

## Poverty Relief and the Economic Crisis in the Region of Belfast from 1921 to 1939.

The aim of this paper is to show that the economic and social response to the depression which affected the region of Belfast from 1921 to 1939 was inappropriate because of both a lack of humanity and coordination between the Northern Ireland Government and the Belfast Board of Guardians. Besides, as the necessary diversifications to adapt to a new world economic order were not carried out, Northern Ireland workers, and particularly those of Belfast, paid a heavy price, and as a result, many of them were made redundant.

Massive unemployment entailed a huge development of poverty and despair which soon turned into massive social protest. Therefore, thousands of workers gathered in Belfast city centre and claimed for better assistance from both the Government and the Belfast Board of Guardians. As the situation became very tensed, the Government first decided to keep a close eye on all the people and organizations it considered as subversive and representing a potential threat to its staying in power. Then, as the economic crisis turned into a real depression, the relationships between the Northern Ireland Government and the Belfast Board of Guardians deteriorated at the expense of all the people who asked for relief. Finally, at the end of the 1930s, the Government came to realize that it had to put an end to its ambiguous relationships with the Belfast Board of Guardians and adopt a more neutral position as regards poverty alleviation. However, the incapacity of the Northern Ireland Government to attract new industries explains that the economic recovery was very slow to take place.

During the First World War, there was a certain prosperity which had a positive impact on low wages, but by the end of the conflict, it was cancelled by a fast growing inflation. This problem was all the more serious that there was a significant increase in the price of imported raw materials from Great Britain. This affected many finished goods and as a result the competitiveness of Northern Ireland. Between 1924 and 1940, Northern Ireland had a deficit of its balance of payments, mainly as a result of the cost of coal and oil. In January 1921, the Government which was really worried by inflation asked the Ministry of Labour to carry out an inquiry on the comparative cost of life in Northern Ireland and Great Britain. In this inquiry, all the sectors of economy were analyzed and it revealed that prices had increased by 133% in Northern Ireland and by 110% in Great Britain.

After 1923, inflation started to decrease not only because the Government had taken measures to prevent the economy from overheating, but mainly as a result of the collapse of the industrial production which meant that Northern Ireland economy was to face a terrible economic crisis entirely supported by the working classes.

Shipbuilding was the first sector affected by massive lay-offs and its level of unemployment rose from 6.5% in January 1921 to 20.8% in October 1921. Then, engineering was also concerned by these massive waves of redundancies, and progressively not a single branch of industry was spared by the crisis. In October 1921, the rate of unemployment reached 16.3% in Northern Ireland as whole, and 15.8% in Belfast.<sup>1</sup> Although the number of redundancies was reaching high levels at Harland and Wolff, this prestigious company was less affected than its competitors probably because its production had remained very high as a result of its amazing capacity of innovation.

The linen industry was not in a better position since it had to cope with Russia which revealed as a rough competitor. Even if linen was one of the main assets of the textile industry, it started to suffer as a result of the competition with cotton which was then cheaper to produce and much more appreciated by the general public. This deteriorated economic situation led to the development of a huge poverty in Belfast and also to a growing general discontent and protest. At the end of 1922, a delegation of unemployed workers organized regular meetings to stress this intolerable situation and to denounce the incapacity of the Northern Ireland Government to tackle unemployment. Meetings were organized by both members of the Labour Party and the Committee of Unemployed Workers. The first meeting

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<sup>1</sup> *Ministry of Labour*, Northern Ireland, October 1921, LAB/4/12/8, PRONI, Belfast

which took place on December 19<sup>th</sup> 1922 in 82 Royal Avenue in Belfast, was advertised in the press by a satirical poem written by Michael Nolan, a member of the Committee of Unemployed workers who denounced the inaction of the Belfast Board of Guardians. The delegation of unemployed workers also criticized the lack of humanity of the Belfast Board of Guardians which only proposed indoor relief in the thick of the crisis.

