

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

How did Cosgrave handle Anglo-Irish relations and the economy during the period 1922-32?

Upon taking power in 1923, Cumann na nGaedheal, led by WT Cosgrave, inherited a backward economy, burdened by Civil War debts and an overwhelming depression in agriculture. Aside from these economic problems and all other issues arising in state-building, they had to manage an ever-evolving relationship with Britain while also asserting the country's new-found independence. Here, they oversaw the doomed Boundary Commission, the influential Balfour Declaration and the introduction of the Statute of Westminster. As for the economy, CnG opted for a conservative policy and focused on agriculture but also enjoyed the success of the Shannon Scheme.

The government believed that industrialisation could not be a result of government intervention and instead decided to focus almost all of their attentions on agriculture. Due to the poor quality of goods supplied to Britain during the Great War, the nation had a reputation of poor quality. To combat this, Patrick Hogan, the Minister for Agriculture pushed for improved standards and oversaw the passing of the Livestock Breeding Act in 1925 and the Agricultural Produce Act 1930. Both set standards that goods had to meet in order to be sold. He was also responsible for the 1923 Hogan Land Act which forced landowners to sell to tenants. Taxation was reduced as was government spending in the area and both of these measures really only served to help larger farmers. While all these policies were not immediately successful, they ensured the sector coped well with the economic crisis of the late 1920's and early 1930's.

Cosgrave and his government identified early a crippling issue within Irish industry – the lack of a reliable national power source. Coal was imported to produce electricity and there was a small number of electricity schemes in the larger towns but they didn't produce enough for industrial purposes. When approached by an engineer working with a German electrical firm about the idea of building a hydroelectric power plant on the River Shannon, they set up the Shannon Scheme. Work began in 1924 in Ardnacrusha in Limerick and over 4,000 men were employed. The Electricity Supply Board was established in 1927 to oversee the distribution of the energy across the country. The scheme came into full effect in 1929 and was an immediate success. Power from the plant reached almost every town by 1939 and most rural areas by the

1950's. The scheme was far removed from the usually conservative policies of CnG but it proved to be far and away their most successful endeavour.

Whereas the old Sinn Féin favoured a policy of protectionism and a left-leaning economic policy, CnG strove for low taxation and adopted a laissez-faire approach towards trade and tariffs. Income tax was kept low initially by the government and was reduced from 25% to 15% in 1925. In 1923, the wages of most public and civil servants were cut by 10%. In 1924, old age pensions were also cut by 10%. As a result of both these policies and their neglect of industry in favour of agriculture, economic growth was slow and unemployment high. It never fell below 6% but was blamed on lazy workers and restrictive trade unions. Immigration was at 33,000 people per year and the low income tax rate meant they could not and would not address the growing issue of poverty. These unpopular actions ensured CnG's resounding election defeat in 1932.

Much like their actions on the domestic front, Cosgrave and his government's conservative approach to Anglo-Irish relations saw little success. Under Article 12 of the Anglo Irish Treaty, a Boundary Commission was to be set up to establish the border between north and south. It was delayed by the Civil War but finally began its work in November 1924. The three-man board consisted of Eoin MacNeill, JR Fisher and Richard Feetham, a South African lawyer. Free State ministers had hoped the transfer of land from North to South would make the former unworkable. However, Feetham's pro-Commonwealth beliefs ensured there was little chance of that. Fisher eventually leaked that there would be few changes made. Cosgrave panicked at this development and MacNeill soon resigned. Cosgrave met Ramsay MacDonald and agreed the report be suppressed and Ireland's war debt dropped. The whole incident was an embarrassment to he and his government.

The primary success on the foreign front came at the 1926 Imperial Conference, a meeting of all Commonwealth countries where Ireland played a prominent part. That year, Kevin O'Higgins and the rest of the Irish delegates met with Canadian and South African representatives and together they forced the chairman of the conference into a significant speech. Arthur Balfour described dominions as "autonomous communities" within the British Empire that were equal in status with Britain. This became known as the Balfour Declaration and is recognised as a key moment in the push towards sovereignty for many nations across the world. It was the standout success of CnG's foreign policy.

It also helped to pave the way for the Statute of Westminster. In December 1931, the British parliament enacted the statute of Westminster, a ground-breaking piece of legislation which essentially gave dominions full control of their own affairs. It said that no law made by Britain would extend to the dominions other than at their request and with their permission. It also allowed these countries to repeal previous laws and make laws in relation to foreign policy. Cosgrave, in an unpopular move, chose to honour the Anglo-Irish treaty. This only served to strengthen support for Fianna Fail and, as promised in the election, De Valera used the Statute to push the nation towards full independence upon taking power.

When assessing the successes and failures of WT Cosgrave's Cumann na nGaedheal government, it's important we understand the momentous challenges facing them. The Irish economy was crippled by the Civil War and the most industrialised part of the country had been partitioned away. However, their inaction on an industrial front and mixed results in the agricultural sector mean that despite the victory of the Shannon Scheme, their economic policies can hardly be considered a success. They didn't fare much better on the foreign front and they paid the price for this in the 1932 election when Fianna Fail seized power.