

## The Iron Lady and the IRA:

What effect did the 1984 Brighton Bombing have on Margaret Thatcher?

### Introduction

On October 12 1984, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), also referred to as the 'Provisionals', staged 'the most audacious attack on a British government since the Gunpowder Plot', attempting to kill the British Prime Minister (PM), Margaret Thatcher, and all of her cabinet ministers (Hughes, D. 2009; Carroll, R. 2023). The attack, known as the Brighton Bombing, occurred at the Grand Hotel in Brighton during the Conservative Party Conference and was part of the IRA's 'key war' in England against 'high-prestige' targets; a campaign which sought to end British rule in Northern Ireland by weakening the British' resolve to remain (English, R. 2003. 248; Oppenheimer, A.R. 2009. 32-33; McGladdery, G. 2006. 8).

The IRA were meticulous in their planning of the attack, with a long-delay time bomb planted underneath a bathtub five floors above Thatcher's suite by Patrick Magee, a month prior (Carroll, R. 2023). Detonating at 2:54am on Friday 12 October, Magee's bomb failed to kill its intended target with Thatcher, often referred to as the 'Iron Lady' for her steely character, and her husband Denis narrowly avoiding death and serious injury (English, R. 2003. 248; Carroll, R. 2023). However, it led to the deaths of five attendees of the Conservative Party conference, one of whom, Anthony Berry, was a Conservative Party whip and injured thirty four others at the Grand Hotel, including the wife of Conservative MP Norman Tebbit, who was left permanently paralysed by the attack (McGladdery, G. 2006. 127; Parry, G. 1986; Donnelly, L. 2009). Had Magee's bomb successfully targeted Thatcher, it would have been only the second

time that a British PM had been killed whilst in office, the only other example being the assassination of Spencer Percival in 1812 (Carroll, R. 2023).

This paper explores the effect that the 1984 Brighton Bombing had on Margaret Thatcher from the attack, on 12 October 1984, to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) on 15 November 1985. It will investigate the effect of the Brighton Bombing on three distinct aspects of Thatcher's premiership. Firstly, it will describe the immediate aftermath of the bombing, arguing that whilst Thatcher expressed a public defiance against the IRA's attack, she was personally impacted by the attempt on her life. Secondly, on the issue of the bombing's domestic impact, it will argue the attack united the political spectrum amidst The Miners' Strikes and improved Thatcher's, and her Conservative Party's, approval amongst the public. Finally, the paper will explore the effect of the bombing on Thatcher's policy towards the IRA, arguing that bombing had a trivial effect on her stance, which remained intent on increasing security cooperation between the British and Irish governments. Further, in the aftermath of the bombing, relations initially deteriorated between the two governments, despite Republicans later arguing that the AIA was Thatcher's political response to the bombing, suggesting that the attack was not the catalyst for new agreement between the British and Irish.

The paper will first outline its methodological approach, before reviewing current literature on the Brighton Bombing. The paper will then situate the bombing within the IRA's use of 'spectacular' attacks and 'high-prestige' targeting in England. It is important to situate the attack within the IRA's wider campaign to understand Thatcher's prior stance to the group, and the tactics employed by the IRA in an attempt to weaken the British' resolve. The

remainder of the paper will be spent explaining the impact the bombing had on Margaret Thatcher, under the above-mentioned areas.

### **Methodology**

This paper employs a qualitative methodology in its analysis. Secondary sources of literature pertaining to the Northern Ireland conflict, the history of the IRA and to the premiership of Margaret Thatcher were used throughout the research process. Numerous primary sources were also consulted, including digitised documents showing correspondence between civil servants in the Prime Minister's Office, available through the National Archives and records of Parliamentary debates accessed through the Hansard collection. Documents showing ministerial correspondence pertaining to Anglo-Irish talks, held by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) and digitised by Ulster University's Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN) were also utilised.

Despite the existence of a broad range of literature pertaining to the Northern Ireland conflict, the IRA, and the Provisional's campaign in England, the lack of secondary sources of literature that focus primarily on the Brighton Bombing acted as a barrier during the research process. Further barriers to the research process include sources, held by the National Archives, such as the documentation of Anglo-Irish talks prior to and in the aftermath of the bombing being held in Kew and thus, unavailable for access considering the scope of this paper. In this situation, the commentary of scholars and the published memoirs of Margaret Thatcher were relied upon to gauge an accurate representation of the Anglo-Irish talks.