The Unemployed.<sup>2</sup>

Now working men wake u we say !  
Don't fall asleep from day to day;  
You know the Wolff is at door  
And hunger makes the best hearts sore.  
You have been promised work. It is coming slow,  
When times will change it is hard to know,  
We go with anguish in each soul :  
You cannot exist on the labour dole  
And the Poor Law Guardians they confess,  
In Belfast City there is no great distress,  
So take their sympathy, you might as well as not,  
But has sympathy ever boiled yet  
Our unemployed must all agree  
There are none so blind as they don't want to see.  
One Guardian was very much annoyed  
At the deputation from the unemployed  
Who do they represent, he cried Ochone!  
I think they represent themselves alone;  
But the men who went to urge your claim  
Represented Trade Unions of great fame.  
They spoke for thousands-their appeal was brief-  
When they begged the Guardians for outdoor relief,

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<sup>2</sup> *Ministry of Home Affairs*, December 20<sup>th</sup> 1922, HA/5/1158, PRONI, Belfast.

And then the Guardians they replied:  
You have our sympathy, but our hand is tied  
So gentlemen, now that's a fact,  
It can't be done according to the present Act,  
For a new Act to pass, you will have long to wait  
But please keep from the workhouse gate.  
But the Guardians would welcome you all with joy  
If you donned the pauper's suit of corduroy :  
So walk inside, they won't be annoyed  
That's how they mean to relieve the Unemployed.  
But like good men, we will stop outside  
If we are starving, thank god, we still have pride;  
And a demonstration to their gates  
Will slow them who have paid the rates  
In Scotland and England, they must confess,  
The Guardians relieve the dire distress,  
And to cry out we are the last :  
The Unemployed of proud Belfast.

*Issued by the Belfast Unemployed Committee*

*Price, 2d.*

In 1922, these kinds of meetings took place at least once a week and then, as the economic crisis intensified, they became more numerous with about 400 to 500 people attending each time. There were different speakers like Samuel Kyle who preached for the development of socialist values and indicated that “the Labour Party was the only party that advocated the abolition of poverty.”<sup>3</sup> Henry Midgley, General Secretary of the Belfast Labour Party also stressed that the fate of poor people could only improve with the development of a real opposition. These different meetings did not please the Government which was really worried by the propagation of “subversive ideas” that could precipitate its fall. In order to understand the situation, it has to be recalled that after the Partition, the Government had decided to vote the Special Powers Act which had given exceptional authority to, Dawson Bates, the Minister of Home Office: “Any person may be detained for an indefinite period without charge or trial.”<sup>4</sup> The Special Powers Act also prohibited public gatherings; and as a result the different members of the delegation which often decided to congregate outside the Belfast Workhouse could be arrested at any time. This repressive arsenal indicated that the Government knew it was unpopular and that its own existence could be threatened by such organizations. As a result, whenever there was a meeting, a report was made by a Royal Ulster Constabulary officer to the Home Office and all the leaders were blacklisted.

Samuel Patterson who in, 1927, had openly criticized James Craig, The Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, was put under police supervision after he had declared: “ James Craig said on several occasions that he would solve unemployment, but he hasn’t done it. Every time he made a speech, he got gouty or went on cruise for the good of his health forgetting about his proposals.”<sup>5</sup>

Under the Unemployment Act, 1920, able-bodied unemployed adults received benefits for only 15 weeks and then their fate depended on Poor Relief. With a rate of unemployment which remained between 20% and 23% from 1923 to 1926, the Government had no other option but to organize public works to relieve those who had no solution to maintain their families.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ministry of Home Affairs, 1924-1927, HA/ 5/1342, PRONI, Belfast.*

<sup>4</sup> *Report of a Commission Appointed to Examine the Purpose and Effect of the Civil Authorities ( Special Powers Acts (Northern Ireland) 1922 & 1933, (London : National Council For Civil Liberties), 1936, Detention under Regulation 23, p. 19.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ministry of Home Affairs, September 17<sup>th</sup> 1927, HA/5/1342/, PRONI, Belfast.*

