Politics in the Streets

The origins of the
civil rights movement
in Northern Ireland

by
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THE PEOPLE'S DEMOCRACY

> It was on the first day of the year in 1969
> We gathered at the City Hall, the weather being fine.
> With McCann in front to lead us, Michael Farrell in the van,
> Off on the long march to Derry . . .
>
> They ambushed us at Irish Street and at Burntollet too,
> And the air was thick with stones and bricks, and the missiles fairly flew.
> But we got up and struggled on, though battered black and blue,
> To finish the long march to Derry.
>
> *from* 'The long march to Derry' (civil rights song)

The events of 5 October 1968 created a mass movement but they also initiated the processes which were to lead to its dissolution. Over the next year the civil rights movement was riven by bitter disputes as irreconcilable differences emerged. At the centre of these disputes was the group of young radicals known as the People's Democracy. To some extent it is misleading to see this group as a dissident section of the civil rights movement. The PD was distinctive in its student origins, its predominant youth and its international links and influences. NICRA came to be predominantly made up of branches in the provincial towns, which were strongly rooted in traditional nationalism and republicanism. In Derry the DCAC was dominated by established community leaders. The PD was almost as hostile to these strands of the civil rights movement as it was to the Unionist government. The PD affiliated to NICRA and worked within it for a time, but as a deliberate tactical ploy. The two groups met at many points but they never really mingled.

QUB students of the 1960s shared the tendency of students elsewhere in the United Kingdom to support radical and humanitarian causes, but as Paul Arthur has pointed out:

> By 1968 there was very little indication that Belfast undergraduates were part of the world-wide wave of student protest. There were a

few demonstrations protesting at American involvement in South East Asia but . . . the largest anti-Vietnam march in Belfast attracted only about fifty participants.[1]

The Conservative and Unionist Association at QUB told the Cameron Commission that 'apartheid, CND and other *causes célèbres* of the fifties never made much impact . . . Outbursts of student enthusiasm were frequent but seldom political.'[2] Bernadette Devlin remembered the profoundly unserious nature of university politics. In 1965 the main debating forum, the Literific Society, 'had degenerated into nothing more than student obscenity'.[3] In fact the 'Lit' was suspended by the university authorities in 1964 after a guest speaker had stripped off in front of the audience. Devlin sampled the offerings of the main political societies but found that they 'weren't *real*'[4] and that there were more genuine political ideas in the Folk Music Society. Ciaran McKeown suggested that a deterioration in the quality of debate and discussion was due to the 'oppressive level' of the pressures arising from an enhanced importance of qualifications, brought about by the expansion of the university in line with developments in higher education elsewhere in the United Kingdom.[5]

McKeown was the initiator of a movement of 'like minded people' which opposed the domination of the Student Representative Council (SRC) by sectarian blócs and worked to get control of the SRC. By 1966, he claims, there was 'no longer a sectarian majority' on the council.[6] This, however, did not necessarily have any profound political significance; McKeown was a skilful organiser and one student leader reckoned that 'SRC elections are decided 60% by personality, 10% by politics, 10% by religion and 20% by apathy'.[7]

The first organisation to use the term 'civil rights' was the Working Committee on Civil Rights in Northern Ireland, set up at QUB in 1964. It was an ad hoc and self-financed student group which carried out surveys in Newry and Derry. According to Eamonn McCann, in Derry they

> interviewed Unionist and Nationalist members of the Corporation . . . We spoke to local union leaders and employers and the Catholic and Church of Ireland Bishops. We heard oral evidence from members of the public and gathered considerable data from official

and unofficial sources. We carried out a public opinion poll. It was our intention to publish the results . . . together with the results of a similar study of Newry.[8]

But by the time the work was completed the committee was heavily in debt and could not raise the necessary funds to publish its findings.

The driving force behind the committee was Bowes Egan. Kevin Boyle remembers him as 'young, bright, anarchistic, totally intolerant of anybody's opinion but his own . . . He organised an empire . . . and seemed to control all the various debating societies'.[9] A number of the more radical students were grouped around Egan at this time, including Michael Farrell, but the latter's increasing interest in Marxism drove them apart. Farrell claims that Egan was a cynic who was opposed to any ideology, of left or right, and by 1967 they had little to do with each other. Egan reappeared after the mushrooming of the civil rights movement; he co-authored a widely distributed pamphlet on the ambush of the PD march at Burntollet in early 1969 and was the PD candidate for Enniskillen in the February 1969 Stormont general election. Subsequently he returned to London, where he was a law lecturer. He was active in the Anti-Internment League there in 1971 and 1972, before dropping out of politics to pursue a lucrative practice as a consultant on industrial relations law. He shunned the limelight and scarcely figures in any of the published reminiscences but he seems to have been highly innovative and imaginative and will probably never be given his full due as an influence on events in Northern Ireland in the 1960s.[10]

In the early to mid 1960s one of the most energetic groups at QUB was the New Ireland Society. Its aims were 'to bring together all those interested in the eventual re-unification of Ireland; and the political, social, cultural and economic advancement of the country, and to foster and encourage . . . debate, discussion, lectures, etc.'. Its patrons included a number of literary and political luminaries and it published a high-quality review, *New Ireland*. Its debates and lectures attracted considerable attention outside the university and it also initiated a prestigious award for people in public life who had made an outstanding contribution to good community relations.

There was some overlap between the New Ireland Society and one of the most effective political organisations in the university, the National Democratic Group, founded in 1966, which was affiliated to the NDP. Its first president was Ciaran McKeown and he was followed by Fred Taggart, a member of the Church of Ireland and Brian Turner, a Methodist. Its officers and committee included Denis Haughey, later to be prominent in the SDLP, and Peter Rowan and Peter Cush, who were active members of the early PD. Among the group's activities was a scholarly seminar on the Easter Rising in 1966 and a survey of the Suffolk–Andersonstown area of west Belfast to determine the size of the future labour force and the likely availability of employment.

The moderate approach of the New Ireland Society and the National Democratic Group was shared by the Conservative and Unionist Association, which was firmly on the O'Neill wing of the party. One of the most remarkable events of these years was the election of a Catholic, Louis Boyle, to the chair of the Conservative and Unionist Association, at the same time as the National Democratic Group had elected a Protestant as its president. Boyle had some difficulty within the association when he was falsely accused of trying to recruit anti-Unionists to disrupt the organisation, but he was reinstated with a full apology. His experience with the party outside was less happy, and in July 1969 he resigned, blaming Orange influences which had blocked his nomination as Unionist candidate for South Down. His brother, Kevin Boyle, later became a prominent member of the PD.

There was an active Liberal Association which was formed in March 1962. However, it was not as effective as the New Ireland Society, the National Democratic Group and the Unionists, probably because its politics tended to overlap with theirs. The Labour Group was the largest political society and it did not try to compete for the middle ground. It was affiliated to the NILP but some, at least, of its members were not enthusiastic about the party. One of them, Michael Dowling, castigated it for not proposing a 'distinctive socialist alternative to Unionist policies' and for being 'too timid in its advocacy of the proposals it does support'. Nevertheless, the NILP had to be supported because it was the 'only party possessing organic links with the organised working-class movement'.[11]

The other important radical group at QUB was significant not so much for its activities as for its existence. On 8 March 1967, the day after Minister of Home Affairs William Craig had announced a ban on commemorations of the 1867 Fenian Rising and proscribed the Republican Clubs, a meeting of about sixty students set up a Republican Club at QUB. This had no associations with the illegal organisations and Ciaran McKeown, who was at this time president of the Students' Union, estimated that there were no more than four or five genuine republicans at Queen's. At the same time a Joint Action Committee Against the Suppression of Liberties was set up to organise protests against the ban. It linked all the political groups with the exception of the Unionists (although its chairman was an honorary life member of the Unionist Association). The other officers were drawn from the Labour Group, the National Democratic Group, the Republican Club and the Liberal Association. Two days later about eighty students took part in a demonstration from the Students' Union to the city hall. Officially this was not a student march since there had not been enough time to clear it with the Academic Council of the university. The following day many of the same people were on a Young Socialists march against the ban, through the city centre. Despite police fears of conflict with a loyalist flute band which was parading in Sandy Row, this event, like the first, passed off peacefully. Towards the end of April the National Democratic Group and the Labour group, together with the Republican Club, picketed Armagh courthouse in protest at the prosecution of twelve republicans for their part in an Easter Rising commemoration in the town. They had been refused the use of the Students' Union minibus, an indication that those involved were part of an active, but small, minority of the student body.

In May 1967 the SRC recognised the Republican Club as a student society by a vote of thirty-three to six, after a strong intervention in favour of the motion by the president, Ciaran McKeown. The executive of the SRC had obtained an assurance in advance from the club that it had no links with any proscribed organisation and had no intention of forming such links. The decision was taken despite a statement made in Stormont a few days earlier by William Craig:

In view of the ban it would not only be unwise, but illegal, for clubs, even though constitutional in character, to adopt the title 'Republican Clubs', which is that of an unlawful association. They should choose some other, appropriate, title and provided their objects are . . . lawful, there would not be any objection to their formation.[12]

However, on this occasion, and in one or two later exchanges, Craig avoided any direct reference to the QUB Republican Club. On 14 November Harry Diamond MP asked him to place in the library the evidence on which he had acted to ban the QUB Republican Club. The Minister replied: 'I did not place a specific ban on the club to which the hon. Member refers.'[13] He denied having ordered a police investigation of the club, but added that they did not need to have his sanction to investigate any possible breach of the law. A little later he commented that the students, 'if they act as hon. Members say they are acting, could have so arranged the constitution and organisation of the club as to leave no doubt how it stood as regards the law'.[14] To which Eddie McAteer replied: 'The Minister does not know students.'

The SRC's recognition of the Republican Club was required to be ratified by the Academic Council. Ciaran McKeown had informed the secretary to the council of the SRC decision and had approached the vice-chancellor, Dr Arthur Vick, to suggest that the matter be referred to the university's legal advisers and there the matter rested until the new academic year. Early in November 1967 the Academic Council wrote to the SRC: 'After having advice from the Legal Advisory Committee, which stated that the Republican Club is an unlawful association . . . the Academic Council on November 3rd resolved that the Council and the SRC are prevented from recognising the club while the Government order remains in force.'[15] This revived the issue. The secretary of the Republican Club made it clear that it would remain in existence and the Labour, National Democratic and Liberal societies reiterated their support for the right of the Republican Club to operate as a recognised student group; the New Ireland Society passed a resolution deploring the ban and Louis Boyle, chairman of the Conservative and Unionist Association, stated his personal support for the right of the club to be recognised.