This paper does not divide its analysis proportionately, with significantly more time spent analysing the effect of the Brighton Bombing on Thatcher's stance to the IRA. This is in part due to the conflicting claims of Republicans and the Thatcher government over the role of the

attack in influencing the British to accept a role for the Irish in the governance of Northern Ireland. The AIA is viewed as a natural end date in this investigation due to the widely held view that the agreement between the British and Irish governments, attempting to end the Troubles, was the Iron Lady's political response to the IRA's attack.

### **Literature Review**

Literature that focusses solely on the 1984 Brighton Bombing is lacking. Carroll, *The Guardian's* Irish Correspondent's 2023 publication *Killing Thatcher* is one of few examples of literature devoted to the attack, along with earlier publications compiled by Hughes and Ramsay, respectively (Carroll, R. 2023; Hughes, K. 2015; Ramsay, S. 2018). Carroll's publication provides a rigorous analysis of the attack, situating it within the IRA's English campaign as well as narrating the journey of the Brighton Bomber, Patrick Magee. However, it falls short of evaluating the impact of the bombing on Thatcher (Carroll, R. 2023). Invaluable literature that discusses Brighton within a larger analysis of the IRA include English's monograph *Armed Struggle*, Oppenheimer's *IRA: The Bombs and The Bullets*, McGladdery's *The Provisional IRA in England* and Maloney's *A Secret History of the IRA* (English, R. 2003; Oppenheimer, A, R. 2009; McGladdery, G. 2006; Maloney, E. 2007). These are highly commendable studies of the IRA and the conflict in Northern Ireland however, their focus on the Brighton Bombing is limited.

This paper is, to the knowledge of the researcher, the only paper that discusses the effect of 'the most audacious attack on a British government since the Gunpowder Plot' on Margaret Thatcher and one of few examples of literature that focuses solely on the 1984 Brighton Bombing (Hughes, D. 2009).

### **The IRA's campaign in England and the Thatcher premiership**

In August 1969, tensions in Northern Ireland, which had existed between Catholic and Protestant communities since the arrival of Protestant settlers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century surmounted and turned violent after the Protestant Apprentice Boys group marched through the centre of Derry, throwing pennies at the Catholic area of the Bogside in an insulting gesture (Maloney, E. 2007. 7). By the end of the year, British troops had been deployed to Northern Ireland to manage the spiralling violence that became known as 'the Troubles', a conflict involving Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups, as well as the British Army (English, R. 2003. 81; Taylor, P. 1998).

The Provisional IRA, a Republican paramilitary organisation, emerged at the end of 1969, following a split in the previous embodiment of the IRA into two factions, the 'Officials' and the 'Provisionals' (English, R. 2003. 81-82). By 1972, the Provisionals had emerged as the dominant faction of the IRA, seeking to end British rule in Northern Ireland and reunify the island of Ireland, after its partition in 1921 (English, R. 2003; Maloney, E. 2007). Their strategy involved employing a guerilla campaign against the British Army, attempting to make Northern Ireland ungovernable and inflict enough damage that the British would have no desire to remain in Northern Ireland (McGladdery G. 2006. 56; English, R. 2003. 125; Smith, M.L.R. 1995. 97-99). In addition to targeting British Army personnel in Northern Ireland, senior IRA figures believed that it was a 'necessity to bring the war in Ireland home to the British people', following in the footsteps of historical Irish Republican groups such as the Fenians who, in the 1860s, had also waged a campaign against in England (McGladdery, G. 2006. 4; *An Phoblacht/Republican News*. 5 Nov 1981)

In 1973, viewing the targeting of England as a natural progression of the conflict, and realising that the policy of internment had limited their campaign in Northern Ireland, the IRA planned a 'spectacular', an attack that dominated media attention, on English soil (McGladdery, G. 2006. 12). The Provisionals' first foray into a campaign in England was subsequently the bombing of four symbolic buildings, including the Old Bailey Court, in London in March 1973, killing one and injuring over two hundred (Carroll, R. 2023. 22). The commotion caused in the capital as a result of the bomb secured the IRA a propaganda victory over the British and proved to senior Republicans that 'one bomb in London was worth a dozen in Belfast' (English, R. 2003. 163; Maloney, E. 2007. 126; McGladdery, G. 2006). Despite the IRA members who had planted the bombs being arrested at London Heathrow airport as they tried to flee, the success of the attack led the Provisionals to begin a comprehensive campaign in England, which including bombings in Guildford and Birmingham in the 1970s (English, R. 2003; McGladdery, G. 2006; Keefe, K P. 2018).

