Thatcher telling her ministers what would happen (Hennessy, 1986: 99). Northern Ireland rarely featured in cabinet, unless the cabinet needed to be briefed on a security issue. In 1983, Northern Ireland only appeared on the agenda of cabinet meetings four times out of the total thirty-eight meetings. In 1984 it appeared on six occasions, four of which were during the time Prior was SSNI. On the rare occasions that Northern Ireland was discussed in cabinet, ministers were given the impression that a discussion was taking place but this was not the case; the decision had already been taken. The important decisions were hidden from cabinet. Thatcher would, instead, get the minister, Jim Prior, to prepare a paper for her to see. The civil servant would present the paper and the options which went with it (Hennessy, 1986: 98). The
minister and his team would then defend the paper against Thatcher and her officials from the Cabinet Office, Policy Unit, and Private Office. If the paper survived, Thatcher would support it in cabinet (Thomas, 1998: 38). This also played a part in explaining the autonomy that Prior had in Northern Ireland. If decisions were not deemed important enough to reach Thatcher or be discussed in cabinet, Prior could make them. At this time, there was not an official Northern Ireland cabinet committee either but there was a core group of individuals who were responsible for making decisions in Northern Ireland, of which Prior was part.

Decisions only featured in cabinet when an issue needed widespread support, such as the creation of a Northern Ireland assembly on 1st April 1982. But this was rare. On the few occasions that Northern Ireland reached the cabinet, the agenda had already been determined by Thatcher and Prior and the cabinet were guided into arriving at the outcome they wanted. Cabinet meetings and discussion were increasingly manipulated and controlled, but perhaps this was necessary due to the controversial nature of the Northern Ireland conflict. Thatcher’s Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong would have wanted to prevent the cabinet from making rash decisions against Sinn Fein or from supporting measures that were favoured too strongly by the unionists.

Therefore, when Northern Ireland was discussed in cabinet on 22nd December 1983, in relation to the possibility of proscribing Sinn Fein, it appears, on the face of it, that Northern Ireland was being discussed as freely as in April 1982 when the Northern Ireland assembly was debated. But again, this was not the case. The archival documents, from the days leading up to the cabinet meeting, reveal that the decision had been made the day before in an informal cabinet committee, between Thatcher, Prior and Armstrong. They decided not to proscribe (ban) Sinn Fein from future elections because of the IRA Knightsbridge bomb on 17th December. Thatcher had previously asked Prior, as SSNI, and Leon Brittan, Home Secretary, for their views on proscription (PREM19/1069 f53). They concluded that the British government should only proscribe Sinn Fein if the Irish government chose to, as they, the British, would have to follow suit (PREM19/1069 f52). Armstrong met with the Secretary of the Irish government to confirm this view (PREM19/1069 f48) and Prior met with the Irish Foreign Minister Peter Barry who advised Prior that the Irish cabinet ministers were overwhelmingly against
proscribing Sinn Fein (PREM19/1069 f18). From the British perspective, the decision was made. Therefore, the day before the cabinet meeting on 22nd December 1983, Thatcher, Armstrong and Prior met to ensure that there was no opportunity for cabinet disagreement. Armstrong instructed Thatcher to “guide the cabinet” (PREM19/1069 f18).

In the cabinet meeting on 22nd December, both Thatcher and Prior presented arguments to the cabinet in favour of proscribing Sinn Fein but then put forward their most convincing reasons as to why they should not, which is the outcome that Thatcher and Prior both wanted. Thatcher told her cabinet that the Irish cabinet was reluctant to proscribe Sinn Fein and had postponed their decision to do so (CAB 128/76 f366). Prior told the cabinet that the majority of people in Northern Ireland were against proscription, with the exception of Ian Paisley, the leader of the DUP. John Hume thought proscription would damage his SDLP party (CAB 128/76 f366). Prior also warned the cabinet that if they chose to support proscription, that this would not prevent Sinn Fein from standing in EU elections and that the decision would be difficult to defend in the USA where it would be seen as an attack on democracy or an attempt to “muzzle legitimate Irish representatives”. The Home Secretary Leon Brittan also agreed with Prior that, on balance, proscription would be unhelpful as it would not help to fight terrorism and could lead to widespread civil disobedience (CAB 128/76 f366). Thatcher concluded the cabinet meeting by confirming that further, and possibly new, thought needed to be given to the Irish question in light of recent events and that no decision about whether to proscribe Provisional Sinn Fein had been made (CAB 128/76 f366); this, despite the fact that it had been by Thatcher, Prior and Armstrong.

Not only was the cabinet manipulated on some issues, but on others it is not fully informed nor given the opportunity to discuss them. In the same cabinet meeting on 22nd December 1983, the issue of whether joint sovereignty over policing could be considered is simply slipped into the cabinet meeting without any discussion, Prior announcing that joint measures against terrorism should be taken with the Irish Republic (CAB 128/76 f366). The cabinet did not get the opportunity to discuss this and the cabinet was not given any background information. This is despite the issue of joint sovereignty having been the main topic of discussion between Thatcher, Prior, Geoffrey Howe (Foreign Secretary) and Robert Armstrong.
(Thatcher’s cabinet secretary) almost continuously for the previous two months and talks had been taking place between senior civil servants in the UK and Ireland.

There are occasions however, when the cabinet are informed about important developments in order to enlist their support and a genuine discussion is allowed to follow. In February 1984 cabinet approval was needed due to a “major development in the government’s position on the Irish question” (CAB 128/80/4). Prior used the cabinet meeting on 16th February 1984 to extensively brief the cabinet about Anglo-Irish talks which had been taking place between himself and Peter Barry, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong and his Irish counterpart Dermot Nally. Prior sought the cabinet’s permission to continue an “informal, confidential and a strictly exploratory approach” with Barry and Nally in order to discuss the Irish initiative and ways forward. The intention was to sound out the Irish position, without any commitment from either side, and send a signal to the Irish Taoiseach that the British government was thinking constructively about the problem in advance of the Forum for a New Ireland’s report. Prior explained that interference at ministerial level, rather than just civil servant level, was needed to fully and officially gauge Irish opinion on such proposals. Prior promised the cabinet, during the meeting, that they would be “fully consulted” before any detailed and firm proposals were put to the Irish government (CAB 128/80/4). Prior kept his word and the cabinet were brought up to date again in the 28th June 1984 cabinet meeting. On this occasion however, when the cabinet were asked to authorise the secret exploratory discussions to continue, they were not given the opportunity to refuse or debate. Thatcher simply told the cabinet that their authorisation would be “appropriate” because further talks were necessary to establish a clearer idea of the Irish position and viability of such an agreement (CAB 128/80/6).

Armstrong warned Thatcher in December 1983 that if a new direction of policy was decided at the planned Chequers meeting in January 1984, between a small group of ministers and senior officials, that more individuals in the government would need informing to allow them to flesh out the policy. In addition, cabinet approval would be required (PREM19/1069 f20). A cabinet meeting was therefore, scheduled for 16th February 1984 to allow Prior to inform the cabinet about discussions which had taken place between himself, Thatcher and Geoffrey Howe, the Foreign Secretary, on new considerations to the Irish question at Chequers
in January 1984 (CAB 128/80/4). This included the possibility of joint policing in specific areas along both sides of the border and the ‘harmonisation’ of law enforcement procedures between the North and the Republic. Prior told the cabinet that Thatcher, Howe and himself would only agree to such measures if Dublin gave Britain an indication that the Republic would, in return, formally recognise the continuing existence of the union (at least for the considerable future) by waiving articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution which lay a territorial claim on Northern Ireland (CAB 128/80/4). Prior was very careful that the words ‘joint sovereignty’ were not presented to the cabinet. Instead, discussions about co-operation from the Republic in policing in the North were emphasised (CAB 128/80/4).

The cabinet were allocated time to freely express their reservations. This included the logistics of the Irish Republic abandoning their claim on Northern Ireland and the need for a referendum and international implications, especially for Anglo American relations. The cabinet did primarily support Prior, stating that it would be wrong to ignore the possibilities for change and that contacts with the Irish government were desirable and should not be deterred by fierce unionist hostility. The cabinet authorised the secret, explorative talks to continue (CAB 128/80/4).

This is what we would expect from cabinet and government management during the Thatcher years. Although on this occasion the cabinet were given the opportunity to give their opinion, the decision had already been made by Thatcher, Prior, Howe and Armstrong. The cabinet were simply agreeing for something (secret talks) to continue which had already started and were going to continue. Nevertheless, their rubber stamp of approval was needed, due to the sensitivity and controversy surrounding the issue. Therefore, cabinet is still used. It also re-iterates that Prior remains at the forefront of policy making, by being included in the January Chequers meeting, and he was being allowed to involve himself, at ministerial level, in the crucial talks with the Irish government for the first time. This is definitely a change from earlier in Prior’s time as SSNI when relations between him and Thatcher were much less amicable, especially during the time of the Northern Ireland Assembly bill. The extensive planning that took place during the Thatcher years when developing even the smallest detail of policy in Northern Ireland, and the small group of people that were involved but the large scale implication that any
decision could have, could also go some way to explaining O’Leary’s claim that policy during the Thatcher years moved at a very slow pace (O’Leary, 1997).

The cabinet meeting in June 1984, in which the cabinet are briefed about the progress of the Nally talks, also saw Thatcher more committed to policy in Northern Ireland in a way that had not been seen before. The Prior years saw Thatcher become significantly more involved, and invested, in the outcome in Northern Ireland. Thatcher told the cabinet on 28th June 1984 that the British government must “look further ahead in Ireland” than ever before. “Ten thousand British soldiers could not be left in Northern Ireland forever, nor could the very considerable cost of subsidising the Province be sustained, without continuing the search for possible forward movement” (CAB 128/80/6). Thatcher was often accused of lacking commitment to Northern Ireland but at this point in time we saw her engage fully with the importance of the situation and commit herself to doing something about it.

Section II: Key actors

Rather than using the cabinet, the informal cabinet committee for Northern Ireland, which started during Atkins’ time as SSNI, remained under Prior, was where most of the discussion on Northern Ireland took place. This comprised of Thatcher, Jim Prior, Geoffrey Howe (Foreign Secretary), Robert Armstrong (Cabinet Secretary) and when necessary Leon Brittan (Home Secretary) and John Biffen (The Lord Privy Seal). After the 1983 general election, Northern Ireland policy, by and large, was determined in the informal cabinet committee. Prior was placed directly at the centre of proceedings. This however was not the case until the beginning of 1983, when relations between Prior and Thatcher had improved after the Northern Ireland assembly bill. Even before 1983, including during the Atkins years, when Northern Ireland was occasionally discussed in cabinet, it was a point of information, to bring the cabinet up to date with an issue at the end of a cabinet meeting rather than to allow real discussion within cabinet on the issues. The real decisions were made in advance in the smaller cabinet committee.

In the early years of Prior’s time as SSNI, there were times when Prior was excluded from the small group which was at the heart of policy making in Northern
Ireland. Thatcher alienated Prior after her annoyance at not being able to kill off Prior’s Northern Ireland assembly bill in the House of Commons. Prior’s ability to influence policy was very much dependent upon his relationship with Thatcher. At this point in time relations were strained so Prior was excluded. By October 1983 however, relations were much better and therefore Prior was placed at the centre of policy making alongside Robert Armstrong and Geoffrey Howe. He was even authorised by Thatcher to meet with both John Hume from the SDLP and the Irish Foreign minister Peter Barry to discuss how to move the Northern Ireland situation forward.

In December 1982 when Thatcher needed to respond to the Greater London Council, inviting members of Provisional Sinn Fein to visit London, Thatcher turned to Willie Whitelaw, the Home Secretary, to deal with it and Prior was not consulted. As Home Secretary you would expect Whitelaw to be in charge of dealing with this but it would also be expected that Prior would be involved as well in deciding what to do. Whitelaw announced to the cabinet on 9th December 1982 that he had decided to serve an exclusion order on members of Provisional Sinn Fein, under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, to prevent them from being able to visit London (CAB 128/74 f265). This confirms that other departments in government and key cabinet ministers, such as Whitelaw, continued to have an important involvement in Northern Ireland policy during the Prior years, as they did under Atkins. Although this would have been expected, due to the spectrum of issues that Northern Ireland covers and the need to involve the Home Office and Foreign Office, it is not expected that Prior would be powerless over issues which affect his department as well as others’.

Evidence of an informal Northern Ireland cabinet committee can be seen clearly in October 1983 when Thatcher was required to respond to the Irish initiative and package outlined by Michael Lillis, Head of the Anglo-Irish division in the Irish department of Foreign Affairs, about a possible change in the Irish government’s attitude to the constitutional issue surrounding Northern Ireland (PREM19/1069 f157). Robert Armstrong, the Cabinet Secretary, advised Thatcher that she should meet with Prior and the Foreign Secretary, Geoffrey Howe on 4th November, three days before the 7th November Anglo-Irish summit meeting, to discuss what the implications would be of such an initiative. Armstrong urged Thatcher to discuss
this urgently but only with a very small group of officials from the NIO, Foreign Office and Cabinet office (PREM19/1069 f228). This intentionally small group of individuals involved with developing policy is a reflection of Thatcher’s style of government, her consolidation of her position and her ability to control policy even more after winning the 1983 general election.

When Prior wrote to Thatcher on the 19\textsuperscript{th} December, outlining the NIO’s position on the proscription of Sinn Fein, Prior referred to a ministerial meeting held between himself, Thatcher, Brittan, John Biffen (The Lord Privy Seal) and the Chief Whip. The minutes from the meeting are forwarded to the NIO, the Foreign Office, the Lord Privy Seal’s Office, the Law officer’s department, Chief Whip’s Office and the Cabinet Office, confirming the number of departments in government involved (PREM19/1069 f57). These are the same departments that were involved in the informal cabinet committee for Northern Ireland during Humphrey Atkins’ time as SSNI, suggesting that the same cabinet committee, as under Atkins, continued under Prior. In December 1983 Armstrong warned Thatcher however, that if there was some consensus, once the cabinet were informed about changing the direction of policy, the government would need to be informed and officials would need to flesh out the policy “\textit{this will mean widening the very restricted circle of people who have been involved so far}”. (PREM19/1069 f20) beyond that of him, Thatcher, Prior and Howe alongside their small group of civil servants.

Prior as Northern Ireland Secretary of State and Howe as Foreign Secretary were at the very heart of discussions relating to the direction of policy in Northern Ireland. Thatcher may not have personally liked Prior and did give him the post of SSNI in September 1981 to move him away from central Whitehall, but she was not alienating him from key decisions and discussions at this stage in 1983. This was very different to relations between Prior and Thatcher and the wider Conservative government previously. This also challenges what we thought about how Thatcher dealt with Northern Ireland at this time. These discussions, about the Irish initiative, are the start of talks that lead up to the AIA of 1985. It is widely thought that Thatcher alienated her cabinet ministers when discussing Anglo-Irish relations and just dealt directly with the Irish Taoiseach and her cabinet secretary Robert Armstrong when making decisions. At this stage, in November 1983, this is simply not an accurate reflection of the situation. Thatcher may have been preparing to meet with the
Taoiseach for a summit meeting on 7th November and Robert Armstrong was also working very closely with his Irish counterpart Dermot Nally on the Irish ideas but Jim Prior and Geoffrey Howe were still very much involved in the policy and thinking towards Northern Ireland. Prior might not have been the individual who was sat down negotiating, but he was kept up to date with all correspondence and met with Thatcher to discuss how she should react in the summit meeting. Jim Prior was also tasked with meeting John Hume and Peter Barry to discuss the possible changes to the Irish constitution on 19th October 1983. Meetings with such key individuals, to discuss these problems, reveal how involved Prior was at this point in 1983 and how significant the cabinet committee was too.

*Robert Armstrong: more important than Jim Prior?*

The most significant Northern Ireland policy during the Prior years however, was not led by Prior but instead by Robert Armstrong (Downing Street Cabinet Secretary) and his Irish counterpart Dermot Nally. This period is the most crucial when examining Anglo-Irish relations because it provides the basis for the AIA which was signed in November 1985. The talks leading up to the AIA, led by Armstrong and Nally, can be traced back to September 1983 after Peter Lillis (Head of the Anglo-Irish division in the Irish department of Foreign Affairs) put forward his package of suggestions on how to move the situation in Northern Ireland forward. This reveals that the talks leading up to the AIA began much earlier than is currently believed, as seen in the previous chapter.

Armstrong and Nally were instrumental in Northern Ireland policy, relating to the Anglo-Irish relations, both during the Prior years and afterwards in the build up to the AIA. Their talks officially began after the November 1983 summit meeting between Margaret Thatcher and the Irish Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald at Chequers. One of the reasons that the talks were so successful however, was due to the relationship between the two men. They first met when they were both appointed to chair the Anglo-Irish Steering committee in November 1981, after a meeting between Thatcher and the Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald (PREM19/509 f28). This was done purposefully to remove the Northern Ireland problem from both the Foreign
Office and NIO. It therefore allowed more neutral individuals, in the form of civil servants, to build a relationship away from political and departmental interferences, which was based on trust. It was hoped that this committee would encourage contacts between the two governments, within a council framework, both at ministerial and official level (THCR 5/1/1E/47 f4). This sparked a new phase in Anglo-Irish relations and was the start of the Robert Armstrong and Dermot Nally relationship, which had long term consequences.

The process of improving Anglo-Irish relations had originally begun during the Humphrey Atkins period, when Thatcher led a delegation to Dublin in May 1980 and met with the Taoiseach Charles Haughey to discuss the relationship between the UK, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This became known as the 1981 Thatcher Haughey initiative. This resulted in a number of significant joint studies reports being produced which outlined suggestions for the new institutional arrangements, security matters, economic cooperation and most importantly mutual understanding. The phrase ‘the totality of relationships between these islands’ was established during the Atkins years. During the Prior years, this was put into practice. The joint studies reports, during the Atkins years, established the Steering committee of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council (AIIC) which Armstrong and Nally chaired. It was a series of intergovernmental contacts at various levels, and the non-governmental Anglo-Irish Encounter, primarily concerned with cultural and social issues. This provided a starting point for the dramatic improvement in Anglo-Irish relations which took place during the Prior years and paved the way for the Armstrong and Nally relationship to develop into talks and their partnership become established. This was imperative during the Prior years. It was thought that a new approach was needed from the British government before the situation became even worse after two of the hunger strikers were elected to the Irish Dail (Parliament), leading to an increase in IRA support.

During this time, the New Ireland Forum was also established by the FitzGerald government and sat from May 1983 to May 1984. It was established partly in response to the rise of Sinn Féin following the hunger strikes. Although Thatcher ruled out all three options suggested by the report when it was published in May 1984 “the unified Ireland was one solution - that is out. A second solution was a confederation of the two States - that is out. A third solution was joint authority
that is out”, the report was very influential on the AIA which included much of the New Ireland Forum Reports substance and language.

The AIIC first met in January 1982 and met on twenty occasions between then and November 1983. Although security matters were not discussed in the meetings, progress was made in the cooperation in the fields of education, sport and youth. Topics discussed included language questions, Kinsale Gas, Fisheries, youth matters and local government (THCR 5/1/1E/47 f4). The real success was the Nally and Armstrong partnership which formed what was undoubtedly one of the most effective partnerships in the history of Anglo-Irish relations, as the two senior civil servants worked intensively together. This also marked the start of Armstrong’s crucial involvement in policy in Northern Ireland.

As Anglo-Irish relations started to significantly improve in September 1983, Thatcher engaged in the process and tried to improve the situation in Northern Ireland by developing Anglo-Irish relations. As expected, Thatcher was cautious about suggestions put forward by the Irish government but for the first time we saw her not dismissing ideas outright. Instead, she listened to Armstrong’s advice. By this point in 1983, Thatcher was in a much stronger position after the general election and was secure enough within her party that she could engage in meaningful talks with the Irish government about the future of Northern Ireland without fear of repercussions from her cabinet or party. Thatcher was also aware that she would be Prime Minister for another few years. This allowed her to feel free to exert her opinion over these issues towards the Irish government, and not be rushed into making any decisions so early into her second term. After winning a second general election, and the Falklands war, she had the time to engage more in international affairs. This was evident in the increasing number meetings she had with the Irish Taoiseach.

This also had implications for Jim Prior who was no longer needed to the same extent when Northern Ireland became an international issue. Thatcher could either deal with the issue herself or she could use her trusted civil servants, such as Robert Armstrong. Prior was also no longer seen as a threat to Thatcher in government; she did not need to appease him. She did not need to involve him in every decision when meeting with the Irish government and she could get away with
governing in a much more bi-lateral way, using civil servants. Prior did himself conduct talks later in 1984 with Nally but it was Armstrong who was at the centre of them.

As Anglo-Irish relations started to significantly improve in September 1983, other civil servants became important too. Michael Lillis, Deputy Secretary and Head of the Anglo-Irish division in the Irish department of Foreign Affairs, asked to discuss, with British officials, a possible change in the Irish government’s attitude to the constitutional issue surrounding Northern Ireland before the planned Anglo-Irish summit meeting at Chequers on 7th November between Thatcher and FitzGerald. Michael Lillis was extremely close to the Irish Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald and had previously been his diplomatic advisor. David Goodall, who worked in the Cabinet Office and was a senior British diplomat, visited Dublin to discuss the Joint Studies Action Check list, in preparation for the summit meeting, and met with Michael Lillis. Lillis told Goodall that his ideas were tentative, originating from a discussion in August 1983 with John Hume, the leader of the SDLP. They were a “a ‘concession’ for Joint Sovereignty in the security area in Northern Ireland...Not Brits out, but Irish in” and that although they were not yet the views of the Irish government, the Taoiseach was prepared to back them. Lillis reported that the general thinking from the SDLP was that they would stop seeking the unification of Ireland in exchange for participation, from the South, in the policing and judicial processes in Northern Ireland. They would also want to play a full part in the political life of Northern Ireland; including an acceptance of a majority (Unionist) devolved government. Lillis suggested that this could be guaranteed to the British through a referendum in Ireland to remove the territorial articles from the Irish constitution. Lillis’ suggestions, which represented the Irish and FitzGerald’s views, can be summarised into three main ideas. Firstly, a change to the Irish constitution, acknowledging that Northern Ireland was, and would remain, part of the UK. Secondly, that the South would play a role in policing and justice in Northern Ireland. Hume and Barry wanted to see some form of joint authority in law and order matters, eventually extending to separate police forces in minority strongholds in Northern Ireland that would be responsible to the Irish government. Thirdly, that a Stormont government would be set up, not joint sovereignty.
Goodall briefed Robert Armstrong on the meeting who then, in turn, briefed Thatcher on 21st September. Armstrong warned Thatcher that if the British government failed to consider the proposals that it could be very damaging because it would appear that they had ignored the possibility of an approach from the Irish government that had gone further than they ever had gone in the past to meet the Unionist concerns (PREM19/1069 f245). Armstrong asked Goodall to acquire further details from Lillis and Thatcher, rather than rejecting the proposal outright. He also requested a report on Goodall’s next discussion and a further assessment of the implications of the Irish suggestions (PREM19/1069 f243). On the 3rd October, Thatcher told Armstrong “we will explore further - but no good will come of it”. Therefore, despite Thatcher having grave doubts about the viability of Lillis’ suggestions she is not, at this stage, prepared to dismiss them outright. Thatcher agrees to Armstrong’s suggestions that she should listen to FitzGerald, during the November Anglo-Irish summit, about the proposals put forward by Lillis even though on the 7th October Thatcher told Armstrong that she believed that the proposals would lead to a higher level of violence and that the joint security forces in Northern Ireland would lead to too many potential problems (PREM19/1069 f218).

The influence that Armstrong had at this time, and his significant role in these talks, does suggest that Prior was not always at the heart of what was going on in Northern Ireland policy, especially when the issue is international. This was not however, the case. Prior was not alienated as much as the Armstrong and Nally talks suggest. Thatcher charges him with the task of finding out what the political parties in Northern Ireland want, rather than Dublin. This would support the view that Prior remains significantly autonomous when it comes to dealing with domestic political issues relating to Northern Ireland but not when it comes to dealing with international issues such as the Irish government. This was left to either Thatcher or the Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe, as we would expect.

