

# Politics in the Streets

The origins of the  
civil rights movement  
in Northern Ireland

by  
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## THE NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIL RIGHTS ASSOCIATION

To Derry we went on October the fifth,  
 to march for our rights, but oh what a myth!  
 They beat us with batons, they beat us with fists,  
 they sprayed us all over with water.

*from 'October the Fifth' (civil rights song)*

NICRA was the best-known civil rights group but it was neither the first nor the only organisation to agitate on civil rights demands. It was, however, the most important group within the civil rights movement and it initiated the events that led to the creation of a mass movement. For a time it provided an umbrella beneath which the other organisations came together. It began life as a counterpart to the NCCL, but even in this it was not original; in 1962 a Northern Ireland Council for Civil Liberties (NICCL) was set up. In June 1962 the NCCL had adopted a resolution from the Connolly Association calling for an inquiry into civil liberties in Northern Ireland; the NICCL seems to have been set up in response and as its first action, in July, it held a meeting to prepare a memorandum on civil rights to present to Mr Justice Bose of the International Commission of Jurists, who was visiting Belfast.

Martin Ennals of the NCCL visited Northern Ireland in September 1962 to investigate the situation but he was rebuffed by the Nationalist leader, Eddie McAteer, who told journalists that an inquiry at this stage would be inadvisable. This was a considerable about-turn; in March a delegation of Nationalist MPs and councillors had met Home Secretary Rab Butler to present a dossier of complaints about discrimination. But now McAteer said that 'no matter what truths might be revealed by such an investigation they could only be interpreted as weapons of war at this stage'. He was anxious, he said, to create the best possible climate for the Orange-Green talks. Following the visit, Sean Caughey, secretary of the NICCL, issued a statement which said that his council had told

Ennals that an impartial inquiry by an independent body in Britain could do much to redress the grievances of the minority. It said that the Special Powers Act was preventing British standards of justice from prevailing in Northern Ireland, and went on:

The mass disfranchisement of thousands of citizens in local government, the disgraceful manipulation of constituency boundaries, the enforced political tests for government jobs and legislation, such as the Flags and Emblems Act, were some of the shackles on individual freedom which would never be tolerated in England. Yet the British Government was responsible under Clause 75 of the Government of Ireland Act for everything that goes on in Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

Caughey's statement paralleled the ideas about 'British standards of justice' and the responsibility of the British government under the Government of Ireland Act which were later put forward by the CSJ and the CDU, but in Caughey's case they were able to coexist with a strong commitment to republicanism. Shortly afterwards the NICCL disappeared from public view and Caughey resurfaced as secretary of the (republican) Political Prisoners Release Committee. He was an example of the contradictory crosscurrents of nationalist and republican politics in this period. Although in 1962 he had appealed to the Government of Ireland Act, in 1963 he described it as a 'constitution of bondage'. In July 1964 he was fined for singing the Irish national anthem, 'A Soldier's Song' (in Irish) at a republican rally in Ballycastle, County Antrim. In 1965 he resigned from Sinn Féin, of which he had been a vice-president, because of its refusal to recognise the legitimacy of both governments in Ireland. In the early 1970s he was editor of the Provisional republican newspaper in the north, *Republican News*.

Following the winding up of the Political Prisoners Release Committee, Caughey became secretary of a small group called Irish Union, which, in its personnel, provided a link between the NICCL and the later Wolfe Tone Societies and NICRA. The chairman was Jack Bennett, a former member of the CPNI; he came from a Protestant background and had led a campaign in the late 1950s to get the CPNI to return to the pro-republican line of the Irish Communists in the 1930s. Another prominent member was Fred Heatley who, like Bennett, was a member of the Belfast Wolfe Tone Society and later of NICRA.

NICRA itself originated at a conference of the Wolfe Tone Societies held in Maghera, County Derry, on the weekend of 13–14 August 1966. The societies had been created in 1964 out of the committees which were set up to organise the 1963 commemorations of the bicentenary of the birth of Wolfe Tone, the leader of the United Irishmen and martyr of the 1798 Rising. Their 'primary objective was a united, independent and democratic Irish Republic in accordance with the principles of the 1916 Proclamation and the Democratic Programme of the First Dáil'. Fred Heatley described them as 'an autonomous adjunct of the Republican Movement', and Roy Johnston called them 'a Fabian Society to the Republican Movement'.

