

Civil Rights

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The 1960s 'Crossroads'

Ireland seemed set for change by the 1960s. The Republic of Ireland abandoned economic protection and set about attracting export orientated multi-national corporations. So doing exposed the country to more cosmopolitan cultural influences (the establishment of a national television broadcasting network in 1961 – RTE – was important in this). Changes in the culture of Roman Catholicism – institutionalised by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) – had a direct impact on Irish national life as in no other country. Desmond Fennell, an interesting intellectual in the cultural nationalist tradition, wrote with more than a little regret: “When the Church ended Friday abstinence, the Lenten fast, the night-long fast before Communion, the keeping of the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle on the altar, and the Latin hymns at Benediction; when it discouraged ... confraternities, sodalities, Sacred Heart devotions, Miraculous Medal novenas, scapulars, the rosary, frequent confessions, exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and other practices; and when it removed most of the statues and holy pictures from the interiors of churches – it thinned Irish culture considerably, and reduced its distinctiveness from British and American culture.”¹

Sean Lemass, Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of the Republic from 1959-66, is held by many to have encouraged this process of ‘modernisation’. Paul Bew and Henry Patterson herald him as a statesman leading Ireland out of the Platonic Cave of nationalist verities and autarchy.²

Something similar, it is argued, was going on in Northern Ireland. In many respects, it was swinging: Belfast was the centre of the most sophisticated of the ‘Showbands’ music phenomenon, glorying in blues influenced musicians of rare talent such as Rory Gallagher and Van Morrison.³ In the post-war period, the British ‘subvention’ to Northern Ireland increasingly took into account the concept of ‘leeway’, that is, the acknowledgement that Northern Ireland required extra resources to catch up with the rest of the United Kingdom. The principle of leeway, in addition to that of parity of taxation and social services, was promulgated in 1955 by the Joint Exchequer Board, a

civil service committee that mediated between the Treasury and the Northern Ireland Government.⁴ This created what Arthur Green, Assistant Secretary in the Department of Finance, called an “expenditure based system” in which the British ‘subvention’ would be determined not by an abstract formula but by the perceived merits of the case made by Stormont.⁵

The failure of the IRA’s ‘Border Campaign’ (1956-62) was both caused by and reinforced the ‘new reality’ increasingly informing the thinking of nationalists. There was a proliferation of new political pressure groups – Tuarim, New Ireland Society, National Unity, National Political Front – all critical of the Nationalist Party’s failure to engage with the state and anxious to enter into dialogue with unionism.⁶ The Nationalist Party itself tried to accommodate the groundswell. For the first time accepting the role of ‘Official’ (and thus implicitly ‘loyal’) Opposition at Stormont.⁷

Terence O’Neill

There appeared to be at least as much potential for change from the Unionist side. Terence O’Neill replaced Lord Brookeborough as Prime Minister in 1963. His rhetoric of modernisation and development, partly a ploy to persuade the British Treasury to increase the ‘subvention’ to Northern Ireland, was pitched in terms of unprecedented inclusiveness. Slowly this developed into an explicit appeal for the cooperation of Catholics. He made a number of famous gestures: visiting a catholic school and, in 1965, meeting with Sean Lemass at Stormont. This latter was hailed internationally as the end of the Irish ‘cold war’. His attitude, sharply at variance with previous Stormont Prime Ministers, seems to have found an echo. In a ‘loyalty survey’, conducted just before the ‘Troubles’ exploded, the political scientist, Richard Rose, found that 65 per cent of Catholics felt that there had been a change

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for the better in community relations during the O'Neill premiership.

However, O'Neill was no great manger of his own party: one backbencher reflected uncharitably that "Capt. O'Neill was the most egotistical man I have ever met and was altogether quite the most unpleasant personality I have ever encountered." Civil service mandarins and liberal opinion formers found him much more congenial, but they were unable, of course, to directly influence his political support base. Active 'O'Neillites' were conspicuously ill-organised within Unionist ranks.

The more damning allegation is that O'Neill's reforms were nothing more than gestural: in fact they served only to raise Catholic hopes without satisfying them, a recipe for rebellion. Indeed, O'Neill's own autobiography tends to reinforce this image: he admitted that the Civil Rights Movement "initiate[d] more reforms in two years than I thought possible in ten."⁸ He often seemed primarily concerned with 'stealing the thunder' of the Northern Ireland Labour Party and thus re-consolidating the Protestant pan-class alliance. In so doing he weakened perhaps the only party capable of uniting both communities behind a reformist agenda.