Thatcher sent Prior and his Ministers of State for Northern Ireland, Nick Scott and Adam Butler, to meet with John Hume in secret on the 7th October. The aim of the discussion was to consider ways to move the situation in Northern Ireland forward along the lines that Michael Lillis, deputy secretary at the Department of Foreign Affairs in Ireland, had proposed. Prior immediately reported back to
Thatcher that Hume’s suggestions differed from Lillis’ as the SDLP no longer favoured more Irish involvement in Northern Ireland and joint sovereignty, describing the changes to the Irish constitution as “fanciful”. Hume instead offered to support joint sovereignty with regards to policing. Prior reported to Thatcher that he “made it plain” to Hume that it was not helpful to have his ideas misrepresented to the British from the South, displaying irritation about the Lillis talks. Prior also told Thatcher that he informed Hume that the British were willing to adopt a flexible and imaginative approach to policing with the South but “would not contemplate joint sovereignty”. Thatcher replied to Prior observing that “Hume is not party to the ideas that were earlier described to us” (PREM19/1069 f212) but does not annotate anything else, suggesting that she is not completely against considering the ideas put forward by Prior about policing. Prior continued to have a significant role, meeting with Peter Barry (Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs) to discuss this further on 19th October before meeting again with Thatcher and Howe to report that Barry had said that amendments to the Irish constitution were “not practicable”.

Although Prior remains involved in policy and talks with the Northern Ireland parties, he does not have the power of persuasion over Thatcher that Armstrong does or the ability to make suggestions which she vehemently opposes. Armstrong warned Thatcher that the demands made by the SDLP, to Prior, would result in far reaching concessions from the British in the law and order field (PREM19/1069 f157). He also persuaded Thatcher that the constitutional crusade against articles 2 and 3 should no longer be the top constitutional priority of the British government due to the long political history in the territorial provisions in the Irish constitution and because the Irish had recently held a referendum to change the Constitution on the issue of abortion (PREM19/1069 f157). Armstrong steered Thatcher into considering alternatives.

In the build up to the Anglo-Irish summit meeting between Thatcher and FitzGerald in November 1983, Armstrong warned Thatcher that “it would be premature to dismiss Dr Fitzgerald's ideas out of hand”. This is in response to Thatcher’s pessimistic approach to meeting with FitzGerald, telling Armstrong that “the Irish ideas are imprecise and vary significantly according to who is presenting them” (PREM19/1069 f157). Despite this, Armstrong advised Thatcher that there might be parts of the Irish imitative “which it might be possible to turn to British
advantage both internationally (e.g. vis-a-vis the US) and domestically if an Irish government were seen to have abandoned the Republic’s traditional insistence on territorial unification”. He told Thatcher that she should listen “sympathetically” to FitzGerald’s ideas, including those outlined in the Lillis package, whilst making it clear that there can be “no question” of joint sovereignty. Instead, limited arrangements of a practical nature might be possible. Armstrong urged Thatcher to receive clarification on what the Irish are suggesting before considering the proposals because “the history of Ireland shows that initiatives designed to improve relations between North and South, however well intentioned, are all too likely to fuel prejudice on one side or the other and to raise, rather than lower, the level of violence” (PREM19/1069 f157).

Two Premiers: Thatcher and the Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald

Nevertheless, the 7th November 1983 Anglo-Irish summit meeting between Thatcher and FitzGerald at Chequers was significant, leading eventually to the AIA of 1985. This sparked the start of real progress in Northern Ireland. In response to the Lillis package, Thatcher and FitzGerald decided together, for the first time, that something had to be done about the situation in Northern Ireland. Thatcher told Armstrong that there was “common ground” between the British and Irish governments in reducing the influence of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA). This challenges the view that Thatcher was unwilling to try to work with the Irish and compromise into finding a solution to the troubles in Northern Ireland.

Thatcher’s relationship with FitzGerald had been intermittent due to a change in Irish government and the appointment of Charles Haughey as Taoiseach. By the end of the Prior years, Thatcher had developed a stronger relationship with FitzGerald, even if this was not always a positive one. When FitzGerald had returned as Taoiseach in December 1982, it was an opportunity for Thatcher to pick up where she and FitzGerald had left in attempting to improve Anglo-Irish relations (Thatcher, 1993: 395). FitzGerald was also more willing to work with Thatcher in 1983.
FitzGerald prioritised restoring Anglo-Irish relations and hoped that the 7th November summit meeting would “signal that relations have now returned to normal”. This was after a low point earlier in 1983 under his predecessor, Charles Haughey. Haughey, the leader of Fianna Fail, had adopted a much harder line Republican stance with Thatcher and defended the Irish constitution and desire for unification (PREM19/1069 f157). FitzGerald believed that, due to the stability in London and Dublin after the general elections, this was the time to try to find a “new approach” to Northern Ireland, testing the market to see what might be acceptable to various interested parties. The Irish were especially worried about instability and violence spreading to the Republic of Ireland and pressure from the United States to make progress (PREM19/1069 f157).

FitzGerald used the Forum for a New Ireland, which was originally set up to help the SDLP in the elections, as a sounding board for new ideas to help educate nationalist opinion in the Republic against pursuing the unification of Ireland. This was not the first time that FitzGerald had tried to promote such ideas. In 1972 he published a book titled “Towards a New Ireland” which argued that the Irish constitution needed to take into account the sensitivities of the Northern Ireland Protestants more. He thought that articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution were offensive to the majority community in Northern Ireland and had sectarian bias. FitzGerald was keen for certain associates of his, such as Lillis, to continue to explore informally the possibility of changes to the relationship between the North and South of Ireland, with British ministers and officials. FitzGerald hoped that the discussions would not seek to change the current position of sovereignty but would instead establish some viable Southern presence in Northern Ireland (PREM19/1069 f157). This was significant as it was the first time that the Irish government sought not to pursue their demands of joint sovereignty, instead considering alternative ways of improving Anglo-Irish relations and the situation in Northern Ireland though policing and the judicial system.

During the 7th November summit meeting, Thatcher and FitzGerald officially appointed Armstrong and Nally to draw up plans for some sort of agreement in order to try to improve relations between Britain and Ireland, having already worked closely together chairing the Anglo-Irish steering committee. Thatcher played a key role in this and ultimately it was her idea to have the AIA, having been encouraged
by Armstrong. He played a pivotal role in ensuring Thatcher’s involvement in the AIA and the process leading up to it (interview with Ken Bloomfield). Thatcher’s relationship with FitzGerald was significant to the improvement in Anglo-Irish relations. Although the relationship takes a turn for the worse in 1984, it still results in the signing of the AIA in November 1985. The turning point for this appears to be the aftermath of the 1983 general election. This creates stability in both London and Dublin and gives Thatcher both the time and power to pursue a new direction regarding Northern Ireland.

After the 7th November summit meeting, it was agreed that a follow up meeting would take place, to explore the issues raised in more detail, at Chequers in January 1984. This meeting would be between Thatcher Prior and Geoffrey Howe, the Foreign Secretary, in order to evaluate new considerations to the Irish question (CAB 128/80/4). Thatcher also made plans to discuss the situation further with FitzGerald at an EU meeting in January 1984 (PREM19/1069 f113). In preparation for the January Chequers meeting, Thatcher asked Armstrong to prepare a discussion paper on possible policy options in Northern Ireland for consideration by a small group of ministers and senior officials at the Chequers meeting (PREM19/1069 f20). Prior was also involved. He made plans to meet with Michael Noonan, the Irish Justice Minister, to discuss numerous measures to improve co-operation between the police forces in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. Prior’s importance, and improved relationship with Thatcher, was evident as Thatcher tasked him with urgently examining the items which could be acted upon jointly and the ones that the UK should act upon themselves (PREM19/1069 f12). In addition, Prior met with leaders of the main unionist parties in Northern Ireland (Jim Molyneaux from the Ulster Unionist Party and Ian Paisley from the Democratic Unionist Party) to discuss closing numerous crossing points on the border of Northern Ireland and the Republic, which were being used as easy crossing points for terrorists (CAB 128/80/1).

Prior informed Thatcher, on 21st December 1983, of the joint measures, that he and the Irish Foreign Minister Peter Barry, believed needed to be taken, by the British and Irish government, to tackle terrorism on the island of Ireland (PREM19/1069 f12). Prior suggested that the British worked with the Republic of Ireland to strengthen their border security and to focus their attention on the 200-300
Northern Irish terrorists taking refuge in the South. He argued that if the Republic implemented selective internment in the South, the North could follow suit. Prior stated that the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) needed to be further established and that laws needed reviewing, regarding incitement of violence, to bring terrorists to trial quicker. An agreement was also needed with the South to restrict the availability of fertilisers that are used to produce explosives (CAB 128/76 f366).

During the meeting at Chequers in January 1984, Prior, Thatcher and Howe had agreed “that consideration should be given to the possibility of a new approach to the Irish question” for a number of reasons including the growth of the political strength of Provisional Sinn Fein, the increasing lack of confidence in law and order felt by the minority community and the international perspective, particularly in light of Anglo-American relations. Prior and Thatcher agreed that security co-operation with the Irish Republic needed improving and that some concerns, highlighted by the minority community in Northern Ireland, needed addressing. This included the possibility of joint policing in specific areas along both sides of the border and the ‘harmonisation’ of law enforcement procedures between the North and the Republic. Prior, Thatcher and Howe decided that they would only agree to such measures if Dublin gave Britain a firm indication that the Republic would, in return, formally recognise the continuing existence of the union (at least for the considerable future) by waiving articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution which lay a territorial claim on Northern Ireland (CAB 128/80/4). These proposals paved the way for the AIA of November 1985 and reveal that the British government did consider a change in policy direction in Northern Ireland, which Prior was at the heart of. It also reveals an increasing willingness, by Thatcher, to explore these ideas, having stated the previous September that “schemes based on joint sovereignty would definitely not be acceptable....but would consider the possibilities if they offered hope of a practical and useful way forward” (PREM19/1069 f157). Thatcher was however aware that it could be very damaging to the UK if it appeared that they had ignored the possibility of an approach from the Irish government, that had gone further than they had ever gone in the past, to meet the Unionist concerns about the future of Northern Ireland and the British union (PREM19/1069 f245).

At the start of 1984, both the British and Irish governments were under pressure to improve the security situation in Northern Ireland, which was why the
new approach was needed. The Irish were worried about violence spreading to the Republic (PREM19/1069 f157) and in Britain, despite the 1983 general election, the Conservative party were under increasing public and parliamentary pressure to improve the situation, and the levels of violence in particular. Prior explained to the cabinet on 12th January 1984 that “he had at first felt nervous about being put under British pressure to take more effective action on the security front” but that it was important for Britain to ensure that law and order did not breakdown throughout the island of Ireland. It was also important that Britain and Ireland worked closely together to ensure that this did not happen (CAB 128/80/1). Thatcher agreed, stating that further, and possibly new, thought needed to be given to the Irish question and consideration given to what further measures could be taken to improve the effectiveness of fighting terrorism in Northern Ireland although Thatcher emphasised that “care should be taken not to embarrass the Irish government by public statements to this effect” (CAB 128/76 f366). This was the start of serious joint sovereignty considerations for the first time during the Thatcher years.

In March 1984, Anglo-Irish relations appear to be promising. Although FitzGerald had been preoccupied with concluding the ‘Forum for a New Ireland’ report, and was therefore surprised by the British proposal, he welcomed elements of the Lillis package and suggestions about what matters the British and Irish governments could work together on. FitzGerald was less enthusiastic about a ‘border strip’ which would incorporate territory both North and South of the border but agreed to consider the practicalities of law enforcement in Northern Ireland, in exchange for recognising the union, after the publication of the Forum’s report (CAB 128/80/5). Simultaneously, discussions between Armstrong and Nally continued to try to find a practical solution to please both the British and Irish. Armstrong suggested to Nally that an Anglo-Irish Security Commission, to oversee joint policing arrangements on both sides of the border, could be set up if the Republic dropped their Constitutional claim on the North (PREM 19/1408/1 15/3/84, Armstrong to PM). These discussions continued but relations between the British and Irish government deteriorated later in 1984.
Two Premiers: PM and Taoiseach relations deteriorate

There was a dramatic shift in Anglo-Irish relations in May 1984. As Anglo-Irish relations deteriorated, relations between Thatcher and Prior improve. The Irish pushed for more concessions and Thatcher out-right refused. Although negotiations between British and Irish officials continued, the Irish government became increasingly uneasy about the situation and how it would be viewed by the Irish electorate. The Irish government accused the British of being too narrowly focused on security and instead proposed joint authority, comprising a minister appointed by each government, which Thatcher immediately ruled out (PREM 12/1286; 14/5/84, Armstrong to Thatcher). It also looked increasingly unlikely that the Irish government would support a change to their constitution, to remove articles 2 and 3, as FitzGerald proposed after a British official was told by Peter Barry (Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs) “If we run our flag up this particular mast, don't expect everyone in the government to stand to attention and salute it.” (PREM 12/1286: Ireland. Situation in NI, part 16; 31/5/84, Goodall to Coles). There was clear evidence here that there was re-thinking of policy but the policy stalled before it had an opportunity to be implemented. Neither the British nor the Irish were willing to provide the other side with any more concessions than was the absolute minimum. In addition, the Irish government faced significant opposition from within their cabinet and country as a whole to making any concessions to Britain over their territorial claim on Northern Ireland. This prevented the new thinking from becoming a reality at this point.

Thatcher also considered redrawing the border in Northern Ireland to move mainly Catholic areas into the Republic of Ireland and allow the Unionist majority to be strengthened but abandoned this idea on the advice of Prior and Howe. Jim Prior advised against redrawing the border, citing “enormous difficulties, both practical and political”. The Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe and other senior officials also agreed, arguing that “repartition did not offer a way forward” (PREM 12/1286, 21/6/84, Thatcher meeting with Howe, Prior and officials). Here we saw Thatcher asking for advice from Prior, followed by other significant ministers, and
listening to their views. As Anglo-Irish relations deteriorated further in 1984, relations between Thatcher and Prior improved even more.

British and Irish relations continued to worsen after the Forum for a New Ireland report was published in May 1984. Prior described the report as “disappointing, rhetorical and thin on practicalities” (PREM 12/1286). FitzGerald sent an advanced copy of the report to Thatcher in secret, explaining that he was forced to “stress traditional nationalist beliefs” to ensure support from his cabinet, party and electorate (PREM 12/1286). Thatcher appreciated the difficult position FitzGerald is in, responding to FitzGerald that her government would do their best "to avoid saying things which could make it harder for you and for us to continue the dialogue" (PREM 12/1286). This does reveal a softer side to Thatcher. Despite everything that had happened Thatcher remained pleasant in her response to FitzGerald and indicated her desire for dialogue to continue due to the seriousness of the situation in Northern Ireland.

Part III: The Thatcher – Prior relationship

Although relations between Thatcher and Prior in 1983 were positive and constructive, this was not always the case. The Prior years were controversial in government because Prior represented a completely different wing of the Conservative party to Thatcher and her supporters. As his views differed so much from the Thatcherites in government, Prior was bound to face high opposition within government when he was appointed to the cabinet in 1979 as Secretary of State for Employment. This however was even evident two years into Thatcher’s premiership, in September 1981, when Thatcher had filled her cabinet and government with her sympathisers and supporters. Prior had been exiled to Northern Ireland to remove him from the centre of policy making in Whitehall but at the same time had been promised a free hand to make policy. This resulted, at times in divisions between the NIO run by Prior and the wider government position. In cabinet there was strong support for Prior, due to the very difficult situation he faced in Northern Ireland (CAB 128/71) but this changed after he put forward his plans for a Northern Ireland assembly in 1982.
The tension between Prior and the NIO and the wider government began as soon as Prior took over from Humphrey Atkins as SSNI in September 1981. The cause of this was how to deal with the on-going hunger strike. Jim Prior was determined to make progress, where Atkins had not succeeded, on the hunger strike situation. When Prior took over from Atkins in September 1981 the hunger strike was still on-going. Atkins had been unable to move the situation forward, despite attempted negotiations with the Provisional IRA, because Thatcher would not change the existing position of the government on the issue (8/7/81). Prior did what Atkins could not do and used the autonomy given to him by Thatcher to immediately try to ease relations in order to put a final stop to the hunger strike (Young, 1990: 467).

Prior put forward legislation agreeing that political prisoners could wear their own clothes and have other rights, such as association, that they had before (Prior, 1986: 232). Thatcher thought that this was a mistake (Thatcher, 1993: 393), even though she did not raise any objections to it (Moore, 2013: 616). Thatcher at this time distrusted the political arm of the Northern Ireland civil service and believed that they were too nationalist (Interview with George Fergusson). Prior faced increasing opposition after this from both Thatcher and members of his own party. It was also the start of increased tensions and divisions within the Conservative party.

The backbenchers of the Conservative party used the divisions between Prior and Thatcher to their advantage, sniping at Prior in the House of Commons, in order to win points from Thatcher. Prior faced particular opposition from Ian Gow, Thatcher’s Parliamentary Private Secretary. Gow was much more sympathetic to the Unionist view than Prior. Throughout the Prior years, Gow led a campaign against Prior and was responsible for tensions between Prior and the wider government. Gow used Thatcher’s closeness to Airey Neave, the shadow SSNI who had been killed by the IRA in 1979, to attempt to turn Thatcher against Prior. Gow wrote to Thatcher in April 1982 arguing that any attempt to support Prior’s plans for Northern Ireland go against the memory and wishes of Neave "you understand...how difficult my position is. I cannot forget Airey" (THCR 2/6/2/117 Part 3 f142).
One of the issues, during Prior’s time as SSNI, that resulted in the greatest tensions between Prior and Thatcher and her government was Prior’s proposals for devolution to Northern Ireland and the creation of a Northern Ireland assembly. The 1982/1983 Northern Ireland Bill was contested heavily in the House of Commons by Thatcherite Conservatives and Ian Gow (Interview with Richard Needham). Gow mounted an extensive campaign to try to convince Thatcher not to support Prior’s legislation for devolution to Northern Ireland (THCR 2/6/2/117 Part 3 f160) and tried to stop the bill, just like he did in 1980 on Prior’s Employment Bill, when Prior was Secretary of State for Employment. Gow disagreed with Prior’s suggestion for power sharing arguing that the “wisest course is not to try to do anything spectacular” (THCR 2/6/2/117 Part 3 f224). In March 1982 Ian Gow told Thatcher that Prior’s plans for devolution were “doomed to failure” and would “divide the parliamentary party”. He argued that Prior’s proposals went in the opposite direction to that which Airey Neave would have followed. Moreover, many backbenchers opposed them as they would “give encouragement to the PIRA” and “dismay decent unionists” (THCR 2/6/2/117 Part 3 f160). Gow later resigned in 1985 when Thatcher signed the AIA but for the duration of the Prior years, remained an important figure and a significant opponent to Prior in Parliament.

The Northern Ireland assembly bill was the first real opposition that Jim Prior faced in the House of Commons because Prior’s ideas about a Northern Ireland assembly were very different to the Conservative position whilst in opposition. Devolution had always been a long term British government policy (Interview with Richard Needham) but an assembly was not. In the 1978 Conservative Campaign Guide, Airey Neave, the then shadow SSNI, outlined that the Conservative party had no desire to establish a Northern Ireland Assembly at any time in the future (Campaign Guide 1978). This was reiterated in the Conservative 1979 manifesto which simply promised to devolve some power to Northern Ireland (CAB 128/73 f122). Thatcher had not changed her mind and was not supportive of the idea put forward by Prior when he outlined his plans for a Northern Ireland assembly (Cunningham, 2001: 46).

Despite this, Prior decided that achieving a devolved administration, bringing everybody together and getting the assembly up and running, was the first thing that he wanted to do as SSNI (Interview with Richard Needham). Prior was
happy to allow his ministers to get on with their relevant local areas in Northern Ireland which in turn allowed him to focus on the bigger picture (Mitchell, 2008: 170). This was unlike his predecessor Humphrey Atkins who had been more focused on security and the hunger strikes (Interview with David Brooker). Before taking the position of SSNI, Prior noted that there had been no political progress in Northern Ireland between 1979-1981 (Prior, 1986: 192); he wanted to change that. Prior believed that it would be in the best interests of Northern Ireland to push the legislation for the assembly through and for both the political parties and in Britain and Northern Ireland to agree to it (Hansard, 10/2/1983: Col.1132).

It was not just Ian Gow who opposed Prior’s plans. The cabinet, on 1st April 1982, argued that an assembly would just be a forum to criticise the government and that to do nothing was still a credible option (CAB129/214 f153). Despite this, the cabinet agreed to support the proposals in Prior’s white paper, even though the content was controversial, acknowledging that Jim Prior faced a difficult and unique responsibility for the province (CAB 128/73 f122). This is surprising expect given the levels of opposition to Prior’s legislation (James, 1999: 124). This could be because Thatcher had not filled her cabinet full of Thatcherites at this time meaning that some individuals remained, who were willing to listen to Prior and support his policy ideas for Northern Ireland.

Gow might not have been able to convince the cabinet to oppose Prior’s Northern Ireland assembly bill but he did help to create deeper divisions between the Northern Ireland department and the wider Conservative party through the Conservative backbench Northern Ireland committee. In a meeting on 1st April 1982, Gow ensured that everybody in attendance, except Arnold who thought that it was worth undertaking as all parties wanted devolution, opposed Prior’s plans (THCR 2/6/2/117 Part 3 f145). Opposition to Prior’s plans continued in May 1982 when Ian Gow’s cousin, Nick Budgen resigned as Assistant Whip over Northern Ireland Bill saying "I believe that it will create further instability in the Province and that it will undermine the unity of the United Kingdom" (THCR 1/3/7 f43).

One group that Prior did not face significant opposition from during this time was the Labour opposition. The Labour party were in a weak position which worsened after Michael Foot’s heavy defeat in the 1983 general election, securing
the lowest number of Labour seats since 1935. Labour were a feeble opposition under Michael Foot as they faced heavy criticism from the high levels of unemployment and the recession in the 1970s. In addition, the party were divided. The 1983 general election result highlighted Labour’s weaknesses and Thatcher was able to exploit this even further (Prior, 1986: 153).

Relations between Thatcher and Prior reach a low point on 17th June 1982 when Thatcher ordered a guillotine motion for Prior’s Northern Ireland bill to prevent discussion of the legislation and to force a vote on the issue without its full examination (Wilson et al, 2011: 51). Thatcher hoped this would defeat the bill (THCR 2/6/2/117 part 3 f120) but it did not.

The legislation was supported and passed regardless. Prior had managed to force through the legislation (Bloomfield, 2007: 55) despite limited support in the small cabinet committee (Prior, 1986: 196) and Ian Gow’s attempts to stop it. Ironically, without a guillotine, Prior’s legislation would not have passed. Prior did have to make concessions to the original bill though. It was less supportive of the Irish dimension which alienated the Irish government and Nationalists in the North (Prior, 1986: 197). Crucially, Prior was helped by a great deal of support from previous Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland including Willie Whitelaw, Francis Pym and Humphrey Atkins. This revealed that Prior did have some support in government, at this time, from significant individuals within the cabinet. This is important because Thatcher needed the support of her cabinet, as her position was not yet secure. Thatcher was faced with the knowledge that the majority of the cabinet would support Prior at this point (Moore, 2013: 619-621), and before the general election of 1983, she needed the support of her cabinet and could not marginalise Prior completely.

The establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly however, caused another rift between Prior and Thatcher when one of Prior’s ministers was photographed with Gerry Adams, from Sinn Fein, on the steps of the Parliament building. Five members of Sinn Fein were elected to the Stormont Parliament building in 1982 as a result of Prior’s Northern Ireland assembly bill. Prior advised his ministers that, although Sinn Fein were not recognised by the British or Dublin government, they should treat members of Sinn Fein in exactly the same way as any
other Assemblymen. If they therefore, wanted to discuss issues which affected their electors, ministers should deal with them. David Mitchell, Minister of State for Northern Ireland, met with Gerry Adams from Sinn Fein a couple of weeks later to discuss a housing estate which affected his electors. This was the first time a British government minister had met a representative from Sinn Fein in ten years and the story was covered on the main news in the UK and Ireland. FitzGerald rang Thatcher in “a state of seething fury” stating that British ministers should not be talking to Sinn Fein whilst they accuse the Irish government of not isolating them enough (Interview with David Mitchell). The following day Prior received a message from Thatcher saying that no minister may meet any Sinn Fein Assemblymen (Mitchell, 2008: 176-179), resulting in a further deterioration of relations between Thatcher and Prior. Although this is an example of Thatcher overruling Prior, it was necessary due to the international dimension.

