

# Politics in the Streets

The origins of the  
civil rights movement  
in Northern Ireland

by  
**Bob Purdie**  
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## THE NEW OPPOSITION

There's many a victory decisive and complete  
 Has meant a sight less fighting than a hardly fought defeat;  
 And if people do their duty, every man in his degree,  
 Why defeat may be more glorious than a victory needs to be.

quoted in the *Belfast Labour Chronicle*, February 1905

In 1945 Nationalist politicians in Northern Ireland assumed that the changed political situation put a united Ireland within their grasp. As they perceived it, the Unionists were Tories, therefore the new Labour government at Westminster was bound to oppose them. With a minimum of persuasion the Government could be brought to see that this meant supporting Irish unity. The new importance of the United States as ally and benefactor of Britain would make this more likely by giving the Irish-American lobby strong influence. It was such thinking that lay behind the creation in 1945 of the Anti-Partition League (APL),<sup>1</sup> which was set up to co-ordinate the Nationalist MPs at Stormont and to build a grass-roots political movement that would unite the entire Catholic community behind them.

The APL was launched by Nationalist MPs and senators in a series of public rallies throughout the nationalist areas of Northern Ireland, beginning in January 1946. At these, the triumphs of the past and heroes long dead were summoned up to support the claim that Ireland was about to break the last fetter that tied it to the British Empire. Despite the rhetoric, the activity of the APL was fairly prosaic. Led mainly by Catholic professional men and organised by small businessmen, with the support of the clergy, the APL concentrated on electoral activity, which meant registering Catholics to vote, scrutinising the registrations from the 'other side', and putting together an election machine. The APL sought support from the rest of the Irish nation and was partly responsible for the anti-partition campaign of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The high point of this campaign came after the declaration of a republic by the Dublin government in 1948. The withdrawal of the south from the British Commonwealth provoked Westminster's Ireland Act of 1949, which for the first time guaranteed the position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. The anti-partition movement in the south mounted a massive campaign involving all the main political parties and culminating in the Mansion House Conference of 1949, which set up a fund to help finance anti-partition candidates in the north.

In response the Unionists called a general election and made the 'threat' of southern 'interference' the main issue. They were returned to power with an increased majority, having wiped out the NILP's parliamentary representation. In this polarised situation the Nationalists retired to abstentionism and ineffectuality. Although the APL standing committee was retained as a form of liaison between Nationalist MPs, senators and notables of the Catholic community, there was a return to the tradition of independent politicians operating from purely local power bases without any form of permanent party organisation. The attempt to create a movement to unite and mobilise the Catholic community was abandoned.

The situation in Belfast was different, but not qualitatively so. The APL made no attempt to challenge the existing representatives of the minority in the city, who sailed under a variety of flags, all claiming some association with Labour politics. There were defectors from the NILP who set up branches of the southern Irish Labour Party, and there were Independent Labour, Socialist Republican and Republican Labour candidates at different times. This nomenclature had three purposes: it facilitated a certain amount of voting across sectarian lines in mixed constituencies; it accommodated individual Protestants who had been won over to a left-nationalist standpoint; and it was indicative of the fact that the Catholic traditionalist stance of the APL on social welfare issues did not appeal to urban Catholic workers. Effectively, however, these were usually local machines supporting individual politicians, similar to the organisation of rural Nationalist politics. Two of these politicians, Harry Diamond, Stormont MP for Falls, Belfast, and Jack Beattie, Westminster MP for West Belfast, were useful to the APL in helping to forge links with a group of Labour back-

benchers at Westminster who called themselves the Friends of Ireland.<sup>2</sup> Not all of these MPs were Irish nationalists and the basis of their collaboration was not against partition but against what they saw as the oppressive and discriminatory aspects of Unionist rule in Northern Ireland. Another theme, pursued especially strongly by their main spokesman, Geoffrey Bing, in his best-selling *Tribune* pamphlet of 1950, *John Bull's Other Ireland*, was the responsibility of Westminster, under the Government of Ireland Act 1920, for the operation of devolved government in Northern Ireland. This, they argued, made it incumbent on Westminster to intervene to check on the discrimination practised by Unionists and to impose reforms.

Although some of the APL's most important allies were implicitly at odds with the view that the only problem in Ireland was partition and the only remedy reunification, there was plenty of scope for uniting to harry the Unionists at Westminster and to agitate about discrimination. But there seems never to have been any discussion about the long-term incompatibility of their aims and the alliance broke up in the wake of the Ireland Act of 1949. For the next decade Nationalist opposition in Northern Ireland concentrated on maximalist and fruitless agitation for Irish unity. The episode is instructive; the Nationalists were happy to adopt a tactical line of agitating about discrimination but their commitment to this line proved to be very fragile. They seemed to think of discrimination not as an issue demanding reforms within Northern Ireland but as a means of exposing unionism and of justifying their denial of the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland government. At the first setback they reverted to their fundamental commitment to Irish unity. It is a characteristic which, on the one hand, gives a measure of the extent to which the civil rights movement differed from the nationalist tradition, and on the other helps explain why sections of that movement reverted to anti-partitionism during the crises of 1969-1972.

The early 1950s saw Irish nationalism still riding the tide of emotionalism created by the Ireland Act. The Dublin government tried to make partition an international issue and failed. The Irish-American lobby failed to shift Washington from its non-interventionist policy. The anti-partitionists in Britain failed to punish Labour by mobilising the Irish vote against it. Nationalist

politics in the north lapsed into another bout of abstentionism and extra-parliamentary action, which merged into the IRA campaign of 1956-62.

The founding leaders of the APL, people like James McSparran MP, Thomas Campbell KC, MP, Cahir Healy MP, and Senator James G. Lennon, were staid, not to say ponderous: they were socially and politically conservative men who were very traditional Catholics and nationalists. In contrast the new leader of nationalist Derry, Eddie McAteer, who was in his early twenties when first elected to Stormont in 1945, had a vivid rhetorical style and a degree of political imagination which was not common within the ranks of the APL. In his pamphlet of 1948, *Irish Action*, he proposed a campaign of civil disobedience which was to have included traditional Irish sanctions like the boycott, but also more light-hearted tactics like gumming up the operations of officialdom by 'acting stupid'. 'Chuckle your way to freedom,' he advised. 'It is still a little risky to twist the British Lion's tail. Just tickle it.' Despite this advice there was nothing light-hearted about politics in Northern Ireland in the 1950s. The instinct of nationalists embarking on extra-parliamentary action was not to adopt McAteer's proposals for civil disobedience but to indulge in communalist pageantry. McAteer himself was involved in a number of clashes with the RUC over the carrying of the Irish tricolour. Communal hostilities were further exacerbated by a series of incidents in which Orangemen insisted on attempting to march through nationalist streets. The commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the 1798 Rising of the United Irishmen in 1948 and the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 were further occasions for displays of conspicuous disunity.

The creation of the APL had not changed the practice whereby the selection of Nationalist candidates in rural areas was in the hands of local conventions. As long as the Nationalist leadership was unchallenged, this worked in its favour, but it created an opportunity for Sinn Féin, who nominated candidates for all twelve Westminster constituencies and then challenged the conventions to select a Nationalist and split the Catholic vote. This effectively blackmailed the Nationalists into conceding the right to contest Westminster seats to the republicans. Since Northern Ireland legislation prevented Sinn Féin from contesting Stormont

seats as abstentionists, there was a tacit division of labour whereby the Nationalists held their seats in the Northern Ireland parliament, while after 1955 the minority community had no representatives at Westminster.

However, after 1959, Catholic opinion had turned against an increasingly futile IRA campaign which had become little more than a series of isolated attacks on individual policemen. Militant republican tactics had failed but the frustrations within the Catholic community remained and were shared by increasing numbers of Protestant opponents of the Unionist Party. This meant that the 1960s saw another period of experimentation but this time with a broader, more fragmented and more heterogeneous opposition movement. The IRA cease-fire in 1962 cannot be credited with the responsibility for creating the conditions for the emergence of this new opposition, but it did mark a major watershed in Northern Ireland politics.

Immediately after the IRA cease-fire there was a split in Sinn Féin; a number of older leaders left and there were reports that they intended to start a new republican party. But instead they retired to the sidelines and the new leadership devoted fresh energy to public political activity. The new leaders of the movement were Tomás Mac Giolla, acting president of Sinn Féin, Cathal Goulding, chief of staff of the IRA, Tom Mitchell, the disqualified MP for Mid-Ulster, who became director of elections, and Seán Ó Brádaigh, secretary of Sinn Féin. After the 1970 split, Mac Giolla, Goulding and Mitchell went with the Official Republicans and Ó Brádaigh with the Provisionals, but at this time there was a general consensus among republicans about the new direction. Seán Mac Stíofáin, later chief of staff of the Provisional IRA, has recorded in his autobiography the pleasure with which he greeted Goulding's appointment and his support for the turn to politics. It was not until 1964 that he began to be concerned about Marxist influences within the leadership.

On the surface, however, it appeared that little had changed within the republican movement. In 1962 the Easter Rising commemorations in Belfast and Newry attracted large crowds, although in Newry it was noted that most of the hundreds who turned out preferred to line the route rather than march. In Milltown cemetery in Belfast, Sean Keenan gave the oration: 'One

day the appeal of those crying from the grave [will] be heard not only by the faithful few, but by all Ireland. Then Ireland, like a giant waking from its slumber, [will] throw off the yoke of tyranny and wonder why it [has] borne it so long.<sup>3</sup> In Newry, Christopher Loy voiced the same unchanging message. The country, he said, had been divided against the wishes of the overwhelming majority and allegiance was due to neither of the usurping governments. One American writer evoked the atmosphere of decay and isolation that surrounded the republicans in the early 1960s: Sinn Féin was a

demoralised party – defensive, self-pitying and self-righteous . . . [It] has been reduced to the stage of being led by a waxen-faced, middle-aged Government clerk named Tomás Mac Giolla. His party's headquarters, in a run-down building in a lower-class section of Dublin, are airless, unpainted and dusty; and they reek of disinfectant. Scattered throughout the two small offices are old pieces of furniture, ancient maps of Ireland, ragged banners and stacks of yellowing literature.<sup>4</sup>

The main focus for the republicans in 1962 was the campaign to obtain the release of IRA prisoners still held in Belfast and in British jails. Political prisoners release committees were set up all over the north, uniting various strands of nationalist opinion. Among those lobbying on behalf of the prisoners were the Ulster council of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the AOH in County Tyrone, the Old Fianna Veterans' Association, Dublin Corporation, one hundred members of Dáil Éireann, twelve Stormont and twenty-five Westminster MPs, as well as three trade-union national secretaries. Among the Stormont MPs who were most prominent in the campaign were: Joseph Stewart, MP for East Tyrone and leader of the Nationalist Party in Stormont; Harry Diamond, the Socialist Republican MP for Falls; and Gerry Fitt, the recently elected Independent Irish Labour MP for Dock.