The intellectual leaders of the Wolfe Tone Societies were two Dublin academics, Roy Johnston and Anthony Coughlan. Johnston had been a founder member of the Irish Workers' League (the Communist Party in the Irish Republic), and both were involved with the Connolly Association during periods spent in England. Johnston was important as a systematic thinker who put together a package of ideas on the links between Marxist and republican politics. He had the distinction of being viewed with deep suspicion by Seán Mac Stíofáin and William Craig, who both saw him as being responsible for leading the republican movement in a Communist direction. It is clear, however, from examining some of his writings, that by the mid-1960s his nationalism was far stronger than his Marxism. In an article published in 1966 Johnston identified the failure of Irish governments in the 1920s and 1930s as one of not having acted to 'assume full control over the reinvestment of the economic surplus'. The article advocated a policy of economic autarchy, with the exclusion of foreign investment and legislation to ensure that 'gombeen capital' was invested in Ireland. The state 'could have developed along managed capitalist lines, such as a small nation occasionally can do, for example, as Norway'.<sup>2</sup> In 1968 he advocated a 'national revolutionary programme' which would seek to unite 'workers in industries threatened by "monopolistic rationalisation"', small farmers, emigrants and 'technically qualified intellectuals'. This programme would have 'social objectives appropriate to the contemporary situation, and quite distinct from the classical European path of nation-building. This programme may be successful in helping a small nation to

emerge from the grip of imperialism even though under considerable economic domination'.<sup>3</sup>

Johnston's Communism, therefore, had been transmuted into a nationalism which emphasised economic independence, state planning and the unity of a wide range of social groups in the tasks of nation-building. When Johnston joined the republican movement in 1965, at the invitation of Cathal Goulding, IRA chief of staff, he was probably some distance to the right of some existing members of the movement and he was responsible not so much for leading the movement to the left as for crystallising a more coherent political strategy. Through the Wolfe Tone Societies, Johnston and Coughlan initiated projects such as a Co-operative Development Trust which assisted in the creation of co-operative enterprises along the lines of those started by Father James McDyer of Glencolumbcille in County Donegal. They also agitated against the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement of 1965 and argued for a strategy of building republican support through involvement in agitation on social and economic grievances, as well as by a principled stand for a united and independent Ireland.

The republicans were active in influencing the direction taken by NICRA as well as in its creation. Goulding himself was present at the Wolfe Tone Societies meeting in Maghera in 1966. To understand the significance of their involvement, however, and the direction in which republican influence took the civil rights movement, it is necessary to examine carefully the political strategy of the republicans in the mid-1960s. The abandonment of the 1956-62 IRA military campaign was highly ambiguous and from outward appearances it was possible to interpret republican actions as either preparation for a renewed onslaught or as a delicate operation to keep the movement together while its direction was fundamentally changed. It is clear, however, that important innovations were being made in republican political activity. A document taken by the Garda Síochána (the Irish police force) from a leading republican, Sean Garland, in May 1966, and later published as an appendix to the Scarman Report,<sup>4</sup> contained a good deal of evidence of plans for intensive military training, but it also outlined some of the new political initiatives being taken by the movement. It began by stating the need for an organisational form which could attract trade-unionists and for a 'radical Social and

Economic programme'. Committees should be created to deal with such issues as housing and co-operatives, which would work with other radical groups and with individual members of the Irish Labour Party and trade-unionists.

There would have to be extensive education within the movement: here the document indicated that social and economic agitation would be given a much higher priority than purely military activity:

The present form of recruit training will be changed. This change will replace the emphasis now placed on arms and battle tactics to a secondary position and be replaced by an emphasis on Social and Economic objectives . . . A recruit . . . finds that there is a lot of unromantic and possibly boring work to be done before he gets a chance to use his military training. This accounts for the high turnover in membership . . . the recruit having seen emphasis laid on military activity is not prepared for the political activity which must come before it.<sup>5</sup>

The document proposed that the basic unit of the movement should be the local *cumann* (branch), with factory-based *cumainn* wherever possible. These should have specialised sections that would agitate on different issues and among different sections of the population. Elections were to be contested up to the level of Dáil Éireann when the movement had built up sufficient support. There was a quixotic suggestion that elected representatives north and south should meet to set up an alternative national parliament which would proceed to 'legislate' for the whole country. This, it was suggested, could lead to a situation of 'dual power', which might come to a head over the 'nationalisation' of some foreign-owned factory which would be 'occupied' on behalf of the Irish nation.