Prior recognised the opposition that he had faced from his own government, and Thatcher, and took action not to publicly pursue any further radical policies after the Northern Ireland assembly bill. In December 1982 he told Thatcher that his five year plan for Northern Ireland was simply to continue the policies currently agreed which involved prioritising law and order, establishing the role for a Northern Ireland assembly under direct rule and preventing economic decline (THCR 1/15/10 f146). When Enoch Powell expressed concern about Northern Ireland devolution, Thatcher requested that Armstrong wrote back disagreeing with his concerns and supporting Prior (THCR 2/6/2/130 part 1 f5). This marked an improvement in Thatcher Prior relations which led to the breakthrough in 1983.

Conclusion

The most significant change in Northern Ireland policy during the Prior years was Thatcher’s decision to “do something about Ireland” (Goodall, 1983). Thatcher’s strengthened position in government, thanks to the 1983 general election victory, signalled a significant change in Northern Ireland policy and her relationship with Jim Prior. Thatcher revealed her increasing desperation at the Northern Ireland situation in July 1983, mid-way through Jim Prior’s time as SSNI, expressing doubts
to Prior about “whether we (the British government) could solve the Northern Ireland problem” and considered a tactical withdrawal. Prior advised against this (PREM 19/1069). This was the start of genuine dialogue between Thatcher and Prior about what to do in Northern Ireland. Although Prior was not included in every policy decision, he was very much kept involved in what was going on. Thatcher was more open to new Irish initiatives, as suggested by Robert Armstrong, and Prior was supportive of these ideas. This dramatically improved relations between Thatcher and Prior.

The 1983 general election was also critical in giving Thatcher the security in the House of Commons, and cabinet, that she needed to enable her to do this, despite opposition from Unionists within the Conservative party. Thatcher became significantly more involved in policy in Northern Ireland; for the first time acknowledging that further, and even new, thought needed to be given to policy in Northern Ireland. In addition, measures needed to be taken to improve the effectiveness of fighting terrorism in Northern Ireland.

The relationship between Thatcher and FitzGerald was crucial in paving the way for the 1985 AIA. The intergovernmental relationship was embodied in the ‘Anglo-Irish Inter-Governmental Council’ which was set up after the summit meeting between Thatcher and the Irish premier Garret FitzGerald in November 1981. This had been reactivated on the initiative of the Irish cabinet secretary Dermot Nally, directly after Thatcher’s success in the 1983 election. In effect, from this point on, meetings between the two heads of government were formalised and were assisted by a steering committee comprising officials from both Britain and Ireland, led by the two Cabinet Secretaries- Armstrong and Nally (Goodall, 2013). Beginning in the Prior years and continuing into the Hurd years, Thatcher’s power and authority as Prime Minister was needed to negotiate with the Irish Head of State and thus to move the situation on in Northern Ireland (Interview with David Brooker). During the Prior years, the Armstrong-Nally talks not only began but also intensified, leading eventually to the signing of the AIA of November 1985. This will be the focus of the next chapter during Douglas Hurd’s time as SSNI.
Chapter 5: Douglas Hurd: Secretary of State for Northern Ireland September 1984-September 1985

Introduction

During the Hurd years Thatcher continued to be involved in Northern Ireland policy and this resulted in the signing of the AIA in November 1985 which formalised Anglo-Irish relations in relation to Northern Ireland and paved the way for future agreements in the 1990s. This chapter shows that Thatcher remained committed to Northern Ireland even after the Brighton bomb, with “the North... moved much higher on Mrs Thatcher’s personal list of priorities than it has ever been” (PREM19/1408 f58). In the Hurd years, especially, Thatcher did place Northern Ireland high on her priority list - the sheer number of correspondents which Thatcher comments on in relation to Northern Ireland and the number of meetings that she has with FitzGerald or Hurd and Howe convey a significant change in Thatcher’s attitude towards Northern Ireland. This chapter shows Thatcher immersed herself in Northern Ireland like she had never done before in the lead up to the AIA. Thatcher believed that if the two countries, Britain and Ireland, could get together the Catholics in the North would see Dublin as their champion and that some progress could be made. Although in previous years Thatcher did not dedicate much time to Northern Ireland, she did make it part of her agenda and she took a keen interest in a variety of solutions. During Hurd’s time as SSNI, Thatcher dedicated much more time to Northern Ireland.

In the previous chapter we saw the development of Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland and the build up to the AIA. Relations between Thatcher and the Irish Taoiseach improved significantly and the Armstrong and Nally talks, which paved the way for the AIA, progressed. During this time Thatcher was subject to gentle manoeuvring by her Cabinet Secretary, Robert Armstrong. This continues even more prominently in this chapter, as the AIA comes closer to being agreed. This chapter shows that without Armstrong’s persuasion, it is unlikely that the AIA would have been signed and if it had, it would not contain as many concessions to the Irish as Thatcher agreed to. This was also helped by both Hurd and Howe, who
helped Armstrong to persuade Thatcher to keep going when negotiating with the Irish government.

This chapter reveals much about governance during this point in Thatcher’s premiership too. It outlines, in detail, the key individuals and officials involved in Northern Ireland. The way in which the group is widened is even more significant. Thatcher listened to advice from Armstrong and her Foreign Affairs advisor Charles Powell but ignored her SSNI Douglas Hurd. The inclusion of Powell in June 1984 was important and conveyed, as we would expect from the Thatcher literature, that Thatcher involved more advisors in policy making at the expense of her ministers. When Powell joined No.10, his influence on Northern Ireland was limited by the fact that the Armstrong and Nally talks were well on the way. Powell could not significantly change this and could not replace Armstrong in this process. After the AIA, Powell was significantly influential, not in Northern Ireland specifically but, in government as a whole and on issues relating to foreign affairs. This made policy making in Northern Ireland elsewhere very different in the latter years of Thatcher’s premiership. Powell became one of the few crucial individuals inside the tight knit group of advisors Thatcher has in No.10. This chapter, unlike previous chapters in this thesis, begins to shed more light on Thatcher’s leadership style and the importance of advisors from 1984 onwards.

Unsurprisingly, this chapter therefore reveals that Hurd as SSNI was often marginalised and the cabinet was not used for decision making, but was merely a rubber stamp for important policy. This is what we would expect from Thatcher as leader during these years. This chapter sees Thatcher keep her cabinet informed about the AIA as it gets closer to being signed and Thatcher’s need to seek approval due its controversial nature. Unlike with Prior, Thatcher’s relationship with Hurd was much more positive. Even when Hurd was not involved in policy, this was less due to him personally but because he was simply not needed due to the officials and foreign secretary who had already done most of the ground work relating to the AIA. Domestically, Hurd carried on much of what Prior set up. Even when Hurd was marginalised at the end of his time as SSNI, he was later promoted to the post of Home Secretary confirming that relations between him and Thatcher were much more positive than they were at the end Prior’s time as SSNI. The most significant finding that this chapter confirms, in relation to Northern Ireland, is that at this point
in Thatcher’s premiership, advisors rather than ministers were more crucial in policy making.

Unlike the previous chapters, the scene was set when Hurd became SSNI and compared to his predecessors Atkins and Prior, Hurd was not SSNI for very long. Unexpectedly, Thatcher had already become involved in Northern Ireland policy. This chapter, therefore, charts the progress towards the signing of the AIA and shows Thatcher allowing herself to be convinced to sign the agreement with the Irish government. It touches upon Thatcher’s regret at signing the AIA due to the extent to which the Unionists oppose the agreement, resignations from the party over it and her general reluctance to engage with Northern Ireland policy, as previously outlined in the Thatcher chapter. Thatcher’s regret at signing the AIA is looked at in more detail in the next and final chapter of the thesis, Tom King and beyond.

This chapter will start with a general overview of Northern Ireland during Hurd’s time as SSNI before looking at the significance of the Brighton bomb. Thatcher’s determination to preserve with Northern Ireland and the AIA reiterates that she was more involved, and dedicated, to improving the situation in Northern Ireland than is currently recognised. This was an opportunity for Thatcher to back track and not continue talks with the Irish; she did not take this opportunity. This chapter will also look at the need for Thatcher to gain cabinet approval after this to continue with the talks and later approval for the AIA. Like the Atkins and Prior chapters, key individuals are identified, and with the exception of the inclusion of Charles Powell as Foreign affairs advisor, they remain similar with Robert Armstrong continuing to have a key role. In order to answer the research question about Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland, the chapter focuses on Thatcher’s relationships with both the Irish Taoiseach and Hurd as SSNI. Hurd, alongside the NIO and Foreign Office, was less involved than officials as the process of the AIA is already underway. The chapter finishes by looking at the demise of Hurd, despite being later promoted to Home Secretary by Thatcher, and opposition which Thatcher faces after the AIA, which is discussed more in the next chapter. The chapter concludes that, during this time, Thatcher was the driving force behind securing the AIA. Thatcher had more meetings, and the archival evidence reveals the increasing extent to which she was updated with the progress. Even though Thatcher had many other things to do, and therefore did not dedicate a significant amount of time to
Northern Ireland, it became an important part of her agenda. Thatcher’s willingness to pursue the agreement and progress in Northern Ireland resulted in her being persuaded to keep the Unionists in the dark, something she later regretted; resulting in her dedicating less time to Northern Ireland in the future. This chapter shows the extent, over a short period of time, of Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland; much more than is currently acknowledged – Thatcher was the key feature in the signing of the AIA (Interview with Robert Andrew).

Section I: The Hurd years

Just before the 1983 election, Thatcher told David Goodall, the Catholic Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet of Irish descent, that if she was returned to power, she wanted to “do something about Ireland” (Moore, 2013: 622). Though Thatcher herself had no clear idea of what this “something” was, by the time that Douglas Hurd succeeded Jim Prior as SSNI in September 1984 the talks that would lead to the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) of November 1985 were well on their way. Although Hurd had moved onto the Home Office by the time the agreement was signed, his years at the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) were dominated by the build up to the AIA (Interview with Robert Andrew) and Hurd himself recalled how he was tasked with keeping them going and to try to get them to succeed (Interview with Douglas Hurd).

In some key respects there was, therefore, continuity between the Prior and Hurd years, as there was between Hurd and his successor Tom King when he oversaw the signing of the AIA. However, there were also a number of key developments that touched directly upon relations between the PM and her SSNI. The most important of these was the intergovernmental relationship embodied in the ‘Anglo-Irish Inter-Governmental Council’. Set up after the summit meeting between Thatcher and the Irish premier Garret FitzGerald in November 1981, this had been reactivated on the initiative of the Irish cabinet secretary Nally, directly after Thatcher’s success in the 1983 election. In effect, from this point on, meetings between the two heads of government were formalised and were assisted by a steering committee comprising officials from both Britain and Ireland, led by the
two Cabinet Secretaries- Armstrong and Nally (Goodall, 2013). Beginning in the Prior years and continuing into the Hurd years, Thatcher’s power and authority as PM was needed to negotiate with the Irish Head of State and thus to move the situation on in Northern Ireland. (Interview with David Brooker). For this reason, it was always going to be difficult for Hurd to make changes in Northern Ireland or to stamp his mark on policy. When he took up the role, the wheels for the AIA were already firmly in motion, and it was mainly for this reason that Hurd did not enjoy the same discretion and jurisdiction as some other Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland.

Hurd’s appointment as Secretary of State was also seen as a chance to widen the very small circle of individuals who had been involved during the Prior years (Thatcher, 1993: 399). A significant finding from the Hurd years is therefore the increased number of British and Irish officials involved in Northern Ireland policy, compared with the very small number of people involved earlier. An important consideration was secrecy. In November 1983 FitzGerald had told Armstrong that in Dublin only a small group of ministers was involved at the expense of the rest of the cabinet and that discussions would have to be kept to “a very restricted group of people.” (PREM 19/1408/1, 8/11/83, Armstrong to Thatcher). Nevertheless, Thatcher, for the first time, allowed senior officials from the NIO to be involved in the inter-governmental discussions (Thatcher, 1993: 399), and though these were not necessarily regular attenders they did contribute their specialist knowledge on the issues of policing, law and order, justice and devolution (PREM19/1288 f164). Already evident in the Hurd years, the involvement of the NIO was to become even more important when Tom King replaced him and involved the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service Ken Bloomfield (Interview with Tom King).

There are a number of possible explanations for this. Several key respondents have confirmed that Thatcher had thought of the NIO as being too nationalist and ‘green’ and did not trust them (Interviews with George Fergusson and Michael Ancram). Nevertheless, given that the initial ideas for the AIA had already been agreed, and included elements which the Irish government would support, it was possibly thought to be safe by September 1984 to bring in selected officials from NIO to assist with the agreement. Thatcher remained constrained by considerations of secrecy (Interview with Tom King) and she could not afford for Unionists in the
NIO to derail the progress and process. She was therefore very anxious that the Protestant community should not know what was going on because otherwise they would try to prevent it, and the agreement itself purposely contained moderate language and while avoiding anything that was too hostile towards the Protestants in Northern Ireland (Interview with Robert Andrew).

In the build up to the AIA, secrecy became a key issue regarding ministerial autonomy and Thatcher. Thatcher was happy to allow ministerial autonomy, on occasions, because she trusted the judgement of those involved. This was not the case with others. In later years in Northern Ireland, Thatcher was even happy, at times, for there to be secrecy in the process from her because if she did not know about it she could say that and maintain her position to her party and in public. The short time that Hurd is SSNI illustrates a period when Thatcher is most engaged in Northern Ireland policy. This is a departure from the years proceeding and those yet to follow which see Thatcher return to a less interventionist and managerial leadership style in relation to Northern Ireland.

The Hurd years, which were dominated by elite level Anglo-Irish negotiations and debates within the British government, allow us to draw conclusions about autonomy and decision making in Northern Ireland - the individuals who were responsible for progress, negotiation, its success and the occasions during which this happened. The most illuminating aspect of this period, in relation to my research question, is being able to clearly identify which individuals were key to the decision making processes. From the cabinet, Douglas Hurd and Geoffrey Howe remain at the centre of discussions with Thatcher but Charles Powell, Thatcher’s Private Secretary and trusted foreign policy aide, was also heavily influential. Although Robert Armstrong continued the secretive high level talks with Irish officials, on many occasions this could have been stopped by Thatcher, at the request of Powell or on the advice of Hurd and Howe.

The build up to the eventual signing of the AIA illustrates how decisions are negotiated at elite level, the core executive and elite power during the height of the Thatcher years. It also draws out debates and divisions within the British government and bipartisanship. The issue of secrecy and the controversy surrounding how wide the circle of those involved should be, including civil servants from the NIO and
Northern Ireland civil service, shed light on the relations between institutions and the individual, and how individuals reacted within the institution (of the Northern Ireland department). Most importantly during these years we appreciate the stark contrast in Thatcher’s relationship between each of her Secretaries of State and Northern Ireland previously and then that with Hurd and his successors.

The significance of the Brighton bomb

The preliminary work that had been done on the AIA was almost derailed on 12th October 1984 after the Provisional IRA attempted to assassinate Thatcher and her government at the Conservative party conference in Brighton. The Brighton bomb changed very little policy on Northern Ireland (Moore, 2015: 315, 316, 319) but it significantly changed the tone and the relationship between the two governments (Goodall, 2013). Although Thatcher allowed negotiations with the Irish government to continue between Armstrong and Nally (PREM19/1288 f149), her mood was different (Moore, 2015: 316). Prior to the Brighton bomb, an agreement between the British and Irish governments looked likely to be signed in December 1984 but after the bomb Thatcher decided that there is no possibility of signing an agreement in December (PREM19/1288 f82). Thatcher was heavily influenced by Charles Powell into making this decision. Thatcher was wary (Thatcher, 1993: 399); noting “we must go very slow on these talks” (PREM19/1288 f154) because she suspected that “it will be the first in a series” (PREM 19/1288 f101). However, it was Charles Powell who advises Thatcher that “the difficulties are becoming more apparent” (PREM19/1288 f87), having read the minutes from the latest Armstrong and Nally talks, and urges Thatcher to ensure that FitzGerald understands that “we are in a different world following the Brighton bomb” (PREM19/1288 f106). This could simply be Powell responding to Thatcher who he describes as “becoming very pessimistic about this exercise and whether it can be taken much further” (PREM19/1288 f76). Thatcher questioned whether an agreement can be made writing “I do NOT think that we can take this much further” (PREM19/1288 f78). Powell even suggested that Thatcher could consider using the summit meeting with FitzGerald to tell him that the process would be all too difficult (PREM19/1288 f25).
The Brighton bomb gave Thatcher more opportunity to re-consider parts of the Armstrong/Nally talks that she disagreed with, including the Ministerial Committee for Northern Ireland that would see an Irish government representative being a Minister for Northern Ireland Affairs and the consultative role of the joint Security commission. Thatcher questioned why the Irish should have a representative in Belfast who was consulted and involved in Northern Ireland (Moore, 2015: 317).

Thatcher decided, based on Powell’s advice, to conduct further meetings with her colleagues (PREM19/1288 f87) before allowing Armstrong to next meet Nally (PREM19/1288 f83). Thatcher used this opportunity to deliberate with Hurd in a meeting on 31st October whether or not to call off the Armstrong/Nally talks and to admit that they failed. Hurd and Howe both advise Thatcher that the government cannot afford to do nothing and that acceptable arrangements could still be achieved. Thatcher agreed to not allow the Armstrong/Nally talks to collapse despite her anxieties but stated that she would make her reservations clear (PREM19/1288 f22). Robert Armstrong was ‘quite gloomy’ about the situation and how close Thatcher had come to stopping the talks. Armstrong also had to ‘do some fence mending’ with the Irish through their London Ambassador Noel Dorr (Moore, 2015: 318).

The Anglo-Irish talks continue after October 1984, albeit at a slower pace. From the very beginning Douglas Hurd was very much involved in the top level negotiations with elite actors; at Thatcher’s request. This period of time also saw Thatcher steering the direction of Anglo-Irish relations to reflect her hesitation at proceeding forward with an agreement with the Irish. On 25th October 1984 Thatcher asked Douglas Hurd and the Northern Ireland Permanent Secretary Robert Andrew, who was now involved in the talks, to visit Peter Barry the Foreign Minister and Michael Noonan the Justice Minister in Dublin (PREM19/1288 f68) and make it clear to the Irish government that the British thought the Irish proposals were too ambitious in relation to the amending of articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution (Thatcher, 1993: 399). Thatcher also asked Robert Andrew, when he met with Irish officials over dinner, to reduce the Irish expectations of the impending summit meeting (PREM19/1288 f57). When Armstrong and Nally met on 5th November, along with a newly extended group of officials from both Britain and Ireland, the
Irish responded positively to Thatcher’s request and agree to move the timetable for an agreement to before the May 1985 local elections with the view to an agreement sometime after that. This was to be discussed further in the summit meeting between Thatcher and FitzGerald (PREM19/1289 f96).

Relations between Thatcher and FitzGerald deteriorated before the summit meeting due to Thatcher’s refusal to agree to FitzGerald’s request to increase the European Union budget (PREM19/1408 f238). This disagreement resulted in Thatcher becoming even more reluctant to agree to a deal with the Irish government.

When Thatcher saw FitzGerald’s objections to repartition on 9th November, Charles Powell reminds Thatcher “the fact that the Taoiseach’s against it, does not necessarily mean it’s a bad thing” (PREM19/1289 f90). When Thatcher was told by Alan Goodison, the British Ambassador to Ireland, that FitzGerald could not “afford to come away from the summit empty-handed”, Thatcher responded “that is not my problem” (PREM19/1408 f192).

As expected Thatcher reacted personally; ensuring that less ground is given to the Irish by amending the draft communique, put together by Armstrong in preparation of the summit meeting, to ensure that there was no suggestion of endorsing power-sharing and to emphasise that Northern Ireland would remain part of the United Kingdom until the majority of its inhabitants decided otherwise (PREM19/1408 f225). Thatcher defended the amendments as necessary to avoid Unionist resentment. In reality, they were included to demonstrate Thatcher’s power and ability to steer the whole process.

Thatcher’s doubts about continuing with talks with the Irish so soon after the Brighton bomb are revealed in demanding that the summit meeting should only be announced once FitzGerald had arrived at Chequers and that no press conference should follow (PREM19/1408 f194). The heightened secrecy was emphasised in the small grouping of additional individuals involved; Armstrong and Nally, plus a private Secretary and the Tánaiste for the first 10 minutes (PREM19/1408 f183). These doubts are confirmed when Thatcher arranged a meeting with Hurd and Geoffrey Howe on 14th November before the summit meeting where it was agreed that after Brighton, the British officials should toughen their negotiating position, refusing to accept joint authority but willing to make progress on co-operation.
(Thatcher, 1993: 399). Thatcher also raised concerns again about the progress of the Armstrong and Nally talks and asked Hurd and Howe to consider if they should continue (PREM19/1408 f173).

Howe appears to be more vehement than Hurd in his desire for Thatcher to continue to attempt to seek an agreement with the Irish in the upcoming summit meeting. He used multiples approaches in a letter to try to convince her, suggesting that Thatcher was in reality very close to giving up on the AIA. As Foreign Secretary, Howe was keen for the British and Irish governments to come to an agreement and would be much less cautious about other concerns such as the Unionist reaction, which worries Douglas Hurd. Howe sent the letter not just to Thatcher but to Hurd and Armstrong also, knowing that if he could convince them too, the talks are unlikely to collapse. First, Howe urged Thatcher not to give up unless there was absolutely no realistic hope of reaching an agreement. He then tried to reassure Thatcher that FitzGerald had said that he was prepared to continue devoting great energy to the search for an agreement, implying that her time would not be wasted an agreement could be reached. Third, Howe tried to scare Thatcher into not giving up by saying “your own fear of a government of radical extremists in Dublin, on the Cuban pattern, could one day become a reality” if Sinn Fein and the IRA continued their advance (PREM19/1408 f137). Fourth, he addressed Thatcher’s worry about the Unionist reaction and parliamentary response. Howe suggested that the Unionists can be reminded of the commitment to Northern Ireland remaining part of Britain. He also reassured her that her standing within the UK and in the House was also high enough to allow for her and the government to move the situation forward (PREM19/1408 f137). Howe warned Thatcher that there could be no “simple solution to the Irish problem” which would be with us for “many decades yet” (PREM 19/1408); emphasising that some effort would be required on her part if an agreement was to be reached.

The aim, therefore, of the Anglo-Irish meeting on 18th and 19th November was to attempt to find a compromise between Anglo-Irish positions which had been intensifying throughout 1984. There had been deep divisions over reforms to policing, with British officials stating “we cannot offer the Irish a veto on Northern
Ireland security decisions (PREM 19/1408/1, 29/8/84, Goodall to Powell). These issues resurfaced again a couple of days before the summit meeting when John Hermon, Chief Constable for the RUC, argued it would be “crazy” to deploy Gardaí in West Belfast but what was really needed was more Gardaí on the border (PREM19/1408 f127).

The November summit meeting was the second meeting of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council to be held at the level of heads of government (THCR 1/10/14 f12) and the first significant summit meeting during Hurd’s tenure as SSNI. Thatcher had an opportunity to postpone the meeting, as it was due to take place in Dublin but could not amid security fears. Instead Thatcher agreed to Armstrong’s suggestion that she take up FitzGerald’s offer to hold the meeting at Chequers (PREM 19/1288).

Thatcher’s commitment to Northern Ireland even after the Brighton bomb, including continuing with the summit meeting, did not go unnoticed in the media. The Irish Independent reported “The North has been moved much higher on Mrs Thatcher’s personal list of priorities than it has ever been” (PREM19/1408 f58). In the Hurd years, especially, Thatcher did place Northern Ireland high on her priority list - the sheer number of correspondents which Thatcher comments on in relation to Northern Ireland and the number of meetings that she has with FitzGerald or Hurd and Howe convey a significant change in Thatcher’s attitude towards Northern Ireland.