The Joint Action Committee Against the Suppression of

Liberties was revived; over one thousand students and staff had signed a petition supporting the Republican Club and the committee organised a march to hand this in to Unionist Party headquarters in Glengall Street in Belfast. Shortly after the announcement of the march William Clulow, described as 'Secretary of the Unionist Trade Unionist Association', called on all loyalist trade-unionists to join a counter-demonstration in Glengall Street to 'help educate these so-called intellectuals a little further'. Then Ian Paisley announced that he would organise a counter-demonstration in Shaftesbury Square, on the students' route to Glengall Street. This was a sensitive area because of its proximity to the loyalist Sandy Row area. When the march assembled on the afternoon of 15 November 1967, the police proposed a change of objective. Instead of Glengall Street, the students marched to William Craig's house by a route which took them well away from the city centre. There the permanent secretary to the Ministry of Home Affairs received the petition and promised to pass it on to the minister. About 1,500 people took part, a significant growth in support compared with the earlier marches. The marchers included Austin Currie MP and a delegation from University College Dublin.

Two weeks later a deputation consisting of Rory McShane, Brian Patterson and Brian Turner of the joint action committee, together with the Students' Union president Ian Brick, met Craig at Stormont. He told them that he was satisfied that the QUB Republican Club was constitutional and only infringed the law by using the name 'Republican Club', and suggested that they should call themselves the 'Republican Society' or 'Republican Association'. Needless to say the club rejected this advice; commenting on its refusal, Craig said that 'they will, of course, be in breach of the law and the matter becomes one entirely for the police'. The police, as might have been forecast, did not get around to prosecuting anyone and the club continued to operate, using the name of a sympathetic society, such as the Labour Group, to book facilities in the Students' Union. It organised one or two meetings and debates, but it was largely symbolic and not a major force within student politics.

The affair raised some important issues and it is significant that Craig thought it a straightforward matter to prosecute citizens who had infringed a prohibition which, clearly, was never meant to

cover their activities. He also made it clear that their illegal act had been to use the word 'club' in conjunction with the word 'republican'. This raised some nice points of jurisprudence and about the obligations of citizens in a democratic society. But the implications were fairly direct; had it not been for his explicit statement in parliament that the QUB Republican Club was in breach of the law, the university authorities might have been able to find some way of recognising the club, while not adverting to the fact that they had been advised that it was, technically, illegal. Craig closed that option and what had been a passing enthusiasm for a few score of radicals then became an issue which was of concern to hundreds. It created an alliance between a tiny group of revolutionaries, a minority of liberals and a large number of students who were vaguely worried about civil liberties. The students did not direct their protest at the university authorities, but at the Government, as personified by William Craig, whose statements and whose accessibility made him a more obvious target. This turned the protest outwards, away from the university, and contributed to the later evolution of the PD. While this was helpful to the university authorities, it meant that student radicalism was a further complicating factor in the developing political crisis. The joint action committee was a nucleus which was used to mobilise the students after 5 October and the earlier demonstrations had alerted extreme loyalists to the existence of a vigorous anti-Unionist opposition at QUB, which was all the more objectionable because it contained a large number of 'Lundys' from a Protestant background. Moreover, because of the location of Queen's, student protests took place outside traditional nationalist areas. This compounded the public order problems arising from the civil rights movement.

The 5 October march in Derry took place before the beginning of the new academic year and the first response of students was a small picket of William Craig's house on Sunday 6 October (the RUC having obligingly let them know its location eleven months earlier). On the first day of term, Tuesday 8 October, the joint action committee held a meeting in the Students' Union which was attended by seven hundred to eight hundred students. They agreed on a march from the university to the city hall to take place the next day. The proposed route would have taken the marchers through Shaftesbury Square and, predictably, Ian Paisley

announced a counter-demonstration. About three thousand marchers gathered at 2 p.m. on Wednesday 9 October in Elmwood Avenue, beside the Students' Union. At first they voted to maintain the original route but the police served an order banning them from Shaftesbury Square and they accepted an alternative route which would have avoided any contentious areas. While the march proceeded, Paisley's meeting in Shaftesbury Square broke up and he and his supporters made their way to the city hall, arriving before the students did. After addressing his followers, Paisley asked them to go home quietly, but about two hundred remained and were waiting in May Street at the back of the city hall when the students reached Linenhall Street, which leads directly on to the rear entrance of the building. The police cordoned off the end of the street, leaving a space of about fifty yards between the students and the jeering, singing Paisleyites.

The marchers obeyed the instructions of the joint action committee and sat down in the street with their backs to the police and the Paisleyites. After consultations with the march organisers and with university chaplains who were present, Sheelagh Murnaghan MP phoned the cabinet office at Stormont and asked that a minister come to meet the students and discuss their demands. They were invited to send a deputation of five or six to Stormont but this was rejected by the demonstrators who remained sitting on the street. At about 6 p.m. a further vote was taken and a majority favoured trying to reach the front of the city hall. As the marchers began to stand up, the police prepared for a confrontation, but Fred Taggart of the joint action committee and Peter Rowan, the chief marshal, successfully persuaded the students to sit down again. After another half-hour only about 150 demonstrators remained and Taggart successfully persuaded them, over the police loudspeaker, to march back to the university.

It was a classic case of the police restricting a legal civil rights demonstration because they had not been quick enough to prevent an illegal loyalist counter-demonstration. This highlighted the students' moderation and restraint. Ciaran McKeown recalled that 'they seemed to be discussing among themselves as they might have done on any afternoon in the Students' Union coffee bar'.[16] Seamus Heaney saw them as 'embarrassed indignant young Ulstermen and women whose deep-grained conservatism of behaviour

was outweighed by a reluctant recognition of injustice'.[17] Bernadette Devlin remembered that 'our behaviour on that day earned us a great deal of respect in the community'. [18]

On returning to the university the marchers crowded into a mass meeting which lasted until the early hours of the morning and which resulted in the emergence of the PD. This was the first of the open unstructured meetings which were the chief distinguishing characteristic of the early PD. One commentator described them as 'a cross between a Quaker meeting and a Pentecostalist service. Enthusiasm was high, commitment was strong and idealism pervasive.'[19] The Cameron Report described the form and structure of the new movement:

> People's Democracy has no accepted constitution and no recorded membership. At any meeting any person attending is entitled both to speak and to vote; decisions taken at one meeting may be reviewed at the next – indeed during the currency of any given meeting. No subscription, entrance fee or membership qualification is required of members . . . and the requisite finance is obtained from collections at meetings, subscriptions or contributions from well-wishers or supporters.[20]

The mass meeting elected a Faceless Committee, so called because it was deliberately selected from people who were unknown and who were not likely to act in the interests of their career or a political faction. The committee had purely executive functions. It was to carry out the decisions of the mass meetings and was not to be a leadership nor to substitute itself for the 'people's democracy'. The committee's first job was to arrange another march. This was to have been on Saturday 12 October, but two days beforehand a mass meeting agreed to postpone it to avoid a clash with a Paisleyite march which had been called as a spoiling tactic. The march eventually took place on 16 October and it was, once more, re-routed away from Shaftesbury Square but permitted to reach the front of the city hall. About 150 Paisleyites heckled the meeting but declined a polite offer of the microphone to put their point of view to the students. Again there was praise for the responsibility shown by the marchers. The vice-chancellor wrote to Kevin Boyle saying that the arrangements had been 'excellent', but he suggested that marches should be used cautiously, 'if at all', in the future.[21]

The praise was not unanimous. Almost from the start there were dissenting voices among the students. At the original meeting on 8 October the president of the Students' Union, Ian Brick, had strongly counselled against marching. He organised an alternative rally in the Whitla Hall at QUB to coincide with the march. A leaflet issued by his Action Committee for a Peaceful Protest claimed that the march was being 'organised by various political groups in the University and others outside'. In the current atmosphere of Belfast, it claimed, the march could end in 'bloodshed'.[22] Less than one hundred students attended this rally; it did not oppose the aims of the marchers, only their tactics and the presence among them of 'agitators'. It passed a motion calling for greater efforts by the Government to achieve reconciliation.

There were no reports of similar actions at any of the other institutions of higher education in Belfast. Undoubtedly a number of staff and students, particularly QUB graduates, from other colleges supported the QUB students, but it was in Queen's alone that most of the university community was caught up in what was happening. The other institutions were smaller and more narrowly vocational; also their students lacked the social prestige and self-confidence which being a student at QUB conferred.

The New University of Ulster did not have its official opening until 25 October 1968, but teaching had already started and a student community of about four hundred had been established on its Coleraine campus. Shortly after the Derry events, the RUC in Coleraine received notice of a march from the university to the Diamond in the town centre. But almost before they had time to consider the implications, the students had cancelled it, 'as they had no desire . . . to cause any local ill-feeling should any irresponsibly minded person from outside seek to attach themselves and cause trouble'.[23] There had, in fact, been local opposition which was led by the Reverend John Wylie, a Free Presbyterian minister and at that time a close colleague of Ian Paisley. There was also opposition within the student body, with pro-civil rights posters being torn down from campus notice boards. Above all, the students did not have any neutral territory, other than their isolated campus, through which to march. These pressures effectively stifled solidarity with the civil rights cause. Even when given an opportunity to demonstrate away from the university, in Derry

on 2 November, there was not enough support to justify organising transport. Geoffrey Bell and Inez McCormack, who were students at Magee College in Derry at the time, recall involvement in the civil rights activities in the town but not any specific movement among the college's small student body.[24]

There was, however, an attempt to set up a PD branch in the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, the prestigious boys' school founded in 1810. About twenty senior boys were involved and a friend of Kevin Boyle's, who was teaching there, wrote that they included: 'the best material in the school . . . they are light years ahead of their parents (and 85% of them Protestant)'. However, 'as they are shitting on their own doorstep it will have to be unofficial'.[25] The group seems to have been formed in about early December 1968; after that, increasing communal tension as well as pressure from families and the school authorities would have made it impossible to continue. The historian and feminist Margaret Ward recalls attending the first PD march with classmates from her convent school but found that she and other school students were initially shunted off into a junior group called the 'Young Democrats'.[26] The consequence of all this was that it was at QUB alone that the PD emerged and the lack of any broader student-based movement increased the PD's tendency to look on itself as a civil rights, rather than a student, organisation.