<sup>6</sup> *Unemployment, Northern Ireland, 1923-33, CAB/9B/137/1-2.*

Table 1: Public Works organized between 1922 and 1928 in Northern Ireland.<sup>7</sup>

Periods	Nb of projects	Value of projects	Men concerned
May 1922-nov 1925	612	£3 458 869	20 558
Dec. 1925-Dec 1928	385	£2 465 143	15 968
Total	997	£5 924 012	36 526

At first, these projects absorbed quite a lot of unemployed workers, but after 1925, the number of men who benefited from these public works reduced by 25% and projects by 40%. When unemployment reached almost 30% in Belfast in the early 1930s, the situation became really complicated for those who had lost their jobs because they had no financial resources after a while. The Belfast Board of Guardians still refused to grant outdoor relief to able-bodied workers and only proposed indoor relief. At that time, there were still about 2,500 people relieved in the Belfast Workhouse and the number of people who received outdoor relief was increasing significantly. The level of outdoor relief was far more important in the Belfast Union, than in the surrounding Unions of the Region of Belfast, but this system of relief was also far less generous.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ulster Year Book*, 1929, p. 113.

Table 2: Evolution of Outdoor Relief in the Belfast Union, Lisburn Union, Larne Union and Antrim Union from 1923 to 1927.<sup>8</sup>

Year	Belfast Union	Lisburn Union	Larne Union	Antrim Union
1923	950	210	190	170
1924	1325	220	180	190
1925	2120	210	220	180
1926	2500	205	190	160
1927	5500	200	160	170

Table 3: Number of persons relieved outdoor from June 1929 to June 1932 in the Belfast Union and cost of outdoor relief.<sup>9</sup>

Period	Number of persons relieved outdoor	Cost of outdoor relief
June 1929	2100	/
April 1930	1816	£2200
October 1931	2832	£2998
March 1932	5744	£3832
June 1932	9744	£4524

<sup>8</sup> *Minutes of the Belfast Board of Guardians, 1923-27, BG/7/A/109-BG/7/A/118, Minutes of the Lisburn Board of Guardians, 1923-27, BG/19/A/133-35, Minutes of the Larne Board of Guardians, 1923-27, BG/17/A/136-139, Minutes of the Antrim Board of Guardians, 1923-27, BG/1/A/60-64, PRONI, Belfast.*

<sup>9</sup> *Minutes of the Belfast Board of Guardians, June 1929-June 1932, BG/7/A/122-127.*

The increase in outdoor relief numbers did not please the Belfast Guardians because, for them, it meant that the cost of relief was no longer under control and besides, it did not correspond to their philosophy. The Belfast Board of Guardians was not really concerned by destitution and it considered its mission as a way to exclude those who could not participate to the economic development of Belfast. This Board which had become a very powerful administration was then one of the best ally of the Government. The Belfast Guardians were influenced by Calvinist principles, and thus they considered poverty as a sin, and unemployed able-bodied workers as lazy persons. The way the Belfast Board of Guardians granted relief was much stricter than in the rest of the United Kingdom. In Belfast, outdoor relief was about 8s for a married man without any children, 12s if he had a child, whereas it was 21s in Manchester, 23s in Liverpool and 36s in Glasgow. In Lisburn, outdoor relief went from 4s for a single person to 15s a week for a large family.<sup>10</sup> The Belfast Board of Guardians was the only administration to grant outdoor relief in kind and not in cash. This had far reaching consequences since the recipients were given vouchers to collect foodstuffs in shops, many of which were run by the Belfast Guardians. Very often those who asked for goods in these shops had to bear different humiliating remarks, especially if they were Catholics.<sup>11</sup> The Belfast Board of Guardians knew it had a strong influence and could do almost anything because the Government needed badly this administration to stay in power. However, by the end of the 1920s when poverty became really widespread, the Government realized that its best ally could soon become a burden. From that time, the relationships between the Home Office and the Belfast Board of Guardians became really tensed, and this was at the expense of poor people.