Thatcher dominated the entire summit meeting, not holding back about what she thought about Northern Ireland, despite the consequences. It did not appear as if she was willing to compromise in the slightest or reach a deal. At the end of the first days meeting, FitzGerald described himself as ‘quite depressed’ although the meeting helped to clarify the positions of both the British and Irish governments (Moore, 2015: 320). FitzGerald wanted power sharing in the North to give the republican minority confidence and some influence over their future (PREM19/1408 f81) but Thatcher disagreed and opposed joint authority (Thatcher, 1993: 400). The following day, Thatcher becomes even more assertive, telling FitzGerald that the IRA “did not represent just an Irish dimension, it had a Marxist and an international terrorist dimension grafted onto it” (PREM19/1408 f90). Thatcher also continued...
her questioning from the previous evening about whether the Catholic minority’s grievances in Northern Ireland were really so great since direct rule (PREM19/1408 f81 and f90). She accused FitzGerald of wanting to create a ‘Republican enclave’ in Northern Ireland (PREM19/1408 f90). Although a deal was not reached, when FitzGerald asked Thatcher if the Nally/Armstrong talks could continue, Thatcher said that they could (PREM19/1408 f83). It was also agreed that talks, by officials, would continue (Thatcher, 1993: 400) and a meeting was agreed for the coming months (PREM19/1408 f90). Thatcher told FitzGerald in a plenary session later in the second day of the summit, “We like you...we’re now tackling the problem in detail for the first time” (Moore, 2015: 320-321).

_Thatcher becomes more involved in Northern Ireland policy_

Thatcher’s desire to control the process was seen in her decision to personally amend the wording of a script to be delivered at the press conference after the meeting from “Dr. FitzGerald and I have just completed a friendly and useful bilateral meeting” to “Dr. FitzGerald and I have just completed the fullest, frankest and most flexible bilateral meeting” (PREM19/1408 f109). Thatcher’s need however, to be in control and be unrestrained in her views immediately undid the positive end to the summit meeting. During the press conference, Thatcher was asked about the conclusions of the New Ireland Forum report, which had been published earlier in the year, detailing three options for the future government of Ireland. Thatcher outlined the three possible solutions put forward by the report, unification, confederation and joint authority, as “out, out and out” (PREM19/1408 f33). Although this was not Thatcher’s intention, this caused significant difficulties for FitzGerald back in Ireland and led to a further crisis in negotiations (Goodall, 2013). The Irish feeling of ‘doom and depression’ deepened (PREM19/1408 f30) after FitzGerald faced a hostile reception from the backbenchers within his party and the media. FitzGerald’s standing with his party and public was at an all-time low (PREM19/1289 f32). Thatcher accused FitzGerald of ‘souring’ the atmosphere between Anglo-Irish relations by making unhelpful remarks (CAB 128/80 f15).
Thatcher’s reaction after the summit meeting did little to dampen Anglo-Irish relations. FitzGerald accepted that Thatcher had not intended for her press conference to cause the reaction it did in Dublin (PREM19/1289 f32). FitzGerald was keen for Thatcher to honour their next meeting, previously agreed at Chequers (PREM19/1408 f32) and the Irish foreign minister Peter Barry delivers a speech days later conveying a positive tone about Anglo-Irish relations (PREM19/1289 f22) stating that no effort will be spared to enable a viable initiative to be attempted (PREM19/1289 f45). Dick Spring, the Tánaiste, planned to decide with the Irish cabinet how best to deal with the damage caused and remained committed to continued Anglo-Irish dialogue in order to find a solution to the Northern Ireland problem (PREM19/1289 f38). Despite this, there was a “general feeling of frustration and despair” amongst the Irish leaders about the situation (PREM19/1289 f21).

British officials had noticed this and therefore they, not the government ministers Hurd and Howe, worked to gently manoeuvre Thatcher to respond positively to the Irish effort. The British Foreign Office were keen for Charles Powell to remind Thatcher that Barry’s speech was an effort by the Irish government to start the fence-mending process. Armstrong also urged Thatcher not to abandon the process reminding her that “we cannot afford to do nothing” (PREM 19/ 1289) and warning her that a change in leader or government in Ireland would undoubtedly undermine the progress that had been made between the British and Irish governments. Armstrong was keener than Hurd for the talks not to collapse as he and Nally had invested so much in them.

1985 signalled a new realism following the aftermath of the summit meeting with the British more willing to accept that the Irish would hold a referendum revising articles II and III in their Constitution and the Irish were more willing to accept that joint authority would not be on the table (Moore, 2015: 325). In January 1985 the Irish agreed to consider a detailed draft, proposed and written by the British, which emphasised consultation rather than joint authority. This allowed British sovereignty to remain whilst also allowing the Irish government to have an institutionalised influence on British decision making in Northern Ireland (Goodall, 2013). Thatcher refused later in June however to concede to Irish requests for joint
courts and SDLP requests for radical changes in the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) (Thatcher, 1993: 401).

1985 saw Thatcher involve the British cabinet in an unprecedented way in Northern Ireland policy. The cabinet, for the first time, were invited to give their opinions on the draft agreement. Previous cabinet involvement in Northern Ireland policy was limited to the cabinet being updated a few times a year on policy without allowing members any influence over the outcome. Deepening worries about the unionist reaction required cabinet approval for such a contentious agreement (Thatcher, 1993: 400). In July 1985 the cabinet approved the draft AIA with little opposition, despite cabinet members later not being willing to defend it in public (Moore, 2015: 328). Northern Ireland policy continued to be discussed in cabinet at a level never previously seen in the Thatcher years, not just in the lead up to the AIA but also afterwards, being discussed in every cabinet for the remainder of 1985.

On 25th July 1985, Hurd and Howe jointly presented the draft agreement to cabinet, Howe more forcefully than Hurd, tried to get the cabinet to agree by telling his colleagues that the current agreement is considerably scaled down from what the Irish wanted (CAB128/81). Howe tried to get the cabinet to see the deal as a British victory being acutely aware as Foreign Secretary of the negative implications of not getting the agreement signed. The cabinet were provided with an unprecedented detailed (secret) 38 page briefing paper about Anglo-Irish relations and the possibility of an AIA (Howe, 1995: 422). The cabinet were reminded that in February 1984 they had authorised exploratory talks and that the dialogue had now resulted in a possible agreement aimed at easing the security situation in Northern Ireland, reaffirming the status of Northern Ireland and helping to bolster the SDLP’s standing in order to oppose Sinn Fein in elections. The cabinet were not explicitly told about the Armstrong/ Nally talks. They were asked to agree to the government signing the agreement described by Hurd and Howe as “a prize well worth having” to aid long term stability in Northern Ireland and beneficial to international relations, particularly with the United States. Hurd and Howe warn that failure in the negotiations could do the British government “real damage”. They both acknowledge though that the unionist reaction is likely to be “negative” but that moderate unionists could concede that an agreement of greater co-operation with the Republic over terrorism could be a substantial gain. They suggest that any opposition
should be channelled into Parliament. Hurd and Howe emphasise that the Irish government would have no executive or decision making authority (CAB129/219). In cabinet discussion, it was agreed that unionist opposition could most probably be contained. The cabinet invited Thatcher, Hurd and Howe to continue negotiations with the Irish government and to bring the proposed agreement back to cabinet, for further consideration, before it was finally signed (CAB128/81).

Northern Ireland was discussed again in cabinet meetings on the 30th October and 7th November and then again in the next seven consecutive cabinet meetings in the lead up to, and aftermath of, the AIA. Never before in the Thatcher years had Northern Ireland been discussed so much in cabinet. This emphasises the importance of the AIA. Although the detail of the agreement had been decided by civil servants, guided by ministers, in the Armstrong and Nally talks, the cabinet had ample opportunity to debate the final agreement before it was signed. Despite this, when Thatcher presented the cabinet with the proposed AIA, it was as a result of nearly two years of official talks between British and Irish officials. It was incredibly difficult for the cabinet to refuse to rubber stamp the policy or to make any substantial changes to the details of the agreement. Therefore, although Thatcher, alongside the Foreign Secretary and SSNI, invited cabinet discussion over the AIA, the cabinet had little opportunity to influence the agreement or to refuse to support it in public. The decision had been made to go ahead and the cabinet’s role was how to help ensure that it was implemented and there was limited damage from unionist opposition.

By the time the next draft agreement was presented to cabinet, Hurd had been replaced by Tom King as SSNI, himself moving to the more prestigious post of Home Secretary. The new SSNI, Tom King, and Geoffrey Howe, who had remained Foreign Secretary after the September reshuffle, presented the cabinet with a further proposal for the final AIA on 30th October 1985. Cabinet approved for the government to sign the AIA in 31st October 1985, whilst Parliament was sitting (CAB128/81), helped by King and Howe re-iterating to the cabinet that the agreement was not the ‘joint authority’ that the Irish government initially wanted. The cabinet were asked to approve the agreement, to be signed in November, and it then be debated in Parliament (CAB129/219). There was no trouble getting the agreement passed, especially once the cabinet had been informed that the agreement
did not concede anything significant (Moore, 2015: 332). Although a few members of the cabinet expressed “grave reservations” most believed that the agreement would be received positively both in Parliament and in the country as a whole (CAB128/81).

The new agreement was a careful balance of British and Irish interests. It provided further reassurances to the unionists through the formal recognition from the Irish government about the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and that this will only change with the consent of the majority. The minority in Northern Ireland would be similarly reassured by the establishment of the Intergovernmental Conference, where the Irish government could put forward their views, staffed by a small joint secretariat, located in Belfast.

Once the cabinet had approved the agreement, Thatcher was keen to get on (Moore, 2015: 332-333) but was acutely aware that there would be wider opposition to the agreement and that this needed to be dealt with. The following cabinet meeting on 7th November, and the last one before the agreement was signed, saw the cabinet advised about how to deal with the media, during the difficult period, before the agreement was signed (CAB128/81). A week later, after securing further concessions from the Irish government, Thatcher told the cabinet that her, King and Howe were “in no doubt that it was right to go ahead with the proposed agreement” and that the agreement was more favourable to the British government than the media had reported. In response, the cabinet confirmed its decision that Thatcher should sign the agreement (CAB128/81).

*The signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement*

The AIA was signed by Thatcher and FitzGerald at Hillsborough Castle in Northern Ireland at 2pm on Friday 15th November 1985. Although the debate over judges in Northern Ireland remained unsolved because agreement only included the promise to consider joint or mixed courts (Thatcher, 1993: 402), the AIA was extremely significant. Although the Irish did not get joint authority, they did get the ‘consultative’ structures implemented over a range of subjects. This, although not
joint authority, was joint responsibility. From this, mutual confidence was built, over time, by the British and Irish governments and between future PMs and Taoiseachs. Without this aspect of the AIA, future agreements, such as the Downing Street Declaration, would have been much more difficult to agree (Goodall, 2013). The signing of the AIA did not however lead to significantly improved Anglo-Irish relations in the short term. FitzGerald failed to keep his promise to Thatcher that Ireland would ratify the European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism (ECST) (Thatcher, 1993: 402) until 24th February 1986 when he eventually signed it but it was not implemented until December 1987 (Cunningham, 2001: 62). It marked the start of a new era in Anglo-Irish relations and a new focus on policy by the British government.

Section II: Key actors

Thatcher was the driving force behind getting the agreement after meeting in 1983 with the Irish Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald when they decided that something had to be done about Northern Ireland. Thatcher would meet with Armstrong to receive updates about how the situation was progressing. Although Thatcher did not dedicate much time to Northern Ireland, she did make it part of her agenda and she took a keen interest in a variety of solutions including re-drawing the boundaries to get rid of the Catholics. Thatcher knew however, that this was not possible due to the strong Catholic population in different parts of Northern Ireland (Interview with Robert Andrew). The Irish Independent newspaper accurately wrote after the November 1984 Anglo-Irish summit meeting at Chequers that “The North has been moved much higher on Mrs Thatcher’s personal list of priorities than it has ever been” (PREM19/1408 f58).

The group of officials charged with Northern Ireland policy and leading the negotiations between the British and Irish governments in the lead up to the AIA was initially kept deliberately small. The appointment of Hurd, a new SSNI in September 1984, was seen as an opportunity to widen the very small circle of individuals who had been involved during the Prior years (Thatcher, 1993: 399). Thatcher, for the first time, decided to allow senior officials from the NIO to be
involved (Thatcher, 1993: 399). Even after 1984, the group of individuals involved in Northern Ireland policy and privy to what was going on was so small that even Thatcher’s chief press secretary Bernard Ingham was not informed of the British and Irish government talks until days before the Anglo-Irish summit meeting in November 1984 (PREM19/1408 f194). John Coles, who was Thatcher’s Private Secretary, was also more of a gate keeper than a policy maker during this time so was not involved either.

The small group of officials, Robert Armstrong and Dermot Nally, along with the team of British officials: David Goodall (Senior Foreign Office representative in the Cabinet Office) and Alan Goodson (the British Ambassador in Dublin) and Irish officials: Michael Lillis (Head of the Anglo-Irish Relations division of the department for Foreign Affairs 1982-1985), Sean Donlon (Permanent Secretary at the Department for External Affairs) and Noel Dorr (Irish ambassador in London) met either in Dublin or London, or in a remoter location, every six weeks during 1984-1985 (Lillis, 2013). The outcome and decisive bargaining leading up to the AIA was undoubtedly shaped by the political leaders, Thatcher and FitzGerald, but the detailed negotiations were left entirely to this small group of British and Irish officials (Goodall, 2013). Thatcher had a high opinion of their abilities even though she had doubts about David Goodall because he was a Roman Catholic and on occasion lacked faith in Armstrong, suspecting that he was conveying messages to the Irish officials through Noel Dorr. Despite this, Thatcher was happy to let them lead negotiations and continue, even when she disapproved in theory (Moore, 2015: 318).

The Armstrong and Nally relationship

The relationship between Armstrong and Nally was one built on trust and respect. They liked each other and both had an enormous amount of patience and humour (Goodall, 2013). Unlike the politicians involved, the two men could separate themselves from the internal politics of the issues and could focus simply on the job in hand. They also had the experience of previously working together during the 1973 Sunningdale agreement (Lillis, 2013) where they had become highly skilled
negotiators and draftsmen (Goodall, 2013). Armstrong had not been directly involved in the talks himself at Sunningdale in 1973 but met Nally at a dinner at 10 Downing Street for the participants in the talks (Armstrong in Moore, 2015: 302).

Working alongside Armstrong and Nally was David Goodall. Goodall had been seconded to the Cabinet Office and was a senior Foreign Office representative. In addition, Sir Alan Goodison was the British ambassador in Dublin was a key figure in developing relationships with the Taoiseach and his wife over their shared love of Christian theology (Lillis, 2013); Goodall was a Roman Catholic of partially Anglo-Irish protestant descent (Moore, 2015: 302).

On the Irish side, Sean Donlan, who was Secretary of the Department for Foreign Affairs, was highly experienced having also been involved in the 1973 Sunningdale agreement. He also had unchallengeable access to President Reagan and the White House. This was crucial when trying to convince Thatcher to be more flexible when negotiating the agreement. Noel Dorr was the ambassador in London and later became Secretary of Foreign Affairs. Like Donlon, Nally and Armstrong, he had experience from his involvement in the Sunningdale agreement and was primarily tasked with drafting solutions when negotiations became difficult or unproductive. Michael Lillis, who was head of the Anglo-Irish Relations division of the department for Foreign Affairs (1982-1985), was also involved. Lillis had previously been a diplomatic advisor to the Taoiseach in 1981. In addition, Robert Andrew, the permanent Secretary for Northern Ireland from 1984-1987, joined the team of British negotiators once he took up his new post. Andrew was head of the department responsible for law and order in the North. Finally, towards the end of negotiations, Christopher Mallaby from the Cabinet Office joined the British team (Lillis, 2013). On the Irish side, Howe’s counterpart Peter Barry, Minister for Foreign Affairs, and the Tánaiste Dick Spring were crucial figures in talks and were central to numerous meetings between Irish and British officials. John Hume was also an important source of advice for the Dublin government at the time (Lillis, 2013). The two sides of the Armstrong Nally group were so close that the Irish side had ties created with the letters NA (Nally Armstrong) - dark green for the Irish side and maroon for the British side. The ties were worn by members of each side at future reunions (Moore, 2015: 302).
The first extended team of ministers, including Bourn and Brennan from the political arm of the NIO, met Armstrong, Goodall, Lillis and Donlan on 15th October 1984 (PREM19/1288 f164). They were drafted in, alongside others, for their specialist knowledge on policing, law and order, justice and devolution. It was the start of the widened circle of ministers and officials dealing with British government policy on Northern Ireland during the Hurd years. Andy Ward (who was Secretary in the Irish department of Justice) and Tony Brennan (who was a senior official in the NIO) both worked on the Constitutional and legal issues surrounding devolution. A small team were also brought in to deal with hard-line opposition to the AIA. Daithi Ó Ceallaigh (who later became Ambassador in London) was tasked with diplomatic fieldwork in Dublin and working with a number of Northern nationalists. Richard Ryan (who later became Ambassador at the UN) had the even harder task of winning round the sceptical grandees of the Conservative party. Ryan ran a campaign from the clubs of St James’s to win support for a combined Dublin-London approach to address the political crisis in Northern Ireland (Lillis, 2013). Robert Andrew’s appointment as Permanent Secretary for Northern Ireland in 1984 saw him also included in this group of key officials dealing with British government policy on Northern Ireland who met in early October to discuss the various proposals that had been put forward by both the British and Irish in 1984 (PREM19/1288 f164).

The group (Nally, Lillis, Donlon and Dorr from the Irish team and Armstrong, Goodall, Andrew and Goodison from the British team) met again on 17th December to discuss how to proceed given that after the November Anglo-Irish summit meeting, it was agreed that discussions should continue but that the Irish side wanted these talks to be tentative and exploratory. The Nally Armstrong group would meet again at the end of January 1985 after seeking further instructions from ministers (PREM19/1289 f6).

Ministers decide, civil servants advise?

After the Brighton bomb in October 1984, Robert Armstrong and Charles Powell persuaded Thatcher to widen the circle of those involved even more. Armstrong
argued that Sir John Hermon (the Chief Constable of the RUC), the Lord Chancellor and the Attorney General should be brought into the secret talks with the Irish government. Armstrong acknowledged that Thatcher had already agreed to widen the group to include Brennan and Bourn from the NIO but that with mixed law courts and an all-Ireland law commission to discuss, that the circle needed widening further. Charles Powell supported Armstrong’s suggestion and advised Thatcher that widening the circle further could contribute to slowing down the discussions as Thatcher wished after the Brighton bomb. Thatcher agreed to include the Lord Chancellor, Attorney General and John Herman (PREM19/1288 f110). Thatcher, however, dismissed Howe’s request on 23rd October 1984 for the Northern Ireland group to be widened further again to include the Lord President, the Lord Privy Seal and the Secretary of State for Defence. Howe argued that the time had come to consider establishing a small committee of ministers under Thatcher’s chairmanship to which he and Hurd could report. Howe believed that this would allow closer and systematic scrutiny of the exchanges between the British and Irish government. Thatcher dismissed this idea and annotates that “we need our own talks first” (PREM19/1288 f78). Thatcher also did not see any need for this committee to be established (PREM19/1288 f76). This emphasised how influential Armstrong and Powell were in advising Thatcher at this time and how much more she was prepared to listen to them than her ministers such as Howe.

Charles Powell was also a significant inclusion into Thatcher’s team in June 1984. He replaced John Coles as her Foreign Affairs Private Secretary (THCR 1/17/114/ f3). Powell became one of the few crucial individuals inside the tight knit group of advisors Thatcher had in No.10. Even after the 1987 general election Thatcher resisted moves to relocate Powell as he had spent longer than the standard time in the post for a civil servant. Thatcher refused, arguing that she needed Powell as nobody understood her thinking like he did (Hennessy, 2000: 405). Powell’s closeness and influence over Thatcher caused conflict in later years between No.10 and the Foreign Office and No.10 and Whitehall (Hennessy, 2000: 406). Powell became very closely identified with Thatcher and her policies (Yong and Hazell, 2014: 138). Nigel Lawson described Powell as ‘the dominant force in her private office’ (Lawson, 1992: 680).
Charles Powell was instrumental to the change in policy after the AIA, not just in relation to Northern Ireland. When Powell joined No.10, his influence on Northern Ireland was limited by the fact that the Armstrong and Nally talks were well on the way. Powell could not significantly change this and could not replace Armstrong in this process. After the AIA, Powell was significantly influential, not in Northern Ireland specifically but, in government as a whole and on issues relating to foreign affairs. This makes policy making in Northern Ireland elsewhere very different in the latter years of Thatcher’s premiership.

Robert Armstrong, who led the talks with Nally, was the most important individual involved in Northern Ireland during the Hurd years. Thatcher’s confidence in Armstrong was critical to the success of the Anglo-Irish negotiations and agreement in 1985 (Goodall, 2013). There is a view which suggests that Robert Armstrong manoeuvred Thatcher and gently pushed her into agreeing to sign the agreement (Interview with Ken Bloomfield) and that Armstrong and Goodall were the ones driving the policy surrounding the AIA (Interview with Joe Pilling). This was true to a large extent. Armstrong and Nally, on the Irish side, were desperate for the agreement to succeed in a way that Thatcher never was (Moore, 2015: 341). Armstrong and Goodall, in the Cabinet Office, were skilled civil servants who were far more expert in Northern Ireland affairs than Thatcher was. Despite the fact that Armstrong never overstepped the mark, and always observed all of the proprieties, he and Goodall frequently disagreed with Thatcher and went behind her back; their meetings were primarily aimed at how to handle Thatcher (Moore, 2015: 303). Goodall notes that “it is very fair to say that we were all trying to persuade her...we did a bit conspire” and great lengths were gone to oppose what they saw as Thatcher’s mistakes (Goodall in Moore, 2015: 342).

Armstrong’s role in leading the secret Anglo-Irish talks with Nally allowed him to take charge of producing the speaking notes for meetings, summarising the latest British government position on Northern Ireland policy. This allowed Armstrong to steer Thatcher’s thinking, as well as Hurd’s and Howe’s. Armstrong would produce the notes and they would then be sent to Thatcher and Hurd and Howe to comment on. Armstrong also controlled the timescale of the minutes. In October, Howe criticised Armstrong for not giving him more time to consider the issues outlined in the proposed speaking notes for a meeting between British and
Irish officials (PREM19/1288 f150). This allowed Armstrong to prevent Howe from having too much time to scrutinise, amend or delay the suggested speaking notes.

When Armstrong gave Thatcher the proposed speaking notes, which were a summary of the latest British government position on devolved government, including mixed law courts, policing and an Anglo-Irish Parliamentary body on 15th October, 1984, Armstrong told Thatcher that the notes are cautious and fall short of what the Irish government want and will need (PREM19/1288 f164). The Irish, on behalf of the SDLP, wanted measures which would show the minority community that the institutions of the state were becoming Irish as well as British, despite the preservation and acceptance of the Union (Goodall, 2013). Thatcher however, expressed concerns that the Unionists would resist an Anglo-Irish Parliamentary body with members chosen from London and Dublin and states that she could not agree to a joint draft declaration on Northern Ireland due to the Unionist objections (PREM19/1288 f164). Thatcher was concerned about the extent of Unionist objections and the possibility of the Irish amendment of articles 2 and 3 in their constitution, believing that the Unionists would prefer ‘an aspiration to unity’ than the Irish outright claim which currently existed (Thatcher, 1993: 399).

Hurd responded by stating that he is content with the proposed speaking notes, assuming that ministers are not committed to any of the individual ideas before the package as a whole is judged (PREM19/1288 f153). Hurd might not have been driving policy in Northern Ireland but he seemed satisfied with this and he was at least being informed about what was happening and being asked for his opinion. Hurd was also aware when he took the post of the extent to which Armstrong was involved that the process for conducting secret talks with the Irish government had already began. Thatcher needed Hurd to not upset the status quo or want to radically change anything (Interview with Douglas Hurd). Howe was less positive, stating that he would have liked more time to consider the issues. He did, however, agree to them being used so long as Thatcher is in agreement (PREM19/1288 f150).

The influence of Armstrong and Powell over Thatcher can be seen in Thatcher’s relationship with FitzGerald and the attitude towards the Irish in the lead up to the AIA. What is interesting is the increasing influence of Powell. At times
Powell seemed more cautious about proceeding forward with the Irish than Armstrong, and Thatcher listens.

In December 1984 Powell thought that the Irish are asking for too much. “PM, the Irish still harbour unrealistic expectations” was Powell’s response to the minutes from the latest Armstrong Nally meeting. Powell’s hesitancy about the reality of moving forward and reaching an agreement was reflected in Thatcher’s thinking who becomes more cautious writing “the Irish want more than we can give and always will. I doubt whether we shall find a way forward” (PREM19/1289 f6).