Following the 16 October march there was another mass meeting of the QUB students' new movement, now officially called the People's Democracy.[27] The report in the *Irish News* of 17 October conveyed the early PD's tone of earnest well-meaning:

> Marches are now secondary. Future action will mainly concentrate on what the PD can do to help Northern Ireland's future. This will involve intensive fact-finding activities . . . on such factors as company votes and the number of people with no voting voice in their local government affairs, or the number of families living in unfit and overcrowded conditions in Belfast.

An independent inquiry into the events in Derry was also mooted, along with woolly proposals about helping couples to find the deposit for new homes, helping voluntary agencies and converting old property into flats for the homeless and waste ground into children's playgrounds. Most of these proposals either duplicated

work already done or would have diverted the student protest into charitable or community work.

By November strategy was being sharpened up. A document entitled *People's Democracy Agenda* was circulated. Among the proposals being considered were: a lobby of Stormont; picketing William Craig's house and 'irrigating' his garden; a challenge to the ban on Shaftesbury Square by a continuous circuit on the pavement by PD members giving out leaflets; Sunday-evening meetings at the city hall; a 'monster teach-in' at the Ulster Hall; and 'infiltration' of local civic weeks. They would disseminate information by 'infiltrating' the Citizens' Advice Bureaux or alternatively by setting up a PD advice bureau near the city centre. A major 'fact-finding inquiry' was to be set up, utilising social scientists. The university was to be asked to donate a house to the PD; in the event of a refusal, 'we move in and take over'. The proceeds of the rag week were to be 'earmarked for the Derry homeless'. There was to be a march and rally in Trafalgar Square, with a petition to be presented at Downing Street on Christmas Day. The sheer unreality of much of this was highlighted by the proposal to ask for the support of British students for a march at Christmas. Apparently no one appreciated the fact that most British universities simply cease to exist during vacations.

Some action did emerge. There was a very effective protest at Stormont parliament buildings on 24 October. Students demonstrated in the gallery before occupying the central lobby for a number of hours. At this stage they were still being treated with kid gloves and not only was their sit-in tolerated, but the Minister of Education, William Long, discussed with them. There were peaceful pickets of O'Neill on 28 October, of Lord Grey, the Governor of Northern Ireland, on 3 December, of Unionist Party headquarters on 6 December and of William Craig's house on 7 December.

During these activities the mood of the PD was becoming more militant and less 'responsible'. On 4 November another attempt was made to march to the city hall and once more the police insisted on a re-route to avoid a Paisleyite counter-demonstration in Shaftesbury Square; this time the PD refused. A march of about three hundred assembled in Elmwood Avenue and set off down University Road, only to be stopped at the junction with University

Street, the point at which previous marches had been diverted. They sat down as stewards attempted to negotiate, but while the attention of the police was distracted some students filtered round the cordon. On seeing this, some police broke ranks, scuffles ensued and there were some arrests. The main body of the march remained blocked off by the police and by this time some loyalist counter-demonstrators had arrived. After sitting for a time the students agreed to disperse and make their way individually to the city hall. Meanwhile about two dozen PD members had been waiting inside the building, trying to keep out of sight until it was clear whether or not the march would get through. When their presence was discovered they were ejected, but not before laughing students had dodged police and corporation officials all round the corridors. When caught they offered no resistance and were dragged bodily from the building. Outside the affair became less light-hearted when they were attacked by Paisleyites. A meeting was held outside the city hall, where the marchers had gathered after their frustrated attempt to get through the police cordon. After the meeting they sat down across Donegall Square West, blocking the traffic on one of the city's busiest thoroughfares. Police forcibly removed some of them and there were further attacks by loyalists. Eventually the marchers agreed to cease obstructing the road on being promised that they would be allowed to march back through Shaftesbury Square. In fact they were again re-routed, but the return march had swollen to twice the size of the original one from Elmwood Avenue.

The arrests showed that the PD was no longer a purely student movement. Only four of the nine arrested were students and of the others only one, a research assistant, had any connection with the university. Those arrested included a caravan salesman, a barman and an unemployed statistics clerk. The new spirit of militancy was shown again when the PD picketed a prize-giving by Terence O'Neill in the Whitla Hall at QUB on 13 November. Although the PD had decided that the protest should be silent, members of a far left group, the Revolutionary Socialist Students' Federation (RSSF) chanted slogans on the steps of the hall. A number of demonstrators tried to get through the police cordon round the prime minister and mobbed and pounded his car. The PD issued a statement denouncing the federation as 'revolutionary infants'.

O'Neill was given a formal apology but the incident did disproportionate damage to the moderate image of the PD and of students generally.

During November the situation in Northern Ireland was becoming more and more polarised and fears of an outbreak of sectarian violence were growing. As early as 26 October a small civil rights march from Strabane to Derry was attacked at Magheramason and some participants injured. This trend coincided with a turn by the PD to agitation outside the university. They launched a 'Programme to Inform the People' in response to O'Neill's 'Programme to Enlist the People'. Branches of the PD were set up in Newry on 9 November and in Omagh and Dungannon on 23 November. The Dungannon meeting illustrated the problems now emerging for civil rights activities. An attempted public meeting in Market Square had to be abandoned after scuffles with a hostile crowd and local civil rights supporters and journalists were threatened by loyalists. There was a meeting of about three hundred in a local restaurant, which elected a standing committee to form a local PD branch. But they were besieged by a crowd of loyalists, about thirty of whom broke through the front door and assaulted the proprietor and his pregnant wife. The police succeeded in getting the people attending the meeting out of the building safely, but they were harassed going to their cars. There was tension between rival gangs of youths in Market Square until the early hours of the morning.

Concern about this trend of events was crystallised by what happened in Armagh on 30 November. Loyalists, led by Ian Paisley, had failed in their tactic of calling a counter-demonstration to get a civil rights march banned, but they occupied the centre of the town, armed with cudgels and sticks, and effectively prevented it from traversing its intended route. Serious violence was averted but the resources of the RUC were stretched to their limits and there was good reason to fear that on another occasion they would be unable to prevent a major outbreak of sectarian conflict.

This was the background to O'Neill's 'crossroads' speech of 9 December. 'As matters stand today,' he warned, 'we are on the brink of chaos, where neighbour could be set against neighbour.' He appealed for the civil rights movement to call off demonstrations and to 'allow an atmosphere favourable to change to

develop'.[28] He pledged that there would be no watering down of the changes the Government had already announced – the abolition of Londonderry Corporation, an ombudsman and a new system of housing allocation. NICRA and the DCAC responded by calling a truce, but on 20 December the PD defied the Government, liberal public opinion and the mainstream of the civil rights movement by announcing a march from Belfast to Derry in the first four days of 1969.

At 9 a.m. on Wednesday 1 January about forty PD supporters gathered at the city hall and after a minor fracas with some loyalist women, set off on their march. By mid-afternoon they had reached Antrim, where there was minor scuffling as the police tried to get them through a crowd of loyalists. Eventually they agreed to detour the town in police vehicles, an offer made by the RUC after the intervention of the local Unionist MP, Nat Minford. They reached Whitehall, their overnight stopping place, where the police told them that loyalists were blocking the bridge into their next objective, Randalstown. They were disturbed by a bomb scare at 3 a.m. and next morning agreed to go on to Randalstown and not to insist on going back to try to march through Antrim. Again they had to detour the town, this time in the cars of local supporters, and they marched into the friendly territory of Toomebridge where, during the previous night, a statue of the local hero of a nationalist ballad, Roddy McCorley, had been blown up. Their next objective was Maghera but the police imposed a triangular detour through Bellaghy. Despite the fact that this was supposed to help them avoid trouble, the march was met by another hostile crowd, with Major Ronald Bunting prominent among them. At this point the march was supported by a large number of civil rights adherents from Toomebridge and, for the first time, the police took determined action to clear the opposing crowd, which dispersed without much resistance.

The marchers were welcomed in Gulladuff, where they agreed, once more, to avoid a confrontation by going round Maghera in supporters' cars to Brackaghreilly, their stopping place for the night. Next day they made another attempt to march through Maghera, where there had been violence during the night, but the RUC blocked their way, and after a token show of resistance they proceeded to Dungiven. The police warned them of a hostile crowd

at Feeny, about four miles ahead, but PD members reconnoitred the road and found it clear and they passed through Feeny, reaching Claudy without opposition.

That evening there was serious trouble in Derry when Paisley held a meeting in the Guildhall. Despite pleas from leaders of the DCAC, local youths clashed with police in an attempt to attack the building. The marchers were informed of what had happened and spent a troubled night in Claudy, where opponents yelled threats outside the hall which they were occupying for the night. Next morning there was a long discussion about whether or not the march should be called off: it was now clear to everyone that there was a definite danger of encountering serious violence. But in face of the determination of a number of the marchers, and considering the distance already covered and the short distance which remained, they agreed to proceed.

When the march reached the junction with the main Dungiven–Derry road, the police warned them that there was a hostile crowd about three hundred yards ahead on high ground and that stones might be thrown. Although a number of alternative routes could have been taken, the police did not advise a re-route and the march proceeded, with a contingent of police wearing helmets and carrying shields at its head. Shortly afterwards they began to see people in the fields, which were banked up at some height above the road: first a single man wearing a white armband, then about fifty, standing in little knots. A little further on the march was bombarded with stones and bottles thrown from the fields. About 150 people could be seen, some of them wearing white armbands, and also groups of uniformed policemen, some of whom seemed to be engaged in amicable conversation with the attackers. When some marchers tried to escape by breaking through the hedges into the fields, these officers drew their batons and drove them back onto the road.

Worse was to come: a little further on two groups of attackers, armed with cudgels, lengths of lead piping, crowbars and iron bars, were concealed in and around Ardmore Road at its junction with the Derry–Claudy road, just before it reaches Burntollet Bridge. Since the police were grouped at the head of the march, they offered little or no protection when these attackers leaped out and assaulted the marchers. The attack was brutal and relentless;

the unresisting marchers were beaten, knocked down and kicked, prevented from seeking shelter, pursued and further assaulted. There was at least one near fatality when a girl was knocked unconscious and left lying face down in a stream. Several people were taken to hospital and although the police recorded only thirteen injured, the Cameron Report acknowledged that this was incomplete.