Through their skill at pageantry and their front organisation, the National Graves Association, the republicans established a monopoly on the commemoration of such symbolic anniversaries as the birth of Wolfe Tone and the Easter Rising. This enabled them to parade, at least twice a year, as the leaders not of a faction but of a nation, and helped to create the ambiguous situation in which, while Catholics would not vote for them in any significant numbers, they retained a secure niche within the nationalist community

of Northern Ireland. The importance of such pageantry for the IRA in the early 1960s was underlined in a talk given in 1972 by Billy McMillen, commanding officer of the Official IRA in Belfast following the split with the Provisionals in 1970. He claimed that in 1961 the total membership of the IRA in the city was twenty-four and they were equipped only with two short arms. They did, however, have flags, and they were asked by the organisers of the Wolfe Tone bicentenary commemoration in 1963 to supply a colour party for the Belfast parade. The Government imposed a ban on the carrying of the Irish tricolour, and in the face of a large force of RUC the then commanding officer, Billy McKee, accepted the decision of the parade organisers and withdrew the flag:

The parade . . . marched up the Falls Road headed by an IRA colour party minus the tricolour to the hoots and jeers of a couple of hundred onlookers. The humiliation and embarrassment of the Volunteers was acute and McKee's refusal to sanction the carrying of the tricolour created bitter resentment . . . The tricolour was to play a central part in the future developments in Belfast, especially in re-awakening the dormant nationalism that slumbered in the hearts of the people.<sup>5</sup>

The following Easter there was no interference with the tricolour, but in October 1964 it was the focus of the Divis Street riots and in 1966, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising, 'the Belfast staff saw . . . a golden opportunity to drive a coach and four through the notorious Flags and Emblems Act'. 'Thousands' of tricolours and 'miles' of green-white-and-gold bunting festooned nationalist Belfast, large crowds marched and watched and 'although no great material benefit accrued to the IRA . . . there was general satisfaction that progress had been made in dispelling the deadening apathy that had immobilised the people for so many years'. McMillen was careful to present this activity as defiance of the Flags and Emblems Act and an assertion of the civil right to carry the tricolour. He also stressed the IRA's success in overcoming apathy and mobilising Belfast Catholics, but there must be a large suspicion that much of what happened was the result of fairly apolitical communal polarisation, focused on the emotive issue of nationalist symbols.

In other ways, too, republicans were reluctant to break from their traditions. Despite the cease-fire, a number of incidents



showed that military activity had not been totally eliminated. In March 1963 a young man was killed and another injured in an attempt to blow up an old IRA memorial in County Cork. The IRA denied that this was one of its operations but the dead man was buried with full republican military honours and the Irish Republican Publicity Bureau admitted that they were IRA volunteers who had been trying to forestall an unveiling by President Eamon de Valera. In July 1963 a republican meeting in Waterford town protested at the arrest of 'young freedom fighters' who had been training in the hills outside Dungarvan. These were a Belfast man and two others who were arrested in possession of uniforms, arms and ammunition. During the trial the Belfast defendant interrupted to say that the arms were for use 'against British forces in the six occupied counties'. In October six young men were held after RUC raids in the Falls Road area of Belfast. In January 1965 explosions cut off the electricity supply at Abbeyleix, County Laois, during a visit by Princess Margaret and Lord Snowdon. In the summer of 1965 the IRA fired on a visiting Royal Navy torpedo boat in Waterford harbour. In January 1966 a young Dungannon man was charged with collecting information on the use of explosives, anti-personnel mines and rocket launchers. Four other teenagers were arrested with him and charged with possession of two bayonets and a copy of the *United Irishman*, the republican movement's newspaper. In March 1966 there was an attempt to set fire to the home of the British military attaché in Dublin. A few days later the Nelson Pillar in O'Connell Street, Dublin, was toppled by an explosion.

Other incidents in 1966 included a campaign of sabotage in south Kilkenny for which the well-known republican, Richard Behal, admitted responsibility. There were scuffles in O'Connell Street during the Easter Rising commemoration in Dublin, as gardaí tried to seize a banner bearing the legend 'Óglaigh na hÉireann' (Irish Volunteers, the Irish title of the IRA). In September shots were fired over the grave of Patrick McManus of Kinawley, County Fermanagh; he was described as commanding officer of the IRA's south Fermanagh unit. In late 1966 an IRA unit broke up a British Army recruiting lecture in a Catholic boys' school on the Crumlin Road in Belfast; its members smashed a film projector and injured British officers who were present. In February 1967 a

man was found tarred and feathered and tied to a lamppost in Leeson Street in the Lower Falls; a statement from the Belfast IRA claimed that he had been giving information to the RUC. In October the RUC alleged that during a raid on the Sean McCaughey Club in Oldpark, Belfast, they found a number of young women drawn up in military formation and responding to commands. Prominent members of the republican women's organisation, Cumann na mBan, were recognised. In September 1968 the RUC alleged that the IRA had been responsible for raiding a house in Sultan Street in the Lower Falls and demanding the householder's legally held firearms.

Not all of these incidents were particularly serious. The five Dungannon teenagers seem to have been simply young romantics. Gerry Fitt and Harry Diamond claimed in Stormont that the alleged Cumann na mBan parade was actually an Irish language class. Richard Behal was disowned by the IRA leadership as were those responsible for blowing up the Cork monument and the Nelson Pillar. Allegations by the authorities, north and south, that a resumption of the IRA military campaign was imminent were strenuously denied by the Irish Republican Publicity Bureau. J. Bowyer Bell helps to clarify the reasons for this ambiguity about militarism:

Without the IRA the Movement would be a fraternal society, a clan of the alienated, not a force for change. Without the IRA the Movement would wither and die. Thus the IRA was maintained; organisers travelled the hinterland, training camps were held, equipment was polished – and there was no action, the IRA was building with sand. Recruits drifted through a revolving door of idealism, boredom and departure. Units dissolved or squabbled. Pressed for money, for time, for men, Dublin GHQ had to move ever faster on the treadmill even to shore up the Army much less to enlarge it.<sup>6</sup>

In a *Belfast Telegraph* interview of 10 February 1967, Cathal Goulding, IRA chief of staff, admitted that there had been unauthorised activity by splinter groups. This was because of the maintenance of the cease-fire: 'Men who had been engaged in military training wanted to put it to use. If you train a horse you have to race him. We weren't able to race these people so they raced themselves.' The new leadership had adopted a strategy aimed at involving the republican movement in agitation on social and

economic issues, with a final goal of a united socialist republic. Militarism was not to be abandoned but it was to be used in a different way. As one commentator put it, the new strategy 'involved abandoning the strict theoretical division between "military" and "political" action and their combination in a much more subtle blend in which they would fully complement each other'.<sup>7</sup> Sean Garland, one of the key members of the new leadership, put it this way: 'There are no longer two different types of Republicans; physical force men and politicians. We in the Republican Movement must be prepared to take the appropriate educational, economic, political and finally military action.'<sup>8</sup> In practice the strategy could not be implemented as the theory predicted. The old distinction between physical force and political action reflected the simple fact that the first was illegal and the second was not. Involvement in both became difficult because open political action exposed the small numbers of volunteers to police attention, threatening the security of the movement's covert activities. And since all this was being carried out by a secret organisation that did not even make all of its own members privy to the thinking of its inner councils, what appeared on the surface was highly ambiguous. This ambiguity could be interpreted either as evidence that the IRA was being kept in readiness for a renewed military campaign, or as a tactic to keep the organisation together while its direction was fundamentally changed. The security forces and governments on both sides of the border held the first view, but sections of the republican movement favoured the second. Seán Mac Stíofáin has recorded his disillusion with Goulding's leadership and in retrospect he saw developments during the 1960s as a justification for the Provisionals' split in 1970. But even at the time, elements in the IRA warned about reformism and an abandonment of militarism.

A group of left-wing oppositionists in Cork published a duplicated magazine, *An Phoblacht*,<sup>9</sup> which in March 1966 berated the leadership:

Republican leaders will talk their heads off on the subject of the IRA fighting for Irish freedom when they appear at some commemoration or other. But they make no preparations for such a struggle; and in private conversations with them, it became very apparent that they haven't a clue how such a war is to be waged and they have no desire to find out.

In October 1967 they excoriated the 'present trend towards a total reliance on non-violent methods'. The involvement of the republican movement in the civil rights movement will be examined later and it will be made clear that the evidence does not point to any intention of exploiting the latter movement for subversive purposes. The publishers of *An Phoblacht* seem to have been right: behind the façade of a continued verbal commitment to militarism and the occasional 'racing' of volunteers, the leadership had turned away from any perspective of a renewed military campaign.

After the May 1962 Stormont general election an *Irish Weekly* editorial commented: 'It is clear that . . . the policy of more vigorous tactics, employed by the [Nationalist] Party at Stormont in the last Parliament, has won recognition and would seem to indicate that Nationalists want political opposition at Stormont rather than any policy of abstentionism.' Despite this, as with the republicans, the surface appearance was very little different. Eddie McAteer told a victory rally in Derry that the election results represented a 'new rising tide of strong nationalism in the north', and Irish tricolours were carried in the victory parade and flew from many houses, including McAteer's. Shortly after the election, Cahir Healy, the eighty-five-year-old MP for South Fermanagh, addressing a Gaelic League *feis* in Newcastle, County Down, said that 'the Irish language was the badge of their nationality and where it was being neglected or put aside the spirit of nationality receded'. This kind of statement showed how much the Nationalists were caught up in a very traditional Catholic-Gaelic interpretation of nationalism and were suspicious of influences from outside. In June 1964, James O'Reilly MP, speaking at a *feis* in County Down, said that while youth was 'kicking over the traces in other countries – seeking thrills in outlandish fashions and habits – we can be thankful that the *feiseanna* show an Irish way of life that is satisfying and sound'.