The Belfast Board of Guardians considered that unemployed workers had to be relieved by the Ministry of Labour and not by Poor Laws, but the Government indicated that “[...] the Guardians had the powers to deal with such cases [...]”<sup>12</sup> In spite of the pressure put by Dawson Bates on the Belfast Guardians, the Board went on refusing to relieve more people outdoor, explaining it represented a considerable amount of work: “Even if the funds were placed at the Guardians’ disposal they could not deal with such large number of cases and without hesitation the work would be impossible for this Board.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Geraldine Quigley, *The Belfast Revolutionary Workers’ Group. Its Development, Ideology and Role in the Outdoor Relief Strike of October 1932, and the National Railway Strike 1933*, Dissertation thesis, Queen’s University, Belfast, 1993, p.15

<sup>11</sup> *The Paddy Devlin Collection, Typewritten Piece on Poor Law System in Northern Ireland*

<sup>12</sup> *Minutes of the Belfast Board of Guardians*, May 12<sup>th</sup> 1926, BG/7A/115, PRONI, Belfast.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

When the Guardians realized that they would be obliged to grant outdoor relief, they asked the Home Office to set up Labour tests, so as to limit the number of recipients. The Government was opposed to the idea but, finally it accepted it, and launched a building programme under the name of “Whitewell Scheme.” On February 27<sup>th</sup> 1928, several men were taken on as part of this project to do different building works, and in return, they received outdoor relief. Those who were physically incapable of working were entitled to outdoor relief but the Belfast Board of Guardians posted their names on the various lampposts of the city. This humiliating practice was particularly dreaded by the recipients.<sup>14</sup> When the building programme was over, the Belfast Board of Guardians declared that there was no longer extreme poverty prevailing in Belfast, and as a result, they were not obliged to relieve so many individuals as it was mentioned in section 13 of the Local Government of (Ireland) Act, 1898. This declaration did not please the Government and it notified the Belfast Guardians they were taking “[...] a very serious responsibility in not taking the necessary steps to arm themselves with the power to deal with the cases falling within this category.”<sup>15</sup>

Confronted to the refusal of the Belfast Board of Guardians to relieve unemployed able-bodied workers, the Government finally voted the Poor Relief Exceptional Distress Act, 1928 which cancelled section 13 of the Local Government of (Ireland) Act, 1898. This infuriated the Belfast Guardians and its president John Wilson who declared that this act would entail “a general pauperisation of Northern Ireland.”<sup>16</sup>

In January 1929, John Wilson was replaced by Lily Coleman who adopted a more human attitude towards able-bodied workers, however the Belfast Board of Guardians kept on reducing the level of outdoor relief which was skyrocketing, and to do so, it did not hesitate to resort to discriminating measures. To justify their refusals, the Guardians carried out inquiries on the people asking for relief. A close analysis of outdoor relief registers shows that at the beginning of the economic crisis, the Belfast Board of Guardians had decided to favour female workers, but in the early thirties, they decided to be more generous with male able-bodied workers. This reversal of social policy was really conspicuous when Harland and Wolff’s workforce was reduced from 30,000 in 1922 to 1,200 workers in 1932.<sup>17</sup> At that time, the various registers show that the main refusals mainly concerned women and catholic

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<sup>14</sup> *The Paddy Devlin Collection, Typewritten Piece on Poor Law System in Northern Ireland.*

*Minutes of the Belfast Board of Guardians*, November 1928, BG/7/A/120.<sup>15</sup> *Belfast Newsletter*, August 1<sup>st</sup> 1928 cité dans Henry Miller, *The Administration of the Poor Laws in Ireland till 30<sup>th</sup> November 1921, and in Northern Ireland from the 1<sup>st</sup> December, 1921, till the present date, 1942.*, QUB, 1942.