There was clear evidence of advance preparations for the attacks. Piles of newly quarried stones had been left in the fields. The previous evening, outside normal working hours, a group of workers arrived in a telephone engineering van and did some work on the telephone lines and next day local lines were dead. Bowes Egan and Vincent McCormack got an admission from the caretaker of a local Orange hall that it had been used to store and distribute cudgels. Many assailants wore white armbands which readily distinguished them from marchers. Egan and McCormack were able to identify a number of the attackers from photographs and these came from a wide area but not from districts outside the scope of the local farming and commercial community. Many were B Specials; this was a good propaganda point for the civil rights movement, but since membership of the B Specials in the area was roughly co-terminous with the status of adult, able-bodied male Protestant, this underlines the point that it was an attack by local people.[29]

The marchers were stoned again on their way into Derry and there was trouble at a DCAC rally and during the night. The most ominous feature of this was a breakdown in discipline by some policemen, who attacked shoppers in a city-centre supermarket and broke windows, kicked doors and sang sectarian songs in Catholic areas into the early hours of the morning. If the events at Burntollet had been shocking, those in Derry were menacing. As a result of clashes originating in communal tensions brought on by the PD march, the police had been more seriously compromised than ever before in the eyes of Derry Catholics and hostility between Protestants and Catholics was being superseded by hostility between the Catholic community and the forces of the state.

Terence O'Neill condemned the attempt to march to Derry as a 'foolhardy and irresponsible undertaking. At best those who planned it were careless of the effects it would have; at worst they

embraced with enthusiasm the prospect of adverse publicity causing further damage to the interests of Northern Ireland'.[30] Brian Faulkner considered the march to be 'deliberately provocative . . . Young people were used as bait in a hoped for and expected attack which could be used to arouse community antagonisms'.[31] O'Neill commended Eddie McAteer for his opposition to the march but the Nationalist leader's interpretation of the motives of the PD was more benign:

> God love them in their innocence, they thought that this thing could be conducted on an entirely civil rights plane without regard to sectarianism or nationalism or any of those other things which really move people . . . These dewy eyed innocents thought that in the sacred name of civil rights and democracy they could walk through . . . Orange areas without incurring Orange displeasure. As . . . anyone who had any knowledge of the terrain or knowledge of history could have told them . . . they were simply resented as people who were likely to disturb the established order.[32]

Frank Gogarty, chairman of NICRA, made a similar point: 'To me they are the innocents, the wee folk out to slay the dragon. They at times have the innocence of children and all their love. They are the white in the Irish flag, martyred between the Orange and the Green.'[33]

The 'innocence' thesis strains credulity, but O'Neill's and Faulkner's analysis depended on the PD having calculated in advance all of the consequences of its action. A passage from Bernadette Devlin's autobiography explains the PD's motives:

> Our function in marching . . . was to break the truce, to relaunch the civil rights movement as a mass movement, and to show the people that O'Neill was, in fact, offering them nothing. We knew that we wouldn't finish the march without getting molested, and we were accused of looking for trouble. What we really wanted to do was pull the carpet off the floor to show the dirt that was under it.[34]

Paul Arthur quotes a PD militant who gave a similar interpretation: 'In marching we felt that we were pushing a structure . . . towards a point where its internal proceedings would cause a snapping and breaking to begin.' But he is too sweeping in his assertion that 'some PD members were now seeing their task as the destruction of the State, no matter what the consequences'.[35] The PD's intentions

were radical but they were not revolutionary. Michael Farrell has recorded that the march was modelled on Martin Luther King's Selma–Montgomery march of 1966, 'which had exposed the racist thuggery of America's Deep South and forced the US government into major reforms'.[36]

Farrell explained the point further:[37] he had not been innocent; being from the south Derry area himself, he was well aware of the nature and depth of Protestant hostility. He had not, however, anticipated the full extent of the violence. He had thought that the march would force the Government either to confront the loyalists or to drop its pretensions about reform, but he had not been clear about the further consequences of forcing the Government to resist sections of its own supporters. The loyalists might back down, or the Government might fall, forcing the British government to intervene. The purpose of the march was to upset the status quo but it is going too far to say that it was an attempt to destroy the state – except in the very special sense that it might be supplanted by a stronger state. It was essentially an oppositional tactic, against what was seen as O'Neill's fake reformism, against the truce in civil rights activities, and against the leaderships of the civil rights movement and the Catholic community.

Almost on the heels of the Belfast–Derry march came the announcement of a march to be held in Newry on 12 January. This was billed as a PD march but in fact it was organised by the Newry PD, which had been set up following the PD visit on 9 November. It was not a student or an exclusively young body, but a group of local civil rights supporters who called themselves PD because that movement had been the first to evangelise them. Its first attempt to mount a demonstration, in December, had failed through lack of support but the traumatic events at Burntollet now ensured a big turnout. Its chosen route would have taken the march through part of the town's business centre. This was an area which did not have a resident population to be offended or inconvenienced but it was contained within a Unionist-held local government ward. Major Ronald Bunting threatened a counter-demonstration and the RUC imposed a change of route. This incensed the civil rights supporters, who saw it as a denial of their right to march through the centre of their Catholic-dominated town, when only people living outside the area would be offended. Police refused a compromise

whereby the organisers would have accepted a change of route if there was evidence of a counter-demonstration, and even when Bunting called off his threatened rally, the ban remained. The march resulted in dramatic scenes as demonstrators broke through police barriers and attacked several police tenders, burning them, pushing them into the canal dock beside which they were parked, or driving them off to be vandalised elsewhere. The police lines were drawn up behind the tenders and many civil rights supporters alleged afterwards that this had been deliberate, to offer no deterrent to just such misbehaviour as had occurred. In any event it meant that there was no actual physical conflict until a baton charge drove the remnants of the crowd out of the area.[38]

The affair was intensely damaging to the civil rights movement. John Hume, Michael Farrell, Kevin Boyle and other civil rights leaders appealed for order and stewards attempted to restrain their supporters. But the local group lacked the experience and authority to keep control and it made serious blunders in its preparations for the march. The Cameron Report summed up the reasons for the débâcle as 'inefficient and inadequate arrangements', which included a lack of an effective loudspeaker and an adequate stewarding system. To this had been added an unworkable plan to occupy public buildings in order to divert attention away from trouble: 'In the event the organisers were confronted by an unorganised group which blocked their path . . . and by an extremist element . . . spoiling for an attack on the police . . . The march degenerated into a riot.'[39] As Kevin Boyle put it: 'The local organisation made a mess of it.'[40]

The Newry march led many people to conclude that civil rights marches could no longer be carried out peacefully and that the movement had lost control over the more hot-headed and extreme elements of its support. In fact, between the end of January and the end of July, there were ten occasions on which civil rights activities led to trouble and twenty-one on which they were carried out entirely peacefully, including a march in Newry on 28 June. But for the PD the issue of marching was thrust into the background when Terence O'Neill called a general election for 24 February. He was appealing over the heads of many in his own party for the support of all moderates, Catholic as well as Protestant. To the PD, however, his reformism was fake and it decided to

contest the election to challenge the idea that he had anything to offer.

The PD stood on a manifesto which encompassed the established civil rights demands on the franchise, state repression and housing allocation, but added other demands such as a crash housing programme, state investment and state-owned industries with workers' control, integrated comprehensive education and a break-up of large estates in the west to provide land for co-operative farms. No seats were won, but the PD candidates totted up 25,407 votes. Eamonn McCann stood as an NILP candidate in Foyle and if his 1,993 votes are added to those of the PD, this amounted to 29 per cent of the total poll in the seats contested. In South Down, Fergus Woods came within 220 votes of unseating the Nationalist MP. The PD saw this as a major triumph and an endorsement of their radical policies but a closer examination reveals the flaws in such an assumption. Overall the election weakened O'Neill's position, since he did not get the decisive endorsement across the sectarian divide for which he was looking, but the other significant aspect was the success of candidates with a record in the civil rights movement in challenging the Nationalist Party, of which John Hume's defeat of Eddie McAteer in Foyle was the best example. The events of the previous eighteen months had brought about a fundamental shift within the Catholic community for whom the civil rights movement was beginning to eclipse the Nationalist Party as a means of political expression.

The PD's vote has to be seen in this broader context of the performance of the civil rights candidates. The PD's support ranged widely, from 9.2 per cent of the poll in Belfast Cromac (the only lost deposit) to 48.8 per cent in South Down. The average over the nine constituencies was 26.4 per cent. This was not strikingly different from the performance of other unsuccessful candidates with a civil rights record. Erskine Holmes of the NILP got 29 per cent of the poll in Belfast Ballynafeigh, Sheelagh Murnaghan of the Liberal Party got 14.8 per cent in North Down and another Liberal, Claude Wilton, got 35.1 per cent in City of Londonderry. Paul Arthur comments: 'There is no strong evidence to suggest that [the PD] persuaded people to vote across the traditional divide.'[41] A more comprehensive analysis shows that in contests in Unionist-held seats they secured 'no more than a rather modest

turn-out of voters'. In the Nationalist seat of South Fermanagh, PD got the support of 'dissident Catholics rather than Protestants'. Bernadette Devlin in South Londonderry achieved the best result in a Unionist-held seat, with 38.7 per cent of the poll, but this was almost the same as the Nationalist candidate who had fought the seat in the 1965 general election. In South Down, which included Newry, 'the performance can best be comprehended less as a People's Democracy achievement than as general Catholic support for a civil rights candidate'.[42]

On the day before the election Neil Blaney, Minister for Agriculture in the Dublin government, was presiding over a convention of the Fianna Fáil party in Cahir, County Tipperary. He departed from the prepared text of his speech in order to declare that the election in the north was about Irish unity and he urged 'Irish' voters not to support Unionist candidates. This was highly embarrassing for the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, who was seated on the platform. It was part of an internecine war within the cabinet over northern policy which had begun in November 1968 when Blaney had made an uncompromising anti-partitionist speech, inspired by the events in Derry a month earlier. Together with statements by the Minister for Local Government, Kevin Boland, these constituted a challenge to Lynch's policy of not aggravating the situation in the north by public displays of traditional nationalist irredentism.