The differences between the Nationalist Party and the republicans were not so much about policy or ideology as temperament. Constitutional nationalism in the south was the adaptation of republicanism to the empirical realities of running a small, poor, independent state. Constitutional nationalism in the north could appear like republicanism without the maximalism and idealism

that made people willing to kill and die for the unity of Ireland. As Ian McAllister points out, the Nationalist Party had

a half-hearted commitment to constitutional politics. They failed to organise and restricted their activities to enclaves where they possessed a numerical majority. Moreover they frequently abstained from parliament and continued to emphasise partition to the exclusion of other social issues affecting the welfare of their supporters. In many ways this solution . . . was the worst they could have adopted, for it left them open to attack from all sides. Unionists accused them of being quasi-revolutionaries, moderate Catholics of not adequately seeking to redress their grievances, and militant Republicans vilified them for not having the courage of their convictions to oppose partition by force.<sup>10</sup>

There was a fatalism about the Nationalists that prevented them from making any real effort to break out of this vicious circle. Eddie McAteer, leader of the party from 1964, saw things in terms of a broad historical perspective:

You have this cyclical appearance of the Irish struggle for freedom. At times there's a constitutional movement; then they weary of it because you cannot accomplish very much by talking peacefully. When they weary of constitutionalism, then there is an outbreak of violence. At times we wander about in such matters as civil rights, civil liberties, and so on, and at an earlier period in our history in the great agrarian conflict over the ownership of the land . . . But all these, I insist, are side issues, really. You have the old racial-colonial struggle going on, and this is the key to the whole problem.<sup>11</sup>

The Nationalists maintained two contradictory principles: on the one hand they rejected the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland constitution; on the other they acquiesced in and worked within it. But the two principles were not held together in the kind of intellectual tension which can produce creative politics, but by the absence of a critical faculty. They usually simply did not notice that what they were doing was contradictory. In so far as they did notice, they attempted to resolve the contradiction through futile gestures – like blanking out the word 'leader' on the door to the office of the leader of the opposition at Stormont, and refusing to take the salary.<sup>12</sup>

The Nationalists still looked on the other political forces in

Northern Ireland with suspicion. In April 1962, Joseph Stewart, refuting suggestions that there had been a pre-election pact with the NILP, said that Labour's policy on the fundamental issue of national unity was 'no different from that of the Ascendancy Party'. In June, when forcing a division on the nomination of Sir Norman Stronge as Speaker at Stormont, Eddie McAteer said that he was 'not an expert on Orange mysticism, but he thought that the Black Preceptory of which Sir Norman was the head contained a darker distillate of Orangeism and was even more anti-Catholic than the parent Orange Order'. In June 1964 the Nationalists put down an amendment to a Stormont bill to disqualify Orangemen from participation in local government. Even when they made what were meant to be conciliatory gestures to the Protestant majority, they insisted on their own terms. Joseph Connellan MP, speaking at a Nationalist meeting in south Down in February 1965, said that

so many changes were taking place in the outlook of intelligent people everywhere that it would be a glorious gesture if the Protestant people of the North decided to return to the fold of nationalism . . . Protestants would be no strangers in the field of nationalism. Their Northern ancestors, pioneers of democratic thinking, were the founders of Irish nationalism . . . Several thousand of the more educated Protestant people had . . . quietly voted for Nationalist candidates . . . It is deplorable that they have not so far publicly identified themselves with our work.

To be fair to the Nationalists, their crusted antiquity and suspicion of the modern world was shared to a large extent by their Unionist opponents. A little vignette conveys this: McAteer asked a question about the computer which had recently been acquired by Stormont and requested that members should be 'allowed to peer into the belly of the monster'. Replying, the finance minister, Herbert V. Kirk, said that members would have the machine explained to them and that it was 'close to a thing of black magic'. There were some signs that the Nationalists were aware of the changing world in which they lived. At an AOH demonstration in March, Joseph Stewart said that young people realised that this was 1962 and not 1690 but he interpreted that change as making the downfall of unionism imminent: 'The sooner our Unionist friends realise that the writing is on the wall and [do] not favour the

action of Unionists in Government and local government levels, the better.' At the same rally P. S. Donegan TD (Teachta Dála, member of the Dáil) warned the Unionists to be prepared for the ending of the border in the European Economic Community (EEC) and Senator P. J. O'Hare forecast that the 'props that support partition would soon be swept away'.

When Eddie McAteer succeeded to the leadership of the Nationalist Party in June 1964, he was fifty years of age and was described by the *Irish News* as 'young'. Within the party's frame of reference this was accurate, but from the perspective of the new layer of university-educated young Catholics there was little to choose between McAteer and Cahir Healy, who was now approaching the end of his forty-year stint as Stormont MP for South Fermanagh. Shortly before McAteer's election, the twenty-seven-year-old John Hume had written a series of articles in the *Irish Times* which lambasted the Nationalist Party for its 'irresponsible' leadership:

There has been no attempt to be positive, to encourage the Catholic community to develop the resources which they have in plenty, to make a positive contribution in terms of community service . . . Unemployment and emigration, chiefly of Catholics, remain heavy, much of it no doubt due to the skilful placing of industry by the Northern Government. But the only constructive suggestion from the nationalist side would appear to be that a removal of discrimination will be the panacea for all our ills. It is this lack of positive contribution and the apparent lack of interest in the general welfare of Northern Ireland that has led many Protestants to believe that the Northern Catholic is politically irresponsible and therefore unfit to rule.<sup>13</sup>

In the autumn of 1964, Cahir Healy defended the party from criticisms that it was out of touch with the younger generation. He claimed that it was 'difficult to find places for all the clever, aspiring young men who are hammering at our door'. But only one clever, aspiring young man – Austin Currie – appeared. He held the Stormont seat of East Tyrone for the Nationalists at a by-election in July 1964, increasing the majority from 815 to 1,296. Aged twenty-four, Currie had been born near Coalisland in County Tyrone, the eldest of a family of eleven and the son of a lorry driver. He had won a scholarship to St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon, and went on to graduate in politics and history at QUB. He first made his mark as

president of the New Ireland Society – an important arena for innovative nationalist thinking. Although many of his contemporaries went on to be active in the civil rights movement and later still joined Currie in the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), he was alone in beginning his political career in the Nationalist Party. To do so he had to submit himself to an archaic procedure – the Nationalist nominating convention. It is worth quoting from a contemporary description of the convention that picked Currie to give a flavour of Nationalist politics at the grass roots in this period:

Who are they, these delegates shouldered with the responsibility of selecting a candidate to hold the Nationalist fort in East Tyrone? There are over seventy of them, comprising the public representatives of the area – County Councillors and Rural District Councillors (there are no urban areas in the constituency), the registration agents, the men who mind the machine by keeping the register and attending the revision sessions, and finally two delegates from each church area. These have been selected earlier in the day at a meeting held after Mass and most come pledged to support a particular candidate as long as he is in the fight.

The meeting was presided over by Senator Lennon and agreed on its own rules of procedure and the conditions to be imposed on aspiring candidates. Nominations were taken from the floor and the prospective candidates had five minutes each to address the convention.

Voting was by secret ballot and by an exhaustive procedure in which those with the lowest number of votes were eliminated until one candidate had an absolute majority. Outside, ‘men loiter around the street in small groups. The Sunday suits, the Pioneer pins, the *fáinnes*, the parked Volkswagens, the sporadic guffaws’. Someone ‘looks up at the tall chimney of the hall and comments that the “white smoke will be coming soon”’. A delegate comes out to give the result of the first ballot:

Those outside speculate on how the transferred votes will go, and defend their own predictions while those inside decide the issue. This sequence is repeated from time to time as another man goes out on each count. At the third vote one of the throng outside produces a notebook and starts offering odds on the remaining



candidates. He is soon holding a fistful of notes. At last the hall doors open and this time it is not a solitary delegate slipping out, but a surge of humanity. 'Currie has it.'<sup>14</sup>

In his convention speech Currie had stressed his 'acceptability to the conservative and radical elements in the constituency'. In an early speech in Stormont, in November 1964, Currie bowed to traditionalism by saying that the Union flag was 'not the flag of this country'. However, a year after being elected he made a speech at a *feis* in Newcastle, County Down, in which he pointed out the changes taking place in the 'political, cultural and social life of Ireland'. They must 'welcome useful and progressive change, while maintaining the customs, traditions, attitudes and way of life which distinguish us from the rest of the world'. Two months later he announced plans to create a 'more intensive and democratic movement' in the constituency. He was dissatisfied with the lack of a democratic grass roots and he hoped to involve many of the younger generation. But not all of his colleagues agreed that new initiatives were necessary. Joseph Connellan, speaking in Newry, denied that nationalism was declining or that it was sectarian. They must be radicals like the United Irishmen – 'They had no academic degrees and did not pose as intellectuals.'

However, the tide of events was running Currie's way. There was increasing pressure north and south of the border for Nationalists to adopt a more positive and active role in Northern Ireland political life. Conor Cruise O'Brien records a discouraging trip that he made on behalf of Frank Aiken, foreign affairs minister in the Lemass government:

The object was to convey to various nationalist/anti-Unionist/Catholic leaders and publicists the wish of Mr Aiken and the Dublin Government that they should take a more active part in public life, cease to boycott local official ceremonies, and associate with Protestants to a greater extent. Most of them heard me with resignation, but without manifest assent. A typical comment was that, although Frank Aiken had been born in Armagh, he had been away from it a long time.<sup>15</sup>

During 1963 the influential Dublin Catholic political review *Hibernia* carried out a campaign in its columns for a new nationalist attitude towards the realities of Northern Ireland. In the February

issue Henry Heany, assistant librarian at QUB and a former president of the QUB Catholic Students' Association, called on the Nationalist Party to recognise the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland state and government. He demolished most of the historical myths erected during the anti-partition campaign and argued that recognition would be beneficial to the nationalist cause because it would be more in tune with reality. An editorial in the same issue argued that 'recognition' simply meant recognising the actual existence of the northern government, not necessarily approving of its actions, and pointed out that 'the Holy See recognises Gibraltar, though obviously not conceding the abstract right of British occupation'. In the June issue there was an article by the director of the Abbey Theatre, Ernest Blythe, born in Magheragall, near Lisburn in County Antrim, and the only northern Protestant to have been a member of a Dublin cabinet. He called for the appointment of a consul general to be based in Belfast, 'whose presence would put beyond doubt Southern recognition of the powers and rights of the Northern Government'. Another benefit would be that his attendance at official functions would teach northern nationalists 'by example how in the national interest they ought to meet the minor ceremonial difficulties inherent in the situation'. In the December issue of *Hibernia*, William Patrick, in his column on northern affairs, referred approvingly to a speech made in October 1963 by Gerard Newe, secretary of the Northern Ireland Council of Social Service and a leading Catholic of conservative views. He had reminded northern Catholics of their church's doctrine that 'civil authority called for respect because of its Divine origin, even when those elected . . . to exercise that authority might come from a political party or group to whose views as individuals they did not subscribe'.