<sup>16</sup> *Minutes of the Belfast Board of Guardians*, November 1928, BG/7/A/120.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Moss and John R. Hume, *Shipbuilding to the World, 125 Years of Harland and Wolf, Belfast 1861-1986* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1986), p. 292.

workers. Indeed more than 60% of people who were turned down were male Catholics. This discriminatory measure may explain that the Society of St Vincent de Paul Society located in Antrim Road, served an average of 110 meals per day from 1932 to 1936, and thus played a significant role as regards the relief of the Catholic community.<sup>18</sup> Although religion is not indicated, it can be deduced by looking at people's addresses in the Belfast Ulster Directory. There is no denying that those who lived in Falls or Smithfield were part of the Catholic community.

This overtly discriminating practices forced many people to be relieved indoor. In 1932, there were 2,600 people living in the Workhouse and about 60% of able-bodied persons were women and 40% were men (the latter only accounted for 15% of able-bodied inmates during the twenties). In this environment, promiscuity was still very high and the mortality rate was close to 30%.

The Government was really worried about the economic and social situation in Northern Ireland and Dawson Bates declared in July 1932: "Distress is now very acute in most parts of the Province and there is every indication that during the winter matters will become worse."<sup>19</sup> In fact, the Government was convinced that the social situation was so terrible that disorder could take place at any time and that its position was really threatened. Indeed, in October 1932, riots broke out for about five days in Belfast. Demonstrations were jointly organized by the Belfast Workers' Revolutionary Group (BRWG) and its charismatic secretary Thomas Geehan and the Committee of Unemployed Workers. In order to stop social protest, the BRWG brought forward the following conditions:

- Abolition of labour tasks,
- 15s 3d for a man and 8s for this wife plus 2s per child per week,
- 10s for single person per week.

Thomas Geehan had succeeded in lifting religious barriers which prevented the working class to be united:

For long years, the working classes of Belfast have been divided by the old artificial barriers of religion, politics; but the past two months has witnessed a wonderful spectacle of these old barriers being swept away. The workers irrespective of religion or politics were now united in a struggle around a common platform, the motto of which is the right to live.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Annual Report of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, op.cit.*, 1936, Down and Connor Archives, Belfast.

<sup>19</sup> [...]", *Cabinet Secretariat, Unemployment*, Northern Ireland, July 1932, CAB/9B/137/2

<sup>20</sup> *The Irish News*, October 12<sup>th</sup> 1932.

After a couple of days of chaos, the Government and the Belfast Board of Guardians finally accepted the conditions imposed by the BRWG and calm was restored in the capital. However, if unity seemed to be prevailing among workers during the outdoor riots, when they were over, both the Government and the different Churches pointed out the threat of communism looming ahead, and as a consequence sectarianism was reactivated.

Just after this crisis, a significant number of people were relieved outdoor as the following table indicates it. The majority of people relieved outdoor in Northern Ireland were living in the Belfast Union.

Table 4: Evolution of outdoor relief in Northern Ireland and in the Belfast Union.<sup>21</sup>

Year	Northern Ireland	Belfast Union
1932	12 883	7249
1933	28 179	20 050
1934	29 195	20 711

However, if Poor Law Relief was more acceptable in the Belfast Union than before the riots, the Government could no longer rely on the Belfast Board of Guardians to carry out its social policy, as rumours of irregularities and corruption within this administration were reported to the Home Office. Indeed, the first rumours started in 1932 and they concerned several Guardians who were accused of embezzlement. After quite a long period of hesitation, the Government decided to launch an inquiry on the management of the Belfast Workhouse. Even if at first the law of silence prevailed and made the work really long and difficult, after six years, this inquiry finally confirmed the scandal which had been revealed in the press, and the Home Office decided to dissolve the Board of Guardians in 1939.<sup>22</sup> The Government had understood it had to separate from its best ally if it wanted to remain in power. The

<sup>21</sup> *Minutes of the Belfast Board of Guardians, 1932-1934, BG/7/A/128, BG/7/A/132, PRONI, Belfast.*

<sup>22</sup> *Belfast Workhouse Inquiry, 1939, CAB/9B/250, PRONI, Belfast.*

dissolution of the Belfast Board of Guardians was followed by the nomination of two commissioners, Llywelly Drysdale and Harry Diamond who were in charge of supervising indoor relief and outdoor relief. These two persons were former members of the Belfast Board of Guardians but they embodied a progressive line within this administration. The nomination of Harry Diamond, who was Catholic, showed that the Home office could no longer use Poor Law Relief as a way of excluding those who did not share its values.