In June 1968 William Craig read out in Stormont lengthy extracts from a document published in the secret IRA journal *An tÓglach* (the volunteer). This contained several passages which gave credence to the idea that the nature of the IRA and its aims were unchanged:

To re-unify our country. To force the withdrawal of the British Army of Occupation. To abolish the existing Governments of our country, North and South, and replace them with a true Democratic

Republican Government owing but one allegiance to the Irish people.

A commitment to armed force was stated unambiguously:

For mark this well: our enemies will never concede or surrender their Power, Position or Privileges to anything but armed men who are determined, committed and trained in every field of Revolution.

The main thrust of the document, however, was to point out the lessons drawn by the leadership from the failure of the 1956–62 campaign:

- 1 The fact that the people saw no connection between the fight in the North and the idea of improving the Irish social conditions, etc.
- 2 A lack of resources . . . money and the right type of weapons.
- 3 The lack of an efficient publicity and propaganda machine.
- 4 A dwindling of public support both North and South making it virtually impossible for men to operate on Guerrilla lines – one of the basic ingredients for a successful guerrilla campaign is the support of wide sections of the people. This comes only from an awareness and understanding of the reasons and nature of the struggle.

It was not enough to have modern weapons and ‘the best of young Irishmen’ if the people did not understand the nature of the freedom for which they were fighting and that

this freedom we talk about is worthy of their support because it is for them we fight; it is for the establishment of a social system that is going to provide them with the opportunity and the means to develop all that is best in them and the Nation.

Propaganda by itself was insufficient; they must involve themselves in social agitation and make it known that the republicans were involved:

For instance in one area recently there has been a series of protests and demonstrations regarding poor and inadequate housing conditions, the majority of the members of the committees which were responsible for organising the protests are members of the IRA. They are known publicly as such. Further, an Army section actually helped the occupants of houses threatened with eviction to barricade their homes, and actually stayed with the family for a week to help them resist eviction if need arose.<sup>6</sup>

These documents demonstrate a commitment to developing broadly based, open political agitation, but they contain little about a civil rights strategy in the north; such a strategy could be deduced from the analysis which they contain, but the documents give no indication that it had been proposed in any detail.

The Wolfe Tone Societies, as the section of the republican movement most directly involved in creating NICRA, had the most thoroughly worked-out civil rights strategy. In August 1966 their bulletin *Tuairisc* (information) published a long analysis of the political situation facing Irish republicans. The civil rights initiative was put in the context of a changed situation brought about by the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement and the moves to join the EEC. These were seen as products of a new strategy on the part of Britain to ensure its continued domination of Ireland:

Britain now hopes to ensnare Lemass back into the United Kingdom. The Free Trade Agreement will do the trick . . . a situation in which the old-fashioned Unionist intransigence which served Britain so well in the past will also be outdated and no longer so convenient to imperialism.

The contacts between the Lemass and O'Neill governments were seen as having been brought about by pressure from Britain, and as a result 'O'Neill has got his orders to play down discrimination'.

A liberalisation of the north, particularly in its treatment of Catholics, was a prerequisite for these new methods of domination, which would involve the economic integration of north and south. Concessions from the Unionists were necessary to enable Lemass to sell the new arrangements to public opinion in the south. But this strategy might not work out as the British government hoped; the resultant 'unfreezing [could] release the political energies of the people', and it could lead to a situation in which Protestant workers were weaned away from Orangeism and united with their Catholic fellow workers in the Labour movement:

How can Unionism possibly survive when Protestant and Catholic are no longer at each other's throats, when discrimination has been dealt a body-blow? . . . This is the most progressive outcome to the present situation . . . the destruction of the machinery of discrimination . . . the unfreezing of bigotry . . . the achievement of the utmost degree of civil liberties possible, freedom of political action,

an end to the bitterness of social life and the divisions among the people fostered by the Unionists . . . They would permanently weaken the basis of Unionism, and towards these objectives the energies of the progressive people in the North should be bent in the coming months.

This would not occur automatically. The Unionist government would try to make the minimum concessions and strong pressure would have to be put on it:

*There can be no doubt that the policy of Republicans must be to ensure that everything is done to make this demand more strong, vigorously organised, widespread, well-expressed and heard not only in the North but in Britain and throughout the world. Force O'Neill to CONCEDE MORE THAN HE WANTS TO OR THAN HE THINKS HE CAN DARE GIVE without risking overthrow by the more reactionary elements among the Unionists. Demand more than may be demanded by the compromising elements that exist among the Catholic leadership. Seek to associate as wide a section of the community as possible with these demands, in particular the well-intentioned people in the Protestant population and the trade union movement.*

Civil rights, electoral reform, an end to gerrymandering and to discrimination in housing, jobs and appointments, the legal banning of incitement to religious discrimination. These are the essential demands of the present time.