O'Neill initiated Civic Weeks – under the banner of Programme to Enlist the People – in the hope that Catholic and Protestant citizens could cooperate immediately on local issues, and in doing so build up a more general inter-communal trust. As he put it, in a 1960s sound-bite, "Whether one calls it Derry or Londonderry surely one wants one's native city to grow and prosper. In a better Ballynahinch there will be more opportunities for all its inhabitants. New industries for Newry mean new hope for all its people."⁹

Nevertheless, Terence O'Neill did have real reforms to his credit: notably greater funding for Catholic schools and a non-partisan redistribution of Stormont seats in 1967/8. However, discrimination did not fade away. Sectarian practises, as the state had ever greater resources to dispose of, became if anything more glaring: the location (and naming, as 'Craigavon') of the 'New City', the skewed sequencing of public housing projects, and the location

of the new university (in Protestant Coleraine rather than predominantly Catholic Derry), for example.

It was not so much that O'Neill was merely masquerading as a liberal, however. Rather, he believed that a process of technocratic modernisation and the institutionalisation of balmy rhetoric would in themselves lessen sectarian divisions. To confront bigotry more directly would only encourage Paisleyite agitation (Ian Paisley readily rode to prominence with his 'O'Neill Must Go' campaign) and provoke his Unionist Party into lurching to the paranoid right, toppling O'Neill in the process. Indeed, O'Neill's fall very nearly came to pass in 1966.

In fact, O'Neill's political vision was actually quite bold: by appealing in presidential manner to moderates of both communities he hoped to re-configure politics, and in turn effectively re-establish the Unionist Party altogether. Unionism would be loosed from its suffocating embrace with Protestantism.¹⁰

O'Neill's hopes rested on the assumption that Catholics were coming to accept the Northern Ireland state as legitimate. As indicated at the outset, traditional Irish nationalism did seem to be on the wane, and certainly the Nationalist Party in Northern Ireland was in a parlous state. Indeed, in an opinion poll conducted in 1968, no less than 45 per cent of Catholics indicated that they would vote for pro-O'Neill candidates, as against only 20 per cent for the Nationalist Party. This has been explained by the emergence of a Catholic middle class prepared to cast off ancient shibboleths.

Civil Rights Organisations and Demonstrations

It may be more the case that nationalists were demoralised and apathetic rather than genuinely accepting the partition settlement. In 1954, when a republican demonstration in Pomeroy, County Tyrone, was batoned by the police, a foreign visitor was told: "'You are French; tell them at home what's happening here' ... I sensed behind those words a lack of confidence in the value of protests."¹¹ Patricia McCloskey, recalling in 1972 what moved her to set up in 1963 the Dungannon Homeless Citizens Committee, pin-pointed a broadcast traumatic for many in the Catholic community:

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I saw a television broadcast about ten years ago between a Nationalist MP and Mr. [Brian] Faulkner and the Nationalist, who had the best case, made such a poor showing. He asserted the wrongs but had no statistics to back them up. We had a very small television set and we looked at that. I cried. Wasn't that what began it? ... Mr Faulkner just walked rings around him and made a fool of him.¹²

The first civil rights organisation – the Dungannon-based Campaign for Social Justice – was indeed defiantly respectable. One founding activist recalled that, “it was being put about by hard line Unionists that the Homeless Citizens League was a bunch of ragamuffins. The Unionist local newspaper, the *Tyrone Courier*, on 6 June 1963 published an interview with the eight committee members and included a large photograph where it was plain to see that these were dignified and attractive women.”¹³ At this early stage, however, “the marches were not supported by the Catholic middle class. They obviously could not bring themselves to associate closely in those testing times with the ‘lumpenproletariat’ in the housing estates.”¹⁴

The most striking focus of Catholic civil rights discontents was Derry/Londonderry. In a gerrymander in 1923 Unionists wrested control from nationalists, an arrangement reinforced in the 1930s. Derry's City North Ward with an electorate of 5,000 returned eight Unionist seats, South Ward returned eight Nationalists, but had an electorate of 15,000. Waterside, with 5,000 electors returned four Unionists. Thus a Nationalist majority of 5,000 resulted in a Unionist council of 12 Unionists to eight Nationalists. In the 1960s it was deprived of the new university, though there was general agreement that Derry was the most obvious location.

In January 1964 the Campaign for Social Justice (CSJ) was founded in Dungannon, County Tyrone by Dr John and Patricia McCluskey ‘to collect data on all injustices done against all creeds and political opinions’. Hitherto, civil rights propaganda had been simply one string in the anti-partitionist bow. The CSJ's apolitical position was designed to appeal primarily to a British audience. In this they had some success and a Campaign for Democracy in Ulster (CDU) pressure group won considerable support on the back benches of the British Parliamentary Labour Party