For the PD it was an opportunity to bring to the fore what they regarded as an important aspect of its policies. Its election manifesto had stated that the border was 'irrelevant' to the fight for civil rights: 'Our view of the Republic is that many of our demands . . . are equally relevant in the Republic and we support those who are working for full civil rights there as elsewhere.'[43] It announced a march from Belfast to Dublin, pointing out that the tactic used by Blaney and Boland of making intransigent statements just before an election was similar to the tactics of Unionists and Nationalists in the north:

> We are not opposed to people who believe in a united Ireland . . . But we are opposed to Southern politicians using the Northern situation to divert attention from the failings of their own state . . . Objections to the undemocratic laws that obtain in the Republic – such as the prohibition on divorce, the prevention of the sale of

contraceptives, the special constitutional position of the Catholic Church and the anti-strike legislation – does not come only from Unionists in the North but from an increasing number of all those interested in civil rights who are seeking a democratic society in their own situation.[44]

The march was a fiasco; the fact that the PD apparently could not distinguish between provisions of the Irish Republic's constitution and policies of the Fianna Fáil government was evidence of a rich potential for mutual misunderstanding. The most notorious incident was Cyril Toman's attempt to have two books seized by customs at the border. This was used by some newspapers to trivialise the whole event. Southern left-wingers saw it as a crude attempt to raise matters which they were obliged to treat with delicacy and the affair highlighted the PD's capacity to adopt simplistic solutions for complex political problems. By marching to Dublin it hoped to answer Unionist accusations that the civil rights movement was not concerned about the undue influence of the Catholic Church in the south and to show that the PD's commitment to radical change knew no boundaries. But co-ordination with its southern allies was poor and the demonstration in Dublin was marred by a very public split and by bitter recriminations afterwards. Instead of encouraging the emergence of a civil rights movement in the south and allaying the fears of northern Protestants, the PD blundered into a situation which it did not understand and was made to look foolish. Despite this, however, it had now established itself as an important component of the civil rights movement in the north and clearly was a third force, alongside NICRA and the DCAC.

The Belfast–Derry march had been undertaken against the wishes and advice of the two other main civil rights organisations but both had made gestures of sympathy. NICRA gave the PD £25 and the use of its banner and the DCAC organised a welcoming rally, meals and accommodation. After the attack at Burntollet they closed ranks in support of the PD and in genuine admiration of the physical and moral courage of the marchers. Patricia McCluskey, later to be a determined opponent of the PD's influence within NICRA, wrote to them on behalf of the CSJ congratulating them and telling them that 'your heroism and your bearing have added a new dimension to our considerable estimate of your qualities. I can tell

you that we older people regard you with more admiration and respect than perhaps you think us capable of. We are all at one with you in your endeavours'.[45]

The march to Derry, at a time when NICRA had called a truce, did not imply as profound a difference between it and the PD as might be supposed. NICRA had come to a narrowly tactical decision, based on the situation in November and December 1968. One of its leading radicals, Frank Gogarty, made it clear that they had been 'blackmailed off the streets' by loyalist intimidation and police repression. But they 'would not remain off the streets forever'. The Government would have to give them a 'definite timetable of reform' or they would go back to the streets 'and protest louder than ever'.[46] NICRA was also being obliged to elaborate and extend its demands by changes in the political situation. O'Neill's promises of concessions on the franchise and housing, the abolition of Londonderry Corporation and his public-relations successes, together with the emergence of strong anti-O'Neill forces within the Unionist Party, created a more complex political situation. It was no longer a simple confrontation between the civil rights movement and an intransigent and insensitive government. NICRA was not prepared to accept O'Neill's promises and it wanted to keep up the momentum of its campaign. This made it necessary to make more radical demands and to enter qualifying clauses on its former simple and clear-cut aims. A NICRA circular pointed out that

> the shortage of jobs and houses creates the situation that discrimination flourishes in, and we expect both the Stormont and Westminster Governments to make funds available for a crash house-building programme. In areas of high unemployment the Government should start local industries as they started the Forestry Commission.[47]

It also called for trade-union law to be brought into line with British law, for the disbandment of the B Specials and for the RUC to cease carrying revolvers. It had, in other words, adopted a number of demands which were also those of the PD. In addition both organisations were hostile to the proposed Public Order Bill. This made it necessary to give longer notice of parades and banned counter-demonstrations, sit-downs and the occupation of buildings. Since the focus of NICRA and the PD was swinging from

marches to civil disobedience, they saw the bill as aimed directly at them. It became the central issue around which they agitated.

NICRA called a meeting in Toomebridge, County Antrim, on 16 January 1969 to discuss better co-ordination with the DCAC and the PD. It was not a great success; only one representative came from Derry and the PD delegates could not agree to anything, since they would have to report back to a mass meeting. A second meeting, ten days later, was more successful and it resulted in Michael Farrell and Kevin Boyle being co-opted onto the NICRA executive. Subsequently they were elected to that body at the association's annual general meeting in February, which was its first since becoming a mass movement, and it elected a decidedly more radical executive and adopted a more radical set of policies. In effect the PD and NICRA had reached a measure of political and strategic agreement.

The honeymoon did not last long; NICRA had caught up with the PD's shift to the left but the PD was racing leftwards faster than most people on the NICRA executive. The PD catalysed differences within the larger organisation and aroused suspicions of collusion and manipulation. Another irritant was the fact that the PD had ceased to be a mainly university-based body. During the election campaign many PD members had returned home and had found a new commitment to their local areas. Branches were set up in Newry, Armagh, Enniskillen and Cromac in Belfast.[48] This caused friction since it meant that the PD was organising in direct competition with NICRA and it also hastened the PD's leftward drift. Since it was no longer a purely student body and was competing for the same supporters as NICRA, it emphasised the characteristics which distinguished it most clearly from the association – its greater militancy and radicalism.

Kevin Boyle made the point, in a letter to Richard Rose in 1971, that

> those of us who had influence pushed the protest out of the University precincts. It was not difficult . . . because the students were so close to the society outside. Queen's is largely a dormitory university, the 'Revolution through the Vice Chancellor' theme appropriate to a student population isolated from society did not apply.[49]

However, it is not precisely true to say that the PD deserted the university. A group of PD activists continued as an active left-wing

current within the Students' Union but during 1969 it tended to cut its links with the rest of the PD. Its experience, however, illustrates why the majority drifted away from student politics.

The SRC statutory meeting of 27 November 1969, at which various officers and sub-committees were elected, showed that the PD was the largest organised left force. When it gave its support to an independent left-winger for the post of international relations secretary, the candidate won with a handsome majority. Together with independent left-wingers, it took control of the disciplinary committee, which was important because of pending action against one of its members. But it failed by narrow margins to win three other key posts. The PD had submitted a petition calling for a ban on the holding of a closed meeting by the Conservative and Unionist Association; this was rejected by the executive's committee as unconstitutional. A motion calling for the dissolution of the SRC to make way for a smaller committee, with decisions taken by general meetings, was withdrawn. The PD was, therefore, an effective but far from dominant force and progress could only have been made through long-drawn-out, detailed work within the institutions of the Students' Union – not an attractive prospect when dramatic events were taking place outside. In any case the situation within the university was becoming more difficult and complex as the student body was polarised – the November 1969 meeting granted recognition to two new extreme right-wing societies, the Monday Club and The Honourable the Royalist Society, and a National Front supporter was elected to one of the committees.

The PD's increasing militancy was out of tune with the underlying attitudes of a majority of students. Up until October 1968 the moderate left had been on an ascending curve and students endorsed it because it advocated reconciliation and offered reasonableness and tolerance in place of intransigence. It was, in other words, at one end of a spectrum that ran from moderate to extreme, not one running from left to right. In the eyes of most students the PD was placing itself, along with Paisley and Craig, at the immoderate end of that spectrum. The PD was now becoming vulnerable to a challenge from any group which chose to try to mobilise the 'moderate' majority against the 'extremists'.

In November, after the events at the O'Neill prize-giving, the

SRC passed a resolution rapping the RSSF over the knuckles. This was probably unfair, since the RSSF was not alone in mobbing O'Neill's car, but it was an easy target. It testified to its own isolation in its news-sheet *Detonator*, with a spoof letter from 'about 5,000 slobbering students' complaining about 'troublemakers' who were giving students a bad name:

> We are at University because we are clever boys and girls who have passed EXAMINATIONS. We have done this because mummy and daddy and teacher and the church and the ministry of education said we should . . . Why don't you all get your hair cut or go to Russia with Red Ali and all your mates and let us get on with our vital studies?

This was a caricature of the attitude of a large proportion of QUB students but there was a core of truth to it. Although the first march, in October 1968, had mobilised an impressive number of students, Jeremy Comerford points out that 'probably as many as 2,000 to 3,000 students remained passive and kept well away from the Union on the Wednesday afternoon of the march'.[50]

At the beginning of the new academic year, 30 September 1969, Rory McShane, the Students' Union president, together with the vice-chancellor, Dr Arthur Vick, issued a joint statement. This referred to a resolution passed by a general meeting of some two thousand students on 22 April that year which had expressed concern at the growing civil unrest and went on: 'We hereby resolve never to allow religious differences to divide us. We call upon all students to refrain from any militant activity in the present situation.'[51] In the light of this, student and staff representatives, along with the university authorities, had agreed to restrict attendance at all political meetings in the Students' Union to enrolled students and staff. The Labour Group's news-sheet *Defamator* fulminated against McShane, one of its own members, as a 'spineless self-seeker', but the ban was never effectively challenged. Students were turning against militancy as something which challenged the delicate non-sectarian consensus within the university and were opting to shelter from the storm which was gathering outside.

The PD had broken its links with the majority of students because it had become radicalised through its experiences and no

longer accepted the moderate consensus. It shifted to the left through the election campaign, through competition with other civil rights organisations, through moving out of the university, but also by losing members. Each of these phases saw a significant loss of support as groups and individuals who could not go along with the new departure ceased to be involved. There was a process of self-selection through which only those PD supporters who wanted to go on participated in the movement and force of circumstances made it necessary for them to become more militant and more explicitly left-wing. Also, as numbers fell, Michael Farrell's influence grew; his predominance was also reinforced by defections on the left, from those who disagreed with his fundamentally Leninist approach, and who

> were disaffected by the whole notion of fighting a parliamentary election . . . this faction consisted of . . . members from Republican backgrounds, together with a few Republicans with Anarchist leanings, whose natural sentiments, in accordance with Sinn Féin tradition, were to turn their backs . . . on the constitutional process.[52]

The decision to march to Derry illustrates another reason for the transition. It was taken by a smaller, less-publicised and less-representative meeting, following one at which the idea had been rejected. The PD radicals were accused of undemocratic obstructive tactics by the Conservative and Unionist Association. Given the open structure of the PD and the nature of its decision-making machinery, it was quite simple for any organised group to dominate particular meetings and entirely legitimate for them to do so. No rules would be broken because there were no rules. When serious differences arose, therefore, the result was paralysis and anyone who actually wanted to do something would have to indulge in manipulation. The consequence was that the mass movement evaporated and the name 'People's Democracy' became the property of whoever had the energy and commitment to sit it out until everyone else had departed, leaving them in possession.