The article went on to disavow the use of violent methods:

Above all, actions must be avoided which would serve to solidify the disintegrating Unionist ranks – all irresponsible adventures, anything which could be construed as provocation. There may well be people who think, for example, that it may be a good thing to throw a bomb at some orange hall, because Orangemen have thrown bombs at Catholic halls. But this would undoubtedly be playing into the hands of the enemy at the present time. Let us choose our own battlegrounds and not be provoked. At the present time the strength of the Catholic and nationalist forces in the North lies in their political discipline and restraint. Let the Unionists expose themselves and rend one another asunder. Why should we join in and help them to unite against us?

Another document, *Ireland Today*, published by the Republican Education Department in 1969 when the civil rights movement

was already an established fact, gives further evidence on republican strategy:

The achievement of democracy and civil rights will make the way open for linking of the economic demands to the national question. Those who see the former as an end in itself . . . insofar as they comprise the present leadership of the NICRA . . . may be expected to lose interest as rights are gained. They must then be replaced by more consistent people.

It was necessary to work for the 'maximum co-ordination of efforts between the principled radical elements' and to win support from the NILP and the trade unions. It was also

essential that the civil rights movement include all elements that are deprived, not just republicans, and that unity in action within the civil rights movement be developed towards unity of political objectives to be won, and that ultimately (but not necessarily immediately) the political objective agreed by the organised radical groups be seen within the framework of a movement towards the achievement of a 32-county democratic republic.<sup>7</sup>

The republicans, in other words, were keen to push the civil rights agitation further and to use it to build a radical coalition which would set its sights, eventually, on a united Ireland. But it should be noted that this document envisaged a definite stage of development in which Northern Ireland would be significantly changed as a result of success in achieving the reforms being demanded by the civil rights movement. A further stage of more radical agitation, including the objective of a united Ireland, would follow. It is unclear how quickly this stage would follow the preceding one, but clearly this more radical phase was predicated on a successful achievement of the limited demands of the civil rights movement.

Another Republican Education Department document, published in 1970, offers further clarification. A section, which the editor notes was originally written in 1967, discusses 'Tactical Objectives' in Northern Ireland:

The major obstacle to the development of radical national ideas in the six counties is the lack of any form of communication between the Movement and the people. There is an extreme need for a paper which would inform the general public of the stand point of the

Movement. The existence of a ban on the legality of the Movement makes the position even more difficult in that it is practically impossible to even get a hall in some areas in which to hold a meeting. Both these facts point to the high priority of the struggle for civil liberties. In taking this up, however, it is necessary to realise that non-Republican people in the North are not disposed to agitate to get full civil rights for Republicans; they have to be involved in their own interests. This means that the civil rights movement in the North will have to involve Catholics on the issue of the local government election register which is weighted against them by property qualifications.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, the republicans saw the civil rights movement, at least in part, as a means of achieving the legalisation of republican political activity. Once this had been achieved they could campaign more openly for a united Ireland on the basis of uniting Catholic and Protestant workers, small farmers and the lower rungs of the business community for an independent, democratic, united and self-sufficient Irish Republic. Military action, although retained as an option for the future, did not figure as part of this strategy. Exactly when, where, how and if it would be resurrected was extremely vague. It is clear, however, that it was not regarded as a useful adjunct to the civil rights agitation. For all practical purposes the republican leadership saw its movement as being in a phase of activity which would concentrate on non-violent, political agitation.

The initiative of setting up NICRA was very much that of Johnston, Coughlan and the Dublin Wolfe Tone Society. The Belfast Wolfe Tone Society 'had always maintained a sturdy independence, but somehow lacked the interconnection necessary to become an effective ideas forum. Contact with the Belfast Republican and Labour Movements was tenuous, there was no link with Queen's at such a level as to influence student ideas'.<sup>9</sup> Among the people most prominent in Belfast were: Jack Bennett; Fred Heatley; Liam Burke, a veteran Belfast republican and adjutant general of the IRA from 1942 to 1943; Alec Foster, a former headmaster of the Royal Belfast Academical Institution and a rugby international; and Frank Gogarty, a Belfast dentist who was a chairman of NICRA in later years.