On 30 March 1966 a conference of over 80 representatives at the International Hotel in Belfast set up the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), a ‘non-political pressure group modelled on the National Council for Civil Liberties.’ The first civil rights march, in emulation of the movement in the USA, from Coalisland to Dungannon, took place on 25 August 1968. It was barred from Dungannon's town centre to avoid collision with a Paisleyite counter-demonstration. On 27 August leftist activists in the Derry Housing Action Committee – principally Eamon McCann – invited NICRA to organise a march there. Again this was re-routed to exclude it from the city centre by the partisan Minister of Home Affairs, Bill Craig. On 5 October 1968, the Derry march was stopped by police lines, and after the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) moved in to disperse the crowd. This developed into two days of rioting, and an immediate political crisis. On 9 October 1,000 Queen's students staged a sit-down in Linen Hall Street after being barred from the City Hall area on the pretext of a Paisleyite counter demonstration. They quickly went on to form People's Democracy, a radical and activist civil rights group.

In Derry, meanwhile, a broad ranging Derry Citizens Action Committee took over leadership of the city's civil rights movement. An attempt to ban all demonstrations in Derry collapsed on 16 November when 16,000 marched and 2,000 staged a sit-down protest in the Diamond. This was only the first of a series of such incursions; 800 female factory workers and 200 dockers followed suit in the days following. On 22 November a five point reform package was announced by the Stormont Government. A points system for housing allocations was to be adopted and an ombudsman appointed. Derry Corporation would be suspended and replaced by a commission, ostensibly to administer the Derry Area Plan along the same lines as the Craigavon Commission, but in reality to overcome objections to Unionist control of the Corporation through gerrymandering. The local government franchise would be examined after the review process was completed in late 1971. It was implied that one man one vote would be forthcoming, but in the context of a reformed rates system to placate the Unionist right. Company votes would be abolished sooner. Finally, there would be discussions with

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the British Government on withdrawing aspects of the Special Powers Act as soon as it could be done 'without undue hazard'. This was a somewhat limited programme, the concessions of a points system and an ombudsman being the only U-turns.

On 30 November 8,000 civil rights demonstrators took to the streets of Armagh, only to be excluded from the city centre by a belligerent and quite heavily armed crowd of 1,000 Paiseleyites. On 9 December 1968, Prime Minister Terence O'Neill broadcast to the province, addressing directly the civil rights marchers:

Your voice has been heard and clearly heard, Your duty now is to play your part in taking the heat out of the situation before blood is shed.

Shortly afterwards, he sacked Craig, his controversial Minister of Home Affairs.

The immediate response was favourable, and most civil rights organisations called off demonstrations for at least a month. However, one group increasingly in thrall to socialist radicals, the People's Democracy, organised a 'Long March', from Belfast to Derry, starting on 1 January 1969. They were harassed on their way, and seriously attacked on 4 January at Burntollet Bridge, and as they straggled into Derry, by Loyalists including out of uniform police auxiliaries. Subsequent disorder in Derry saw a breakdown in RUC discipline and their temporary removal from a nationalist district of the city. The civil rights agitation re-ignited, but only the following weekend doused again when protestors attacked police and property in a badly organised demonstration in the Catholic town of Newry.

When O'Neill called a general election on 3 February, primarily to still dissent in his own party, civil rights activists re-directed their energies into electoral politics. A slew of civil rights activists, notably John Hume, Paddy Devlin and Ivan Cooper, ousted traditionalist Nationalist Party MPs. Terence O'Neill failed to effectively re-shape his parliamentary party. Thirty six Unionists were elected of whom 24 were pro O'Neill and 12 anti O'Neill. O'Neill himself only narrowly retained his seat against a strong challenge from the Reverend Ian Paisley. The percentage of the vote that went to all shades of Unionism

– including pro-O'Neill candidates – in February 1969 was, at 67.4 per cent, exactly the percentage of Protestants of voting age revealed by the 1971 census. By this stage, at any rate, there is no evidence of a substantial pro-Union Catholic opinion. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that, though most Catholics did not envisage a united Ireland anytime soon, they were anxious to inflict a humiliating defeat on Unionism and unwilling to disavow their nationalist aspirations. In this atmosphere, civil rights demonstrations were re-ignited, now emphasising the demand for one person one vote in local government suffrage and repressive legislation arising out of recent disorders.

Loyalist Protestants, anxious to expose what they took to be the essence of civil rights – a nationalist assault on the legitimacy of Northern Ireland – strove to physically peg the movement back into 'Catholic' areas and goad it into overt partisanship. First the RUC (directed by William Craig, Minister of Home Affairs) attempted to restrict marches to 'Catholic' areas. When this led to widely publicised repression (5 October 1968), Paisleyite counter-demonstrations took up the slack (notably in Armagh, 30 November 1968). The Burntollet ambush saw the B Specials operating in an unofficial capacity. As a close civil servant to Terence O'Neill recalled, "The B Specials were the men for Burntollet. There's no doubt that the B Specials in that area were an extremist force. In certain areas they did very useful work and were very fine, but in other sections of the country they were completely out of hand. And they had their little bosses."¹⁵ By April 1968 such confrontational tactics had percolated into the ghetto 'interface' areas, with predictable rowdyism. The August 1969 riots were a massive culmination of the process.