Within Northern Ireland the Nationalist Party was being pressed by a new organisation, based mainly in Belfast – National Unity. It should be noted that the Nationalist Party did respond positively to one of the aims of National Unity – the creation of a democratically structured, grass-roots party, with individual membership and local branches. In November 1964 plans were announced for the Nationalist Party to 'step into the twentieth century', with individual membership and an annual conference. The party would also examine the 'sacred cow' of refusing to become the

official opposition at Stormont. Following the meeting between Terence O'Neill and Sean Lemass in January 1965, the Nationalists did, in fact, become the official opposition. In May 1966 the first party conference was held. It passed resolutions calling for: electoral reform to bring Northern Ireland into line with Britain; the abolition of discrimination and the introduction of competitive examinations for all government and local authority appointments; substantial increases in grants to voluntary schools; legislation to bring about equal opportunities for all citizens and an extension of the north-south talks. However, by this time conciliation was already turning sour and McAteer hinted that the party might have to review its position as the official opposition because of government reluctance to 'accept ideas not arising from the narrow limits of their own front bench'. Party organisation was sketchy and it never matured into a genuine, widely organised party based on grass-roots democracy.

The Nationalists responded to events in the early 1960s in much the same way as they had in 1945. Any alteration in the status quo was seen as threatening the existence of the 'artificial' state and the rule of the 'undemocratic' Unionist Party. Their endless variations on the same theme indicated that their political tradition did not contain the resources that would enable them to come to terms with the solidity of Northern Ireland and the resistance of the majority to Irish unity.

Alongside the Nationalist Party there was the smaller nationalist group, National Unity, founded in 1959, which was confined to Belfast and most strongly represented among the QUB-educated Catholic middle class. Ian McAllister, in his study of its successor, the National Democratic Party (NDP), defined the two prongs of the organisation's policy:

National Unity based its appeal firstly, on the need to make reunification conditional on consent and, secondly, the need for a united opposition. The notion of the consent of majority was a recognition that not only Protestants but a substantial number of Catholics were apathetic to the ideal of Irish unity. Any 'new nationalism' in the Province would therefore have to spring from the integration of the two politico-religious traditions, 'and not from the domination of one by the other'. The aim of creating a united opposition from the existing fragmented nationalist groups made

the Unity movement a focal point for the co-ordination of these groups and aroused hopes that a united opposition was an attainable goal.<sup>16</sup>

The thinking behind National Unity's approach was outlined in 1964 by its chairman, John Duffy. He pointed to three main factors: first, the realisation that resort to arms by a minority group was 'neither . . . legitimate nor successful'; second, that the people of the Irish Republic had 'lost much of their enthusiasm for reunification . . . There is now in the South a fully developed political system which conducts its controversy almost entirely in terms of domestic issues' – this meant that the drive for Irish unity now had to come mainly from the north; and, third, Nationalists in Northern Ireland had played into the hands of unionism by

relying too much on Catholic support and by allowing nationalism to become identified with gaelic games, the language revival and the affairs of the Catholic Church. The habit of having 'after Mass' meetings to select delegates for Nationalist conventions is an abuse which is damaging both to the church and the nationalist cause . . . Again Unionists are well pleased with the Nationalists' refusal to become the vehicle of effective opposition on the almost unbelievable grounds that this would amount to 'co-operation', involving 'recognition of the present constitutional position'.

Duffy saw glimmerings of hope in the emergence of a new generation of educated younger nationalists who rejected the negative attitudes of the Nationalist Party. What was needed was an overhaul of nationalist organisation and a re-examination of its political philosophy. He outlined a structure for a democratically organised nationalist party which would enable new ideas and new people to come forward:

The open policy debate which would then ensue both at local association level and at annual conference would radically reshape nationalist thinking . . . One almost certain development would be the discarding of present preoccupation with the rights and wrongs of drinking toasts to the Queen . . . A more concrete development might be the acceptance of the Nationalist role as official opposition at Stormont.<sup>17</sup>

An example of such new thinking was Duffy's proposal, in 1963, that the Stormont parliament should be given greater powers. He

pointed to the difficulties that Stormont's circumscribed economic powers created for matching economic policy to Northern Ireland's special difficulties and the poor quality of political life which resulted from the parliament's lack of prestige.<sup>18</sup>

National Unity's aspirations, therefore, were for a reorganisation of nationalism, a restructuring of its political philosophy and a new and more attractive offer to Unionists of a united Ireland in which they could share. What this programme boiled down to, in practice, was an immediate aim of reorganising nationalism. In April 1964, National Unity invited all elected Nationalist representatives to a conference in Maghery, County Armagh, to discuss the creation of a united party with democratic structures. However, the elected representatives were only encouraged to attend by a threat that if they did not, the assembly itself would create such an organisation. The meeting agreed on the creation of a National Political Front to co-ordinate elected representatives and grass-roots activists and to prepare the ground for unity. But the new body was soon racked by disagreements over whether or not to contest the Westminster seat of Fermanagh and South Tyrone at the next general election.

Two years earlier National Unity had declared its intention of contesting the Westminster constituencies rather than permit republican domination to continue. But the Nationalists were reluctant, and when the National Political Front backed an Independent Nationalist candidate in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, this ensured a Unionist victory and also the destruction of the front. However, these events stimulated a challenge to the mainstream Nationalist Party from Patrick Gormley, MP for Mid-Londonderry, and his brother, Thomas Gormley, MP for Mid-Tyrone. The former had stood against McAteer for the leadership of the Nationalist Party but was soundly beaten. The brothers shared many of National Unity's ideas; they believed that Nationalist thought

had been too rooted in the past and must adapt itself to current changes and needs. They argue that a more rational approach to politics should replace their old emotional approach. Therefore . . . the party should change its emphasis from arguing the . . . merits of partition to arguing the more relevant economic shortcomings of the six counties. The Gormleys, for instance, do not like to see their

party forced into an anti-Protestant position every time their old policies are subject to scrutiny; nor do they like the trend of abdicating the nationalist position in Westminster elections to the 'renegade' Sinn Féin Party.<sup>19</sup>

In October 1965, Patrick Gormley said that Northern Ireland needed 'more socialist measures', and in November he helped to organise a democratic party organisation in his constituency. Addressing this body, he called for the creation of an organised political party to 'put forward a realistic programme of political action for the social development of all the people of Northern Ireland'. In 1967, Thomas Gormley became the first Nationalist MP to attend a royal garden party at Hillsborough, the governor's residence in County Down, held in honour of Princess Margaret and Lord Snowdon; in 1972 he joined the Alliance Party.

With the break-up of the National Political Front, National Unity adopted a policy of going it alone and it set up a properly organised party. It concentrated initially on the Belfast area, where it would be treading most lightly on the Nationalist Party's toes; branches were set up in north, west and east Belfast, and in south Antrim. The organisation was at first called the 'National Party' but in June 1965 it adopted the title National Democratic Party. From the start, however, the organisation bent over backwards to avoid disputes with the Nationalist Party; the first announcement by the new party said that it intended to 'link up with and eventually merge with the Nationalist Party'. In November 1965 it decided not to contest any of the seats held by Nationalists. Throughout its existence the party hankered after the nationalist unity that had eluded it in 1964. In September 1966 the Nationalists set up a committee to consider how to achieve unity and this was welcomed by the NDP. Nationalist observers attended the NDP conference and a joint action committee of the NDP and the Nationalist Party was set up. In February 1967 they issued a joint statement declaring that neither party would organise in a constituency already organised by the other and that each would call on their supporters to work for the other party.

A year later Ben Carraher, assistant secretary of the NDP, speaking at QUB, said that it was 'ludicrous' to have three nationalist parties. He called for a 'mass party [with a] radical social policy [to] present their case to all creeds'. He pointed out that as the

population of Northern Ireland was redistributed, they were in danger of losing votes to other anti-Unionist parties if they did not broaden their appeal. However, by June 1968 the agreement of February 1967 was in tatters. The Nationalists had maintained that where an MP represented a constituency, this meant that it was 'organised' by them, even if no democratic, grass-roots organisation existed. The NDP repudiated the agreement because it effectively confined the party to Unionist areas. By this time the NDP had one Stormont MP and twenty-eight representatives in ten local councils. It controlled local government in Strabane, County Tyrone, and Downpatrick, County Down, but it was manifestly a small party facing major obstacles. One indication of this was its failure to attract the Gormley brothers and John Hume. As Barry White says, 'it should have been a natural home' for the latter, but the self-denying ordinance that kept the NDP out of Nationalist-held constituencies meant that he could not join. In 1966 the NDP asked Hume to stand as its candidate in the Westminster general election, but he 'was going for an important role in a mass movement and the NDP, overloaded as it was by teachers and intellectuals, did not have the makings of a winning combination'.<sup>20</sup>

The NDP's difficulties were not only with the Nationalists; in its stronghold of Belfast it was challenged by Gerry Fitt's RLP. The political differences between the two groups were narrower than those between the NDP and the Nationalists. The RLP had a left-of-centre policy on social and economic issues and it had a grass-roots organisation. However, according to Ciaran McKeown, 'the NDP saw Gerry Fitt as merely a more able version of the one man bands whom minority politics tended to throw up . . . Far from trying to recruit him, the National Democrats saw his brilliant lonerism as a block to the development of organised Catholic minority politics'.<sup>21</sup> For his part, Fitt ridiculed the NDP for its intellectualism and lack of the common touch. He 'pictured them sitting round a table saying to each other, "Think of a big word to impress the people in the Pound Loney – no that's not big enough, give us a longer one."<sup>22</sup>

In December 1965 the NDP announced its intention of contesting the West Belfast Westminster constituency at the forthcoming general election. Its candidate was the first to be nominated and it

began canvassing ahead of any other party. However, the RLP nominated Fitt for the constituency shortly afterwards, and in March he publicly attacked the NDP for putting up 'a young schoolteacher with absolutely no experience of politics' and for its attitude that 'they were the only spokesmen for the nationally minded electorate. In effect they are one more splinter party.' By the middle of March the pressure on the NDP had been successful. Its own canvassing returns had shown that Fitt had a better chance of winning, and after a meeting in which Eddie McAteer pleaded with the party to stand down, it withdrew its candidate. The party came under similar pressure during the run-up to the Belfast City Council elections the following year. It was obvious that both groups would suffer if they ran against each other and a meeting was organised to work out a division. However, the pact broke down; Fitt accused John Brennan, the NDP's only MP, of putting up candidates in Falls. In the event the Unionists benefited from a split vote but the RLP increased its representation at city hall, while the NDP failed to make gains which it had expected.