Along with the use of 'spectaculars', which had been proven to dominate headlines, the IRA's campaign to get at the heart of the British state included the targeting of 'high-prestige' individuals (English, R. 2003; Oppenheimer, A, R. 2009. 32-33). One such target was Lord Mountbatten, the cousin of Queen Elizabeth II, who was killed on 27 August 1979 off the Irish coast by a bomb that had been placed on his boat the day prior, shocking the British establishment and the newly elected PM, Margaret Thatcher (Maloney, E. 2007. 175; Carroll, R. 2023. 22). For Thatcher, who saw Northern Ireland as 'part of the United Kingdom; as much as my constituency is', the death of Mountbatten came five months after she had lost her Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Airey Neave, to a car bomb planted by the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) (Hansard. 10 November 1981; .Maloney, E. 2007. 177). After the death of Neave, Thatcher told the BBC, in relation to Irish Republican groups that

‘they must never, never, never be allowed to triumph’ (Carroll, R. 2023. 35). The death of Neave and Mountbatten hardened Thatcher’s stance to the IRA, with the new PM viewing the group as security problem that could be defeated (Carroll, R. 2023. 22).

By the early 1980s, Thatcher’s resolute defiance against the IRA’s tactics began to be tested when IRA prisoners undertook a hunger strike in the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland, protesting against the British Government’s refusal to give IRA prisoners political status, which would have recognised their struggle as political, rather than criminal (English, R. 2003. 187-226). Thatcher’s defiance against the IRA continued, refusing to concede to the demands of the hunger strikers in 1980/81. It led to ten IRA prisoners dying on hunger strike, including newly elected Sinn Féin MP, Bobby Sands, and was widely viewed as a victory for the Thatcher government (English, R. 2003; Rowan, B. 2001). However, it marked a propaganda victory for the IRA, who came to view Thatcher as ‘the biggest bastard we have ever known’ and subsequently led the group to designate Thatcher as their number one ‘high-prestige’ target (English, R. 2003. 207-208; Rowan, B. 2001; Thatcher, M. 1993. 391).

The Hunger Strikes also saw the beginning of a dual strategy for Republicans, named the ‘Armalite and the Ballot Box’ in which Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA would contest elections on the island of Ireland, whilst the Provisionals would continue to target the British (English, R. 2003. 224-225). The IRA’s ‘Armalite’ campaign continued in England in the 1980s, targeting British Army personnel at the Chelsea Barracks in 1981 and in the following year during the Hyde Park and Regent’s Park bombings in July 1982 (English, R. 2003. 248; McGladdery, G. 2006. 117-120). The IRA also targeted commercial areas such as Oxford Street in 1981 and Harrods in December 1983, hoping to drain the finances of the British state and sway public opinion towards British withdrawal from Northern Ireland (McGladdery, G. 2006.

119-123; *The New York Times*. 1983). However, the Harrods bombing, which killed civilians including U.S. citizens instead gave the British leverage against Irish American funding of the IRA, arguing that the IRA were not fighting a 'liberation war' but killing innocent civilians (McGladdery, G. 2006. 124; *The Belfast Telegraph*. 1983; Carroll, R. 2023). Thatcher, and the British public also displayed a defiance against the IRA, with the country swiftly returning to 'business normally' suggesting that the government were willing to put up with an 'acceptable level' of IRA violence (Thatcher, M. 1993. 399). The British's willingness to put with an 'acceptable level' of violence and a number of security measures, led the IRA to seek a large propaganda victory over Thatcher's government (McGladdery, G. 2006. 125).

It was hoped, by the Provisionals, that Brighton would mark the culmination of the English campaign as the ultimate 'spectacular' that targeted the number one 'high-prestige' target (Carroll, R. 2023; English, R. 2003. 163-164). Should the bombing have successfully targeted Thatcher, the IRA believed the British would have withdrawn from Northern Ireland citing 'we lost Airey Neave, Lord Mountbatten, Margaret Thatcher etc. -is it worth it?' (English, R. 2003. 248; *An Phoblacht/Republican News*. 18 Oct 1984). However, as the Conservative Party Conference opened, the conflict in Northern Ireland was not at the centre of Thatcher's attention. She was instead fixated upon the protracted industrial dispute that had begun in Spring 1984 between her government and trade unions representing coal miners whose jobs were threatened by Thatcher's wish to close unprofitable coal mines (Carroll, R. 2023. 188).