One of the achievements of the Belfast Wolfe Tone Society was

the publication in 1967 of a pamphlet by Fred Heatley on Henry Joy McCracken, a Protestant and a hero of the United Irishmen and the 1798 rebellion in the north. This had prompted the Ulster Museum to put on an exhibition about McCracken and BBC Northern Ireland and Ulster Television to feature the bicentenary of his birth. The following year the Belfast society promoted the commemoration of another Irish patriot, James Connolly. A meeting in February 1968 brought together representatives of the Wolfe Tone Society, the Communist Youth League, the CPNI, the QUB Republican Club, the Republican Clubs, the NDP and Dúchas, Council of Irish Tradition. A series of lectures was arranged, as well as a *céilí* and film show. On 9 June there was a parade down the Falls Road to the house in which Connolly had lived while he was in Belfast. There a commemorative plaque was unveiled by Connolly's son, Roddy Connolly. The event was marred, however, by the refusal of the Young Socialists to march behind the Irish tricolour, which they described as a 'bourgeois flag'. It had been included in the first place on the insistence of the republicans, who refused to march without it. The following weekend a similar parade in Derry was called off when its route through the city centre was banned; an alternative route through a Catholic area was not acceptable. In June 1969 a proposed Connolly commemoration parade through Belfast city centre was bitterly opposed by loyalists. John McKeague of the Shankill Defence Association forecast that thousands of loyalists would gather in Royal Avenue to prevent it marching. The police restricted the parade to the Falls area and the organising committee then called it off so as to avoid compromising the principle of working-class unity. However, four members of the organising committee tried to hold a silent protest march over the proscribed route but were chased by loyalists.

The events surrounding the Connolly commemorations were an important indicator of the difficulty of reconciling Ulster Protestants to nationalist pageantry, no matter how much it was stressed that the traditions being commemorated included the Protestants. Since most of those involved in organising these commemorations were also involved in NICRA, and both were initiated by the Wolfe Tone Societies, the events illustrate how deep-rooted was their belief that it was possible to bring about unity between workers in

both communities in Northern Ireland, provided the right political formula could be found.

It was the Dublin Wolfe Tone Society which suggested a civil rights campaign. Roy Johnston recalled: 'The August 1966 Maghera conference of the Wolfe Tone Societies . . . discussed a memorandum on civil rights prepared by the Dublin Society . . . with some of the Republican leadership present, convincing the latter that this constituted a valid way forward.'<sup>10</sup> The meeting was attended by representatives of Wolfe Tone Societies in Dublin, Cork, Belfast, Derry and County Tyrone. The first political business was to denounce the Unionist Party, following a UVF attack in Malvern Street in Belfast, which, they said, had shown the 'rapid moral disintegration of Unionist ideology'. In something of an afterthought the *Irish News* of 15 August 1966 recorded that 'a discussion took place on the desirability of holding a convention on civil rights for the purpose of drawing up a civil rights charter'. According to Fred Heatley, a letter was read from the Dublin Wolfe Tone Society which outlined the proposed civil rights strategy.<sup>11</sup> It was a long document which took about forty minutes to read and it was not greeted with warm enthusiasm. Michael Dolley and Jack Bennett were severely critical; Fred Heatley and Billy McMillen were doubtful about the emphasis given to the trade-union movement – McMillen pointed out the vast difference between trade unions in the north and in the south. Cathal Goulding was generally in favour but agreed that some of the phraseology could be altered. However, the broad strategy was accepted and the Belfast Wolfe Tone Society began discussions on the proposal with other interested people.<sup>12</sup>

After these discussions it was decided to drop the Wolfe Tone Societies tag, and an ad hoc body was formed which organised a seminar on civil rights on 28 November 1966 in Belfast. The main speakers were the president of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement, Kadar Asmal, who was a South African-born lecturer in law at Trinity College Dublin, and Ciarán Mac an Áilí, a Derry-born Dublin solicitor who was a member of the International Federation of Jurists and president of the Irish Pacifist Association. It was agreed that another meeting should be called to launch a civil rights body and this took place on 29 January 1967. Tony Smythe and James Shepherd from the NCCL in London were

present and there were over one hundred delegates from a variety of organisations, including all the Northern Ireland political parties. However, Senator Nelson Elder of the Unionist Party walked out after an argument over capital punishment for the murder of policemen. A thirteen-person steering committee was elected to draw up a draft constitution and a programme of activities. Its membership was drawn from the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers Technical and Administrative Staffs Section (AUEW TASS), the CSJ, the CPNI, the Belfast Wolfe Tone Society, the Belfast trades council, the Republican Clubs, the Ulster Liberal Party, the NDP, the RLP, the Ardoyne Tenants' Association and the NILP. The committee subsequently co-opted Robin Cole, who was one of the most liberal of the Young Unionists and chairman of the QUB Conservative and Unionist Association.