The two aims of the NDP were to unite and to renew nationalism. It failed to achieve either because these aims were incompatible. Nationalist MPs did not need a democratic party or sophisticated policies because personal election machines and anti-partitionist rhetoric were enough to get them elected. Gerry Fitt needed socialist rhetoric and an organised group of supporters, but he did not need the NDP, whose complex ideas and high principles simply got in the way of his instinctive political cunning. And because the NDP put such a high value on unity, it was always at the mercy of less scrupulous politicians. In any case, nationalist politics could not be renewed through unity with the Nationalist Party, but only by replacing it. That task took a combination of the civil rights upheaval and the emergence of a skilful and determined politician in John Hume. Members of the NDP then supplied the organisational muscle to build the new nationalist party – the SDLP – which they were incapable of creating.

In May 1962, Gerry Fitt, who had been a member of Belfast City Council since 1958, won the religiously-mixed Stormont seat of Dock in Belfast. He stood as an Independent Irish Labour candidate and his campaign emphasised bread-and-butter issues. He accused his Unionist opponent of trying to turn the election into a



'sectarian political wrangle' and challenged him to debate the economic situation in Northern Ireland instead. Fitt had been associated with the Irish Labour Party when it was organised in Northern Ireland during the 1950s. In 1962 he joined with another former member of that party, Harry Diamond, leader of a splinter group called the Republican Socialists. Their new organisation was called the Republican Labour Party.

Fitt claimed to be a Connolly socialist; speaking on 'Socialism and Republicanism' in University College Dublin in February 1967, he said that the Irish socialism that James Connolly had envisaged had not evolved because of partition, which 'isolated the industrial North from the agricultural South'. The only solution was to integrate the Labour movements on both sides of the border. In August he spoke at a commemoration for Sir Roger Casement. He said that

[the] best way to honour Casement and Irish patriots was to make certain that conditions in Ireland were brought into line with what they fought for. Casement had fought injustice in the Congo and had supported James Connolly on the streets of Dublin in 1913. I believe that the uniting of the progressive forces in Ireland would bring about a standard of living comparable with any other country in Europe.<sup>23</sup>

None of this was particularly original; Connolly was a favourite icon of the Irish left in the 1960s and was often used to provide a nationalist slant for socialist social and economic policies. Much of the same kind of rhetoric could be heard from left-wingers in the Irish Labour Party, the NILP and the republican movement. However, Fitt used it with great skill to present just the right degree of non-sectarian imagery to wrong-foot his opponents and rivals, while not straying too far from what was acceptable to his core support among Catholic Belfast voters.

In other ways he was quite a conventional nationalist politician. In September 1962 he expressed concern at the showing of a 'vice' film in Belfast. In November 1963 he attacked the appointment to the National Assistance Board of a deputy Grand Master of the Orange Order who had 'stirred up opposition to St Malachy's College using its sports ground on Sundays'. In October 1965 he protested at the decision of Belfast City Council's General Purposes

Committee to allow the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland to incorporate the city's arms in a special badge. In September 1966 he attended a concert given in Belfast by the popular Glaswegian Irish singer Glen Daly, where he was presented with a pennant by members of the Andersonstown Glasgow Celtic Football Club Supporters' Club. He promised to take Saturday off to 'see his favourite team – Celtic – play'.

The NDP and the NILP tended to assume that the RLP was simply a personal vehicle for Fitt, similar to the organisations maintained by rural Nationalist MPs. In fact the RLP proved to be independent enough to expel Fitt and his colleague Paddy Wilson when they helped to set up the SDLP in 1970. However, it did not survive long afterwards and it is evident that it was not a fully developed political party. But what it lacked in democratic structures and internal intellectual life, it made up for in sheer political shrewdness. Ciaran McKeown, when he was a member of the NDP, was given a glimpse of the RLP in action during the 1967 Belfast City Council elections:

Gerry's machine was actually more of a 'party' . . . than the NDP Executive . . . It was fascinating to hear the realpolitik amongst these genuine ward politicians, who were prepared to sacrifice a great deal of time, money and effort to get their men in . . . They were also a little dubious lest Gerry's ring craft be compromised by too close an association with 'a bunch of green teachers', as they characterised the NDP. Moreover, these men had no pretensions about appealing to 'moderate Protestant opinion' – but they were genuinely concerned about the ordinary Catholic and Protestant working-class people, and felt that Gerry as a 'socialist' would do more for the Protestants than their own Unionist representatives.<sup>24</sup>

Fitt's greatest triumph was his victory in the West Belfast constituency in the Westminster general election of March 1966. He had shrewdly calculated that his Labour rhetoric would catch the mood of popular support for Harold Wilson's seventeen-month-old government. The 1964 contest had shown that the Unionists could be beaten; James Kilfedder won the seat with 41.2 per cent of the vote, while Harry Diamond for the RLP had won 28.3 per cent, William Boyd of the NILP, 24.3 per cent and Billy McMillen, the republican candidate, 6.2 per cent. The republicans

and the NILP were persuaded to stand down and the NDP, after much heart-searching, also withdrew. This left a straight contest between Kilfedder and Fitt. The poll was 74.8 per cent, practically the same as 1964. Fitt won 52 per cent and Kilfedder 48 per cent; Fitt's majority of 2,011 was in line with his own predictions. The difference between Fitt's 1966 result and the total RLP and republican percentage in 1964 was 6.8 per cent. Most of this must have come from former NILP voters, who were largely Protestants. This underlines the success of his campaign in depicting him as 'the standard-bearer of Labour', although an incident, reported in the *Belfast Telegraph* on the afternoon of election day, ensured a maximum Catholic turnout. Two nuns were photographed being jeered by Protestants outside a polling station: 'The psychological impact of this on Catholic voters may have contributed powerfully to the peculiar blend of religious and political loyalties which carried Gerard Fitt to Westminster.'

Fitt's election had a greater impact than the sum of his, or his party's, contributions. It was not just that he had broken a more than ten-year-old Unionist monopoly on Northern Ireland representation at Westminster, but he was the first representative of the Catholic minority to go to Westminster with a firm intention of using the place as a sounding board for its grievances and determined to press the government and parliament of the United Kingdom to take their responsibilities towards Northern Ireland seriously. On flying out to take his seat in April 1966, he announced that he would be trying to get the British Representation of the People Act extended to Northern Ireland. Speaking at QUB seven months later, he 'reminded the Government that the Northern Ireland Constitution arose from a British Act of Parliament, which could be changed by the British Parliament'. Speaking at a Connolly Association conference in London the following spring, he pledged that if after four years he had not achieved anything, he would seriously consider whether or not to return to Westminster. He went on:

'What I ask for is that British standards should be made applicable to Northern Ireland. I cannot conceive any MP denying me those rights. Some day the crunch has got to come in Northern Ireland affairs and this is the overall responsibility of the British

Government.' When it did come it should come within the lifetime of the present Parliament and Socialist administration. The British Government had taken a stand against the Smith regime in Rhodesia. 'How much more necessary that it should take a stand against the Stormont Government.'<sup>25</sup>

Fitt's victory gave added emphasis to the idea that the way to achieve redress of its grievances was for the minority in Northern Ireland to act positively and to seek to communicate with potential allies outside, not to engage in a fruitless, symbolic rejection of the state. The emergence of a more positive and constructive nationalist opposition opened up another possibility – that a grand coalition of opposition parties might actually get a majority at Stormont and oust the Unionists from power. On the face of it, the Unionist vote might have proved vulnerable to a united opposition, in a situation of widespread discontent with the Unionists and demoralisation in their ranks. In 1953, 1958 and 1962 they received less than 50 per cent of the total votes cast at 47.5 per cent, 43.6 per cent and 48.6 per cent respectively;<sup>26</sup> these figures, however, should be treated cautiously. There were unofficial Unionist candidates who polled between 5 per cent and 13 per cent in all the elections except in 1962 and 1965. In addition these figures only offer a comparison for those constituencies in which there actually was an election. In 1958 the Unionists had twenty-five MPs elected unopposed, in 1962 there were twenty, and fourteen in 1965. The figures for 1965 show that if these vast reservoirs of Unionist support had been contested in 1958 and 1962, the overall opposition percentage would have been reduced. In 1962 the total Unionist vote was 143,740, but in 1965 it went up to 191,896, an increase of 48,156. The total opposition vote in 1962 was 152,134, reducing to 132,693 in 1965, a reduction of 19,441.<sup>27</sup> The margin of 18,715 between the Unionist increase and the opposition decrease can best be explained by the contests in these six seats. Nevertheless, until 1965 the opposition was making real progress and had a reasonable hope that the Unionists could be successfully challenged by parliamentary means. But the advent of O'Neill, combined with a favourable turn in the economy, averted this possibility. He successfully stopped the leakage of Unionist votes to the NILP and focused attention on pressure for specific reforms rather than an alternative government. But the period between

1962 and 1965 illustrates the crucial role which might have been played by the two non-nationalist opposition parties, the NILP and the Ulster Liberal Party.