The PD was one component of a broader movement and its political strategy was defined in relation to that broader movement, so that it cannot be treated as an entirely independent entity. By the spring of 1969 it was working within the civil rights movement as

an *oppositional* grouping which, in some respects, was similar to a far-left entryist grouping within the British, Irish or Northern Ireland Labour parties. This trait can be seen at the very beginnings of the civil rights movement. It is well illustrated by Eamonn McCann's letter to Michael Farrell following the first meeting between the DHAC and NICRA to plan the 5 October march in Derry. Referring to the second meeting McCann said:

> The issue of bans and proscriptions should be pushed hard next Saturday . . . Moreover the police are more than likely to ban the march. [Betty] Sinclair adopted a 'cross that bridge when we come to it' attitude, which means she wants the back door left open for a sell out. I think one would have to push for a 'we are marching and that's that' position . . . It is necessary to introduce Socialist politics at the outset or we will be swamped by bums, opportunists and demagogues. The Labour right is 'walking into it' by so far saying that they will have nothing to do with the event, it being sectarian etc . . . I'm not going to push them very hard on this as I see no reason to enable them to avoid being exposed as the spineless bastards they are, and I'll do the exposing *after* the event.

There are two important points about this passage. First, it shows that McCann was far more concerned about a potential conflict with the right wing in the NILP and the moderates in NICRA than he was about a conflict with the state. Second, the term 'bans and proscriptions' was a ritual phrase used by Trotskyist entryists in the British Labour Party in the 1960s to refer to attempts by the party leadership to control far-left influence. These two points should be borne in mind when considering the influence of Trotskyism on some of the key leaders of the PD.

In 1939, at the outbreak of World War II, some British Trotskyists sought refuge from conscription in Ireland. Most settled in Dublin, where they achieved some influence within the Irish Labour Party and the republican movement. A group was started in Belfast, which had some success, but rapidly fell apart, although some former supporters joined Harry Diamond's Socialist Republicans which was later absorbed into Gerry Fitt's RLP.[53] There was a brief resurgence after the war but by the late 1950s Trotskyism in Ireland had died out. However, at the April 1965 conference of the NILP the guest speaker, Bessie Braddock MP, attacked Trotskyist influence on the NILP's youth organisation, the

Young Socialists. Following this, some supporters of the British Trotskyist group, the Socialist Labour League, were expelled and the Young Socialists were disbanded. Some of the left-wing members of the QUB Labour Group, who were later to be leaders of the PD, supported the Socialist Labour League against expulsion but they were not attracted to that particular brand of Trotskyism. By Easter 1965 they had made contact with another variety in the shape of the Irish Workers' Group (IWG).

William Craig referred to the IWG in his statement to the Stormont House of Commons on the events in Derry on 5 October 1968. He said that it was a 'revolutionary socialist group which aims to mobilise the Irish section of the international working class to overthrow the existing Irish bourgeois states, destroy all remaining imperialist organs of control and establish an all-Ireland Socialist Workers' Republic'.[54] This was a direct quotation from the statement of principles which appeared in the IWG's theoretical journal, the *Workers' Republic*, no. 20, Winter 1967/8. Craig's possession of a copy of this duplicated publication was a tribute to the diligence of the RUC Special Branch but more to the point, perhaps, might have been an investigation of whether the IWG was actually capable of achieving any of these grandiose aims. Craig named 'Gerard Richard Lawless . . . a former member of the IRA who was interned by the Government of the Irish Republic in 1957' as the leader of the IWG. Lawless, a Dublin-born electrician, had become involved in republicanism when very young and was one of the leaders of a Dublin faction of the IRA which broke away to join Saor Uladh (free Ulster), the group which initiated the 1956–62 IRA campaign. He was interned in the military prison at the Curragh, from which he was released following his appeal to the European Court of Human Rights – the first case ever considered by the organisation. He moved to London where he had a brief involvement with the Communist Party of Great Britain, then with the Socialist Labour League. In 1963 he helped to form the Irish Communist Group, an amalgam of Trotskyists and other left-wing Marxists. The organisation rapidly split and the Trotskyists around Lawless became the IWG. The IWG had groups of supporters in Ireland, mainly in Dublin, but was principally a London-based organisation.

Eamonn McCann first met Lawless on the 1965 Aldermaston

March. With the practical skills suitable to an IRA quartermaster, Lawless had known that an operation which involved marching over a weekend required material back-up. He appeared on the march not only with Marxist literature but also with sandwiches and an offer of accommodation in London after the march. As a result of this contact, Lawless visited Belfast and addressed a meeting at QUB. An IWG branch was set up, based in Queen's; according to a former member, Rory McShane, this never had more than seven members.[55]

McCann moved to London and became editor of the IWG newspaper, the *Irish Militant*.[56] Both he and Lawless had a natural flair for journalism and the paper was almost alone among extreme left-wing newspapers of the time in actually breaking stories rather than simply interpreting events from a 'correct' ideological standpoint. The first issue was brought out in April 1966 for the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising and it is worth quoting from McCann's comments on the event, to give a flavour of the newspaper:

> Ireland is in an ecstasy of remembered glory. The hands of every poet, priest and politician are raised in valediction . . . Another whited sepulchre is being erected to the men of 1916. Presiding over it all will be the last surviving commander of the rising, Eamon de Valera, the old Fagin of the political pickpockets. But he will only be a decoration. Mr Lemass is the man who will lead the nation in its homage . . . He will tell of Ireland and its history and glory, of gentlemen and heroes; of Caitlin ni Houlihan Free and unfettered.
>
> But the beautiful legendary Caitlin ni Houlihan was a degenerated whore by the time political pimps like Sean Lemass had dragged her screaming into the murky territory where profit is the only law giver. The Republic of Pearse and Connolly does not exist. The miserable miscarriage of a republic which the back street abortionists in Leinster House have procured represents the triumph of Toryism, not the victory of the revolution.

The IWG was republican in the sense that it identified with the radical tradition of the United Irishmen, the Fenians and the Easter rising. Like the Communist Party in Ireland, it sought justification for a socialist revolution in the double failure of the national revolution of 1918–21 to achieve the full social emancipation for which James Connolly had stood and to wrest the whole

of the island from British rule. But the IWG inserted a further layer of betrayal – that of the Communist Party which had participated in the 'degeneration' of the Comintern under Stalin and which wanted to limit the national revolution to those demands which were acceptable to the 'national bourgeoisie'. Since the shift to the left that was taking place within the republican movement was a result of influence by 'Stalinists', the IWG rejected this too, comparing it with earlier republican sorties into constitutional politics, such as Fianna Fáil and Clann na Poblachta.

The IWG had broken up by the end of 1968 as the result of a bitter factional dispute centred on London. But the Belfast members had already dropped out; in fact just a year after the establishment of the branch, Lawless was polemicising against his erstwhile disciples for their 'ultra-left . . . impetuous mistake' in thinking that the working class could 'by-pass the struggle against British imperialism in Ireland'.[57] This referred to IWG members in Belfast such as Cyril Toman, Tony McFarlane and Michael Farrell, who were opposed to giving much emphasis to the 'national question'. Of these, Farrell was to become the most important political thinker and strategist in the PD.

Farrell was from Magherafelt, County Derry. At Queen's he had become deeply involved in the Labour Group and the NILP and had successfully promoted the establishment of an Irish Association of Labour Students' Organisations. He also supported the establishment of a Council of Labour in Ireland, embracing the Irish Labour Party, the NILP and the RLP. Such links across the border were not so much an anti-partitionist gesture by Farrell as an assertion of the common interests of workers north and south against the Tories of the Orange and Green varieties. His position was encapsulated in a speech at James Connolly's grave in 1966: 'Fifty years after Connolly's death his dream of an Irish Workers' Republic has still to be achieved. Only the united action of working-class people North and South, Catholic and Protestant, in a single Labour and Trade Union Movement can achieve Connolly's aim.'[58]

Farrell saw Gerry Fitt's election to Westminster in 1966 as 'the most important development in Belfast for many years'. The working-class electors of 'Belfast's most sectarian constituency [west Belfast]' had 'at last realised that their Unionist masters are

the common enemy of Protestant and Catholic alike'. He emphasised the importance of the fact that nine thousand former NILP votes had gone to Fitt, while RLP voters in Dock had supported the NILP candidate:

> It now seems clear that the Labour unity which the left wing in the North has always urged will soon be forced upon a reluctant leadership by the superior consciousness of the working class . . . The lesson of the general election is clear; in the city Unionism is losing its grip . . . and soon Catholic and Protestant will unite to throw off their masters. In the country the discontent of the small farmers and the growth of the co-operative movement is sounding the death-knell of old-guard Nationalism and Republicanism. When city and country join hands together then Terence O'Neill will need more than public school liberalism to salvage his political career.[59]

The IWG was not the only influence on Farrell. At international student conferences he came in contact with Maoists and he was influenced by the radical wing of the Black civil rights movement in the United States, especially the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee. He was particularly impressed by a pamphlet written by an American Trotskyist, George Breitman, *How a Minority Can Change Society*. Breitman was an important populariser of the ideas of Malcolm X and of Black power. His pamphlet, first published in 1964, contained much that was apposite to Northern Ireland:

> What a minority can do depends on whether or not it is oppressed and exploited because of some minority trait or feature, is separated out by society for special inferior status, is denied equal treatment, opportunity and rights; whether or not it is at the bottom of the social ladder so that when it rises it shakes the whole structure; whether or not it is . . . part of the working class, and yet at the same time is denied the full benefits of membership in that class; . . . whether or not it realises that it has never made any gains except by fighting for them . . . whether or not it is developing a militant and radical consciousness that can motivate and spark sustained, audacious and independent struggle.[60]

Breitman went on to stress the possibility of independent action by Blacks in the United States giving a lead to other oppressed groups,

dividing the majority and 'making the system so inconvenient and expensive that white people will be forced to ask themselves whether continued discrimination is worthwhile'. The key concept, one which was particularly stressed by the American Trotskyists, was of *mobilising* oppressed groups as a means of radicalising society and developing revolutionary consciousness not only among such minority groups but also within the working class as a whole.