### **The immediate aftermath**

At 2:45 on the morning of the fourth day of the 1984 Conservative Party Conference, Thatcher was finalising her speech to the party conference, in which she was to accuse miners who participated in The Miners' Strikes as being 'militant' and the Labour party as being 'the enemy



within' (Carroll R. 2023. 188; *The Guardian*. 2014). Just ten minutes later, the six floors above Thatcher were beginning to cave in as Magee's long-delay time bomb, first used by the group in 1977, detonated (Carroll, R. 2023. 59; Toolis, K. 1986; Oppenheimer, A, R. 2009. 84). The bomb missed Thatcher, but it came remarkably close to toppling the British Government; had Thatcher been in her bathroom, a matter of metres from her bedroom, the IRA would likely have succeeded in killing her (Carroll, R. 2023. 210; English, R. 2003. 247). In the hours following the Brighton Bombing, Thatcher displayed a characteristic resilience towards the IRA's tactics, a resilience which she had previously shown after the death of her Shadow Northern Ireland Secretary, Airey Neave and during the hunger strikes in 1980/81 (Carroll, R. 2023.35; English, R. 2003. 187-226). Her resilience was driven by a desire to prove, at least in public, that she nor her government would be affected by the bombing, for to do so would hand the IRA a propaganda victory (Thatcher, M. 1993. 399).

Half an hour after the blast, as news emerged of the extent of the bombing, Thatcher and her husband, Denis, fearing a second bomb, were whisked to safety in a police car. Denis, clearly shaken by the event, exclaimed in the car, as it drove away from the Grand Hotel, 'The IRA, those bastards' (Thatcher, M. 1993; Carroll, R. 2023. 217). Thatcher, unlike her husband, was determined not 'to let my emotions get the better of me' (Thatcher, M. 1993. 388). The Iron Lady's characteristic defiance was evident in an interview at 4am, just an hour after the detonation of the IRA bomb, where she claimed to BBC journalist, John Cole, that the Conservative conference would open, as planned, in the morning (Thatcher, M. 12 Oct 1984; Carroll, R. 2023. 216). As promised, Thatcher opened the Conservative Party Conference's fourth day of proceedings at 9:30am. Instead of attacking the Labour Party, Thatcher opened in tribute to her Conservative party members that had lost their lives and claimed that 'all attempts to destroy democracy by terrorism will fail' (Thatcher, M. 12 Oct 1984; Thatcher, M.

1993. 382). It marked the continuation of Thatcher's rigid stance towards the IRA, one which was intent on ensuring that the IRA did not interrupt the proceedings of her government, nor to 'break our spirit' of the Conservative conference (Thatcher, M. 1993. 382; Carroll, R. 2023; Campbell, J. 2003. 432) After her opening remarks, she devoted little attention to the IRA, instead declaring 'it must be business as usual', as the British had shown in the aftermath of the Harrods bombing, before proceeding to touch on aspects of the economy and foreign relations (Thatcher, M. 1984; Carroll, R. 2023).

Later in the day, the IRA claimed responsibility for the bombing, releasing a statement which claimed 'Today we were unlucky, but remember we only have to be lucky once. You will have to be lucky always. Give Ireland peace and there will be no more war' (Taylor, P. 2001. 265). Responding to the IRA's claim that the only way to stop violence in England was to withdraw from Northern Ireland, Thatcher represented the 'British public's stoical refusal to submit to terrorism' by confirming 'that the government will never surrender to the IRA' (McGladdery, G. 2006. 128; Bell, J, B. 1994. 687). Despite the fact that Thatcher did in fact negotiate with the IRA, both during the Hunger Strikes in 1981 and later, in 1990, her reaction to the Brighton Bombing was representative of her long standing stance on the IRA that they were criminals and the only way to end the problem of Republican violence was to defeat them (English, R. 2003). She was therefore intent on ensuring the bomb did not alter her government nor give any indication that she would cave to Republican violence and 'be bombed to the negotiating table' (Thatcher, M. 1993. 399; *BBC News*. 2011)