The Stormont general election of May 1962 produced an apparent stalemate. Only two seats changed hands – Gerry Fitt won Dock and Mid-Tyrone returned to the Nationalists. The Unionists had thirty-four seats and the NILP and the Liberals retained four seats and one seat respectively. But, as the *Round Table* of September reported, ‘in an unguarded moment’, Lord Brookeborough called the result ‘a draw’. The NILP had made major gains: its total vote had gone up from 37,000 in 1958 to 77,000 and its total majority in its seats had risen from less than 6,000 to over 8,000. The four Labour seats were in Belfast, where the situation was even more striking. While the Unionists held seven seats, their total vote was 67,450 compared to Labour’s 60,170. As Charles Brett pointed out, there were some 5,049 business votes in these eleven seats, ‘not many of them, I am pretty sure, vote for Labour’.<sup>28</sup> The *Round Table* reckoned that Labour ‘must be an even more formidable contender for the control of Belfast in five years’ time’. Labour was helped by a number of factors. The election, for once, was relatively free from sectarian flag-waving and the Government chose to fight on Labour’s strongest ground – the economy. But for the trend towards Labour to continue, these three factors – a low level of sectarianism, a concentration on economic issues and continued failure by the Government to tackle them satisfactorily – would have to proceed uninterrupted. This was an unlikely scenario: in the event, sectarianism did raise its head again and the Government succeeded in winning back some of the ground it had lost on economic issues. But Labour had another major problem. If it was to progress much further, it would have to resolve some of the contradictions implicit in its position. Since its adoption of a pro-partition policy in 1949 and the split of its nationalist wing, it had become the party of a section of the Belfast Protestant working class. For it to proceed much further it would have to clarify whether it was a Protestant and Unionist party, or a secular party seeking to transcend the divisions between Orange and Green.

The task was not quite as formidable as it might appear. There have always been significant class-based tensions within the

Unionist bloc, and from time to time there have been large-scale rebellions of Protestant workers against the leadership of the Unionist Party. A considerable degree of class consciousness has, in fact, coexisted with sectarianism. As Sarah Nelson puts it:

There was a general knowledge, especially in Belfast, of the political arguments used by democratic socialists, and sporadic but repeated willingness to break with Unionism by actually voting for a party which asserted that social and economic struggles were more important than sectarian ones. Each generation also stored up its memories of strikes and industrial agitation, which again at least made them familiar with the methods and arguments of militant protest, and fuelled their suppressed resentments against the view traditional leaders took of their deprivation.<sup>29</sup>

In 1962 the liberal Unionist Robin Bailie claimed that in many Belfast Orange lodges a majority of members were socialists rather than Unionists, and the official history of the order in Belfast noted that 'the Belfast County Grand Lodge is much less conservative in politics than other County Lodges and its large industrial worker membership dictates that it speaks concernedly on matters that affect to help, or hurt, people whose living is in the factory rather than the farm'.<sup>30</sup> Orangeism was not incompatible with Labour voting – it was not even incompatible with promoting the social and economic interests of Catholics as well as Protestants – but it was fickle support which the NILP could never consolidate. The degree to which Labour could benefit from it depended on the general level of sectarian tensions, on discontent over social and economic issues, principally over unemployment, and on the extent to which Labour was perceived as rock solid on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. It was not impossible for Labour to consolidate its support among Orange workers, but it was very difficult to do so while at the same time opening up the party to members and voters who supported it on a non- or anti-sectarian basis. So many conflicting factors had to be juggled that it was impossible for the party to map out a strategy that would ensure success.

The 1962 election had demonstrated increasing support for the NILP from voters who supported it as a party that opposed the sectarian character of Northern Ireland politics. This was expressed most coherently by its adherents in Northern Ireland's small cultural and artistic world, such as the shipyard playwright

Sam Thompson. His play *Over the Bridge* had created controversy in 1960 when the board of the Group Theatre had demanded substantial changes in the script, forcing the resignation of the artistic director, James Ellis. The board had been fearful of the effects of Thompson's frank portrayal of sectarianism in the shipyard, but the play was switched to another venue and played to large audiences and general acclaim. Speaking in 1962, Thompson gave a direct political point to the critique of Northern Ireland society presented in his play:

We are in danger of ending up as a tribal community of processions and primitive ceremonies – international freaks with half the community starving and the other half emigrating . . . It was typical of the Unionists that they were always marching somewhere – not forwards, of course, but always backwards into history.

In June 1963 his play *The Evangelist* opened in the Grand Opera House. It was an attack on bible-thumping intolerance and fairly openly directed against Ian Paisley. The *News Letter's* drama critic summarised Thompson's philosophy as 'ordinary decency and love and understanding against false and commercialised religion'.

This 'ordinary decency' has to be borne in mind when assessing the NILP's response to what were to become the civil rights demands. Frank Wright points out that the NILP's manifesto for the 1962 general election contained provisions for the revision of electoral law to bring it into line with that in the rest of the United Kingdom, the creation of an impartial boundary commission and the abolition of the ratepayer franchise in local government elections. During the Cromac by-election in Belfast in December 1962 there was evidence that the NILP was conscious of the need to reach out across the sectarian divide in a more positive way. Cromac was a heterogeneous constituency. Although dominated by middle-class Unionist voters, it also contained large numbers of mostly Catholic, working-class voters and the liberal-minded university area. In this constituency the only effective challenge to the Unionists would come from a party which succeeded in pulling together dissatisfied and mainly liberal Protestants with a major chunk of the Catholic vote.

A speech made by the NILP candidate, Cecil Allen, showed that the party was sensitive to the issues about which Catholics might be

expected to be concerned. He made the usual references to the Unionists and their flute bands, sectarian slogans and old hatreds and prejudices, then condemned the governing party's 'absolute barrier to Catholic membership and shabby treatment of the Mater Hospital'.<sup>31</sup> He stressed that the NILP's primary concern was with the economic situation; 'However, the problems of discrimination, no matter from what quarter, and of religious tension are just as great.' Allen was a prominent trade-unionist of Protestant stock and represented the secular, democratic socialist wing of the NILP, which was close to the traditions of British Labour. This grouping was strengthened by the adherence of a small number of educated, professional people, many of them from a middle- and upper-middle-class background. The contribution made by some of these people outside the political sphere in later years is testimony to their intellectual quality: Charles Brett was to become chairman of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and has made major contributions to architectural history; Brian Garrett became a prominent solicitor and broadcaster; Vincent Hanna became a well-known television journalist; and Turlough O'Donnell became a judge.

Charles Brett has eloquently explained the reasons why he joined the NILP:

It was clear that my sympathies were overwhelmingly on the side of those less privileged than I had been. In general I strongly approved of the policies of the post-war Labour government . . . I felt that the working people of Ulster would benefit from fuller parity with the welfare state as understood in Labour Britain: so that the traditions of Irish nationalism and republicanism did not attract me. On the contrary I felt myself to be very much a European and an Internationalist. I was therefore left with a straightforward choice . . . I could join the deeply entrenched Unionist Party and endeavour to lever it leftward from inside; or I could join the tiny and feeble Northern Ireland Labour Party . . . The latter alternative was almost quixotic in practical terms, certainly in the short run, but it was honourable, straightforward and challenging. Moreover the smugness and self-satisfaction of Unionists at all levels, and the overbearing way in which they ran their one-party state, would seem today almost unbelievable; so that it appeared a positive public duty to stand outside and bung bricks at them.<sup>32</sup>



Brett was chairman of the NILP's policy committee, which also included party secretary Sam Napier and parliamentary leader Tom Boyd. They worked out a series of fairly sophisticated policy documents, which although inspired by the ideas of British Labour, were an independent application of Labourist ideas to Northern Ireland conditions. Brett attributed much of the party's success in the 1962 election to its programme, *Ulster Labour and the Sixties*. He believed that many electors were attracted by its approach not only to questions of economic policy and unemployment but also on hire-purchase law, consumer protection, ground rents and housing.

The 1964 programme, *Signposts to the New Ulster*, retained this emphasis on economic policy and better administration. However, it also elaborated policies on two areas of civil liberties: it attacked the Government's delay in introducing a legal aid scheme comparable to the system in Britain; and it also called for a review of the death penalty and advocated not merely a restriction on its use, as in Britain, but its total abolition. Throughout the 1960s, while concentrating on economic matters, the NILP plugged away at many of the issues that were taken up by the civil rights movement. Its 1963 conference called on the Government to extend the local government franchise to everyone over the age of twenty-one. In 1965 David Bleakley MP attacked the Government for not locating Northern Ireland's second university in Derry. In 1965 the party conference opposed the Special Powers Act. In 1966 Tom Boyd made a plea in Stormont for financial aid for the Mater Hospital and later that year Vivian Simpson MP sought suspension of the writ for a by-election in the QUB seat, pending abolition of the university seats. In 1967 the NILP conference called for an inquiry into religious discrimination and electoral gerrymandering. In March 1968, Sam Napier called on the O'Neill government to substitute deeds for words on such issues as housing allocation, discrimination in employment and restrictions on the franchise.

An NILP statement of 1967, published in the newsletter of the London-based Campaign for Democracy in Ulster (CDU) summarised the party's record:

The NILP has always been opposed to discrimination on religious or political grounds and, particularly since 1959, has included statements against such discrimination in all its policy proposals.

Resolutions opposing discrimination have been adopted by successive annual Party conferences and Northern Ireland Labour Members of Parliament have both sponsored and supported anti-discrimination legislation in the Northern Ireland Parliament. In 1965 the NILP issued a statement on electoral reform calling for a revision of Parliamentary boundaries . . . and for elections to be based on the principle of one man one vote. In December 1966 the NILP, jointly with the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, made representations to the Northern Ireland Government in the form of a joint memorandum calling for electoral reform and a deputation sought to press the principles of the document on the Northern Ireland Government.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, the NILP saw the emergence of the CDU and the increased interest shown by Westminster Labour MPs as a very mixed blessing. Jack Hassard, a Dungannon NILP councillor who had a good local record on civil rights issues, complained about the visit of three British CDU-supporting MPs who toured Northern Ireland in April 1967. They had, he said, only talked to 'Green Tories'. The fact that Gerry Fitt had masterminded the tour was another source of irritation.

Paddy Byrne, secretary of the CDU, visited Northern Ireland in August 1967 and had a meeting with members of the executive committee of the NILP. He was greeted warmly, not least because of his long-standing friendship with Tom Boyd, which dated back to their mutual involvement in work for the republican side in the Spanish Civil War. But he was left in no doubt about the NILP's deep reservations about the CDU's activities. Indeed its members gave him the impression that they considered the CDU to be a 'damn nuisance'. They made four points:

- 1 Outside attacks . . . were generally looked on by the majority of people in Ulster as 'interference' and had the effect of uniting people behind the government and away from Labour.
- 2 We should be more pro-Ulster in our approach and not always be indulging in carping criticism. We should be seen as the true friends of Ulster, that is our reforms would benefit all the people and we should press for fair shares for Ulster in the allocation of factories, etc . . .
- 3 We must not appear to be attacking the constitutional position.