Farrell and his associates took over the Young Socialists when the NILP reorganised them following the expulsion of the Socialist Labour League. However, they found that there were people with whom they could work who would not join a group linked to the NILP, so they organised an umbrella group called the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA)[61] which embraced the members of the Young Socialists and a handful of individuals from the Liberal Party, the NDP and the RLP, and this became the main vehicle through which they worked. Farrell was later to claim:

> The people who were batoned in Derry on October 5th and who were involved in the subsequent formation of the PD were mainly members of the Young Socialist Alliance. They travelled to Derry together as the Young Socialist Alliance, which at that time was about 30 or 40 strong and consisted of students and recent graduates of Queen's and they were responsible for the subsequent protest in Belfast. So right from the start the Young Socialist Alliance was the core of the People's Democracy.[62]

This claim should be treated with caution. It is clear from its context that Farrell made it at a time when he was trying to remould the PD into something which more closely resembled the YSA. The reference to the alliance as a 'core' of the PD was seized on by Unionist critics as evidence of far-left manipulation. But the most decisive shift to the left in the PD came *after* the YSA had been disbanded following the Belfast–Derry march and was produced very largely by circumstances. For 'YSA core' one should probably read 'Michael Farrell'. His political skills, his determination and the force of his personality and intellect made him the *de facto* leader of the PD. The role of the YSA, in comparison, was much less important. Bernadette Devlin testified that Farrell had 'a tremendous impact on the PD by his consistent explanations of the

best method of attacking the evils of society'.[63] Kevin Boyle spoke of his 'range, his foresight, his capacity to anticipate results and to endure'.[64]

The YSA was not the only tendency or grouping within the early PD. There was also the RSSF, a British organisation set up in London in June 1968 in response to the May–June events in Paris. A group of QUB students went to London for the big Vietnam solidarity march of 27 October 1968; they visited the London School of Economics, which was occupied by students to provide a base to service the demonstration, and came in contact with the RSSF. On returning to Belfast they set up an RSSF group at Queen's. The RSSF was distinguished from the YSA by being younger and, as Farrell put it, 'even more ultra-left'. Only a small number of RSSF members took part in the early PD demonstrations and the group was criticised by PD leaders as 'armchair socialists' content to discuss revolutionary theory in the Students' Union coffee bar. The RSSF specialised in scandalising everyone else. Its news-sheet *Detonator* had headlines like 'Students Spit on Vick!' (a reference to the vice-chancellor) and 'Disembowel Enoch Powell!' This, of course, produced precisely the apoplectic rage among respectable citizens for which the federation had hoped, although behind its superficial irresponsibility the publication had serious points to make about academic freedom and student rights and conditions. But it did not succeed in getting these points across to its fellow students because its approach was so grossly ill-judged. The RSSF was not a serious threat to the stability of Northern Ireland.

Another tendency was the anarchists, which consisted of about two individuals whose contribution was to encourage the spontaneity and disorganised character of the early PD. They were less important than a fourth, more nebulous tendency around Kevin Boyle and Bernadette Devlin, who might be called, using Boyle's term, 'the innocents', meaning that they had no previously formed political commitment.

Boyle was a Newry Catholic who had studied law at Queen's and criminology at Cambridge. At Queen's he had come to know Farrell, Toman, McCann and some of the others, but he had not shared their interest in left-wing politics. He was a junior lecturer in law at Queen's when the Republican Club affair blew up. He and another lecturer had written a letter on the implications for civil

liberties, which was published in the press, earning them a mild rap over the knuckles. He had not been in Derry on 5 October but his shock at what had happened led him to become involved in the PD, a little against his better judgement, and to get himself elected on to the Faceless Committee. He had no doctrinaire beliefs and had an instinct for public relations and for keeping the PD together; this made him a good foil for Farrell. As Boyle described it:

> Much of the time Bernadette and I tried to hold back the left from galloping, because we thought that they would lose too many of the students who didn't know where they were going . . . A dynamic policy was injected from Michael Farrell and was moderated by us, by being explained. And that relationship with Farrell was one I kept for a long time.[65]

Bernadette Devlin's role in the early PD tends to be obscured by her later career. It was, of course, a remarkable one and it was remarkable not only for the string of accidents which led to her becoming the extreme left MP for a rural constituency but also for her personal integrity and toughness of character, which meant that she was not overwhelmed or absorbed by the system she had gone to Westminster to fight. She personified an important aspect of the early PD; like the other 'innocents', she was swept along by events and had to construct a rough-and-ready ideological framework as she went. Like many of her generation and background, she combined a deep antipathy for unionism with a distaste for traditional nationalism. Her biases were towards a non-denominational republicanism and she was more influenced than she realised by the anti-partitionist propaganda which was part of her young environment. Farrell, McCann and Toman provided a set of explanations for what was happening and they had the ability to formulate and argue for a strategy. Devlin and the others seized on their ideas as fitting the needs of the moment but in her case she made no effort to grasp the underlying philosophical and methodological positions on which they were based. She spouted Marxist phrases but she was never a Marxist.

Discussing these tendencies as if they were separate groups is useful in identifying their distinctive characteristics, but it is somewhat artificial. They generally agreed about what was to be done and the more abstract points of political theory were matters

for late-night discussion. An anarchist writer has provided what is probably the best description of how these left-wing influences worked:

> The chief architects of this politicising of the movement were Michael Farrell, Eamonn McCann and Cyril Toman, who were responsible for developing the lines of socialist thought à la Marx and Connolly, and John McGuffin who ensured that these lines should not be too narrowly drawn and that the libertarian idealism of the early PD should not be lost . . . Marx and Connolly were read and referred to, but not treated in the hushed reverence of holy icons . . . Even old 'Trotters' was spoken of with complete irreverence. Stalin occupied a place close to Sir Edward Carson, Sir James Craig, William of Orange and William Craig.[66]

All this was happening in a period when revolutionary student movements were appearing all over the world and an international network of revolutionary militants was exchanging ideas and information. It was natural for observers to see the PD as part of this movement. We have it on the authority of a writer in the prestigious French radical journal *Les Temps Modernes* that '*la PD d'alors ressemblait fort au Mouvement 22 Mars*'.[67] The 22 March Movement was a loose coalition of left-wing student groups which was at the centre of the events in Paris in May and June 1968. Like the PD, it was an alliance of Trotskyists, libertarians and independent leftists:

> The militants of the 22 March refused to be integrated into organisational structures, however informal or democratic. They wanted to exist only as an informal group, perpetually inventing forms of action . . . the group would meet only to decide on a course of action and only those in favour of these actions would attend. The actions were to be *exemplary*, that is, they were to have the character of political escalation designed to induce others to follow their example.[68]

The influence on the PD of revolutionary movements is evident but it is not difficult to account for. Unionists tended to suggest that it occurred because of some kind of conspiracy; such an assumption does not accord with the evidence. Belfast, after all, was one step beyond London, the farthest outreach of the revolutionary network. It was not until January 1969 that Tariq Ali

arrived in Belfast for a brief visit to speak at a debate at Queen's. He bestowed his apostolic blessing on the civil rights movement on behalf of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Che Guevara and James Connolly, but he did not offer any tactical or strategic advice. Of more practical help was the single member of the London Poster Workshop who arrived in Derry in August 1969 with equipment and expertise which she put to good effect.

The fact that in August 1969 barricades were thrown up in Derry and Belfast and were defended with petrol bombs can give a misleading impression. In Northern Ireland, as in Paris, barricades and petrol bombs were used to repulse a police incursion into a particular area. But in Northern Ireland the social composition of those behind the barricades and their historical sense of territoriality were quite different. In any case it was not the PD which put up the barricades and its function in the barricaded areas was not to defend them – there were other, more experienced hands. The PD's role was as propagandists: writers, illegal broadcasters and leaflet distributors. If some of the methods used in Paris were also used in Belfast and Derry the explanation is not difficult to find – the source of information was sitting in the corner of every living room in the Bogside and the Falls. Some kinds of technical information were not available over television and Eamonn McCann notes that the Bogsiders were indebted to the students of Paris for methods of countering the effects of CS gas. The information, he says, came via the pages of Tariq Ali's newspaper the *Red Mole*.[69] This was merely a special case of the role of the media in transmitting information about revolutionary movements elsewhere. The movements themselves did very little to influence events in Northern Ireland. The most authoritative work on British Trotskyism notes that 'the far left was as unprepared as any other section of the British political spectrum for the eruption of generalised political struggles in Northern Ireland in 1969'[70] – a verdict which is borne out by the evidence of two far left writers, Tariq Ali and Teresa Hayter.[71]

The strategic and tactical problems confronting the PD in the second half of 1969 are dealt with in the only substantial piece of documentary evidence about the organisation in this period: the interview which appeared in *New Left Review*, no. 55, May–June 1969. This was quoted extensively by Unionists who wanted to

present the PD as a ruthless revolutionary conspiracy. What the interview actually shows is the lack of coherence, realism, and above all unity, of the five participants. The interview took place in a hotel in Derry in the spring of 1969. It was conducted by Anthony Barnett of *New Left Review* and he stresses the difficulty he had in getting the PD members together for it. The published text does not make it clear that Bernadette Devlin was only there for part of the time and that people were constantly coming and going. The interview, he says, 'gives a sense of calm, strategic consideration which is due to good editing'.[72]

Barnett was struck by the fact that Farrell 'spoke in paragraphs', which made his contribution especially clear and authoritative. And it is Farrell's statements which require the closest scrutiny. Early in the interview he said:

> But the PD is not just part of the civil rights movement, it is a revolutionary assembly. Its formation was considerably influenced by the Sorbonne Assembly and by concepts of libertarianism as well as socialism. It has adopted a very democratic type of structure; there is no formal membership and all meetings are open. At the moment this structure is not working very satisfactorily, and I think it will be necessary . . . to find a way of introducing a little more co-ordination. I had hoped that the PD would realise the necessity of taking a stand on class issues and would therefore transform itself into a broadly socialist body . . . I no longer think that this will happen of its own accord. There have recently been some sharp disagreements within the PD and differences have arisen between socialists and an alliance of anarchists and right-wingers.[73]

Two Unionist critics of the PD, William Stratton Mills and Robin Bailie, quoted the first two sentences to prove that the PD was a revolutionary movement like that in Paris, but the full quote makes it clear that Farrell actually was critical of the Sorbonne aspects of the PD and had tolerated rather than encouraged them. He now wanted the PD to move towards a more formal type of structure and a politics which more closely resembled the old YSA. He proceeded to outline his strategic objectives. They had taken part in the civil rights movement in order to radicalise the Catholic working class and to radicalise the civil rights demands themselves (a clear reference to the strategy outlined in Breitman). They should now go on to 'complete the ideological development of the Catholic

working class' and to 'develop concrete agitational work over housing and jobs to show the class interests of both Catholics and Protestants'. This was why it was necessary for the PD to become 'an organisation capable of carrying out this agitational work'.[74]

Eamonn McCann took a starkly different approach; they had failed to get their view across that Catholics were being exploited because they were workers, not because of their religion and this was because they had failed to fight within the civil rights movement. They had been scared of frightening off their mass audience: 'We thought we had to keep these people, bring them along, educate and radicalise them. It was a lot of pompous nonsense and we failed absolutely to change the consciousness of people. The consciousness of the people who are fighting in the streets at the moment is sectarian and bigoted.'[75] McCann, to all intents and purposes, had broken with the very idea of a civil rights movement. As early as November 1968, speaking at the New University of Ulster in Coleraine, he had pointed out the 'inherent disadvantages' of civil rights as a 'central co-ordinating issue for a political movement'.[76] It served as a cloak for 'reactionary movements' like the Nationalist Party and pitched demands for reform at the lowest common denominator. To maintain unity, socialists had to 'suspend any demands which would alienate [those] who are willing to campaign for social justice in electoral arrangements and housing and job allocation but are totally opposed to any meaningful redistribution of wealth and income'.[77]

Farrell and Toman thought that McCann was too much influenced by conditions in Derry. While they accepted that there was a good deal of sectarianism among Catholics who had been mobilised by the civil rights movement, they claimed that the PD had, to a certain extent, got across a realisation of their common interests with Protestant workers. But, Farrell said, 'there is now a more radicalised Catholic working class whilst the Protestant proletariat is still as remote and inert as ever'. Toman went somewhat further by suggesting that 'in future we must use the enthusiasm of the Catholic workers to get across to the Protestant working class as well'.

Bernadette Devlin, who had just been elected to Westminster, defended herself against accusations of having accommodated to traditional nationalism and of having given a platform to Nation-

alist MPs. She pointed out that in her victory speech she had told her supporters that they were wrong to think that she could do anything for them in the House of Commons. She anticipated a conflict with the middle-class nationalists among her supporters:

> I have no doubt that within a year these people will do their best to destroy me and may possibly succeed. Within a year we will have sorted out the Catholics who voted for us on a purely Catholic basis and we will still have the support of the Protestants who supported us on a socialist basis, therefore we will have established the normal situation of the socialists supporting us and the non-socialists pulling out.[78]

Far from being a united revolutionary force with a coherent strategy, the PD and the other extreme left leaders were just beginning to face up to the implications of the situation which they had helped to bring about. They had become more acutely aware of the reality of a divided working class and of the serious danger posed by the alienation and hostility of the Protestant workers. They agreed that a bridge had to be thrown across the sectarian chasm. They agreed that this bridge had to be constructed of agitation on social and economic issues. They agreed that communication with Protestant workers would be impossible if they were tainted by traditional middle-class nationalism. They were agreed, therefore, that there had to be a struggle against that wing of the civil rights movement. But they were divided over tactics. Farrell and Toman considered that they should work within NICRA to move it towards taking up the kind of social and economic issues which might win over Protestant workers. McCann, supported by the anarchists in the PD, wanted to break completely with NICRA. He was going to build up the left in the Derry branch of the NILP and use that as a base from which to launch attacks on the Government, the Unionist Party, the Nationalist Party, the DCAC and the middle-class elements of NICRA. He did not publicly attack his former comrades in the PD but he blocked their attempts to set up a branch in Derry and he set up a Young Socialists branch which fulfilled the functions of PD branches elsewhere. Bernadette Devlin was going to use her position as an MP to promote left-wing causes on both sides of the Irish Sea. She drifted apart from Farrell and the others because they thought that she should make the effort to

seek advice from them, and she was alienated by their critical attitude and thought they should make the effort to come to her to give advice.

From the point of view of the rest of the civil rights movement, however, these tactical differences were of relatively minor significance. What all of the participants in the interview were agreed on was that they should go back to a more intensive and determined version of the oppositional politics which had characterised the Trotskyists in the IWG and the YSA. This meant launching a bitter, divisive struggle within and *against* the civil rights movement itself.

It was Eamonn McCann who made the running in developing the left-wing critique of the civil rights movement. Speaking to the Belfast Young Socialists in November 1968, he said: 'The struggle for civil rights has a clearly defined class content. Only workers have no local government vote. The upper classes of whatever religion do not suffer from bad housing, unemployment and low wages.' The aims of the civil rights movement, he claimed, could not be achieved 'without a change in the relationship between classes'. He rejected unity which involved subsuming different class interests under a slogan like 'one man, one vote', which served 'only to keep in check the demands and activities of those most denied social and civil rights'. He claimed that only an approach based on class demands could avoid sectarian conflict. The Protestants who had attacked the PD at Burntollet and in Derry 'are themselves deprived of the very things the marchers were demanding. Indeed I would argue that it is lack of privilege which underlies their viciousness'.[79] It was necessary for the civil rights movement to relate its activity to the 'day-to-day lives' of such workers. The PD argued along similar lines. The first issue of its paper *PD Voice*, published in June 1969, urged that civil rights activity be 'for demands and by methods which will unite the working people rather than divide them'. The PD's major emphasis, however, was on arguing that the civil rights movement had been mistaken in calling a truce in response to the concessions made by O'Neill and this it attributed to the influence of Green Tories within the movement. Its strategy was to push the movement to the left, attempting to open up class and political rifts within it in order to recompose it around a different leadership and strategy.

McCann was unwilling to wait for such an eventuality; by early

July 1969 he was prepared to make his differences with the civil rights movement public. He used the platform of a civil rights rally in Strabane in County Tyrone for an all-out attack. He claimed that the movement was 'making no meaningful efforts' to overcome religious differences and attacked Austin Currie's presence on the platform, criticising the anti-Unionist MPs at Stormont for accepting O'Neill's timetable for reform. Currie defended himself and his colleagues, and the chairman of the rally, Ivan Barr, dissociated the Strabane Civil Rights Committee from McCann's remarks. However, when Bernadette Devlin came to the microphone, they were subjected to an even fiercer attack. She said that she had never heard so many sectarian speeches from any platform. If the Nationalist Party was in charge at Stormont, 'the people standing here would not be the people of Strabane unemployed because they're Catholics, but the people of Strabane unemployed because they're Protestants'. If they were fighting for nothing more than equality for Catholics, the middle class would be equal and the working class would 'all be equal – at the bottom':

> I stand for honesty and this is what matters to me . . . I was elected . . . as a Unity candidate, but if you picked me for the same kind of unity as that Austin Currie stands for then I can't serve you and the sooner you get rid of me the better. I stand for Eamonn McCann's unity and let there be no mistake about it.[80]

The PD commented on the furore created by the Strabane speeches in a leaflet. It pointed out that the differences had existed for a long time and it refused to 'take sides between the personalities involved'. However, it endorsed the central critique made by McCann and Devlin:

> Those who put unity (in fact unity of all Catholics) before everything have tried to fix the civil rights demands at the lowest common denominator; the demands which pose the least threat to the status quo . . . Political differences within the movement have only been allowed to appear as a contrast between 'moderation' and 'militancy' . . . it is not as simple as that. Those who want to confine the civil rights demands to 'equal rights' for all ignore the fact that fair allocation of jobs and houses within the existing system . . . would simply mean equal shares of unemployment and bad housing for all.[81]

The leaflet proposed a programme of building government-owned factories, taking over factories closed by their owners, and control of profits and the export of capital – 'measures which cut sharply across the sanctity of private profit so dear to some civil rights supporters'. It attributed the reluctance of the civil rights movement to take up this programme to its desire for a united front between 'Green Tory slum landlord and the homeless and unemployed', which had resulted in a failure to attract Protestant support.

What was significant about this analysis was not that the PD had 'moved to the left' but that it had rejected the whole strategy of building a movement focused on the issue of discrimination against Catholics. By the end of 1969 it had reorganised itself into a small, quasi-Leninist revolutionary group with a card-carrying membership and formal organisational structures. But unlike McCann, whose break with the civil rights strategy led to a disengagement from the movement, the PD continued to work within NICRA and to try to influence it from outside. Only in early 1970, when it had completed its own transformation, did it turn outwards to direct socialist agitation. The activities of the PD helped to crystallise and to accelerate existing differences within the civil rights movement. But these divisions were not created by the PD, however much that organisation may have exacerbated them. The PD and its allies on the left had put their fingers on an important contradiction in the movement's perspectives. The mobilisation of Catholics was not leading to the emergence of a non-sectarian mass movement seeking advances for all the underprivileged in Northern Ireland; nor was it forcing reform from above through intervention by Westminster. As the events of August 1969 showed, it was leading to a re-emergence of the old animosities and the old violence. It was this which tore the civil rights movement apart.

The course of events from August 1969 has been recorded in detail in many histories of the Troubles and a recapitulation would be tedious and repetitive. There is still a gap in the literature, since no objective account has been given of the internal struggles in the civil rights movement. To have included this aspect in this book would, however, have required a major expansion in size and more time in order to elucidate all the complexities. So it will not be attempted, and we will leave the civil rights movement on the brink

of its own internal crisis and caught up in the larger crisis which was sweeping away much of the superstructure of Northern Ireland. The government and parliament at Stormont, after ruling Northern Ireland for fifty years, proved incapable of withstanding the challenge of a movement which had never imagined the consequences of its actions.