Whilst presenting a public defiance to the IRA, in private, Thatcher was deeply affected by the bombing, sleeping with a torch by her bedside in the months following the attack in order to replicate the lights that had turned on in the Grand Hotel after the bomb detonated and had

been a source of comfort for her (Thatcher, M. 1993. 380; The National Archives. 2014). Thatcher, who, in the following days, was 'calm but...still shaken' also claimed, in a rare display of emotion, that after visiting Sussex County Hospital, she 'could not stop thinking about those unable to return to theirs' (Campbell, J. 2003. 432; Thatcher, M. 1993. 383) Further, it is noted that Thatcher felt a sense of guilt for the injuries that the IRA had inflicted upon Norman Tebbit and his wife, Margaret, something which Tebbit never forgave Magee for, remaining bitterly resentful of the IRA to this day (Carroll, R. 2023. 266; BBC. 2014). In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, Thatcher therefore remained publicly defiant that Britain would not be defeated by the IRA's tactics despite being personally affected by the attempt on her own life.

### **The domestic effect**

The Brighton Bombing occurred during a period of British politics where examples of bipartisanship were few and far between, as Thatcher's privatisation programs pushed her Conservative Party to the right of the political spectrum and the election of Michael Foot as leader of the Labour Party in 1980 simultaneously pushed his party to the left (Clarke, P. 1992; Stevens, R. 2004). Brighton, however, united domestic politics in the 'middle of the most serious industrial dispute for fifty years' and increased support for Thatcher and her Conservative Party, leaving Labour trailing in the polls (Toolis, K. 1984. 10).

By 1984, Foot had been replaced by Neil Kinnock, a more moderate Labour politician, but as Thatcher's policy of de-industrialisation threatened the loss of thousands of industrial jobs, including in the coal mines, The Miners' Strikes divided the two main parties (Tomlinson, J. 2021). Recognising that previous strikes from the National Union of Miners (NUM) led to the end of Edward Heath's government, Thatcher took the NUM head on and deployed the police to break up the strikes which led to violence between the police and the miners (Vinen, R.

2019; *BBC News*. 1974). Kinnock's Labour party stood in firm opposition to the actions of the Thatcher government during this period, but also distanced itself from the NUM's militant leadership (Adney, M and Lloyd, J. 1988).

Brighton created a momentary pause on the disagreements between Labour and the Conservatives as Neil Kinnock expressed solidarity with Thatcher, along with a number of governments who sent messages of solidarity to the Foreign Office in condemnation of the attack (Carroll, R. 2023. 228-229; Hansard. 29 Nov 1984). Parliamentary debates in the following weeks highlighted renewed bipartisanship in the House of Commons, with condemnation from both sides of the chamber, and agreement between Labour and Conservative politicians that measures should continue be taken against NORaid, the organisation that was the source of much of the IRA's American financing (Hansard. 22 Oct 1984; Lyon, J, M. 1984). The attempt on Thatcher's life also forced politicians on the left of the Labour party to stop engaging in talks with Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA (Toolis, K. 1984). This united the Labour party, including those with sympathies for the Republican cause in condemnation of the IRA's attack, blocking the 'ballot box' strand of the 'Armalite and ballot box' strategy (Toolis, K. 1984; English, R. 2003. 223-225). The bombing therefore united the political spectrum in condemnation of the IRA's tactics whilst also encouraging left-wing members of the Labour Party to cease links with Sinn Féin, condemning both the 'Armalite' and the 'ballot box'.

An additional effect of the bombing in the domestic sphere was the increase in public support for Thatcher and her government. By the summer of 1984, the Labour Party, under the fresh leadership of Kinnock, had capitalised on the dissatisfaction with Thatcher's response to The Miners' Strikes and began to lead the Conservatives in opinion polls (*IPSOS*. 1987; Campbell,

J. 2003). However, the trends in opinion polling began to reverse following the Brighton Bombing, as the British public expressed support with Thatcher's response to the IRA's attack, leaving the Conservative party nine percentage points ahead of Labour at the beginning of November 1984 (*The Guardian/ICM*. 1984). As the British public recovered from the shock of the IRA's 'attempt to cripple Her Majesty's democratically elected Government', Thatcher's approval ratings also recovered to the levels they had been during the 1982 Falklands War (Campbell, J. 2003. 432; Sanders, D et al. 1987). This effect however, failed to materialise into long-term support for Thatcher with the public's satisfaction of her government falling again to pre-Brighton levels at the end of 1984 (*IPSOS*. 1988). The IRA's attempt on Thatcher's life therefore united the political spectrum and provided a short-term boost to Thatcher's popularity.