Despite this, Powell still encouraged Thatcher to set a date for the next Anglo-Irish summit meeting, with March or April 1985 mooted as a suggestion. Thatcher noted that a political framework needs to be considered in Northern Ireland that is acceptable for both communities (PREM19/1289 f18). Powell put this on the agenda for a pre-summit meeting in mid-January (PREM19/1289 f16). Although Thatcher was listening to Powell, Armstrong remained an important figure; without him, there is a strong possibility that Thatcher would have abandoned the AIA. The fact that Thatcher was still keen to consider, and come to an agreement over, a political framework shows the continued influence of Armstrong.

Thatcher agreed to a private meeting with FitzGerald in December, against her will, believing that the less that was said the better (Moore, 2015: 322) after the fallout from the November summit meeting press conference. It would have been Armstrong who persuaded Thatcher to meet with FitzGerald who pleaded with Thatcher for extra sensitivity after 800 years of misunderstanding (Thatcher, 1993: 401). Thatcher was growing increasingly tired of the constant emotion from the Irish. Others from the British team shared this view with Alan Goodison noting “emotion is a constant factor in Anglo-Irish relations with which we have to deal”. (PREM19/1289 f32).

Armstrong’s influence can be seen in the speech that Thatcher gave following the Dublin Castle meeting on 5th December where she took great care with the Irish media (PREM19/1289 f19). Although Thatcher refused FitzGerald’s request to say something nice about the Forum report and to recognise the problems of the minority in the North for fear of giving the impression that she was backing down, Thatcher’s speech was well received by the Irish media and went a long way
in relieving the pressure that had built up in the proceeding weeks. FitzGerald found Thatcher’s speech useful as it helped him to convince the Irish cabinet how great the difficulties were in reaching an agreement with the British. Dermot Nally believed that “she was feeling rather guilty about the damage she felt she had done and did her best to make it up to him” (Moore, 2015: 323).

By the end of 1984, even though Thatcher doubted that progress can be made, she was still determined to continue with discussions and to try to find a solution rather than simply doing nothing. This archive challenges opinion by David Goodall who at this time felt that the November 1984 summit meeting and December Dublin Castle meeting had been a watershed moment. Goodall reports that this was the moment in which the Irish knew that they would not get joint authority and must settle for less (Moore, 2015: 323). This is in direct contrast to the archival evidence from 17th December 1984. Perhaps, the individuals involved on the British side knew that this was the turning point, even if those on the Irish side had not yet conceded their ambitions of joint authority.

Throughout 1985, a lot of progress had been made in the official talks (Thatcher, 1993: 402) between Armstrong and Nally. By the middle of 1985 there was a widely accepted draft which had been agreed by both sides, likely to be signed later that year (Goodall, 2013). When Thatcher met with FitzGerald on 29th June 1985 at the Milan European Council and despite the high levels of tension and disagreement, there was a belief between them too that an agreement would be reached. The Irish were prepared to publicly state that there would be no change to the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority of people living there, which did not exist. Thatcher agreed to consider the idea of joint courts. Thatcher and FitzGerald even discussed the timing and place that the AIA signing ceremony would take place (Thatcher, 1993: 402).

Perhaps the reason that so much progress was made during the Hurd years was because Thatcher allowed her ministers and officials to be the primary negotiators and architects for the AIA. Hurd observes that at the beginning of every meeting Thatcher would begin at square one, discussing things that had already been dealt with previously (Hurd, 2003: 335). Perhaps, the enhanced role and numbers of people involved in the AIA from September 1984 took some of the policy
responsibility away from Thatcher and therefore allowed progress to be made much faster.

_The NIO and FO are excluded_

The Cabinet Office, the Foreign Office and the Northern Ireland Office were the three main elements of negotiation on the British side of the AIA. It was, however, not the Foreign Office or the NIO but the Cabinet Office who Thatcher put in charge of discussions with the Republic of Ireland. Thatcher had made this decision during the Prior years (Moore, 2015: 302) after FitzGerald’s request for continued secrecy. It was decided therefore that the Foreign Office and NIO should not be included in the small group of officials who were involved in the Anglo-Irish talks. Armstrong briefed Thatcher on FitzGerald’s views stating “He would not want the Foreign Offices involved on either side, because one never knew what got out on to diplomatic telexes; and he would not want the NIO involved, because if they were what was being discussed would become known about all over Northern Ireland.” (PREM 19/1408/1, 8/11/83, Armstrong to Thatcher). Thatcher was more than happy for this to happen. Thatcher preferred to rely on civil servants within her own office and the Cabinet Office than more general civil servants in other departments (Yong and Hazell, 2014: 23). Thatcher was happy for the civil servants Robert Armstrong and David Goodall to be key players in the lead up to the AIA but not the civil servants in the NIO (Interview with Joe Pilling). The talks between the British and Irish officials were kept, and remained, a secret (Interview with Hurd).

During the Hurd years, the specific details of policy continued, however like during the Prior years, to be led by the British official and cabinet secretary Sir Robert Armstrong and his Irish counterpart Dermot Nally. The Armstrong Nally process, after 1981 when it had been set up by Thatcher and FitzGerald, became formally known as the steering committee of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental council. Its formal role was to keep contacts between London and Dublin, even when times were difficult, and to consider matters that were of mutual concern to both governments (Moore, 2015: 302). This group continued right up until the agreement
was signed in November 1985 (Interview with Tom King). This left little room for NIO or FO involvement.

Under Douglas Hurd, the NIO were instead tasked with much of the day to day running of Northern Ireland. The NIO provided Hurd and the British government with more favourable advice. They were keen to keep the province running and did not want political arguments to get in the way of doing that. Many of them were very experienced and had been specially selected from the Foreign Office when the NIO was established in 1972 (Interview with Douglas Hurd).

Another reason why the NIO and FO had little involvement in the AIA and Northern Ireland policy during the Hurd years was the opposing positions they took. Howe and the Foreign Office were willing to go further when negotiating with Dublin and were willing to go as far as to accept joint authority with Dublin. Howe saw the issue from FitzGerald’s point of view (Moore, 2015: 341) but both Thatcher and Hurd thought that joint authority was going too far. Thatcher opposed it and Hurd supported her. They both felt that giving equal rights to both governments was unacceptable. Thatcher refused to make the concessions that the Foreign Office wanted and the concessions were, in the end, not granted (Interview with Douglas Hurd). Although the civil service in the Foreign office favoured a united Ireland, the NIO civil service as a whole did not publicly share this view and did ultimately believe that an agreement could be achieved (Interview with Douglas Hurd). The Foreign Office argued that it was in Britain’s best interests for the North to be governed by the Irish government (Hurd, 2003: 337). Privately too, some individuals within the NIO in the Conservative party, such as Jim Prior, did believe that a united Ireland was in Britain’s best interests but it could not be pursued without the necessary support in the North (Interview with Richard Needham). Due to the difficulties in the positions of the Foreign Office and NIO, civil servants were very much kept in the dark about early Anglo-Irish talks and in the lead up to the AIA.

Although the Foreign Office were seen to be ‘too green’ and sympathetic to Irish nationalism, it was in fact Armstrong in the Cabinet Office who was the most ‘green’ of them all (Moore, 2015: 302). It was Armstrong who was most emphatic that the Unionists should be kept out of the AIA discussions because, in his view, the Unionists and the union were not affected by the agreement (Moore, 2015: 327).
Armstrong and Goodall were also able to sympathise with FitzGerald and the Irish in a way that was never reciprocated on the Irish side towards Thatcher (Moore, 2015: 341). The Cabinet Office and the Foreign Office were more impatient to get the situation sorted as soon as possible because they had other interests. Some of them would have accepted more extreme agreements with the Irish government than the NIO were willing to accept. During these times, the Permanent Secretary would be the voice of moderation and would explain that a more cautious approach was needed as any agreement would have to be implemented in Northern Ireland (Interview with Robert Andrew). Any agreement would also need approval from Thatcher and the cabinet.

The role of the Cabinet

During the Hurd years, as the Anglo-Irish talks intensified in the lead up to the AIA, the cabinet had to be told. The cabinet was informed on a need to know basis. They were kept involved in general terms but they did not need to know the details of operations (Interview with Robert Andrew). Before this, both the British and Irish cabinets had been completely in the dark about the talks. FitzGerald’s view was “only a small group of Irish Ministers was involved and he had said nothing to the rest of his Cabinet. The discussions would have to be kept to a very restricted group of people.” (PREM 19/1408/1, 8/11/83, Armstrong to Thatcher). And Thatcher was happy to go along with this in Britain. By not telling the cabinet, Thatcher faced less potential opposition.

Northern Ireland was rarely on the cabinet agenda for Northern Ireland, only being discussed from time to time (Interview with Robert Andrew) after events such as the Brighton bomb (CAB 128/79 f154). After this, policy had to be re-evaluated and the cabinet had to decide if the British government should continue with talks with the Irish. At the request of Norman Tebbit, who encouraged the cabinet to support the AIA of 1985, talks continued between the British and Irish (Interview with Douglas Hurd). The support from Tebbit helped to persuade Thatcher (Moore, 2015: 328) to continue; she was too cautious on Northern Ireland to bulldoze ahead with her own views without any support (Interview with Douglas Hurd). Thatcher,
however, was relieved that Tebbit ensured cabinet support for the continuation of talks because even though Thatcher would rage about having to talk to the Irish, she never once said that we shouldn’t be speaking to them (Interview with Douglas Hurd).

Although the cabinet appear to become more involved in Northern Ireland policy during the Hurd years, in reality they are not. As Anglo-Irish talks progressed, the cabinet was informed about Northern Ireland policy at an unprecedented level. Thatcher briefed the cabinet after the 1984 Anglo-Irish summit meeting at Chequers (CAB 128/79 f212). Thatcher did not however seek opinion from the cabinet, instead she informed the cabinet formally about her discussions with the Irish Taoiseach (CAB 128/80 f15). The cabinet were simply given facts about a meeting, most of which have already been revealed in the British and Irish media, and told only what they need to know. Northern Ireland wasn’t discussed again until May 1985 and this was, again, to simply brief the cabinet on relations between the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Irish Garda Siochana (CAB128/81) and then again on 4th July to discuss the marching season (CAB128/81).

Despite this, during the Hurd years, a small group of individuals within the cabinet were important to policy making in Northern Ireland. Although the Cabinet Office were charged with leading the Armstrong and Nally talks (Moore, 2015: 302), Hurd, as SSNI and Geoffrey Howe, the Foreign Secretary remained key figures (Interview with Douglas Hurd). At times, the Secretary of State for Defence Michael Heseltine would also be included to discuss the role of the army in Northern Ireland, which they were in charge of (Interview with Richard Needham). Finally, the Attorney General would be drafted in when necessary. The Chancellor would only ever be present when there was a wider negotiation about the funding of Northern Ireland in general. This core group continued to dominate policy making in Northern Ireland, just as they had in the start of the Thatcher years, and this seamlessly continued into the later Thatcher years and into Major’s time as PM (Interview with David Brooker).

This, however, was not an official cabinet committee on Northern Ireland. (Interview with Richard Needham) and there was not a regular cabinet committee (Interview with Robert Andrew). Thatcher dismissed Geoffrey Howe’s suggestion
in October 1984 to create an official ministerial committee which also included the Lord President, the Lord Privy Seal and perhaps the Secretary of State for Defence (PREM19/1288 f78). This was unlike the cabinet committees which existed for Defence and Overseas development (Interview with Robert Andrew). This meant that these cabinet ministers were limited to some extent in their input into Northern Ireland policy.

*The significance of Sir Geoffrey Howe*

Howe, however, managed to play a crucial and constructive role on the British side. His role was to keep Thatcher ‘positive’ during negotiations. He understood that some level of compromise, with Irish and nationalist demands, was needed to secure peace in the North (Goodall, 2013). He had a great deal of influence and was crucial in determining relations between the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Howe was the most enthusiastic of all ministers for an agreement between the British and Irish government (Moore, 2015: 325). Hurd, as SSNI, would lead the discussion but would have to give way to the Chancellor Nigel Lawson in relation to the budget or Heseltine in relation to the numbers of troops supplied by the Ministry of Defence. The balance of how decisions were made changed and depended very much upon the specific issue in hand (Interview with David Brooker).

Hurd and Howe would be joined by Armstrong, and at times Heseltine, upstairs in No.10 Downing Street in Thatcher’s study and would thrash out policy. If there ever was a significant policy decision to be made, Thatcher would always need to approve it (Interview with Peter Brooke). Robert Armstrong was the only civil servant included in this group (Interview with Douglas Hurd). This was the equivalent of a cabinet committee on Northern Ireland. Although it was never officially referred to as an official cabinet sub-committee until the Major years when Patrick Mayhew was SSNI (Interview with Peter Brooke).
Northern Ireland cabinet committee

The Northern Ireland committee was established in the Major years on the advice of the Cabinet Secretary Robin Butler who thought that without this, there was a risk of fracturing the consensus. Butler believed that the support from the cabinet as a whole was needed. It enabled the government to discuss key issues relating to Northern Ireland with key ministers. It was a way for John Major to bring in powerful colleagues who might be competitors. For example, when the Observer newspaper leaked information acquired from the Irish government, who had been told by Sinn Fein, that the British government had been in talks with the Republicans, the permanent Secretary was able to use the committee to talk to key people and gauge the wide variations of opinion (Interview with John Chilcot). The aim of the committee in the Major years was not to make policy or settle tactics but was a way by which everybody in the government was kept on side (Interview with Joe Pilling). It was important to keep the significant players in cabinet and big beasts such as Ken Clarke, Michael Howard and Michael Heseltine on side. Major needed to take a broad sway of the cabinet with him so ensured that the cabinet committee met regularly to discuss the issues (Interview with Jonathan Stephens). This was not necessary for Thatcher during the Hurd years. After the 1983 general election, Thatcher had removed most of her opponents from within her cabinet and could govern unchallenged. She did not need to consult the cabinet in the form of a cabinet committee to keep the big beasts and her rivals happy.

Part III: The Thatcher – Hurd relationship

Douglas Hurd was appointed as SSNI in September 1984 after Jim Prior had resigned from the role to become chairman of the GEC. He had previously been a mandarin in the Foreign Office. Hurd admitted that when he took over the post, had no clear idea what policy to pursue in Northern Ireland aside from wanting to improve the willingness of the south to tackle terrorism (Interview with Douglas Hurd). This worked out well because Hurd was asked by Thatcher to simply maintain status quo in his new role (Hurd, 2003: 334). Hurd’s lack of experience
made him ideal for this role at this particular time. When Hurd was appointed in September 1984, the Armstrong and Nally talks were progressing well and policy in Northern Ireland was focused upon trying to get these talks to result in some sort of an agreement between the British and Irish governments to ease the security situation in Northern Ireland. Thatcher therefore, needed to appoint a minister, like Hurd, who did not want to radically change anything (Interview with Douglas Hurd). Thatcher described Hurd as being willing to work in the new ‘ideological climate’ (Thatcher, 1993: 399).

Due to the need for seamless continuation, Hurd, unlike Prior, was not given the opportunity to select his own ministerial team but nevertheless was happy with the ministerial team he was given (Hurd, 2003: 330). Hurd acknowledged that for most of time in the position he did have to maintain the status quo, as he was initially asked to. This was not for any ideological reasons but simply because direct rule could not be replaced by any short term political initiatives at this time (Hurd, 2003: 334). Hurd knew that part of his ‘maintaining of the status quo’ involved him keeping the assembly going, that he had inherited from Prior, and the people happy at the top of the political system such as Ian Paisley, Jim Molyneaux and John Hume. Hurd knew that the success and the continuation of the Armstrong and Nally Anglo-Irish talks was dependent upon this. Hurd had a three-part role; keeping in touch with the assembly and political parties in Northern Ireland, the security aspect which had to be kept secret and the Anglo-Irish talks which also had to be kept a secret. During the Hurd years, there was progress made on all three fronts but it was incredibly slow (Interview with Hurd).

Hurd’s brief as SSNI might have been to maintain the status quo and Anglo-Irish talks may have started when Prior was Secretary of State but it was Hurd that continued with the talks and managed to get Thatcher much more involved in them. Hurd and others, such as Robert Armstrong and Geoffrey Howe, managed to get Thatcher to go further than any other Secretary of State had done and got her to sign the AIA, although this happened officially a few weeks after Douglas Hurd left the post of SSNI. Hurd was instrumental in persuading Thatcher that signing the agreement was for the best. He, like Thatcher, was more wary of the agreement than Armstrong and Howe so his opinion mattered to her. Thatcher and Hurd’s good relationship resulted in his promotion to the post of Home Secretary after leaving
Northern Ireland in September 1985. Hurd and Thatcher shared a similar outlook on Northern Ireland. When Hurd took over from Jim Prior, Thatcher found an ally in Hurd. Hurd was a moderate unionist, despite this background in the Foreign Office (Moore, 2015: 318). Both Hurd and Thatcher were a lot less willing to go as far as some foreign officials and Geoffrey Howe in negotiating with Dublin. This caused tension between the Foreign Office, the NIO and the position of No 10 Downing Street. It was well known that Thatcher distrusted the Foreign Office (Moore, 2015: 299).

Even though Thatcher signed the AIA in November 1985, Hurd argued that during his time as SSNI that she had little interest in Northern Ireland, just like during the Prior and Atkins years before him. Thatcher lacked ‘feel’ for the problem (Moore, 2015: 298). Security always came first to Thatcher and she was perpetually dissatisfied about the Republic’s contribution to dealing with the security issues (Moore, 2015: 299). Michael Lillis noted that Thatcher was unwilling to engage in any discussions that were focused on anything other than security with the Irish government. She was not interested in discussing political progress (Lillis in Moore, 2015: 303). Her focus was simply on preserving the union and tacking the security issue. The archival evidence challenges these views, conveying that in the lead up to the AIA, Thatcher did immerse herself in Northern Ireland policy like never before and persevered to come to an agreement with the Irish government. Hurd and Lillis may be right when they say that Thatcher’s focus was security and that she had genuine little interest but this did not prevent her from securing the AIA, which was a significant agreement at the time.

Thatcher was well briefed on the affairs of the province but she herself had no personal vision of how Northern Ireland could be governed more successfully (Moore, 2015: 298). Thatcher relied on Robert Armstrong, her cabinet Secretary, to negotiate with the Irish officials about the details of the AIA and therefore she felt like she did not need to keep herself updated or make all the decisions herself. At the beginning of meetings Thatcher would therefore begin at square one, discussing things that had already been dealt with previously and coming up with the same ideas (Hurd, 2003: 335 and interview with Robert Andrew). It made the whole process very slow (Interview with Douglas Hurd).
Although Hurd and his ministers were able to get on with running Northern Ireland without direct interference from Thatcher as she did not visit the province often (Interview with Hurd), from the start, Hurd was constrained by the path dependency of policy but even more so by individuals, such as Robert Armstrong, who were the real key players in the direction of policy and had been for the majority of the Thatcher years. Hurd and his ministers were able to get on with domestic policy but nothing that affected security or Anglo-Irish relations. When these policy issues arose, Armstrong carefully managed Hurd and ensured that he was not able, even as Secretary of State, to do or say anything that he had not authorised. Armstrong wanted to ensure that nobody derailed his and Nally’s progress in the Anglo-Irish talks. In a memorandum dated 10th October 1984, Armstrong advised Thatcher about the early sounding out of the political parties in Northern Ireland, about some of the key issues discussed in the secret talks between the British and Irish government, before the Anglo-Irish summit meeting on 19th November. Armstrong told Thatcher, in no uncertain terms, to ensure that Hurd confines himself to only probing the Unionist party about their ideas which they have suggested, such as a bill of rights (PREM19/1288 f160) even though Hurd had wanted to go further with talks. This confirms that Hurd’s role is very much to ensure that things tick over and that he is to simply follow instructions to ensure that the progress between the British and Irish governments continues.

**Constraints on Douglas Hurd**

Hurd was also constrained by the foreign secretary Geoffrey Howe who, with Armstrong, tried to ensure that Hurd is not able to influence the process that they had been working on in the preceding years. Hurd readily accepted Armstrong’s request and reconsidered how to handle discussions with the political leaders in Northern Ireland (PREM19/1288 f153) but Howe appeared unhappy that Hurd was reconsidering what to say. Howe told Hurd that he questions his judgement and has substantial reservations about the ideas he proposes and what he plans to say to the political parties when he meets with them in relation to majority rule with safeguards that Hurd plans to express an interest in. He warned Hurd that he did not think that
he would be able to keep the talks as hypothetical as he assumed and re-iterated Armstrong’s instructions of what Hurd can and cannot say. Howe asked Hurd to talk to the leaders in Northern Ireland but to offer them no more than what courtesy demands (PREM19/1288 f112). Howe was clearly under pressure, as foreign secretary, to ensure that there was an improvement, rather than a deterioration, in Anglo-Irish relations. Howe was worried as Hurd was much more pro unionist than his predecessor Jim Prior. This was evident when Howe told Hurd that the Irish foreign minister Peter Barry would see Hurd’s plans as embarrassing for the Irish government if they were leaked before the summit meeting. Howe advised Hurd to proceed with caution as ignoring Barry’s wishes would lead to a row with the Irish government and that it could cause damage to the summit meeting. This was not a significant breakdown in relations between the Foreign Secretary and the Northern Ireland Secretary, but it does reveal tension between the departments in government and the competing interests. Howe was more likely to come out on top as he had been in his post much longer than Hurd and understood the relationships between the key players. This was important in Northern Ireland policy as progress was made from building these relationships and the trust that went with it. Howe also wanted a similar outcome to Armstrong who Thatcher listened to most.

The different ideological positions of Hurd compared with Armstrong and Howe continued throughout the Hurd years and intensified as Armstrong and Howe came closer to securing an AIA and needed to alienate the Unionists more in order to achieve this. Hurd was very different from his predecessor Jim Prior who was much more likely to have made concessions with the Irish and supported the idea of joint rule, which Hurd opposed (Interview with Douglas Hurd). Hurd wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK, unlike Prior who on occasion argued that it was in Britain’s best interests for the North to be governed by the Irish government, but Hurd was wary to parade his views in public (Hurd, 2003: 337). Armstrong and Howe, however, were aware of Hurd’s position and eventually Hurd became marginalised because he did not fully support the content of the agreement or the exclusion of the Unionists.

This began merely weeks after Hurd became SSNI in October 1984 when Armstrong advised Thatcher not to brief the Unionists, or other party leaders, in Northern Ireland about the secret talks between the British and Irish governments
before the summit meeting. Armstrong warned Thatcher that any premature disclosure could wreck the process, as talks were only exploratory and without a commitment of principles, and potentially bring down FitzGerald’s government. Armstrong urged Thatcher not to arouse Unionist suspicions unnecessarily or risk such a confrontation until she makes a deliberate decision Thatcher (PREM19/1288 f160). Armstrong was the architect behind consciously keeping out the Unionists a year before the AIA was signed.

Thatcher chose to listen to Armstrong who she trusted when dealing with the situation in Northern Ireland rather than Hurd who was the Secretary of State. Hurd warned Thatcher that the government cannot be seen to mislead the Unionists. He also stated that it would not be possible for him to avoid discussing the Irish dimension when he meets with the parties in Northern Ireland because of Prior’s speech in July which said that the British government would talk to all the parties in Northern Ireland as well as the Irish government.

Hurd tried to change Thatcher’s mind but he did not succeed. Hurd attempted to convince Thatcher that he could briefly mention the subject to the Unionists without provoking an extreme reaction because they will have nothing to complain about after the summit meeting as no deal was planned. Hurd’s sympathy to the Unionists was reiterated when he suggested that he could also take the opportunity to remind the Unionists that, whatever the outcome of the summit meeting, the British government would remain committed to no change of status to Northern Ireland but that cooperation with the Irish government would be needed to deal with the security issue. Hurd sets out exactly what he would say about sovereignty and the SSNI remaining in charge. Thatcher reacted angrily to this; writing that Hurd’s suggestions would “raise the very fears they seek to alleviate” (PREM19/1288 f103) emphasising that she would rather listen to Armstrong’s advice than Hurd’s. Hurd’s role here was less about maintaining the status quo and more about following the policy set out and not questioning it. This is emphasised in Thatcher’s formal response to Hurd, which states that she has taken on board what he has said, alongside the views of Howe and Armstrong about what should be said to the Northern Ireland parties. Thatcher asked Hurd to remove any mention about the summit from his proposed notes for the discussions with the Northern Ireland parties and to re-write them, taking into account her views and those suggested by Howe,
which she agreed with. Thatcher told Hurd that she wanted to see his revised notes early next week (PREM19/1288 f85). Hurd agreed to seek Thatcher’s approval for what to say to the Northern Ireland parties, on 5th November, nearer the time, depending on developments between now and then (PREM19/1288 f75).