In February the committee issued a statement deploring Ian Paisley's campaign against the visit of the Church of England Bishop of Ripon. It convened another meeting on 9 April to present the draft constitution and this meeting officially brought NICRA into existence. The new constitution, which was based on that of the NCCL, emphasised the association's character as a body which would make representations on the broad issues of civil liberties and would also take up individual cases of discrimination and ill-treatment. The five objectives of the association were:

- 1 To defend the basic freedoms of all citizens.
- 2 To protect the rights of the individual.
- 3 To highlight all possible abuses of power.
- 4 To demand guarantees for freedom of speech, assembly and association.
- 5 To inform the public of their lawful rights.<sup>13</sup>

These objectives said nothing about concrete grievances over discrimination in housing, employment and the electoral franchise. They underline the character of NICRA at this stage as an organisation which, like the NCCL, was concerned with the defence of legal and constitutional rights and the grievances of individuals, not with militant protest.

This phase was to last a year and a half and it was a period of general ineffectuality. As Fred Heatley described it:

The first eighteen months was a time of frustration. William Craig, to whom most of our complaints were directed, usually delayed in replying. When he did he usually denied that the complaints were justified – even when a civil rights officer (myself) was physically thrown out of Hastings Street [RUC] Station! Yet we did detect an easing off in harassment of Republicans and of itinerants. But the most annoying aspect of the early period was the lack of real interest shown by our first council members – at times we couldn't muster up the required six members for a quorum at the monthly meetings.<sup>14</sup>

The work of documenting abuses, which had been begun by the CSJ, was continued and the association intervened on behalf of a group of travelling people who were camped on Belfast's Shore Road. But although in December a national opinion poll in Northern Ireland found that 43 per cent of those interviewed thought that there should be legislation to outlaw discrimination, NICRA seemed incapable of tapping the support of this large, sympathetic minority.

In February 1968 the first annual general meeting of the association saw some changes of officers and in the membership of the executive committee, but no change of direction nor any indication of a breakthrough. It was probably inevitable, therefore, that as one committee member, Ann Hope, put it:

In the spring of 1968 there was much rethinking within the CRA [Civil Rights Association] leadership; the tactics of Martin Luther King in America had been absorbed inasmuch that it was felt by some that only public marches could draw wide attention to what we were trying to achieve by normal democratic means. But there were members on the EC [executive committee] who didn't relish either the trouble this would create or were too constitutional in their thinking.<sup>15</sup>

To some extent NICRA had already become involved in public protest action. In March 1967 Craig had announced a ban on the forthcoming commemorations of the 1867 Fenian Rising and had proscribed the Republican Clubs. NICRA denounced these measures as a violation of the rights of freedom of speech, assembly and association and was represented at protest rallies over the Republican Clubs ban and the banning of the 1968 Easter Rising commemoration in Armagh. NICRA's official history records that the

association 'was slowly coming to realise that a ban on demonstrations was an effective Government weapon against political protest and that although letter writing to Stormont was a fine form of occupational therapy, it was unlikely to bring any worthwhile results'.<sup>16</sup>

By the summer of 1968, therefore, the leadership of NICRA was open to proposals for protest action. On 19 June, Austin Currie raised the question in Stormont of the allocation of a house in Caledon, outside Dungannon, to a nineteen-year-old unmarried Protestant woman, the secretary of a solicitor who was a Unionist parliamentary candidate. A Catholic family who had squatted in the house was evicted to make room for her, and a number of other Catholic families in the area were also denied houses. Currie himself squatted in the house to draw attention to the case. Fred Heatley, on behalf of NICRA, addressed a protest meeting in Dungannon on Saturday 22 June. In July, NICRA's executive committee was meeting in Kevin Agnew's house in Maghera; Currie had phoned Fred Heatley and asked to be allowed to put an idea to the committee, and he was invited to address the meeting. He proposed a march from Coalisland to Dungannon, ending with a rally in the town's Market Square. The committee was at first divided over the proposal, with Betty Sinclair opposing the whole idea of protest marches, and a decision was deferred to a later meeting, which agreed to go ahead and fixed the date for 24 August. An important factor was the support given to the proposal from both the republicans and the CSJ, which as a Dungannon-based group was particularly important.

