# How the Irish Boundary Commission deepened division and reshaped unionist identity



Historian Cormac Moore's recent work, *The Root of All Evil: The Irish Boundary Commission*, draws upon a pivotal moment in Irish history, epitomised by Northern Ireland's first prime minister, James Craig, who famously lamented to Winston Churchill in May 1922 that “the Boundary Commission is at the root of all evil.” This assertion serves as a focal point for understanding the profound anxieties surrounding the commission implicated in the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty. The establishment of the Boundary Commission was met with vehement opposition from Ulster unionists, who were apprehensive about its potential to alter the territorial integrity of Northern Ireland, a state they believed had been solidified through the Government of Ireland Act 1920.

Moore's exploration illustrates how the commission reignited dormant tensions regarding the border, forcing unionists to confront an uncertainty they thought had been resolved. Lillian Spender, wife of the Northern Ireland cabinet secretary, encapsulated the trepidation felt by many unionists: in her words, the week following the treaty's publication marked “the most depressing” period, with a deep sense of betrayal. The implication was clear; many felt that loyalty to Britain had been rewarded with betrayal—a narrative echoed throughout unionist factions as they rallied together in a bid to cement their status against perceived encroachments.

Ironically, while Craig pinpointed the Boundary Commission as the source of calamity for unionists, it paradoxically consolidated their position. The commission fostered a collective sense of anxiety among unionists, reinforcing an insular, siege mentality that prioritised maintaining the status quo. This psychological fortification is evidenced by the resistance among unionist politicians against any significant alteration of the border, a sentiment reinforced by British political actors who recognised the “dynamite” latent within Article 12 of the treaty. Lord Birkenhead, one of the signatories, framed this clause as a potential source of turmoil, not only for Irish affairs but also for the broader British political landscape, highlighting fears that it would revive the Irish question at the heart of British governance.

For northern nationalists, conversely, the Boundary Commission initially seemed to open new avenues. Hopes that the commission would facilitate the transfer of territory from Northern Ireland to the Irish Free State generated a sense of optimism. However, such aspirations ultimately resulted in misunderstandings about the commission's true nature and scope. The varying views among nationalist factions—some challenging the legitimacy of the Belfast parliament while others tacitly accepting it—illustrate the complexities within nationalist politics, obscured by a lack of consensus.

The establishment and subsequent actions of the Irish Boundary Commission were marked by delays and controversies, reflecting the deep-seated complexities surrounding the border issue. Early accounts reveal a slow and fraught process, beset by political challenges that complicated its formation. Archives indicate that the commissioners faced significant hurdles in navigating the contentious landscape of Irish politics at the time, contributing to an environment rife with uncertainty and competing interests.

As the commission's work progressed, the vagueness embedded within its mandate became increasingly problematic. Indeed, while the intention behind the treaty's Boundary Commission was to resolve the partition issue, the unclear terms ultimately meant that any hopes for a united Ireland or significant territorial transfers were dashed. Once again, northern nationalists found themselves grappling with the harsh implications of political naivety, as decisions made in Dublin were overshadowed by realities on the ground in Northern Ireland.

The demise of the Boundary Commission in 1925 had far-reaching consequences for both unionists and nationalists. The subsequent political landscape exposed the fragility of nationalist aspirations, while reinforcing unionist apprehensions about their position and identity. Despite claims of unfettered optimism, the reality laid bare was that unionist cohesion was strengthened at the expense of nationalist ambitions, paving the way for a prolonged era of division. Ultimately, the hopes that burgeoned around the Boundary Commission faded as the complexities of partition and identity solidified, casting shadows that continue to influence relationships across the Irish border.

Moore's examination of this historical juncture is both a cautionary tale and a call to reflect on the intricate tapestry of political allegiance, identity, and governance that has shaped modern Ireland. His scholarly contribution underscores the significance of these historical events and their legacies, elucidating why the echoes of the Irish Boundary Commission resonate through contemporary discussions on national identity and unity.

### Reference Map

* Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/how-the-boundary-commission-became-the-root-of-all-evil-for-nationalists-OESV2XHXEJD23ED7H2BNYU6QZY/)
* Paragraph 2: [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/how-the-boundary-commission-became-the-root-of-all-evil-for-nationalists-OESV2XHXEJD23ED7H2BNYU6QZY/), [[2]](https://historyireland.com/the-convening-of-the-irish-boundary-commission/)
* Paragraph 3: [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/how-the-boundary-commission-became-the-root-of-all-evil-for-nationalists-OESV2XHXEJD23ED7H2BNYU6QZY/), [[6]](https://historyireland.com/the-boundary-commission-debacle-1925-aftermath-implications/)
* Paragraph 4: [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/how-the-boundary-commission-became-the-root-of-all-evil-for-nationalists-OESV2XHXEJD23ED7H2BNYU6QZY/), [[4]](https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/handle/10197/2258)
* Paragraph 5: [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/how-the-boundary-commission-became-the-root-of-all-evil-for-nationalists-OESV2XHXEJD23ED7H2BNYU6QZY/), [[3]](https://irishgeography.ie/index.php/irishgeography/article/view/1051)
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* Paragraph 7: [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/how-the-boundary-commission-became-the-root-of-all-evil-for-nationalists-OESV2XHXEJD23ED7H2BNYU6QZY/), [[7]](https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/changing-times-and-irish-border)

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## Bibliography

* <https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/how-the-boundary-commission-became-the-root-of-all-evil-for-nationalists-OESV2XHXEJD23ED7H2BNYU6QZY/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
* <https://historyireland.com/the-convening-of-the-irish-boundary-commission/> - This article discusses the establishment and initial proceedings of the Irish Boundary Commission in 1924. It details the appointments of the commissioners, the challenges faced in convening the commission, and the political context surrounding its formation. The piece highlights the controversies and delays that marked the commission's inception, providing insights into the complexities of the Irish border issue during that period.
* <https://irishgeography.ie/index.php/irishgeography/article/view/1051> - This scholarly article examines the archival records of the Irish Boundary Commission, offering a detailed analysis of its proceedings and decisions. It provides insights into the commission's methodology, the political dynamics at play, and the implications of its findings. The study sheds light on the historical significance of the commission and its impact on the Irish border issue.
* <https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/handle/10197/2258> - This research paper explores the origins and dissolution of the Irish Boundary Commission. It delves into the legal and political challenges that led to the commission's formation and eventual collapse. The author analyzes the ambiguities in the Anglo-Irish Treaty and how they influenced the commission's proceedings, offering a critical perspective on this chapter of Irish history.
* <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/building-democracy-in-ireland/boundary-commission-crisis-and-the-development-of-strategies-of-political-efficacy/581959B0664BDB538FE5D30DECC35614> - This book chapter examines the crisis surrounding the Irish Boundary Commission and its impact on political strategies in Ireland. It discusses how the commission's failure influenced the development of political efficacy and the broader implications for Irish democracy. The author provides a comprehensive analysis of the political landscape during this tumultuous period.
* <https://historyireland.com/the-boundary-commission-debacle-1925-aftermath-implications/> - This article provides an in-depth look at the aftermath of the Irish Boundary Commission's failure in 1925. It details the political reactions, the diplomatic efforts to salvage the situation, and the long-term implications for Irish politics. The piece offers a critical analysis of the events following the commission's dissolution and their impact on the future of Ireland.
* <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/changing-times-and-irish-border> - This article discusses the evolution of the Irish border issue, focusing on the period following the Irish Boundary Commission. It examines how the border has been a site of conflict and negotiation, highlighting the changing political and social dynamics. The piece provides a historical overview of the border's significance and its role in Irish history.