Thatcher faced pressure as PM to preserve her relationship with the Irish Taoiseach and Anglo-Irish relations. Charles Powell, Thatcher’s Private Secretary and primary foreign policy advisor, tried to mediate between Armstrong and Hurd. He acknowledged Armstrong’s worries about the risk of confrontation with the Irish if the details about the Anglo-Irish talks were discussed with the Unionists before Thatcher met with FitzGerald. He also reminded Thatcher that Hurd is obliged to meet with the parties and had to say something. Powell advised Thatcher to let Hurd talk to the parties under the lines agreed by Howe. He told Thatcher that what Hurd proposed was already very modest but Thatcher’s response was “I think that we can’t go ahead even with these vague talks without his (FitzGerald’s) agreement” (PREM19/1288 f101). This highlights Thatcher’s concern about losing the trust and faith with FitzGerald and not making progress at the forthcoming AIA. It also reveals Powell trying to find a compromise between Hurd, Howe and Thatcher to move things forward whilst ensuring that they all have a meaningful role, including Hurd.

The issue of exactly what to say to the political parties in Northern Ireland, particularly the Unionists, about the talks between the British and Irish governments is one of the most contentious issues of 1984. The vast number of archives reveal the number of exchanges and debates which took place when deciding on what should be done and whether or not to inform the Unionists. The key players are Thatcher, Hurd, Howe, Charles Powell and Robert Armstrong. Powell plays a pivotal role in getting Thatcher to authorise each decision and carefully tries to reach compromises between the position of No.10 (who do not want to break the trust that has carefully been built up between Armstrong and Nally and Thatcher and FitzGerald), the NIO (who are uncomfortable with mis-leading the Unionists) and the Foreign Office (who do not want to damage Anglo-Irish relations by bringing down FitzGerald’s government).

This debate reveals how far Thatcher had progressed with Northern Ireland policy since 1979. She was not making snap decisions based on her own preferences
or she would have allowed the Unionists to have been informed and involved. Instead, she was carefully considering the best decisions for the process and was directly involved in ensuring that relations with FitzGerald and the Irish government were not damaged. Thatcher was also carefully controlling every part of the process and ensured that everything, especially what Hurd says to both leaders in Northern Ireland and Irish ministers, was agreed by her first. It emphasises that although it may appear that Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland had a great deal of autonomy, this only applied to domestic policy.

Despite the progress that Thatcher had made in relation to Northern Ireland policy, one of the biggest barriers to Anglo-Irish relations at this time was that although Thatcher always behaved courteously while a foreign guest was in the room she was less restrained when she was talking to the press. Thatcher got into a position where she was misbehaving and overstating her arguments (Interview with Douglas Hurd). This was awkward for the rest of the ministerial team and team of officials but it also had a negative impact on Anglo-Irish relations.

It was not just Thatcher who the Irish government were unhappy with. Dick Spring, the Tánaiste, described Douglas Hurd’s statement about the summit as ‘astonishing and unacceptable’ due to selective references he made to issues discussed in the confidential summit meeting between ministers (PREM19/1408 f30). Hurd had made a statement in Belfast, at a Press conference, during which he disclosed some of the details discussed at Chequers, such as the Joint Security commission, but dismissed anything going beyond that (PREM19/1408 f33). This was the beginning of Hurd’s demise as SSNI. The Irish government made it clear that Hurd was not welcome in Dublin. They believed that, unlike Thatcher, he deliberately breached confidentiality in order to damage the process and benefit the Unionists. Instead, the Irish government said that Howe would be welcome at future meetings (PREM19/1289 f32).

Thatcher and Hurd’s comments in the separate press conferences led to a severe deterioration of Anglo-Irish relations and a considerable crisis in relations between the two countries (PREM19/1408 f23). FitzGerald described Thatcher’s response, and a rejection of the forum report, as ‘gratuitously offensive’ (PREM19/1408 f30 and f23). Peter Barry described Thatcher’s behaviour as
‘disgraceful’ (PREM19/1408 f30). Michael Noonan, the Irish Minister of Justice, warned Alan Goodison, the British ambassador in Dublin, that the Irish government’s ability to deal with terrorism had been weakened as the current crisis had increased the Irish public’s tolerance of the IRA (Thatcher, 1993: 400). It had also led to the Irish cabinet wanting to review their Northern Ireland policy at once (PREM19/1408 f23).

**Opposition in Parliament**

Although Douglas Hurd was not constrained in policy making by his own party colleagues, the opposition that came from the Unionists and SDLP required further Prime Ministerial intervention. On 23rd November, Hurd met with John Hume to ascertain his thoughts on the current situation and how best to proceed. Hume suggested that Hurd also held talks with Peter Robinson and Dr Paisley who agreed to hold bi-lateral talks with leaders of the other political parties including John Hume’s SDLP (PREM19/1289 f25). Charles Powell, however, advised Thatcher that she should also agree to meet Hume as it would improve relations with FitzGerald and the Irish government (PREM19/1289 f44). This took away some of the responsibility and autonomy of Hurd. The continuous sniping from both Ian Paisley leader of the Democratic Unionist party and John Hume, the leader of the SDLP (Interview with Douglas Hurd) required intervention from a higher level than Hurd.

Hurd was further side-lined as it was not him but Robert Armstrong, the Cabinet Secretary, who advises Thatcher as to how questions should be answered in the House of Commons relating to Northern Ireland and the secret talks between the British and Irish government. This was to ensure that Hurd did not reveal to the House and Unionists any details about the secret talks between the British and Irish governments. Armstrong also strongly controlled what Hurd was allowed tell the House of Commons. This could have been due to Armstrong’s knowledge that Hurd was more sympathetic to the Unionists. When answering ministerial questions on Northern Ireland, Armstrong suggested that Hurd could tell the House that he was continuing the talks with the Northern Ireland parties which Prior initiated and that
Thatcher was meeting with the Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald on 19th November, providing an opportunity to continue the process. Armstrong warned Thatcher and Hurd against saying any more, even if they were pressed for further information. Armstrong also reiterated that there will be Unionist opposition to this as the government confirmed that they are in talks with the Irish government. Armstrong advised that this should be enough to tell the House until after Thatcher met with the Taoiseach on 19th November. After that, the line delivered to Parliament would depend on the outcome of the meeting (PREM19/1288 f160). Hurd confirmed to Thatcher that he would follow Armstrong’s advice and would avoid informing the House about the secret talks between the British and Irish governments (PREM19/1288 f103).

Hurd was not needed to deal with internal party conflict over Northern Ireland policy either. The Conservative party broadly accepted what the government was trying to do in Northern Ireland and Thatcher’s standing in the House, and UK as a whole, was high enough to give her a mandate to move forward with Northern Ireland policy and make decisions such as talks between the British and Irish governments and the AIA (PREM19/1408 f137). Even after the Brighton bomb, influential figures within the Conservative party, such as the Lord Chancellor Lord Hailsham, emphasised the need to continue to fight against such forces of darkness (THCR 1/1/23 f188).

*Bipartisanship continues*

Nor was Hurd needed as SSNI to convince the opposition Labour party to support the government’s policy in Northern Ireland. Although the Labour party had traditionally been more in favour of Irish unity, bipartisanship continued during the Hurd years. This was primarily down to the fact that the Labour party did not have any obvious policy alternatives to offer (Interview with Robert Andrew). Even when Kevin McNamara, who was more antagonistic than his predecessor Peter Archer, became shadow SSNI in 1987, bipartisanship was largely maintained (Interviews with Peter Brooke, Richard Needham and David Brooker). This meant that unlike other Secretaries of State, who at the time faced fierce opposition from their Labour
party shadow ministers, Hurd did not. This does not mean that the opposition Labour party agreed with everything that was being done by the Conservative government in Northern Ireland but Labour were definitely less likely to attack the government on Northern Ireland than other issues (Interview with Ken Bloomfield). This was very similar to the approach when the Conservatives were in opposition before 1979 and did not pose too much opposition to the Labour party in power over their Northern Ireland policy (Interview with Brian Cubbon).

The main aim was to try to make policy work and hope that the security situation would improve (Interview with Robert Andrew). The idea of bipartisanship, therefore, never prevented the Conservative government with moving forward with policy (Interview with Douglas Hurd). Bipartisanship worked to the extent that the opposition party were reluctant to criticise or denounce what was being done by the government in Northern Ireland. The main disagreement during the Hurd years came over the issue of Irish unity, with both the Labour party and the Americans more in favour of a united Ireland. During the 1980s however, the Conservative party were able to convince both the Labour party and the Americans that Irish unity would never be feasible without the support of the North. At this time, the North did not support this. It was, therefore, not Labour Party opposition that Thatcher and Hurd needed to worry about when the agreement was signed in November 1985.

*The AIA causes more opposition in Parliament*

The signing of, and the build up to, the AIA had a huge impact as opposition to the agreement within the Conservative party and from the Unionists grew to such an extent that this required Prime Ministerial, not ministerial, action. It was Thatcher, not the Secretary of State, who was required to defend the AIA and exclusion of the Unionists from the process. This was also required because in September 1985, Tom King replaced Douglas Hurd as SSNI. Hurd moved to the post of Home Secretary. King was in charge when the agreement was signed but had no significant part to play in it; the details had been agreed before he took up the post and the details had been agreed largely by Armstrong and Nally. Hurd was no longer in the Northern
Ireland department and wanted no credit for it as he opposed the way that the Unionists were excluded.

There was tension between Thatcher and both her Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland over the decision to exclude the Unionists from the AIA negotiations. Tom King was ‘alarmed’ when he took over the post and realised the extent to which the Unionists had been ignored and the SDLP led by John Hume had been fully briefed by the Irish government. King warned Thatcher that the Unionist reaction after the agreement had been signed would lead to ‘unmanageable and unwelcome consequences’ (Moore, 2015: 330-331). Douglas Hurd and the NIO tried to convince Thatcher to give more thought to the Unionists but there had been surprisingly little discussion about the decision to deliberately exclude the Unionists from the process. Thatcher ignored Hurd and King in the September before the agreement was signed in the November, and instead was led by her Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong. He was the individual who was most adamant that the Unionists be excluded from all discussions because he believed that the agreement did not affect the Unionists or the union. David Goodall, who worked in the cabinet office at the time on the agreement, reported that the exclusion of the Unionists was ‘uncomfortable and indeed unfair’ (Moore, 2015: 326-327). Even Garret FitzGerald initially disliked negotiating over the heads of the Unionists, who he saw as fellow Irishmen but it suited the Irish to tell the Unionists as little as possible. Hurd was so annoyed with Thatcher’s decision to listen to Armstrong and exclude the Unionists that he offered to tell Jim Molyneaux about the negotiations on Privy Council terms and briefed Molyneaux and Ian Paisley, who was not a member of the Privy Council, on the progress of the agreement. The Unionists felt that the British government did not trust them (Interview with Tom King) and had sold them down the river to the Irish government (Interview with Robert Andrew) because of the decision to deliberately keep the agreement a secret from them. There was a sense that the main parties in Northern Ireland were excluded whilst the British and Irish governments decided on their fate (Interview with Ken Bloomfield).

It was not Thatcher or the Secretary of State, but the Northern Ireland Minister Nick Scott who was left to make a brief statement in the House of Commons, late at night, which failed to include the exact details which had originally been agreed, due to the extreme Unionist reaction (Lillis, 2013). The new
Secretary of State Tom King was charged with dealing with the domestic impact of opposition to the agreement and faced a very difficult time. It was anticipated that Unionist anger at the agreement was likely to cause industrial action in Northern Ireland (CAB128/81). The Unionists threatened a strike (Interview with Robert Andrew) and on 3rd March 1986 they called a general strike referred to as a ‘Day of Action’ (Moore, 2015: 337). The main problem was the relationship between the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Garda (Interview with Tom King) but Thatcher and the government also faced particular opposition from the RUC and Sir John Hermon as they had to defend the AIA and maintain order on the streets of Northern Ireland even though they despised it (Lillis, 2013).

Thatcher dealt with initial opposition in Parliament by ensuring that members did not have the complete details about the agreement until she had signed it with FitzGerald. Thatcher would brief the Leaders of the Opposition, Liberal party, Social Democratic party and Ulster Unionist party under Privy Council terms about the contents of the agreement before it was signed. It was anticipated that a few members of the Lords would oppose the agreement (CAB128/82). Most members of the cabinet agreed to support the agreement despite some expressing “grave reservations” (CAB128/81).

Tom King, the new SSNI, believed that Thatcher had not anticipated the strength of opposition from Unionists (Moore, 2015: 337). After the AIA was signed, Thatcher was seen as the ‘betrayer to decent Unionists’ (Lillis, 2013) and it caused a lot of bad blood between her and the more Unionist MPs (Interview with Lord Lyell). Previously, Thatcher had only faced criticism from a couple of backbenchers on the right wing of the Conservative party (Interview with Robert Andrew) but now key individuals on the right wing of the party were particularly enraged (Lillis, 2013). This was despite the fact that the AIA was passed in the House of Commons by 473 to 47 votes, one of the largest margins of any vote in the twentieth century, and received overwhelming bipartisanship support from MPs of all parties (Hansard: HC Deb 27 November 1985 vol 87 cc884-973). The Labour opposition praised the agreement as a means of advancing a united Ireland (Moore, 2015: 336), which made the Unionist opposition fiercer. The agreement was also praised by the British media (Moore, 2015: 335).
Thatcher was particularly unhappy that the AIA led to two resignations - Ulster Unionist MP Enoch Powell and her Parliamentary Private Secretary Ian Gow (Thatcher, 1993: 403). Thatcher was ‘deeply offended’ when Enoch Powell accused her of “treason” and promised her “public contempt” (Moore, 2015: 333). Thatcher was even more bothered by the resignation of Gow who was a very close friend and advisor to Thatcher. David Goodall remembered that the resignation “seriously upset and rattled her” (Moore, 2015: 335). It came as a big shock to Thatcher that Gow was prepared to resign from the government over Northern Ireland, especially as Thatcher had frequently taken Gow’s side over Jim Prior’s despite the fact that Gow was not her Secretary of State and Prior was.

Due to the widespread opposition and horror at the AIA within the Unionist community, it was Thatcher who was needed to attempt to appease the Unionists during a joint press conference on 15th November 1985 at Hillsborough. Thatcher believed that Article 1 of the AIA would reassure the Unionists that the Irish government would not seek to enforce a united Ireland upon them (Goodall, 2013). The Unionists refused to be appeased by this, nor did they wish to take advantage of the opportunity for the establishment of a devolved, power-sharing administration (Goodall, 2013). Thatcher, having listened to Armstrong, believed that the AIA should be attractive to the Unionists, both within her own party and in Northern Ireland, because the Irish government involvement would be ‘out’ if issues were devolved to a cross-community assembly and power sharing executive (Lillis, 2013) but the Unionists did not want to be a part of it or accept the AIA. Thatcher had ignored the warnings of her Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland over the strength of Unionist opposition but if she had, the AIA would not have been signed.

*International aspect: pressure from the United States*

Thatcher faced significant international pressure to come to an agreement with FitzGerald over the future of Northern Ireland which neither Hurd nor King as Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland could say anything to risk. Nevertheless, the NIO and the SSNI remained more involved than expected, given the internationalism of the issue and the expectation that the foreign office would take
more control. Thatcher gave Hurd the task of keeping the American dimension within bounds and ensuring that the Americans stopped supporting the IRA. Hurd visited the US to discuss British government policy in Northern Ireland and made speeches up and down America.

Allowing Hurd to do this was significant. The American dimension was one of the biggest constraints in moving policy forward during this time. The US was dangerous because it gave the IRA credibility by blaming the British government for the situation in Northern Ireland. This increased support for the IRA within the community in Northern Ireland and in the South (Interview with Richard Needham). The US never placed any direct pressure on the British government to change policy but a number of individuals misunderstood Britain’s role in Ireland. This meant that the British government had to constantly validate their position and policy (Howe, 1995: 422). Hurd’s frequent visits to the US played an important role in doing this.

Despite the fact that the internationalism of the Northern Ireland issue also required a higher Prime Ministerial profile, Thatcher was happy for her ministers to control policy. Thatcher was still annoyed from 1979 about the arms to the RUC disagreement and this was revealed at times throughout the Anglo-Irish discussions (Interview with Douglas Hurd). In addition, there had been a more recent row between Britain and American over Grenada (Moore, 2015: 307-308).

This changed as more pressure was put on Thatcher to keep the US and Reagan happy. Thatcher became more involved in the significance of Northern Ireland on an international stage. She was keen to ensure that America did not view the British government, and herself, as doing nothing (Moore, 2015: 308). The pressure, however, did not come from Reagan himself but Thatcher’s foreign advisor Charles Powell. According to Reagan’s National Security Advisor, Judge William Clark, Reagan did not feel strongly about the Irish issue despite his Irish name and ancestry. It was Charles Powell who urged Thatcher to keep ‘that old Irishman Reagan on side’ as the Irish had an even more intimate relationship with Reagan than the British (Moore, 2015: 308). Powell knew that if Thatcher improved relations with Dublin that this would make Reagan’s life easier in Congress due to the Irish influence, particularly from the Irish American Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill whose support Reagan needed in Congress in order to pass legislation.
The turning point was the Brighton bomb in October 1984. The Americans, and President Reagan in particular, were very sympathetic to the British government after this event. Reagan wrote to Thatcher promising that the British and Americans must work together. Reagan also told Thatcher that due to their ‘special relationship’ he had directed his experts to work with the British to bring the perpetrators to justice (THCR 3/1/41 f33). In February 1985 Thatcher addressed both Houses of Congress, making a well-received speech about the British quest for stability and peace in Northern Ireland (Moore, 2015: 323-325). Over the next few months, in the lead up to the agreement, Thatcher was warned by Charles Powell that the Americans would be disappointed if the agreement did not go ahead and cabinet failed to agree to it (Moore, 2015: 332). Thatcher became more involved and invested in the outcome of the AIA and as such, the views of the NIO and SSNI become less important than those internationally.

Thatcher described the signing of the agreement as putting Britain ‘on side’ with the Americans (Moore, 2015: 336) due to the US welcoming the agreement (CAB129/219). The wider international reaction was also very favourable to the signing of the AIA (Thatcher, 1993: 403) with the German Chancellor Helmut Kohl describing it as ‘historically significant’ (Moore, 2015: 336). From an international perspective, Thatcher was relieved when the agreement was signed as she did not want to be seen by the watching world as being hostile to the process of peace and reconciliation (Moore, 2015: 301).

Once Thatcher believed that her reputation was at stake, she became more determined to ensure that the agreement was signed. As Thatcher became more involved, Hurd’s role became less important. This is worsened by the significant influence that Charles Powell had over Thatcher and the outcome of the AIA. Hurd was much more cautious than Powell about the agreement and as such, Hurd became more marginalised in relation to the US. This was worsened further by increasing tensions between Hurd and the Irish government. As divisions deepened between the NIO and the Irish government, Thatcher could not have Hurd involved in policy making in relation to either the US or Ireland.
The demise of Douglas Hurd

Tensions rose significantly between Hurd and the Irish government during the AIA negotiations and this led to the marginalisation of Hurd and ultimately his demise. This was not that long into Hurd becoming SSNI in September 1984. The Irish government accused Hurd and the NIO of being too sceptical about the agreement and pro-Unionist. They fought hard against Hurd who did not believe that the Irish should risk a political referendum on articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution (Lillis, 2013). Hurd was much less willing that Prior, his predecessor, to accept joint rule with the Irish government. Hurd also did not share Prior’s view that Northern Ireland should not remain part of the United Kingdom (Hurd, 2003: 337). Hurd had always been a moderate Unionist and shared the same doubts as Thatcher about the AIA (Moore, 2015: 318) therefore, although Hurd took a keen interest in the AIA, he was realistic about what it could achieve (Interview with Robert Andrew). This put him at odds with the Irish and other officials who believed that it would have a significant impact.

Only two months after Hurd had been in the post, relations between him and the Irish government worsened further. This led to Hurd’s demise as SSNI almost as soon as he had taken up the role. Hurd was excluded from the remaining key talks leading up to the AIA due to comments he made at the post-summit press conference in Belfast in November 1984, in which he appeared to dismiss the problem of 'alienation' among Catholics in the north, leading to a strong reaction in the Irish media (PREM 19/ 1289). Dick Spring, the Tánaiste, described Douglas Hurd’s statement about the summit as ‘astonishing and unacceptable’. The problem was worsened even further by the accusation that Hurd had made selective references to issues relating to a possible Joint Security commission, which has been discussed in the confidential summit meeting between ministers at Chequers (PREM19/1408 f30). The Irish government made it clear that Hurd was not welcome in Dublin. They believed that, unlike Thatcher, he deliberately breached confidentiality in order to damage the process and benefit the Unionists. The Irish officials also blamed Hurd for not keeping Thatcher in check. Richard Ryan from the Irish Embassy in London believed that Jim Prior would have never let Thatcher continue with her ‘out, out
and out’, speech in November 1984. The Irish believed that Howe was much more able at managing Thatcher (Moore, 2015: 321). The Irish used the marginalisation of Hurd in the talks leading up to the AIA as an opportunity to get Geoffrey Howe and the Foreign Office, rather than the NIO, more involved in the talks. The Irish government said that Howe, as a substitute for Hurd, would be welcome at future meetings (PREM19/1289 f32), most probably due to their belief that Howe could manage Thatcher and ensure that an agreement was reached. The final AIA was primarily negotiated and created however, by Thatcher and FitzGerald the Taoiseach (Lillis, 2013). Even Tom King, who took over from Hurd in September 1985, had no part to play in it (Interview with Tom King).

Thatcher’s belief that Hurd had not been treated fairly can be seen in her decision to promote him to one of the four most important cabinet posts, Home Secretary, in the September 1985 cabinet reshuffle. This did, however, mean that Hurd was less involved in international relations and issues concerning the Irish government. Hurd therefore might have been marginalised by the Irish but this was not the case within the British government. This emphasises that relations between Thatcher and Hurd remained positive and that Thatcher trusted Thatcher to run one of the biggest government departments – the Home Office.

Thatcher believed that she could confidently move Hurd out of Northern Ireland so close to the AIA being signed because the detail had already been agreed and Armstrong and Nally were the architects of it. Thatcher did not have to worry that there would be a repeat of the Sunningdale agreement which was signed in December 1973 but collapsed months later due to Willie Whitelaw’s removal from the post of SSNI at the most critical point. Moving Hurd out at such a sensitive time, when continuity was needed, was a risk. It confirmed that although Northern Ireland was a national problem, it was still subordinate to other issues in the mind of the British PM Margaret Thatcher (Interview with Ken Bloomfield). Geoffrey Howe commented that he “did not regard this change as either necessary or desirable” (Howe, 1995: 424). The Irish saw the change as an ‘insult’, despite their refusal to include Hurd in key Dublin meetings. They thought that with the agreement so close to being signed yet still so vulnerable to collapse, changing the SSNI, who was a key individual in the process, implied that Thatcher did not care about Ireland and was happy to shuffle her ministerial team like chess pieces (Moore, 2015: 330).
Thatcher’s decision to shuffle Hurd from Northern Ireland to the Home Office regardless of opposition emphasises that she refused to be instructed by the Irish, the US, her cabinet or advisors. Despite it appearing that during 1984 and 1985 Thatcher was being manoeuvred into agreeing to the AIA, she was still very much in control of the situation.