A statement issued prior to the march claimed that there was support from the Nationalist Party, the RLP, the NILP, the NDP, the CSJ, the Irish National Foresters, the GAA, the AOH, the Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC) and the Wolfe Tone Societies. The RUC initially agreed to the proposed route and to the meeting in Market Square. But Senator William Stewart, the Unionist chairman of Dungannon Urban District Council, intervened and forecast that there would be trouble if the march was allowed to proceed to the centre of Dungannon. John Taylor, the Unionist MP for South Tyrone, also made representations and the Ulster Protestant Volunteers, a body led by Ian Paisley, announced a meeting for the same time and place as the civil rights rally. The police

responded by re-routing the march to the Catholic sector of the town but NICRA refused to accept this, since it would have implied that theirs was a sectarian march.

Some two thousand people assembled in Coalisland and proceeded, accompanied by nationalist bands, to Thomas Street in Dungannon. There they were met by a cordon of police, standing in front of a barrier of police tenders. A group of about 1,500 loyalists, including Ian Paisley and Unionist members of Dungannon council, were gathered behind the police tenders, with a gap of about fifty yards separating the rival groups. A platform and public address system were set up by NICRA stewards in front of the police cordon. But before the meeting could commence a group of young demonstrators attempted to break through the police lines to get at the counter-demonstrators, who were jeering, shouting slogans and singing party songs. This onslaught was driven back by a police baton charge in the course of which four youths were slightly hurt. But appeals from the platform succeeded in dissuading the civil rights supporters from making any further attempt to breach the police cordon, and the trouble was contained.

The meeting was chaired by Betty Sinclair, who reminded the supporters that their objective was to demonstrate for civil rights, for jobs and for houses: 'We are asking you to listen to the speakers, and what we have done today will go down in history and in this way we will be more effective in showing the world that we are a peaceful people asking for our civil rights in an orderly manner.'<sup>17</sup>

Austin Currie condemned the police action in blocking their route, and said that NICRA would be organising more parades, which would not stop at Thomas Street: 'O'Neill and those Orange bigots behind him [will] realise once and for all that we are on our way forward. We will keep going with disobedience and anything else that is necessary to achieve our aims.'<sup>18</sup> He said that looking out from the platform towards the town reminded him of the late President Kennedy looking out over the Berlin Wall. The regimes in Czechoslovakia and other Eastern European countries were no different from the regime in Dungannon.

Gerry Fitt reiterated the point about Czechoslovakia (the Soviet invasion had occurred a few days before). What had happened in Dungannon, he suggested, was no different from what had happened in Prague: 'We ordinary people have been walked over by a

militant force.' They were there to demand fair play in the allocation of housing and jobs; he was not the enemy of the counter-demonstrators and NICRA had people of all religions demanding the same social justice. He promised to draw the attention of the government at Westminster to what was happening in Dungannon. He ended by saying that the lights would not go out until they had achieved civil rights and a thirty-two-county republic.

Jack Hassard, an NILP member of Dungannon Council, condemned the ban on the Market Square meeting, which had only been notified by the police at twelve o'clock the previous night. Pleas for housing made at council meetings, he said, had fallen on deaf ears. Many Protestants, like himself, were in favour of civil rights. Joe McCann, secretary of the NDP, said that the meeting bore witness to the failure of the Unionist Party to keep faith with the British traditions it professed to admire. In return for the money received by Northern Ireland from the British taxpayer, the Unionists had turned the British flag into a party-political symbol and had made a mockery of the British tradition of social justice. Other speakers were Erskine Holmes of the NILP and T. O'Connor of the Republican Clubs. After the meeting was over and the main demonstration had dispersed, some civil rights supporters succeeded in infiltrating to Market Square by a roundabout route. There they staged a sit-down and were batoned by the police.

In a press statement issued afterwards, NICRA said that the events in Dungannon had proved the need for a civil rights body in Northern Ireland. It condemned the police for failing to control the counter-demonstration and for not ensuring the right of the NICRA marchers to demonstrate peacefully. It praised the stewards who had kept order on its side. However, its supporters were not unanimous; a statement issued by the Belfast Young Socialists condemned the police and also accused NICRA of selling its principles by not leading the demonstration into Dungannon.