### **The effect on Thatcher's policies towards the IRA and peace**

Following his release from prison in 1999, under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), Patrick Magee showed remorse for the victims of the Grand Hotel bombing, and even reconciled with Anthony Berry's daughter (*BBC News*. 2014). However, he continued to defend his role in the Brighton Bombing believing, along with other Republicans, that it gave the IRA increased political leverage by proving to the British the seriousness of the IRA's threat, weakening their resolve to remain in a protracted conflict (Magee, P. 2000; English, R. 2003. 248; McGladdery, G. 2006. 129; McKittrick, D. 2000). For these Republicans, the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA), signed in November 1985 by the British and Irish governments, was proof that Thatcher had conceded that security cooperation with the Irish was required in order to contain the conflict (Magee, P. 2000; McGladdery, G. 2006. 131). However, it was not Brighton that led Thatcher to seek cooperation with the Irish but previous attacks in the IRA's campaign

in England (Campbell, J. 2003. 427). In addition, Brighton did not enhance relations with the Irish, with Thatcher instead hardening her negotiating stance and willingness to cooperate in the months following the attacks. Finally, the content of the AIA showed no marked difference in Thatcher's policy to the IRA and suggested that Brighton had little effect on Thatcher's policy to the IRA.

In November 1981, the British and Irish governments agreed to institutionalise cooperation between ministerial staff under the broader 'Anglo-Irish Inter-Governmental Council' (Thatcher, M. 1993. 393). When the group resumed communication in 1983, a number of IRA attacks in England had increased pressure on Thatcher to seek security cooperation with the Irish. Attacks such as the Chelsea Barracks and Hyde Park bombings had, for example, led military intelligence to warn Thatcher that she could not tackle the IRA head on (Campbell, J. 2003. 427). She therefore sought cooperation on security measures, viewing it as a key priority in 'upholding democracy and the law' in Northern Ireland, when she met Garret Fitzgerald, the Irish Taoiseach, on 7 November 1983 (Thatcher, M. 1993. 395; Campbell, J. 2003; English, R. 2003. 243). The beginning of Thatcher seeking cooperation with the Irish was therefore not the Brighton Bombing, and instead was fuelled by other IRA 'spectaculars' in England.

In the early 1980s, Thatcher had also recognised the need for a strong relationship with the Irish Government in helping 'the process of reconciliation in the North' and as a way to limit support for Sinn Féin, who having stood for election as part of the 'Armalite and ballot box' strategy had begun taking votes off the moderate Nationalist party, the SDLP (Campbell, J. 2003. 427; Thatcher, M. 1993; Brennan, A,J,E. 1984). Despite achieving little meaningful agreement, these ongoing talks had been 'moderately useful' and had reached the point, in the summer of 1984 where the British were happy that the Irish government were willing to

compromise and reassess their claims about the constitutional future of Northern Ireland (Thatcher, M. 1993. 398; The National Archives. CAB 128/80/6).

In 1984, the outcomes of talks were greatly improved by Thatcher's willingness to cooperate with the Irish on the conclusions of the New Ireland Forum, a platform of constitutionally nationalist parties in the Republic, and the SDLP in the North, aiming to find agreement on the future of Northern Ireland (Thatcher, M. 1993. 400). The forum suggested three possible solutions to the Northern Ireland conflict: 1) a united Ireland 2) a federal Ireland and 3) joint sovereignty between the British and Irish (Campbell, J. 2003. 433; Auster, V, J,W. 1984). Prior to Brighton, Thatcher recognised the importance of treating these solutions seriously, highlighting that the forum was also intent on increasing support for the SDLP, following the rise of Sinn Féin support in the 1983 general election (Thatcher, M. 1993. 396).

Brighton however, in contrast to Republican opinion, negatively affected ongoing Anglo-Irish talks and also encouraged Thatcher to denounce the New Ireland Forum's solutions to the conflict in Northern Ireland. Following the bombing, Thatcher's 'enthusiasm for talks was understandably dented', believing the bomb to have slowed down attempts to find an agreement that was acceptable to both the British and Irish (Campbell, J. 2003. 433; National Archives. PREM 19/1288). Thatcher even feared that Brighton 'may in the end kill any new initiative' (National Archives. PREM 19/1288). Her dented enthusiasm for talks led the British to 'harden(ed) our negotiating position', for fear that any concessions made to the Irish would be viewed as her being 'bombed to the negotiating table' and thus a propaganda victory for the IRA (Thatcher, M. 1993. 399).