4 We should work more closely with the NILP. The visit of the three MPs . . . and what they considered open siding with the Nationalists was bitterly criticised.<sup>34</sup>

Such criticisms were not unanimous, and when Byrne asked for their views on the progress of O'Neill's reforms, other differences emerged. A majority criticised O'Neill for moving too slowly on reform but also for not contemplating reform in local government, where grievances were most acute. A minority rejected the notion that O'Neill was doing more than stalling for time and believed that his reformism was no more than a hollow pretence. The meeting resulted in agreement on a number of points to bring about a closer liaison between the NILP and the CDU, but in a letter to Paul Rose MP, written on 21 August 1967, Byrne reported that he had found the NILP's attitude 'baffling'. The guarded nature of the agreement between the two groups was brought out in a letter to Byrne from Sam Napier, dated 14 August, which reported a positive response by the party's executive committee to the meeting, and said that they would submit a statement for inclusion in the CDU newsletter, but went on to say that they 'would like an assurance that the text of this would either be printed in full or only amended with their consent'.<sup>35</sup>

As a political party operating in a complex situation, the NILP could not see things in the same way as the CDU, which was a single-issue campaign based outside Northern Ireland. Indeed it says much for the openness and flexibility of both sides that relations were developed at all. However, by 1968 the NILP was committed to a series of wide-ranging reforms of electoral law, of electoral boundaries, of housing allocation, and to dealing with discrimination. The *Joint Memorandum on Citizens' Rights in Northern Ireland* of 1967 was as full a programme of reform as any brought out by an explicitly civil rights group. And the Northern Ireland Society of Labour Lawyers' pamphlet, *Discrimination – Pride for Prejudice* of 1969 was as sweeping an indictment of the Unionists and as passionate an appeal for civil rights as any of the publications of that time. Why, then, did the NILP not take the leadership of what was to become the civil rights movement? Very largely because, as a party which was oriented to parliamentary methods, it was not a suitable instrument for creating a mass extra-parliamentary movement; indeed most of its leaders were

incapable of imagining such a course of action. The party, however, might have become an *alternative* to the civil rights movement by achieving its aims through parliament. A government led by, if not entirely composed of, the NILP did seem a possibility in the aftermath of the 1962 election. However, by 1966 it was abundantly clear that the party was incapable of ousting the Unionists.

The NILP was severely damaged by the 'Sunday swings' scandal of November 1964, when three of its six councillors voted in Belfast City Council to keep children's playgrounds closed on Sundays. This was in direct contradiction to the party's manifesto commitment during the council elections earlier in the year. The incident provoked bitter disagreement within the party, including the parliamentary party. One of its four MPs, William Boyd, was also one of the rebellious councillors and another, David Bleakley, supported him and blocked his expulsion from the parliamentary party. A compromise was reached and a split averted but this simply underlined the party's divisions. Charles Brett commented at the time that 'due to outside pressures the Executive Committee was afraid to . . . give a ruling on the interpretation of an entirely unambiguous sentence in the party's policy statement'. Frank Wright explains the significance of the dispute:

What was so devastating about 'Sunday Swings' was not only that Catholics were troubled . . . but that it forced a public split between those Protestants who considered sabbatarianism to be a religious question . . . and those who considered that adherence to sabbatarianism was symptomatic of Protestant bigotry. It was an implicit agreement to differ about questions of this kind that the unity between the different groups in the NILP had been based . . . It is difficult to see how the issue could have left the NILP altogether unscathed.<sup>36</sup>

The party's 'equivocal solution of expelling and then readmitting the . . . councillors both shook the "Unionist" credentials of the NILP and "liberal" middle-class support simultaneously'.<sup>37</sup>

The NILP suffered a setback in the 1965 Stormont general election, but this should not be attributed too narrowly to the Sunday swings dispute. The sectarian polarisation created by the Divis Street riots was still operating and a fall in the unemployment rate deprived the NILP of its major issue. It should also be noted that

in Terence O'Neill the NILP had a more formidable opponent than Lord Brookeborough. The new prime minister had a record of achievement on economic issues and his reforming image made him a much more credible repository for the votes of those Protestants who hoped to overcome sectarianism but were not committed socialists. Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, in *The State in Northern Ireland 1921-72*, have argued that O'Neill's strategy was designed principally to reunite the Unionist bloc by winning back from the NILP Protestant workers who were disaffected over unemployment. There is certainly evidence that in the 1965 election O'Neill made special efforts to challenge the NILP. Charles Brett testifies that the prime minister 'personally campaigned against the Labour candidates with more energy than he devoted to most other causes'.<sup>38</sup> After the election O'Neill expressed satisfaction that 'the rising tide of Labour had been well and truly turned'. In later years Sam Napier waxed bitter about O'Neill's campaign. He claimed that the premier had toured the Labour-held Belfast wards of Woodvale and Victoria in his official car: 'By convention no leader of a party would stoop to such tactics.' Napier also claimed that O'Neill smeared the NILP as anti-partitionist: 'He told people who lived in kitchen houses - imagine a Prime Minister - that Harold Wilson controlled the Northern Ireland Labour Party's policies and that Wilson was also anti-partitionist.'<sup>39</sup>

The NILP was partly a victim of circumstances, partly a victim of its own blunders and partly the victim of a deliberate attempt by O'Neill to stop its progress. In whatever way responsibility is measured, one salient fact emerges: by 1966 Labour had failed and its failure was one more factor in the inexorable process that was forcing opposition onto the streets.

The NILP was not the only party offering a radical, non-sectarian alternative; during the early 1960s the Ulster Liberal Party experienced a modest revival. Organised Liberalism in Ulster had broken up during the Home Rule crisis and by the time the Northern Ireland parliament was established it had ceased to be an electoral force. In 1958, however, a small group formed the Ulster Liberal Association - later the Ulster Liberal Party. It elected as chairman a clergyman from Newtownards, County Down, the Reverend Albert McElroy. For more than a decade he personified Liberalism in Northern Ireland. McElroy was born in Glasgow in 1915 and

moved to Toomebridge, County Antrim, with his parents in 1930. He began his political involvement in the Fabian Society at Trinity College Dublin in the mid-1930s. He was active in the NILP and supported Harry Midgley's breakaway, pro-Union Commonwealth Labour Party in 1943. When Midgley went over to the Unionist Party in 1947, the Commonwealth Labour Party disintegrated and McElroy returned to the NILP. But by then he was moving towards Liberalism. His election address as Labour candidate in North Down, during the Westminster general election of 1950, made the point that 'the tragedy of Irish politics is the virtual absence of any Liberal tradition. Labour, whose appeal transcends sectarian bitterness, must champion liberalism in thought and practice'.<sup>40</sup> After a period in Glasgow and after studying theology in Oxford, he returned to Northern Ireland as Minister of Newtownards Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church. With a private income and a respectable position, he was well placed to lead the tiny Liberal forces. His attractive personality, humour, and talent as a communicator soon made him a well-known public figure.

The most important breakthrough for the Liberals came when Sheelagh Murnaghan, a Catholic barrister, won a seat in the Stormont parliament at a by-election in 1961 for one of the QUB seats. McElroy had stood for the QUB constituency in 1958; this was a favourable seat for the Liberals because of its educated electorate and the fact that in university elections the single transferable vote system of proportional representation was used. He won 13 per cent of first preferences but failed to get enough transfers to beat the Unionists to the third seat. The 1961 by-election was a straight fight with the Unionist candidate, and Sheelagh Murnaghan received 52.5 per cent of the vote. She went on to hold the seat at the general election of 1962; afterwards the secretary of the Ulster Unionist Council commented that 'the Liberal got in as a result of a large poll [of QUB graduates] from across the water where there has been an upsurge in favour of the Liberals'. This was not the whole explanation since Murnaghan's surplus was sufficient to elect an independent, Charles Stewart QC, and the party's domestic support was demonstrated in September 1962 when they won a borough council by-election in Bangor, County Down. However, when McElroy contested another by-election for QUB, in the more polarised atmosphere of November

1966, he was defeated by 749 votes, winning 44.4 per cent of the vote.

Although its revival was a result of contemporary factors, the Ulster Liberal Party still embodied the traditions of the party's past. In December 1962, McElroy claimed that it represented the

heritage of Ulster Radicalism, of the brave men and women of '98, of the Rev J. B. Armour of Ballymoney . . . With them the driving force was passionate belief in the fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man. They were no timid Whigs but full-blooded Radicals who got fighting mad at injustice, religious bigotry, smugness and cruelty. Our community needs to be shaken out of its dull conformity, out of its parochial indifference to the forces that are struggling all over the world for a world civilisation based on democracy, justice and peace.<sup>41</sup>

McElroy had moved significantly from the pro-Union views of his Commonwealth Labour Party days, and now, like a true Ulster radical, he wanted to see a united Ireland. He saw this coming about through the EEC, in which 'the border would disappear and there would be a levelling of social services'. Despite his chiliastic enthusiasm for a 'world civilisation', McElroy was anxious to present the Liberals as a 'broadly based, classless, non-sectarian party' which had won votes in the Cromac by-election 'from [Catholic working-class] Markets to [mixed, middle-class] Malone'.

Throughout the 1960s, the Ulster Liberal Party, like the NILP, was moving towards a more and more explicit endorsement of what were to become the civil rights demands. But in the case of the Liberals the shift in perceptions can be traced more easily. In 1964 McElroy wrote a broad attack on Ulster unionism. It made no reference to specific reforms but did focus on the undemocratic character of Northern Ireland:

This community, of course, is not a normal democratic society. The permanent Tory majority at Stormont helps to underline its abnormality. For political democracy to work implies the existence of an opposition that does become the Government from time to time, with the existing Governments recognising this probability . . . Political monopolies, like any other kind of monopoly of long standing, are bad for the community, and even for the monopolists themselves.<sup>42</sup>

At this point McElroy, like the NILP, was emphasising the need for an alternative government to the Unionists rather than demanding a series of reforms from the Government.