**Conclusion**

Although the Hurd years were significantly shorter in time than the Atkins or Prior years, it is here that we see the most surprising evidence relating to Thatcher and Northern Ireland. Previous chapters have revealed that Thatcher was more involved in Northern Ireland than we expected, primarily due to her allowing the Armstrong and Nally talks and secret talks with Republicans and meeting with the Irish Taoiseach. Thatcher’s actions in the previous chapters centre on her authorising things to happen, relating to Northern Ireland, around her. Although this is subtle involvement, it is important and reveals more about Thatcher and Northern Ireland than we already knew. What is most illuminating in this chapter is the level of commitment and determination Thatcher shows in ensuring that an agreement is reached with the Irish government. By knowingly keeping the Unionists in the dark about the agreement, Thatcher even goes against her personal sympathies towards the Unionists, as outlined in the Thatcher chapter due to its connections to conservatism and the Conservative party. This results in close friends, such as her PPS Ian Gow, resigning from government. Thatcher took a great risk in not only signing the agreement but agreeing its contents. Thatcher went along with Robert Armstrong’s insistence that the Unionists could not know about the agreement if it was to be successfully reached.

From the end of the Armstrong years when Armstrong carefully manipulates Thatcher into ensuring that he is charged with leading the preliminary talks with Dermot Nally, and into the Prior and Hurd years, we see the influence of Armstrong and his ability to persuade and manoeuvre Thatcher increase. This chapter also sees the introduction of Charles Powell, Thatcher’s foreign policy advisor. The Hurd years confirm what we would expect governance under Thatcher to be like in the
mid-1980s based on the evidence in the existing literature on Thatcher and the core executive. Thatcher becomes increasingly reliant on advisors, at the expense of her cabinet ministers. Hurd is very much marginalised, quite soon into the post, at the request of the Irish government and due to American pressure, because of his cautious approach to the AIA. Howe, as foreign secretary, remains a central figure. What is not clear in this research whether Howe is sidelined in other areas of foreign policy due to Charles Powell. It is likely that he is as Powell remains influential until 1989. Despite the marginalisation of Hurd in the build up to the AIA, Thatcher later promotes him to Home Secretary and appoints Tom King to replace him. This tells us something about Thatcher as a leader; she let the Irish government exclude Hurd but she then exalted him when the opportunity arose.

The next chapter looks at the King years and beyond. The AIA was signed in November 1985 after Hurd had left office and King took over in September 1985. By then the agreement had been outlined and there was very little room for changes or for Tom King to significantly influence proceedings. What the next, and final, chapter does reveal is the aftermath of the AIA and Thatcher’s regret over signing it. It also explains why the tone of policy changed after its signing and Thatcher became less involved in Northern Ireland affairs.
Chapter 6: Tom King and beyond

By studying the newly released government archival material from when Thatcher became PM in May 1979 until she signed the AIA in November 1985, it brings further nuance and sophistication to our understanding of the developing peace process in Northern Ireland; for it was Thatcher’s involvement in the AIA that set the precedent for PM involvement in the Downing Street Declaration and GFA. On the basis of this research, the finding is perhaps a surprising one: that Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland, though intermittent, was much greater than has previously been appreciated, and without this involvement there could have been no AIA. The Thatcher years leave a legacy in Northern Ireland and set out a blueprint for successive PMs to follow. Key themes continued to dominate policy – the existence of bipartisanship which makes the transition between Thatcher and Major in 1990 and Major and Blair in 1997 smooth regarding Northern Ireland policy, just like the transition from Callaghan to Thatcher in 1979. The need for all-party talks in Northern Ireland continued to be a key aim and the international influence of the United States remained a constant consideration. The channel and link which were opened during the early Thatcher years is again opened during the Major years and direct talks were eventually held with Sinn Fein. This is a progression from the ‘feelers’ that Tom King began during his time as SSNI after the signing of the AIA. The legacy that is most significant however, is the realisation that without PM involvement, there was never going to be any improvement to the situation in Northern Ireland. Thatcher realised this early on in her premiership and even though this thesis shows that her involvement in Northern Ireland was greater than realised, it remained intermittent and this hampered progress. Likewise, Thatcher’s refusal to compromise over issues such as the hunger strike and during negotiations leading up to the AIA re-iterated the importance of PM involvement and the negative impact that such a position could have.

This chapter will briefly examine Northern Ireland policy during the later Thatcher years under Tom King and Peter Brooke. It will then look at the legacy of the Thatcher years, Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland, and the significance that this had on later agreements leading to the eventual end of the conflict. By looking at Major and Blair’s time as PMs during the Northern Ireland conflict, and
their involvement, we can draw wider conclusions about Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland in a comparative setting and identify precedents for Northern Ireland policy which were set during the Thatcher years.

Tom King: Secretary of State for Northern Ireland September 1985 – July 1989

The Tom King years and beyond symbolised a change in Anglo-Irish relations and Thatcher’s approach to Northern Ireland policy. The previous years during Prior and Hurd’s time as SSNI and even during Atkins’ time as SSNI had been focused on working towards the AIA, even if this was not known at the time. The AIA reflected Thatcher and the British governments desire to get strong on security with the Republic whilst also trying to nudge the politics along (Interview with David Brooker). Once the AIA was signed, a new approach was needed in Northern Ireland. In addition, Thatcher’s later regret at signing the agreement and in her view giving too many concessions to the Irish sees the second half of the Thatcher years take a different approach to the first. Despite this, Thatcher began to embrace more than just the security policy, which she had been reluctant to at the beginning of her time in office, and accepted that it was the right way to go (Interview with John Ledlie). The close relationship between Dublin and London, which started during the build up to the AIA, continued throughout the Thatcher and Major years and was vital to the success of later agreements (Interview with Joe Pilling). The AIA resulted in a very different relationship between London and Dublin during the later Thatcher years but the importance of the relationship continued to be recognised even if it was not developed (Interview with Joe Pilling). In the later Thatcher years, King did manage to build up a relationship with his Irish counterpart, the Minister for Foreign Affairs Brian Lenihan (Interview with Tom King). King’s main focus, as SSNI for most of the remaining Thatcher years, however was dealing with the Unionist opposition to the AIA and setting up ‘feelers’ in Northern Ireland to communicate with all sides in the conflict.

The focus after the AIA and during the King years moved away from simply coming to an agreement with the Irish government to making contact with key individuals in Northern Ireland (Interview with John Chilcot). This made the King
years very different to those leading up to the AIA under Atkins, Prior and Hurd. The King years saw Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland policy change. Thatcher had previously only involved herself in Northern Ireland policy when dealing with the Irish government and international aspects. Thatcher never really got involved with the day to day running of Northern Ireland, as seen in Northern Ireland not being run under the same Thatcherite policies as mainland Britain. Thatcher also saw the SSNI as responsible for dealing with the parties in Northern Ireland rather than her. Therefore, Thatcher was less involved in Northern Ireland policy during the King years as the focus moved away from Dublin and towards Northern Ireland. Major and Blair’s involvement, unlike Thatcher, with the parties in Northern Ireland allowed them to make significantly more progress than Thatcher in Northern Ireland in the 1990s.

Although Tom King was the SSNI when the AIA was signed in November 1985, he had no hand in it, having only been appointed the September beforehand, and was therefore able to separate himself from it (Interview with Tom King). Thatcher had told King when he took over the post that she was determined to push the agreement through but the details of the agreement were already set in stone to such an extent that Thatcher refused to consider King’s suggestion to re-consider the balance of the draft agreement, which he believed strongly favoured the Irish (Moore, 2015: 331). King wanted to remove the commitment to consider joint courts but the Foreign Secretary, Geoffrey Howe, was concerned that any amendments so close to the signing of the agreement could lead to the whole thing collapsing. Thatcher upheld the existing agreement, siding with Howe over the newly appointed King (Howe, 1995: 425). According to Thatcher’s Foreign Affairs advisor Charles Powell, Thatcher did not see the ‘garrulous’ King as a match for the intelligence and experience that Armstrong and Howe possessed. Thatcher had just demoted King to the post from Employment, in a similar way in which she did to Jim Prior, so she was not going to cancel the agreement on his say so (Moore, 2015: 330-331).
After the AIA

King was not against the AIA in principle and supported the general idea that there would be no change in Northern Ireland without the consent of a majority of its citizens (Interview with King). Therefore, although he was initially highly sceptical of the value of the agreement, he did later become more enthusiastic about it (Thatcher, 1993: 403). Tom King continued to govern Northern Ireland in a very similar way to Douglas Hurd before him and Jim Prior before that. All three SSNI were on the fairly liberal wing of the Conservative party and throughout this time, there was not any conscious strengthening of right wing influence (Interview with Ken Bloomfield). Just like during the early Thatcher years, and before that, King as SSNI was given great autonomy on a day to day basis when running Northern Ireland. Thatcher rarely intervened.

King was sent to Northern Ireland to handle the aftermath of the AIA (Interview with Richard Needham) and his first months in office required him to deal with the problems of the presentation of the AIA and the secrecy surrounding it (Moore, 2015: 330). King spent the first few months of 1986 attempting to win over the support of some Unionist leaders and explain to the Unionist community what the British government was trying to achieve (Thatcher, 1993: 403). King got a hard time from the Unionists over the signing of the agreement and the way in which they had been kept in the dark (Interview with Tom King). Although King had absolutely nothing to do with the AIA, the Unionists still saw him as the instrument of betrayal because he was in the post when the AIA was signed (Interview with Peter Brooke). King sympathised with them, thoroughly disliking the effect that the AIA had on the Unionist community and the hurt and betrayal they felt. King believed that Thatcher had underestimated the strength of unionist opposition and she was grateful for his efforts in containing it (Moore, 2015: 337).

In the summer of 1986, the Cabinet voted to dissolve the Northern Ireland assembly, as it was not serving a useful purpose. No further elections were held (Moore, 2015: 339). King focused his attention after this time on winning support from the political parties in Northern Ireland, including the Unionists, knowing that until this happened that power sharing could not be returned to Northern Ireland. In
order to win support from the political parties in Northern Ireland, with the eventual hope of establishing power sharing, King focused on making contact with key individuals in Northern Ireland. Similar methods had been used in the Humphrey Atkins and Jim Prior years to deal with the hunger strike but it was King who really re-started the re-engagement with the Republican movement (Interview with John Chilcot). Thatcher’s agreement to use such lines of communication in 1980 and 1981 paved the way for King to do the same in the later 1980s.

King used the new political landscape after the AIA to put out ‘feelers’ to Catholic priests who made contacts and asked questions on behalf of the British government. These sources were used to deliver the message that the British government had no selfish or strategic interest in Northern Ireland (Interviews with Tom King and Robert Andrew). This was the first step towards the opening up of the back channels again and a new chapter in British government policy in Northern Ireland which continued throughout the Thatcher years under the radar of even the successive SSNI Peter Brooke (Interview with Peter Brooke) and ministers. This was because the discussions were led by officials rather than government ministers (Interview with Michael Ancram). The civil servants made progress when at times the government could not; they had to be trusted to get on with it, that way the government could deny any knowledge of it (Interview with Jeremy Hanley). The political organisation within the NIO was aware of the talks, but this was a very small group of people. Few, if any, politicians in London were aware or involved in the talks as many would have been very uncomfortable with it (Interview with John Chilcot). Thatcher was not involved in this and here we see the benefit of this; Thatcher could not disrupt the process and instead allowed the officials and civil servants to get on and try to make some progress.

These talks and links then intensified throughout the Major years and involved the Minister of State in charge of security, Michael Ancram who held official but not public talks with Sinn Fein (Interview with Peter Brooke) using the back channel which was re-opened for the first time since 1981 (Interview with Michael Ancram).

The aftermath of the AIA and the ‘feelers’ which began under Tom King dramatically changed the scope of British government policy in Northern Ireland
during the later Thatcher years and Major years. During the King and Peter Brooke years, an effort was made to improve the conditions in Northern Ireland, needed for political progress, by introducing the most stringent anti-discrimination and equality legislation in Europe to change the attitudes towards the nationalist community and ensure that all parts of the community were treated fairly (Interview with David Brooker).

Peter Brooke: Secretary of State for Northern Ireland July 1989 – April 1992

The King contacts, and carefully crafted speeches put together by Ian Burns who later helped write Brooke’s speeches (Interview with Joe Pilling), themselves did not have great effect but by building up valuable contacts and relationships, they paved the way for Peter Brooke and Patrick Mayhew who became SSNI in 1992 (Interview with John Chilcot) to open the door to further talks in the 1990s and the signing of the Downing Street Declaration under John Major (Interview with David Brooker). Approach rather than policy changed during the Brooke years and that was very significant (Interview with Ken Bloomfield). Brooke continued following King’s contacts and followed Thatcher’s instructions not to embark on any new initiatives before the next general election (Interview with Peter Brooke).

It appears that Thatcher ended her Northern Ireland policy as she began it, telling Brooke just like she told Atkins not to embark on any new initiatives but to ensure that the situation did not get any worse before the general election (Interview with Peter Brooke). Although this is true, the AIA that Thatcher signed in November 1985 stabilised the relationship with the Republic and established regular conferences between representatives from the British and Irish governments every six weeks and rotated between Dublin, Belfast and London (Interview with Peter Brooke). This is significant and would not have happened without Thatcher’s involvement in the AIA.

By the end of the Thatcher years, policy had shifted from being security focused (not making the situation any worse, dealing with the violence and hunger strikes and then trying to secure a deal with the Irish government in the form of the AIA) to trying to get the parties in Northern Ireland to talk with the eventual aim of
devolving power. The speeches which characterised Brooke’s time in office had a huge impact on thinking on policy in Northern Ireland and undoubtedly paved the way for the Downing Street Declaration. Brooke broke the mould with his speeches in a very deliberately attempt to send necessary signals to both communities in Northern Ireland (Interview with Ken Bloomfield).

Peter Brooke, Patrick Mayhew and John Major

Under John Major, Brooke started talks between the parties in Northern Ireland in March 1991, although Sinn Fein were not included. This continued under Patrick Mayhew as SSNI. The principles of the policy were well established by 1992. Mayhew’s role was to tactically handle what Brooke had started (Interview with Jonathan Stephens). Mayhew recalls that his “predecessor Peter Brooke had already negotiated successfully the rules which were to apply to the talks” with the Irish government and political parties in Northern Ireland (Interview with Patrick Mayhew). A consensus developed between Mayhew and Major, developing the framework for further talks with the Northern Ireland parties which paved the way for the start of the GFA (Interview with David Brooker).

The legacy of the Thatcher years on Northern Ireland

The Thatcher years left a legacy in Northern Ireland and set out a blueprint for successive PMs to follow. Most significantly, Thatcher’s involvement in the AIA set a precedent that Prime Ministerial involvement was needed if progress was to be made in Northern Ireland. Both John Major and Tony Blair were significantly more involved in Northern Ireland than Thatcher but followed her lead on the AIA to secure the December 1993 Downing Street Declaration and the April 1998 GFA. Peter Brooke remained SSNI when John Major took over from Thatcher as PM in November 1990 and therefore there was a smooth transition in Northern Ireland policy making. Brooke continued his talks with the parties, which his successor Patrick Mayhew also continued when he took over in 1992.
Although this thesis has shown that Thatcher was more involved in Northern Ireland policy than expected, John Major was significantly more involved in Northern Ireland than Thatcher. Due to his weak parliamentary position, he also involved his cabinet more in policy making. Major learnt from the AIA and Thatcher’s relationship with the Irish Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald that Prime Ministerial and Taoiseach relations were important. This allowed Major to achieve the Downing Street declaration. The most progress in Northern Ireland was made under John Major in the years 1990-1997. Major was the first Prime Minister not to dip in and out of Northern Ireland; he put it at the top of his priority list and this changed the policy. At this stage, nobody was talking. Major was determined to bring the parties back together to talk (Interview with Michael Ancram). Major took a personal interest and asked for constant updates on Northern Ireland, even if he was on holiday. He was the main advocate for peace in Northern Ireland (Interview with Jeremy Hanley). As Northern Ireland was coming up the political agenda during Major’s time, the real progress started. Northern Ireland had been largely ignored by Thatcher after the 1985 AIA because Thatcher simply wanted policy to continue as it was and for Peter Brooke to keep Northern Ireland ticking over until the next election.

There was a gradual change in attitude, not policy, from Thatcher to Major as the style of premiership changed. John Major was less interested in hard fast solutions. He recognised that there was an opportunity for him and Brooke, and then Mayhew, to do more. The clear financial and security plan continued from Thatcher to Major in 1990 (Interview with Lord Cope) but the aim from 1990 onwards was to try to build up contacts and improve Anglo-Irish relations and on the security front to stop violence being the dominant factor in the situation.

Major’s different personality to Thatcher and his conciliatory nature paid off in Northern Ireland negotiations. Major focused on the international dimension including Dublin, Europe and the United States which Tony Blair was able to continue (Interview with Paul Murphy). This was crucial. The Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds described the difference between Thatcher and Major as Prime Ministers as “he (Major) was prepared to listen” (Interview with Albert Reynolds). Both Dublin and London prioritised Northern Ireland and Major and Reynolds took a hands on, can do approach to getting things done (Interview with Brendan Smith).
John Major did not delegate the decisions, unlike Thatcher, and used the officials behind the scenes to prepare what he needed in order to make progress (Interview with John Chilcot). Throughout their time in office, they became very close and it made the peace process easier (Interview with Albert Reynolds).

John Major and Albert Reynolds established two important agreements during their time in office which paved the way for the later GFA. The British and Irish parliamentary body was established in 1993 which improved trust and relations between UK and the Republic of Ireland as frequent meetings were held between members of both governments (Interview with Brendan Smith). The body continued to meet frequently up until the 1997 general election. By March 1997, it had met thirteen times (Interview with David Mitchell). Second, the Downing Street Declaration was signed in December 1993, which Major was the driving force behind. This was vitally important as it proved that it was possible to get people talking (Interview with Albert Reynolds). It symbolised the start of real progress as it indirectly led to the IRA ceasefire (Interview with Michael Ancram). During all of this, Albert Reynolds kept talks going with Sinn Fein members Martin McGuinness who controlled the IRA and the cells within it and Gerry Adams who controlled the political side in order to try to secure peace (Interview with Albert Reynolds).

Policy stalled during the last eighteen months of the Major years due to the weak position of the Conservative party in the House of Commons (Interview with Michael Ancram) and the knowledge that there would soon be a general election which would produce a new government. Nobody in Northern Ireland or Dublin was willing to agree to a deal in the meantime with the outgoing government (Interview with Jonathan Stephens).

In addition, the change in government in the Republic of Ireland in December 1994 was significant as John Bruton took over from Albert Reynolds as Taoiseach and did not treat Northern Ireland as the same priority as he did not believe that peace was possible. The change to Bertie Ahern as Taoiseach in June 1997 changed the situation again as he prioritised Northern Ireland and got on well with the new British Labour government and Tony Blair (Interview with Albert Reynolds). The good relationship between London and Dublin and Washington, that Major set up,
continued under the Blair years and gathered even more momentum (Interview with Lord Dubs).

*Northern Ireland during the Labour years*

In May 1997 when Labour took over in government, they were able to make progress in Northern Ireland where the Conservative party never could by bringing Sinn Fein into the talks (Interview with David Brooker). The question has always been at what point to bring Sinn Fein into the talks (Interview with George Fergusson) but the House of Commons, under a Conservative minority government, would never have allowed Major and Mayhew to bring Sinn Fein into the talks without total decommissioning first. The lack of Sinn Fein involvement meant that the SDLP were also reluctant to get involved in the talks (Interview with Patrick Mayhew). Major had a hard enough time trying to convince opponents such as Michael Howard that the Downing Street declaration was the right thing to do (Interview with Jonathan Stephens).

Bipartisanship also made the transition from the Conservative government to the Labour government smooth. Just like when Thatcher took over from Callaghan in 1979 and Atkins continued Mason’s approach in Northern Ireland, Tony Blair’s government and Mo Mowlam as SSNI were able to seamlessly take over from Major and Mayhew. Even before Labour had won the election, Conservative ministers had been careful to keep Labour ministers in touch and briefed (Interview with Jonathan Stephens). Mayhew allowed Mo Mowlam to talk to all officials in Northern Ireland the Republic of Ireland from 1995 without reference to him, knowing that Mowlam would be the next SSNI (Interview with Patrick Mayhew). This did not however, extend to the leaders of the Irish government. The Taoiseach Albert Reynolds had no dealings with the Labour opposition during his time in office (Interview with Albert Reynolds).

Blair took Prime Ministerial involvement in Northern Ireland to a new level. John Major was a better negotiator than Blair but Blair came in with an extraordinary persuasiveness and was the centre of the whole operation (Interview with John
Chilcot). Blair came in with a personal mission on Northern Ireland which had not been characterised by the same level of Prime Ministerial involvement previously (Interview with Lord Dubs). This was not to say that Northern Ireland had not been given huge attention, especially by Major, but Blair wrote his own speeches on Northern Ireland. He had a personal conviction and interest (Interview with David Brooker). Blair brought authority, credibility and command and when he was involved, the focus was entirely on him. Blair knew what he wanted to do in Northern Ireland so was not prepared to take advice from anybody else. Blair dealt with Northern Ireland uniquely and differently to his other government departments due to the premium that he put on Northern Ireland (Interview with Paul Murphy). He was personally involved in the tiniest detail. Blair gave the leaders of the parties in Northern Ireland complete access to him, even more than international leaders got. He made everybody in Northern Ireland feel very important. Blair was also willing to spend days on end talking to politicians in Northern Ireland. Access to him was made much easier than had been the case under Thatcher and Major and Blair always treated the members of Sinn Fein as very important people (Interview with Joe Pilling). Due to the importance of the situation, key people in Northern Ireland, Dublin and the United States wanted to deal directly with Prime Minister Blair, not the Secretary of State (Interview with Paul Murphy). This left less space for anybody else, including the SSNI Mo Mowlam, to operate in (Interview with Jonathan Stephens). Nevertheless, due to Blair’s personal involvement, he achieved the GFA within one year of taking office as PM.

**Conclusion**

Blair’s signing of the GFA in April 1998 was very similar to Thatcher securing the AIA in November 1985. Government ministers and the cabinet, including the SSNI, were marginalised in favour of the PM and advisors; Blair was assisted by his Chief of Staff Jonathan Powell whereas Thatcher was assisted by her Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong. The key difference however, was the PM took the lead, not the civil servants. If Thatcher had the conviction and involvement of her Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong during the Thatcher years, more progress would have been made in Northern Ireland.
This thesis has focused on Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland and shown that Thatcher, in relation to the AIA especially, was more involved in policy than currently acknowledged. After looking at the involvement of successive PMs in the form of John Major and Tony Blair, it is unsurprising that the literature depicts that Thatcher did very little in Northern Ireland. If one was to compare her to Major and Blair, that is certainly true, especially given the length of time that Thatcher was PM. This thesis does not attempt to re-write history; Thatcher was significantly less involved in Northern Ireland than Major and Blair and arguably less than was necessary at the time. Nevertheless, Thatcher was significantly involved in the AIA and set the precedent for Prime Ministerial involvement and a focus on British and Irish government relations which successive PMs Major and Blair followed. Moreover, Thatcher’s willingness to communicate with PIRA during 1980 and 1981, and Tom King’s feelers in the later 1980s, showed Sinn Fein that the British government were willing to negotiate and talk to them. This allowed the channel to be re-opened during the Major years and for Blair’s government to directly involve Sinn Fein in party talks. Therefore, although in comparison to the Major and Blair years little policy and progress was made in Northern Ireland during the Thatcher years, a number of subtle, but important, precedents were established which allowed for further progress in later years.
Final conclusion

The answer to my fundamental research question ‘To what extent was Margaret Thatcher involved in policy making in Northern Ireland, specifically from 1979 until 1985, and what was the impact of this?’ is surprising: that Thatcher’s involvement in Northern Ireland, though intermittent, was much greater than has previously been known, such that without this involvement there could have been no AIA. This thesis therefore offers new insight into one of the most effective and controversial figures in recent British history. But primarily, in doing so, it brings further nuance and sophistication to our understanding of the developing peace process in Northern Ireland. The thesis shows that it was Thatcher’s involvement in the AIA that set the precedent for Prime Ministerial involvement in the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993 signed by John Major and the Good Friday Agreement signed by Tony Blair in 1998. Thatcher was much more personally involved and willing to come to an agreement with the Irish government in 1985 than is currently acknowledged. Likewise, Thatcher’s intermittent involvement suggests that a more committed approach could have resulted in more progress in Northern Ireland during the time she was PM. The unique detail provided in this thesis from newly released government archives, which include Thatcher’s personal annotations on documents, and evidence acquired from elite interviews unveils new information which transforms our view of Thatcher and Northern Ireland. This significance of this thesis is that it offers new answers to existing questions on Northern Ireland, untangling some of the debates and contradictions in the current literature.