In the aftermath of the Crossroads election there was increasing pressure from Loyalists. On 17 April Bernadette Devlin, a stalwart of the civil rights movement with republican support, defeated the Unionist candidate, Mrs Allen, in a by-election for the Westminster seat of Mid Ulster. In the following days of heightened tension severe rioting broke out in Derry, the RUC crashed into the working-class Catholic area of Bogside badly beating Samuel Deveney who later died. Disorder spread to Belfast and on 28 April 1969 Terence O'Neill resigned.

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His vote proved crucial in the ensuing election of a new leader by the Parliamentary Unionist Party: James Chichester-Clarke on 1 May defeated Sir Brian Faulkner by 17 votes to 16 to become Unionist leader and the next prime minister.

Sectarian disorder continued and in July 1969 there was serious trouble in the town of Dungiven. As tension mounted, Derry Citizens' Defence Association superseded the Derry Citizens Action Committee, indicating a new militancy and pessimism amongst the Catholic working class. On 12 August the traditional Loyalist Apprentice Boys march in Derry triggered three days of rioting between police and Catholic inhabitants in the battle of the Bogside. Rioting in the city ended only with the arrival of British Army soldiers at 5pm on 14 August. Violence spread to Belfast where many Catholics were burnt out. Protestant fears were heightened by intimations from the government of the Republic of Ireland that they would not stand aside. On 16 August British troops were welcomed into Catholic areas of Belfast and the rioting ended. Within a month to British Army had erected reinforced fences – the peace line – one and a half miles in extent in Belfast. During the riots of July and August there were ten deaths, 154 gunshot wounds and 745 other injuries.

On 19 August the Downing Street Declaration issued by the British and Northern Irish Governments announced that Northern Ireland would remain part of UK so long as a majority wished, but that also reforms would be encouraged and overseen by the British Government.

Later in August James Callaghan, British Home Secretary, was welcomed enthusiastically in the Catholic Derry Bogside. Oliver Wright, a London civil servant, was installed next door to the office of Unionist premier Chichester-Clarke as a direct representative of UK Government to oversee the reform programme.

Loyalist resentment began to build. In October there was severe rioting between Protestants and the Army on the Belfast Shankill Road. During this violence, Constable Victor Arbuckle became the first member of the RUC to be killed when shot dead by Loyalists. The Army suppressed rioting with a firm hand and general disorder seemed to decline. Early in November the Army reported the first

incident-free weekend since its deployment. Nevertheless, Stormont remained and Catholics increasingly came to see the Army as the last support for a Unionist power virtually broken and discredited.



NOTES

- [1] See his *The State of the Nation* (Ireland Since the Sixties) (Ward River Press, 1983).
- [2] See their *Sean Lemass and the Making of Modern Ireland 1945-1966* (Gill and Macmillan, 1982).
- [3] Vincent Power, *Send 'em Home Sweating: The Showbands' Story* (Kildanore: Dublin, 1990), p 14.
- [4] Derek Birrell and Alan Murie, *Policy and Government in Northern Ireland, lessons of devolution* (Dublin, 1980), pp 15-18.
- [5] Arthur J. Green, *Devolution and public finances, Stormont from 1921 to 1972* (University of Strathclyde, 1979), p 14.
- [6] To get a feeling of the atmosphere, read Michael McKeown, *The Greening of a Nationalist* (Murlough Press, 1986).
- [7] Brendan Lynn, *Holding the Ground: The Nationalist Party in Northern Ireland, 1945-1972* (Ashgate Publishing Company, 1997).
- [8] *The autobiography of Terence O'Neill: Prime Minister of Northern Ireland 1963-1969* (London, Hart Davis, 1972).
- [9] Terence O'Neill, *Ulster at the Crossroads* (1969), p 130.
- [10] Marc Mulholland, 'Assimilation versus segregation: Unionist strategy in the 1960s', *Twentieth Century British History* Vol ii, no.3 (2000).
- [11] Camille Bourniquel, (trans. by John Fisher), *Ireland* (Vista Books, London, 1960), p 80.
- [12] W.H. Van Voris, *Violence in Ulster: An Oral Documentary* (Amhert, 1975), p 51.
- [13] Conn McCluskey, *Up Off Their Knees: A Commentary on the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland* (Republic of Ireland, 1989), p 11.
- [14] Ibid.
- [15] W. H. Van Voris, *Violence in Ulster: An Oral Documentary* (Amhert, 1975), p 95.