As we have seen, after the 1962 general election it did seem possible that a coalition of oppositional forces might have ousted the Unionists; had this come about the Liberals would have been an important connecting link between the NILP and nationalists, helping to smooth over their mutual suspicions. McElroy was well placed to play the part of honest broker: his correspondence shows the trust he inspired among nationalist politicians such as James Connellan MP, and Ernest Blythe in the Irish Republic. During his 1966 election campaign Father Denis Faul and Austin Currie were active in canvassing on his behalf and Gerry Fitt donated £10 to his campaign. Michael McKeown of the NDP persuaded his party to give him a clear run.

Following McElroy's defeat, there was an increased emphasis by the Liberals on civil rights. It was now fairly evident that the Unionists were not going to be dislodged, but at the same time there was a swelling of grass-roots protest, largely initiated by, or focusing on, the republicans. McElroy held no brief for republicanism; in March 1966 he described Paisleyism and republicanism as 'twin brothers [whose] appeal is to blind unreason'. However, he strongly defended the right of republicans to hold commemorations of the 1916 Easter Rising and condemned as 'extremists' those who suggested that 'orderly and friendly processions in sympathetic areas will provoke anyone'. He spoke out against the ban on the Republican Clubs in March 1967 and against the prohibition of the commemorations of the 1867 Fenian Rising and the Easter commemoration in Armagh, appearing on the platforms of protest meetings along with republicans and nationalists. In September 1966 he challenged the attorney general, E. W. Jones, on the issue of discrimination in jobs and housing against Catholics in Enniskillen, Dungannon, Omagh and Derry. His election address for the QUB by-election in November 1966 denounced 'unjustifiable' discrimination in jobs and housing and said that 'machinery for investigation of complaints [was] essential'. He called for the abolition of the university seats to be accompanied by universal franchise and proportional representation.<sup>43</sup> In his presidential address to the



October 1967 conference of the Ulster Liberal Association he called on O'Neill to

Make a generous grant to the Mater Hospital without strings.

Meet 100% of the costs of voluntary schools without conditions.

Introduce a Government-sponsored Human Rights Bill . . .

Introduce legislation obliging local authorities to remove obscene and offensive slogans.

Introduce real electoral reform – one man one vote plus proportional representation in local government and Stormont elections . . .

Pursue a dynamic policy of economic co-operation with the rest of Ireland.

Repeal the Special Powers Act.

Expand the Privy Council to be representative of all shades of opinion.

Throw the sectarian bigots out of the Parliamentary Party.

Resign, himself, from the Orange Order and its ancillary organisations to show that he is Prime Minister of all the people.<sup>44</sup>

The Ulster Liberals, like the NILP, had links with their counterparts in Westminster. But whereas agitation on discrimination in Northern Ireland was mainly confined to the back benches of the British Labour Party, the front bench of the Liberals spoke out on the issue. Commenting on the visit of the Nationalist deputation to Westminster in July 1962, Eric Lubbock MP said that when they had seen Jo Grimond they had 'made out a *prima facie* case for the existence of discrimination'. Interviewed on Ulster Television in August 1962, Grimond himself said, 'Yes, I think there is discrimination.' Speaking in Belfast in 1967, Jeremy Thorpe MP said that there was 'growing impatience and intolerance at Westminster over the slow pace of reform in Northern Ireland'.

In December 1965, Sheelagh Murnaghan presented a bill at Stormont which would have made it a criminal offence to discriminate on grounds of race, creed, colour or belief, and would have set up a human rights commission to investigate allegations of discrimination. It was supported by NILP, Nationalist, NDP and RLP MPs and by her fellow QUB member, the Independent Charles Stewart. However, in February 1966 it was rejected by Stormont. She made three further attempts to bring forward such a bill; the

third bill dropped criminal sanctions against discrimination and would have made the human rights commission more of a conciliatory and negotiating body, but it too was rejected. Her final attempt came in January 1968, but in February, Stormont refused a second reading by twenty-two votes to eight.

The Liberals had made valiant efforts to advance the cause of reform and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. They had tried to play their part in constructing a wide-ranging parliamentary alternative to the Unionists, but they had failed to achieve this, or even to make any significant electoral breakthrough. They had, from 1965 onwards, pressed determinedly for acceptance of reforms by the Government and had played an important part in drawing attention to the grievances of the minority community. They had successfully used their links with the British Liberals to give legitimacy to the complaints. All had been to no avail.

The launching of street marches by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) in 1968 could be seen as a logical consequence of the closure of every other channel for bringing about reform, but it divided the Liberals. A biography of McElroy comments:

Many Liberals joined the movement and participated in the protest marches in the belief that this was the best way to force the Stormont government to introduce reforms. Albert McElroy was not one of them. McElroy remembered all too clearly the results of mass marches held by the Fascists, Nazis and other extremists in the 1920s and '30s. He knew that it was easier to get people onto the streets than to get them off again and dreaded the descent into bloodlust that the protests might bring.<sup>45</sup>

McElroy's Liberal colleague, Claude Wilton, took a leading part in the Derry Citizens' Action Committee (DCAC), but this was a consequence of his personal prestige as a champion of the rights of Derry Catholics. The Ulster Liberal Party, like the NILP, was committed to parliamentary action and it was not, and could not have become, a vehicle for mass protest.

The unemployment problem led to increasing involvement in politics by a trade-union movement that had always been cautious about any initiatives which might divide its rank and file. In February 1962 the Northern Ireland Committee of the ICTU called a one-day strike against the Government's 'pay pause'. The

shipyard, and engineering and aircraft factories were closed as twenty-five thousand workers marched to a rally in the Ulster Hall, Belfast. In August the committee gathered some one hundred thousand signatures on a petition for the recall of Stormont to discuss unemployment and it proposed to send a batch of these petitions to arrive on Brookeborough's desk each morning, together with a copy of the Unionist manifesto which had promised action to increase employment.

The improved environment for trade-union political activity was shown by a march organised by Newry trades council in October 1962, in which Belfast contingents outnumbered the local participants. In this mainly Catholic town, two of the speakers were the Nationalists Eddie Richardson and James Connellan. They were given a good reception by the staunchly Protestant workers of Shorts aircraft factory and the Queen's Island shipyard. The disenchantment with the Government felt by many of these traditionally Unionist workers had been shown in Belfast City Hall some weeks earlier. A contingent of 150 aircraft shop stewards created pandemonium when the Unionist majority on the city council amended an NILP resolution about the plight of industry so that it praised, rather than condemned, the Government's efforts over unemployment. At the end of October a demonstration of three thousand to four thousand trade-unionists marched to Stormont on the day the Hall Report was debated. It was a smaller march than had been expected but it left the shipyard and the aircraft factory deserted and involved trade-unionists from Newry, Larne, Bangor, Newtownards and other towns. They called on the Stormont parties to 'lay aside party political bickering and sectional interests' and assured them that the unions would 'co-operate in all measures that are aimed at achieving . . . full employment and prosperity'.

The trade-union movement had some success in mobilising its members on narrowly social and economic issues but it tread carefully since it was all too well aware of the divisions within its membership. As the 1960s progressed, the unemployment situation improved as sectarianism revived, and the trade-union movement retreated once more from any public political role.

The Belfast and District Trades Union Council was less restrained. It spoke out on issues that were relatively safe, such as

council rents, and joined in the condemnation of the Unionist Party's 'sectarian tactics' and record on unemployment. But in December 1962 it approved a document from the London-based National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL), which condemned the Government's continued refusal to abolish the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act and called for an investigation into alleged discrimination against Catholics. In 1966 it wrote to Minister of Home Affairs William Craig, calling for legislation against discrimination and incitement, electoral reform, control over arms held by members of the Ulster Special Constabulary (B Specials), and economic development. The trades council was in a better position than the Northern Ireland Committee of the ICTU to take such initiatives because trade-union branches which disapproved of its policies simply refrained from affiliating, or disaffiliated; like the east Belfast branch of the Electrical Trade Union, which withdrew from the council in 1966 because of its support for an Easter Rising commemoration. Betty Sinclair, the trades council secretary, explained that they had taken part to honour a former member of its executive – James Connolly; this was unlikely to persuade trade-unionists who supported the Unionist Party to become involved in the council.

Betty Sinclair was a veteran Communist who later became chairman of NICRA. The NCCL document originated with a resolution to its annual conference from the Connolly Association, an organisation for Irish workers in Britain that has always had close links with the Communist Party of Great Britain. Communism in Northern Ireland was upheld by the Communist Party of Northern Ireland (CPNI); the party was created by a split in the former Communist Party of Ireland over support for the Allied war effort following Hitler's invasion of the USSR in June 1941. The CPNI felt sufficiently encouraged by political developments in 1962 to launch a membership drive. Its main emphasis was on opposition to entry into the EEC and it organised a meeting in Belfast with speakers from its fraternal parties in Britain and the Irish Republic to oppose British and Irish membership. It proposed to flood the factories with leaflets inviting all who opposed the EEC to join the ranks of the party.

University-based protest was fairly weak in Belfast; there was a small branch of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, but even

during the trauma of the Cuba missiles crisis in October 1962, it mustered only fifty people on a picket of the United States consulate, and there was a small group of Trotskyists within the NILP's youth group, the Young Socialists. But the general picture is clear – left-wing movements were tiny, weak and isolated. They had a structure of priorities and a view of the world which had little purchase on the consciousness of other Northern Ireland citizens.

The years between 1962 and 1968 saw a more determined, broader and more sophisticated assault on Unionist domination than had occurred at any time since the creation of Northern Ireland. The opposition forces were divided and could only with great difficulty have come together to offer an alternative to the ruling party, but it was a real possibility. However, such a course of events was cut across and diffused by O'Neill's premiership. This was partly through a deliberate strategy, partly because his more conciliatory image was sufficient for most of the dissident middle-class voters who had dallied with the NILP and the Liberals, and partly because his economic policies and increased sectarian polarisation staunched the haemorrhage of working-class Unionist voters. In any event, O'Neill's success in the 1965 Stormont general election was an important turning point. He had blocked the emergence of any alternative to the Unionist Party but his moderate image gave hope that he might sponsor the necessary reforms. Albert McElroy believed in this possibility; in his 1967 presidential address to the Ulster Liberal Party he said:

Everything depends on the calibre of O'Neill's character. There are those who argue that he is a weakling and/or a prisoner of his own tradition. My personal view is that he means well, that he has the latent strength of character and that up to the present he has been largely a prisoner of the tatty Ulster Tory tradition.<sup>46</sup>

Events would show that McElroy's hopes were not to be fulfilled. O'Neill did not promote sufficiently far-reaching reforms sufficiently early to avert a turn to street politics.