Even if the Government had taken the right decision in dissolving the Belfast Board of Guardians, nevertheless, the economic problems were still very acute in Northern Ireland. Besides, the Government was not very active in attracting new industries in this period of industrial mutations and this explains that the rate of unemployment remained above 20% in Belfast and in the surrounding towns in 1938.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the Government was convinced that that the encouraging statistics of the trade balance proved that there was a clear economic recovery.

Table n°5: Evolution of Northern Ireland imports and exports with trade balance deficit, 1938-1939.<sup>24</sup>

Year	Imports	Exports	Trade balance deficit
1938	£54 385 000	£51 061 000	£3 344 000
1939	£58 683 000	£58 290 000	£393 000

It is true that the Government was hoping that traditional industries would benefit from this slight revival of activity and would be able to absorb a large part of the unemployed workers, but it still refused to admit that the situation had changed, and continued to cling to a glorious heritage which had made the reputation of Belfast. Northern Ireland authorities who, in spite of the New Industries Development Act, 1937, didn't manage to attract new industries, preferred to explain their failure by external causes and above all, a lack of help of Great-Britain. Indeed, the Northern Government often complained that there was "no liaison between the two ministries of labour."<sup>25</sup> It must be said that for its defence that Great-Britain

<sup>23</sup> *Ministry of Labour, Northern Ireland, 1937-1939, LAB/4/22/1, 1937-39.*

<sup>24</sup> *Cabinet Secretariat, Exportations and Importations, 1939, Northern Ireland, CAB/3A/10B/, PRONI, Belfast.*

<sup>25</sup> *Notes and Correspondence Regarding Northern Ireland, 1939-1941, BT 96/ 80, The National Archives, London.*

had always adopted an attitude of spectator which was not very favourable to the evolution of Northern Ireland industry. This is particularly true with the Air Raid Precautions Act which was supposed to protect all the members of the United Kingdom in case of a foreign air attack, but these provisions were not enforced in Northern Ireland, leaving its capital particularly vulnerable at the eve of war.

The economic crisis which lasted about 20 years showed that the way Northern Ireland tried to tackle unemployment and poverty was not adapted to the severity of the situation. Indeed, public authorities were more concerned by maintaining public order than by reducing distress. Throughout this period, a sort of paranoia overwhelmed the Government and as a result, it limited its actions to the controlling of the various organizations or groups which were both asking for social justice and a fairer system of relief. For a long time, it used the Belfast Board of Guardians as a precious ally to implement its social policy, and as a consequence, this powerful administration was rapidly convinced it had to follow a hard line to protect the protestant heritage. The Government often let the Belfast Board of Guardians act without any control, which can explain it took unfair measures in total impunity. When the Home Office realized that some of the Belfast Guardians were corrupted it understood it had to separate from its ally which had turned into a real burden. The dissolution of the Belfast Board of Guardians revealed that the Government could no longer use Poor Law Relief as both a way to remain in power and to exclude all the individuals who did not share Unionist values.

As regards the economic situation, the Government had not understood that traditional industries in Northern Ireland could no longer sustain the formidable growth of the region of Belfast as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Different ministers continued to believe that what had been achieved at that time, had to be protected because it was part of the Protestant heritage. In doing so, they maintained Northern Ireland in a sort of nostalgia and archaism which soon paralysed this region. In this pre-war period which was characterized by the emergence of innovating industries in various sectors, Northern Ireland seemed incapable of climbing on the bandwagon of industrial modernity, and as a result many workers remained unemployed. The job situation only improved when major industries participated to the war effort. On the one hand, the Second World War was an opportunity for some companies to take a new departure and to modernize their activity, but on the other hand, it plunged many people in total despair, particularly during the Blitz.

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