

Ireland: Topic 3 The Pursuit of Sovereignty and the Impact of Partition, 1912-1949 | Sample answer

Between 1922 and 1932, what steps did the Cosgrave governments take to establish the Irish Free State on firm foundations?

The Irish public went to the polls in August 1923 following the ceasefire that brought an end to the Civil War in May. The newly-formed Cumann na nGaedhach party led by WT Cosgrave came to power with a clear mandate. With Fianna Fail refusing to take up their 36 seats, CnG were left with more power than any government since. However, they now faced a number of issues within the country. Establishing law and order was a priority as was setting up a new civil service. They later had to deal with the Army Mutiny and the emergence of FF all while asserting their new-found independence. The success with which these issues were dealt with established the Irish Free State on firm foundations

CnG identified establishing law and order as the most important issue facing them. They feared that people would begin to tire of democracy and communism and fascism would gain support if violence and instability was common. Home Affairs Minister Kevin O'Higgins quickly set up the Civil Guard which was renamed the Garda Síochána in 1924. In the main, it was made up of Pro-Treaty former IRA men. They were unarmed and generally well-respected. They were mainly tasked with policing local issues. The fact they were unarmed helped to remove the gun from Irish politics and help establish law and order. The Public Safety Act of 1923 gave the executive council inordinate power as well as continuing internment and allowing flogging. These actions allowed CnG to stabilise the country and establish the state on firm foundations.

While the government's actions in relation to policing were decisive, they were more conservative in the area of the courts. CnG opted not to try and fix what they thought wasn't broken and so retained the British court system. The 1924 Courts of Justice Act did little more than rename the British courts. Retaining a stable justice system was important in consolidating democracy as it acted as a checkpoint for government legislation. In contrast to their thinking on the courts, CnG revamped local government. Each county was now responsible for local matters such as road

maintenance and public health. This proved to be one of the government's most successful steps in consolidating democracy across the country.

Similar to their attitudes towards the courts, Cosgrave and his government decided to change little in the Civil Service. Departments continued to be run by men who had trained and work for the British. Over 20,000 civil servants were transferred from the British service. The government relied heavily on the experience of senior civil servants such as CJ Gregg, Joseph Brennan and James McElligott. Retaining the same system as before ensured minimum disruption and allowed the state to run as normal following the handover of power and keep it on a solid footing.

Arguably the most serious threat to democracy and stability in Ireland was the Army Mutiny. Cosgrave had begun to decommission the Army seeing it as an unnecessary expense now that the War of Independence and the Civil War had ended. High ranking officials within the army were furious and they retaliated. On March 6th 1924, Charles Dalton and Liam Tobin, very senior officers, signed a letter to Cosgrave threatening a revolt if he did not put an end to the decommissioning, remove the IRB-heavy Army Council which oversaw the running of the army and guarantee a push for a united Ireland. The signatories of the letter were arrested under Cosgrave's instruction and he declared that any who had fled were now presumed to have resigned. This decisive action sent out a clear message that the army was under control and showed the Free State had been established on firm foundations.

CnG also recognised the need to assert their newly-won independence in order to please the people and maintain democracy. If they were not seen to be making strides towards greater independence, the public would look to violence rather than democracy. They oversaw Ireland's entry into the League of Nations and registered the Anglo-Irish Treaty with them. Irish diplomats attended the Imperial Conference every 2 years and played a leading role in the influential Balfour Declaration in 1926 where the conference chairman conceded under pressure from Ireland and others that Dominions were really Britain's equals. While they did not push Britain to the extent they could have, these acts which asserted their independence showed that the government was able to represent the country on an international stage and demonstrated the stability within the country.

CnG began to lose popularity in the early 1930's. The economy went into a sharp depression following the Wall Street Crash in 1929 and the standard of living fell across the country. De Valera and FF gained support with promises of gaining a republic and stabilising the economy. FF claimed an overall majority in 1932 and took power for the first time. Cosgrave stepped aside and handed over power to de Valera without delay. The smooth transition of power facilitated by Cosgrave was crucial in consolidating democracy and these actions have since been viewed as among his most important and impressive. The CnG government left power having established the country on firm foundations.

From the time they took office in 1923 to when they transferred power to Fianna Fail in 1932, Cumann na nGaedheal had to face a number of issues. The most important of these was the consolidation of democracy and establishing the state on a solid footing. They were tasked with setting up a new defence force, civil service and justice system as well as having to deal with the Army Mutiny and international relations. Through an admirable mix of pragmatism and decisiveness, they managed to establish the nation on firm foundations.