At a press conference in the aftermath of talks at Chequers on 19 November 1984, in which Fitzgerald had been described as 'wildly over-optimistic' on the prospect of agreement on

issues following Brighton, Thatcher denounced the New Ireland Forum's solutions to the conflict as unacceptable, marking an alteration in her prior commitment to recognise the importance of these solutions (National Archives. PREM 19/1288; Thatcher, M. 1993. 400; English, R. 2003. 240). These remarks were taken badly by the Irish, with diplomatic tensions worsening after Fitzgerald called the PM's remarks 'gratuitously offensive', with fears also arising that the Irish public's tolerance of the IRA could grow as a result of poor diplomatic ties (Thatcher, M. 1993. 400). It was only the power of the American lobby that could alter these worsening diplomatic ties, with President Reagan meeting Thatcher to discuss his displeasure at these talks, in December 1984 (Campbell, J. 2003. 434). Brighton therefore did not fuel a renewed optimism for agreement about the Northern Ireland conflict between the British and Irish but rather led to counterproductive diplomatic relations.

Following Thatcher's meeting with Reagan, relations with the Irish improved and led to the signing of the AIA in November 1985. Among other things, the agreement gave the Republic of Ireland a consultative role in the future of Northern Ireland (Maloney, E. 2007. 241; English, R. 2003. 241). Whilst receiving significant backlash from Unionists over the consultative role given to the Irish, it is viewed as an important precursor to the 1990s peace process, which led to the signing of the GFA in 1998 (Aughey, A and Gormely-Heenan, C. 2011). Republicans suggested that the AIA marked an altering of her stance to the IRA however, the agreement continued to view the IRA as a security problem, with Thatcher seeking security cooperation from Dublin, particularly between the RUC and the Garda, the respective police forces of Northern Ireland the Republic (McGladdery, G. 2006. 130; Thatcher, M. 1993. 399; English, R. 2003. 241). The AIA included these agreements on security measures and was the main reason, along with the Irish continuing to recognise Northern Ireland as part of the UK, that Thatcher signed the deal (English, R. 2003. 241; Carroll, R. 2023. 35). The claim of Republicans



that suggested that Brighton forced Thatcher to seek a consultative role for the Irish in Northern Ireland is also flawed (McGladdery, G. 2006. 133). Whilst Thatcher accepted the need for an Irish dimension in Northern Ireland, as long as the Irish agreed that Northern Ireland would remain part of the United Kingdom, in early 1985, it had long since been realised by the British that cooperation from the Irish was needed in any attempt to end the protracted conflict (Campbell, J. 2003. 433-435).

The Brighton Bombing therefore did not alter Thatcher's approach to the IRA, which was still intent on securing security cooperation with the Irish. In addition, it was not Brighton which initially encouraged Thatcher to pursue Anglo-Irish talks but rather previous IRA attacks in England in the early 1980s. Finally, the deteriorating relations between the British and Irish government in the months following the Brighton Bombing suggests the IRA's attempt to kill Thatcher did not encourage her to pursue a political deal with the Irish but instead contributed towards deteriorating Anglo-Irish relations.

### **Conclusions**

The Brighton Bombing, the Provisional IRA's attempt to kill the Conservative PM Margaret Thatcher, at the Grand Hotel during the Conservative Party Conference affected Thatcher, and her premiership in three distinct ways. Initially, the Brighton Bombing invoked a characteristically stoical response to the IRA from Thatcher in attempt to avoid the IRA achieving a propaganda victory, despite the fact that she was personally affected by the attempt on her life. Secondly, the Brighton Bombing united British politics amidst the 'most serious industrial dispute for fifty years', increasing Thatcher's popularity to the same levels they had been during the 1982 Falklands War (Toolis, K. 1984. 10). In addition, the Brighton Bombing increased support for her Conservative Party, who overtook the Labour Party in the

polls in the weeks after the attack. Finally, despite the claims of Republicans that the attack weakened Thatcher's resolve to remain in Northern Ireland, it was prior IRA attacks in England in the 1980s that had encouraged Thatcher to seek cooperation with the Irish not the Brighton Bombing. In addition, the AIA, which was focussed, in part, on the need for greater security cooperation, showed no alteration in Thatcher's stance to the IRA, which remained intent on defeating the group. Thatcher's policies towards the IRA were therefore not impacted by the Brighton Bombing.

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