This thesis tells us a new story in relation to Thatcher’s leadership style and the type of a leader she was in regard to Northern Ireland policy. The research sought to answer the debate about what sort of a leader she was – ideological and autocratic, or pragmatic (Wincott, 1990: 26). The thesis shows that Thatcher was open to measures to move towards peace, even though it meant negotiating with an enemy who murdered her close ally Airey Neave and later tried to kill her in Brighton. This suggests immediately that Thatcher could be pragmatic. This research, however, tells a more nuanced story by revealing that Thatcher’s heart was ideological while her head was pragmatic. By this, I mean that she liked the idea of not having to deal with Northern Ireland and the Irish government. She wanted to take a tough stance
by not giving into the hunger strikers, not speaking to terrorists and not giving in too much to the Republic’s AIA demands. However, for all the occasions on which Thatcher takes these strong positions, in reality she knew that she must be pragmatic; the issues were too salient to take an ideological stance, even if she would have preferred to do so.

This adds weight to the argument in the literature that Thatcher allowed herself to be persuaded on Northern Ireland policy. Charles Moore argued (2015: 318) that rather than being persuaded, Thatcher allowed others to do things of which in theory she disapproved. There is evidence of this in relation to the use of the secret channel in 1980. However, on other occasions, such as when Prior tried to push through plans for a devolved assembly, Thatcher took action to prevent the policy from being passed. Others, such as Mulholland (2012: 191), argue that Thatcher was willing to seek out expert opinion, resulting in occasions when she was (willingly) persuaded, even if this required a gigantic struggle by many far-sighted people. This thesis shows that, rather than seeking out expert opinion on Northern Ireland, Thatcher very much relied on a close group of confidents. Willie Whitelaw was one of the key individuals who she trusted. She allowed him to lead debates on Northern Ireland in cabinet meetings, even though he was not the SSNI. There is however, very little evidence to suggest that Whitelaw was involved in the AIA. There is overwhelming support, both from the elite interviews and archival material, to confirm the claims in the literature that Robert Armstrong, Thatcher’s Cabinet Secretary, was the most important individual in relation to the signing of the AIA. Dixon and O’Kane (2014: 54) state that Armstrong and his Irish counterpart Dermot Nally were responsible for the AIA negotiations in 1983. One of the most significant findings in this thesis is that Armstrong strategically ensured that the Cabinet Office took control of discussions with the Irish government in December 1980 by carefully persuading Thatcher to allow him to do this, rather than the Foreign Office or NIO. This was previously unknown. The newly released archives reveal the extent to which Armstrong planned to take control of these talks from a very early stage in December 1980 – much earlier than previously thought. This suggests that not only was Armstrong one of the most influential actors in the AIA, he was strategic in ensuring he had a key role. His ability to persuade and manoeuvre Thatcher into making more concessions regarding the AIA than she wanted to is also supported in
the elite interviews with ministers and civil servants. This new finding shows that as early as December 1980, Armstrong strategically ensured that he controlled talks with Irish officials and was able to persuade Thatcher to take his advice even when she disagreed.

This thesis therefore challenges some claims made in the literature which suggest that Thatcher was persuaded mainly by the US and Republic of Ireland to sign the AIA. Pressure from the United States does play a role in the action taken regarding the hunger strike and AIA, but not to the extent that McGrattan (2010: 117-118) claims. There is no evidence in the archival documents to suggest that the US was the main factor in persuading Thatcher to sign the AIA. There is evidence to suggest that Thatcher desired an agreement to prevent further international embarrassment (O’Leary, 1997: 668), but her primary reason for signing was to improve security (Mallie and McKittrick, 2001: 18). Nor is there sufficient evidence to suggest that Thatcher was persuaded by the Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald and his team into signing the AIA (Marc Mulholland, 2012: 189). If it wasn’t for Armstrong, and to some extent the British civil servant Goodall, Thatcher would never have been convinced to go along with many of the details in the AIA and attend the Anglo-Irish summit meetings in the lead-up to its signing. This thesis therefore supports the view in the current literature that Thatcher ran policy from Number 10 (Birrell, 2009: 36 and Dixon and O’Kane, 2014: 55) and that the NIO were kept out of the AIA (Cunningham, 2001: 49).

The secondary research question that this thesis examined was to characterise Thatcher as a Prime Minister. To understand Thatcher further, I studied each of her SSNIs to learn about her leadership in Northern Ireland through her relationships with her ministers. As policy relating to the AIA was run from Number 10 and the Cabinet Office, and the NIO was not included in discussions, it might be expected that the SSNI would also be excluded and marginalised from this process and perhaps even from other policy relating to Northern Ireland. The new story that this thesis tells is about the role of the SSNI in Thatcher governments. There were occasions in which the SSNI was side-lined, especially Prior when he first became SSNI. Nevertheless, even Prior and Thatcher’s relationship was more complex than
we might have expected; it was not as contentious as either Thatcher or Prior record in their memoirs and which other literatures suggest (Prior, 1986: 137).

The most surprising finding in this regard is that Hurd was marginalised early on during his time as SSNI and had very little influence on the AIA. This directly contrasts with claims made in the current literature. Douglas Hurd most certainly did not have “an influential role” in the AIA as Dixon (2001: 353) argued and did he did not persuade Thatcher to change tack as O’Leary (1997: 668) claimed. In fact, he was not even a key player, as Dixon and O’Kane claim (2014: 58). They were correct in saying that Thatcher, Howe and Goodall were crucial, but not Hurd. The newly released archival material and elite interviews confirm that Howe, as Foreign Secretary, played a key role in the AIA. His role however, was subsidiary to that of Armstrong and Goodall. The evidence in this thesis concludes that Howe was only involved because he agreed with Armstrong’s views on what the AIA should include; therefore Armstrong allowed him to be involved.

This thesis also confirms Cunningham’s claim (2001: 158) that “since the inception of direct rule there is no evidence that a new Secretary of State has engaged in a fundamental re-thinking let alone implementation of Northern Ireland policy”. Although the various SSNIs did change the tone and approach to policy, which is possibly more significant than is currently recognised, none of them fundamentally changed policy. This was despite this thesis showing that the SSNI and their ministers did have a unique level of autonomy and Northern Ireland was governed differently from mainland Britain, as O’Leary claimed (1997: 665).

One finding that directly challenges the current literature is Hennessy (1986: 111) and Dixon’s (2001: 354) claims that Thatcher’s approach to Northern Ireland was constrained by her cabinet. Neither Hennessy nor Dixon had access to the cabinet minutes from the period and although I only had access to the cabinet minutes from May 1979 until December 1985, there was no evidence to suggest that Dixon and Hennessy’s claims had any weight. In fact, if anything, the cabinet were constrained by Thatcher who rarely allowed them to discuss Northern Ireland and even more rarely allowed them to debate it. On the rare occasions this happened, archival documents reveal that the outcome had already been agreed before the
cabinet meetings. If Thatcher was constrained by her cabinet, this was not obvious, and at best, was sub-conscious, which can be neither tested nor proven.

The final question that this thesis examined was Cunningham’s claim (2001: 158) that “the strength or otherwise of the relationship between successive Prime Ministers and Taoiseach has frequently been the subject of discussion. Yet whoever the holder of either position there has been a maintenance and deepening of the bilateral approach to Northern Ireland since 1980”. This suggests that it mattered very little who the Prime Minister or Taoiseach were in relation to policy outcomes in Northern Ireland. After examining in-depth the first half of Thatcher’s time as Prime Minister, and comparing it, albeit briefly, to her successors John Major and Tony Blair, it can be argued that had Thatcher been as committed to Northern Ireland as they were, then more progress might have been made. This thesis does not examine the British government policies in Northern Ireland in the same detail that Cunningham does, nor over the same period of time. Therefore, this final observation does not intend to challenge Cunningham’s claim but rather finish this thesis leaving the question open.

**Final reflections**

This thesis has provided the basis for further research on both the Thatcher government and Northern Ireland by showing that the newly available archival material can offer revealing insights into these already widely researched topics. The research in this thesis, for the period leading up to the AIA, is relatively robust due to the complete release of archival material under the thirty year rule. This meant that all the government papers up until December 1985 were released in their entirety. In addition, elite interview material allowed me to back up my findings. Even so, some documents are not released under the Official Secrets Act if they are deemed to be too politically sensitive so it could be that although this thesis appears to provide a complete picture, some key pieces of information may still be missing which could offer an alternative perspective on the period. In addition, this thesis is written from the perspective of the British government. The Irish and American
governments’ archival data may reveal a different view of Thatcher and her governance of Northern Ireland.

Future releases of archival material, which will cover the second half of Thatcher’s time as PM, will be crucial to testing the claims made in the final chapter of this thesis - that policy in Northern Ireland changed after the AIA was signed and Thatcher became less involved again. Just like this thesis did, further archival analysis may reveal that behind the scenes, much more was going on than we currently know. This may again provide a different perspective on Thatcher and Northern Ireland. One thing we do know is that with the on-going annual release of government archives from the Thatcher years, our view of her and the government during this period will be frequently reassessed and even challenged, as we find out more information. By the time the archival material from the entire Thatcher period has been released, we may well see Thatcher in a very different light to that which the current literature and research portrays.
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1983 Dec 20 Tu Northern Ireland: Armstrong minute to MT ("Northern Ireland") [paper on possible policy options for Northern Ireland] [declassified 2013] PREM19/1069 f20

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THCR 2/6/3/115/ f93

1984 Jun 12 Tu
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Northern Ireland: Powell minute to MT ("Anglo-Irish Relations: Northern Ireland") [MT: "The events of Thursday night at Brighton mean that we must go very slow on these talks if not stop them"] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1288 f154
Northern Ireland: Hurd minute to MT ("Anglo-Irish Relations: Northern Ireland") [Hurd content with proposed speaking notes for secret talks with Irish Government] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1288 f153

Brighton Bomb: Hailsham letter to MT (grieving) [“fight the good fight against the forces of darkness”] [released 2014] THCR 1/1/23 f188

Brighton Bomb: Reagan letter to Thatcher (message of sympathy) [“We must work together to thwart this scourge”] [declassified 2000] Reagan Library: NSA Head of State File (Box 36); copy telegram in THCR 3/1/41 f33 (T172A/84)

Conservatism: Draft speech opening (post-bomb) [rejected draft referring to bomb as assault on government] [released 2014] THCR 5/1/5/270 f6

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Northern Ireland: FCO letter to No.10 ("Northern Ireland") [speaking to Northern Ireland parties about secret talks with Irish Government] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1288 f112

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Northern Ireland: Armstrong minute to MT ("Anglo-Irish Relations: Northern Ireland") [account of secret talks with Irish Government] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1288 f87

Northern Ireland: Draft communiqué (Chequers meeting of Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council) [annotated by MT] [released 2014] THCR 1/10/14 f12

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1984 Oct 20 Sa
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1984 Oct 23 Tu
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Northern Ireland: Howe minute to MT ("Anglo-Irish Relations: Northern Ireland") ["I continue to believe that the process we are engaged on represents the least unpromising way forward on the Northern Ireland question"] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1288 f78

1984 Oct 24 We
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1984 Oct 26 Fr
Archive (TNA)
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1984 Oct 26 Fr
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1984 Oct 31 We
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1984 Nov 12 Mo
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Northern Ireland: Howe minute to MT (report of Howe's talks with Taoiseach Fitzgerald and Barry) [the "Irish problem" will "be with us for many decades yet"] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1408 f137

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Northern Ireland: Ingham minute to MT ("Anglo-Irish Bilateral - Press Conference") [arrangements] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1408 f109

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1984 Nov 22 Th
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1984 Nov 23 Fr
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1984 Nov 23 Fr
Archive (TNA)
Northern Ireland: Powell minute to MT (proposed MT meeting with John Hume) ["You have every reason to be fed up with Hume. But a meeting would help cool things with the Republic"] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1289 f44

1984 Nov 26 Mo
Archive (TNA)
Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland Office letter to No.10 ("Anglo-Irish Relations") [comments on Irish Foreign Minister's speech; it was "an attempt to start the fence-mending process"] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1289 f38

1984 Nov 29 Th
Archive (TNA)
Northern Ireland: UKE Dublin to FCO ("Anglo/Irish Relations and Irish Politics") [assessment of current state of relations and politics: Fitzgerald's "standing in the party and with the public is now very low"] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1289 f32

1984 Nov 29 Th
Archive (TNA)
Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland Office letter to No.10 ("Anglo/Irish Relations") [note of Hurd-Paisley-Robinson meeting] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1289 f25

1984 Dec 1 Sa
Archive (TNA)
Northern Ireland: UKE Dublin to FCO (text of speech by Irish Foreign Minister Peter Barry) [Anglo-Irish summit] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1289 f22

1984 Dec 1 Sa
Archive (TNA)
Northern Ireland: Powell minute to MT ("Anglo-Irish Relations: Northern Ireland") ["general feeling of frustration and despair" on part of Irish leaders] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1289 f21
1984 Dec 5 We
Archive (TNA)
Northern Ireland: UKE Dublin to FCO ("Anglo-Irish Relations") [reaction to MT’s remarks on Anglo/Irish relations at Dublin Castle press conference] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1289 f19

1984 Dec 10 Mo
Archive (TNA)
Northern Ireland: Powell minute to MT ("Anglo-Irish Relations: Northern Ireland") [planning for next Anglo-Irish summit] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1289 f18

1984 Dec 12 We
Archive (TNA)
Northern Ireland: Powell minute to Armstrong ("Anglo-Irish Relations") [request for guidance on way forward in Anglo/Irish talks] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1289 f16

1984 Dec 18 Tu
Archive (TNA)
Northern Ireland: Armstrong minute to Powell (report on Armstrong-Nally talks) [MT: "This whole minute shows that the Irish want more than we can give and always will"] [declassified 2014] PREM19/1289 f6

1984 Oct 18 Th
Archive (TNA)

1984 Nov 22 Th
Archive (TNA)
Cabinet: Minutes of Full Cabinet - CC(84) 38th (Secretary of State for the Environment, Parliamentary Affairs, Foreign Affairs, EC Affairs, Miners' Strike, Employment Legislation, Economic Affairs) [declassified 2014] CAB 128/79 f212
1984 Nov 22 Th
Archive (TNA)
Cabinet: Most Confidential Record to Minutes of Full Cabinet - CC(84) 38th (Anglo-Irish Summit) [declassified 2014] CAB 128/80 f15

1985 May 23 Th
Archive (TNA)
Cabinet: Minutes of Full Cabinet - CC(85) 18th (Parliamentary Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Community Affairs, Northern Ireland, local government, unemployment) [declassified Dec 2014] CAB128/81

1985 Jul 4 Th
Archive (TNA)
Cabinet: Minutes of Full Cabinet - CC(85) 23rd (leak, Home Affairs, Parliamentary Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Community Affairs, Economic Affairs, Northern Ireland Affairs, US/UK diplomatic relations) [declassified Dec 2014] CAB128/81

1985 Jul 23 Tu
Archive (TNA)
Cabinet: Howe & King memo circulated to Cabinet - C(85) 20 (Anglo-Irish Relations: Northern Ireland) [declassified Dec 2014] CAB129/219

1985 Jul 25 Th
Archive (TNA)
Cabinet: Minutes of Full Cabinet - CC(85) 26th (Parliamentary Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Community Affairs, Industrial Affairs, Home Affairs, Northern Ireland affairs) [Anglo-Irish Agreement draft] [declassified Dec 2014] CAB128/81

1985 Sep 2 Mo
Archive (Thatcher MSS)
Reshuffle: Wicks note for MT (Hurd reservations about wholesale changes at Northern Ireland Office) [warns Chief Whip not to move Scott & Patten as well as himself] [released 2015] Churchill Archive Centre: THCR 1/14/14 f82
1985 Oct 30
Archive (TNA)
Cabinet: Howe & King memo circulated to Cabinet - C(85) 25 (Anglo-Irish Relations: Northern Ireland) [declassified Dec 2014] CAB129/219

1985 Oct 31
Archive (TNA)
Cabinet: Minutes of Full Cabinet - CC(85) 30th (Parliamentary Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Community Affairs, Home Affairs, Northern Ireland) [Anglo-Irish Agreement accepted] [declassified Dec 2014] CAB128/81

1985 Nov 7
Archive (TNA)
Cabinet: Minutes of Full Cabinet - CC(85) 31st (Parliamentary Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Northern Ireland Affairs, Community Affairs, Public Expenditure Survey 1985) [Nassau CHOGM] [declassified Dec 2014] CAB128/81

1985 Nov 14
Archive (TNA)
Cabinet: Minutes of Full Cabinet - CC(85) 32nd (Parliamentary Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Community Affairs, Northern Ireland Affairs) [most confidential record discussions of Northern Ireland & teachers’ pay] [declassified Dec 2014] CAB128/81 (plus CAB128/82 for most confidential record)

1985 Nov 21
Archive (TNA)
Cabinet: Minutes of Full Cabinet - CC(85) 33rd (Parliamentary Affairs, Northern Ireland Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Community Affairs) [televising Commons] [declassified Dec 2014] CAB128/81

1985 Nov 28
Archive (TNA)
Cabinet: Minutes of Full Cabinet - CC(85) 34th (Parliamentary Affairs, Northern Ireland Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Community Affairs, Social Security Review) [Ulster by-elections; Fowler review approved] [declassified Dec 2014] CAB128/81
1985 Dec 5 Th
Archive (TNA)

Cabinet: Minutes of Full Cabinet - CC(85) 35th (Parliamentary Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Community Affairs, Northern Ireland Affairs, Economic Affairs) [declassified Dec 2014] CAB128/81

1985 Dec 12 Th
Archive (TNA)

Cabinet: Minutes of Full Cabinet - CC(85) 36th (Parliamentary Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Northern Ireland Affairs, Economic Affairs) [Heseltine raises Westland without notice] [declassified Dec 2014] CAB128/81 (plus CAB128/82 for most confidential record)

Archival documents from the National Archives

Ireland. Situation in Northern Ireland; part 14

Records of the Prime Minister’s Office: Correspondence and Papers, 1979-1997. IRELAND. Situation in Northern Ireland; part 14.

Collection: Records of the Prime Minister’s Office

Date range: 01 August 1983-13 December 1983

Reference: PREM 19/1069

Subjects: Ireland

Ireland. Situation in Northern Ireland

Records of the Prime Minister’s Office: Correspondence and Papers, 1979-1997. IRELAND. Situation in Northern Ireland

Collection: Records of the Prime Minister’s Office

Reference: PREM 19/1286

Subjects: Ireland
Ireland. Situation in Northern Ireland; part 17B
Records of the Prime Minister’s Office: Correspondence and Papers, 1979-1997.
IRELAND. Situation in Northern Ireland; part 17B
Collection: Records of the Prime Minister’s Office
Reference: PREM 19/1288
Subjects: Ireland

Ireland. Situation in Northern Ireland; part 18
Records of the Prime Minister’s Office: Correspondence and Papers, 1979-1997.
IRELAND. Situation in Northern Ireland; part 18
Collection: Records of the Prime Minister’s Office
Reference: PREM 19/1289
Subjects: Ireland

Ireland. Situation in Northern Ireland; part 1/2
Records of the Prime Minister’s Office: Correspondence and Papers, 1979-1997.
IRELAND. Situation in Northern Ireland; part 18
Collection: Records of the Prime Minister’s Office
Reference: PREM 19/1408/1
Subjects: Ireland

Ireland. Situation in Northern Ireland; part 2/2
Records of the Prime Minister’s Office: Correspondence and Papers, 1979-1997.
IRELAND. Situation in Northern Ireland; part 18
Collection: Records of the Prime Minister’s Office
Reference: PREM 19/1408/2
Subjects: Ireland

Ireland. Prime Minister's meetings with Taoiseach; Anglo-Irish summits; part 7.
Records of the Prime Minister’s Office: Correspondence and Papers, 1979-1997.
IRELAND. Situation in Northern Ireland; part 18
Collection: Records of the Prime Minister’s Office
Reference: PREM 19/1408
Subjects: Ireland
PREM 19/1408/1, 8/11/83, Armstrong to Thatcher
PREM 19/1408/1 15/3/84, Armstrong to PM
PREM 12/1286; 14/5/84, Armstrong to Thatcher
PREM 12/1286: Ireland. Situation in NI, part 16; 31/5/84, Goodall to Coles
PREM 12/1286, 24/5/84, note of meeting between Thatcher, Howe and Prior; 18/6/84, Prior to Thatcher
PREM 12/1286, 21/6/84, Thatcher meeting with Howe, Prior and officials
PREM 19/1408/1, 29/8/84, Goodall to Powell
PREM 19/1288, 1984 October 6 - 1984 October 31 Ireland: Situation in Northern Ireland; part 17B
PREM 19/1289, 1984 November 1 - 1984 December 18 Ireland: Situation in Northern Ireland; part 18
PREM 19/1408, 1984 November 1 - 1984 November 23 Ireland: Prime Minister's meetings with Taoiseach; Anglo-Irish summits; part 7
PREM 19/1549, 1984 Nov 27 - 1985 Jun 29. IRELAND. Prime Minister's meetings with the Taoiseach: Anglo-Irish relations; part 8

Record type: Conclusions. Former Reference: Most Confidential Record to CC (84)
1. Agenda: Handling of documents.
Collections: Records of the Cabinet Office
Date range: 12 January 1984
Reference: CAB 128/80/1

Record type: Conclusions. Former Reference: Most Confidential Record to CC (84)
6. Agenda: Northern Ireland
Collections: Records of the Cabinet Office
Date range: 16 February 1984
Reference: CAB 128/80/4
Subjects: Ireland
Record type: Conclusions. Former Reference: Most Confidential Record to CC (84)

9. Agenda: Northern Ireland
Collections: Records of the Cabinet Office
Date range: 08 March 1984
Reference: CAB 128/80/5
Subjects: Ireland

Record type: Conclusions. Former Reference: Most Confidential Record to CC (84)

Collections: Records of the Cabinet Office
Date range: 28 June 1984
Reference: CAB 128/80/6
Subjects: Ireland

The National Archives, released 30th December 2009 PREM/19/80

The National Archives, released 30th December 2009 PREM/19/80
Part 2: The situation in Northern Ireland 24th August 1979- December 1979

Archival documents from Hansard

Government of Great Britain: Conservative Party General Election Manifesto 1979
Government of Great Britain. Letter from Downing Street to the Northern Ireland office: 8th July 1981
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Archival documents from the National Archives Ireland

Conversation with Goodall, 29 Sep 1983, Anglo-Irish Summit (draft programme) Secret: the Irish discussion, recent exchanges

Reference 2013/27/1589
Date Aug 1983-Oct 1983
Creator Department of Foreign Affairs
Extent 1 file
Archival history Transferred by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in November 2013
Level of description file


Archival documents from other sources

British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body leaflet. March 3-4 1997 Thirteenth Plenary session.

Hard copy of document provided by David Mitchell MP

Interviews

Conservative Government 1972-1974
Minister of State: David Howell
Labour government 1974-1979
Minister of State: Lord Melchett
Under-Secretaries of State: Ray Carter and Tom Pendry
Permanent Secretary: Brian Cubbon

Thatcher government 1979-1990
Secretaries of State: Douglas Hurd, Tom King and Peter Brooke
Minister of State: Hugh Rossi, John Cope, Brian Mawhinney
Under-Secretaries of State: Philip Goodhart, David Mitchell, Lord Lyell,
Richard Needham, Lord Skelmersdale and Jeremy Hanley
Permanent Secretary: Robert Andrew
Civil Servants: David Brooker, George Fergusson, John Ledlie, John Marshall,
Jonathan Stephens
Head of the Irish Civil Service: Ken Bloomfield

Major government 1990-1997

Secretary of State: Patrick Mayhew
Ministers of State: Michael Ancram, Robert Atkins and John Wheeler
Under-Secretary of State: Tim Smith
Permanent Secretary: John Chilcott
Irish Taoiseach: Albert Reynolds

Blair government 1997-2007
Secretary of State: Paul Murphy
Under-Secretaries of State: Lord Alfred Dubs and Tony Worthington
Permanent Secretary: Joe Pilling
Cabinet Secretary: Jeremy Heywood
Irish Cabinet Minister: Brendan Smith
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