The Cameron Report's judgement on the march was that

it is significant that this first civil rights march, unaccompanied by any provocative display of weapons, banners or symbol was carried out without any breach of the peace. It attracted considerable public attention and was also regarded as proof in certain circles that many elements in the society of Northern Ireland whose ultimate political

purposes differed in very marked degree could co-operate in peaceful and lawful demonstration in favour of certain common and limited objectives.<sup>19</sup>

As we have seen, there were in fact two minor clashes with the police and the presence of bands playing nationalist tunes could be interpreted as provocative. The organisers kept control of some of their supporters only with great difficulty. Bernadette Devlin recalled that in its early stages 'the whole thing had a sort of good-natured holiday atmosphere', but when they realised that the police had re-routed the march

the whole atmosphere changed. Most of the people . . . hadn't really thought about civil rights; they had come, with a sort of friendly curiosity, to hear something. I do believe that then for the first time it dawned on people that Northern Ireland was a series of Catholic and Protestant ghettos. The meeting got very angry, though it was still a passive anger, with very little pushing and shoving of the police. Some men were calling out that we should force our way through, and the lines of the march were breaking formation and crowding the police.<sup>20</sup>

The trouble was kept to a minimum as much because of the novelty of the situation as anything else. No significant section of the marchers had formed a determination to defy the police, and the RUC, for its part, seems to have behaved in a generally good-natured way. It was clear, however, that such restraint could not survive a serious clash between civil rights demonstrators and the police or counter-demonstrators.

Shortly after the Coalisland–Dungannon march, NICRA was approached by the DHAC with a proposal for a march in Derry. The DHAC was a coalition of radicals from the local Republican Clubs and the left wing of the NILP; they had organised a series of imaginative protests in Derry to draw attention to bad conditions and discrimination in housing. Since NICRA had already targeted Derry for a march, there was ready agreement and a delegation from NICRA travelled to Derry to discuss arrangements with the DHAC. According to Eamonn McCann, who was a prominent member of the DHAC:

It was immediately clear that the CRA knew nothing of Derry. We had resolved to press for a route which would take the march into

the walled centre of the city and expected opposition from the moderate members of the CRA. But there was none. No one in the CRA delegation understood that it was unheard of for a non-Unionist procession to enter that area.<sup>21</sup>

This seems highly unlikely. There had been violent clashes between police and nationalist demonstrators in the mid-1950s in Derry city centre and only the previous June the Connolly commemoration had been banned. A more credible explanation is that the NICRA leadership was unwilling to accept that its marches should be treated as sectarian and provocative. Adoption of this route, however, did not necessarily mean that the association would defy the police in order to march on it. NICRA probably meant to register its protest but to stop short of an actual confrontation, as it had done in Dungannon. This interpretation is supported by a letter written by McCann, before the march, to Michael Farrell, leader of the Young Socialists in Belfast, in which he gave an account of the meeting between NICRA and the DHAC:

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 that 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. The DHAC and the Republican Clubs will push for that but I can't see anyone else.<sup>22</sup>

In the event, the more fateful decision was not the proposal of a route within the walled city but making the starting point for the march the railway station on the Protestant Waterside. This meant that the entire route was prohibited and there was little scope, as in Dungannon, to march peacefully to a token, non-violent confrontation with the police. The ban was imposed by Minister of Home Affairs William Craig after the Apprentice Boys of Derry had announced a procession at the same time and over the same route as the civil rights march. They claimed that this was an annual event and it does seem that the date coincided with a regular initiation ceremony for new members of their organisation. But the ceremony was usually held in the morning and would not, therefore, have clashed with the NICRA demonstration. Fergus Pyle of the *Irish Times* was at the station when the expected delegation from Liverpool arrived on the morning train. He was told that they were

unaware of any plan to switch the ceremony to the afternoon and that arrangements were the same as in previous years.<sup>23</sup>

After Craig had announced on Thursday 3 October that the Apprentice Boys march was to be banned and that the civil rights march would not be permitted to take place within the walled city or in the Waterside ward, an emergency meeting of the NICRA executive committee was called. The committee was divided over whether or not to proceed with the march but it agreed to send a delegation to Derry to consult the local people; this meeting began on the evening of Friday 4 October and went on until 1 a.m. on Saturday. Conn McCluskey of the CSJ held out strongly against defying the ban but the DHAC representatives made it clear that they would go ahead in any case, and this seems to have swayed the NICRA members. Eddie McAteer made a public call for the march to be postponed, but Fred Heatley, John McAnerney and Betty Sinclair visited him at home to persuade him not to pull out. He told them that he did not like the company they were keeping – presumably the DHAC – but he did participate.

The parade formed up outside Waterside railway station, on the opposite bank of the River Foyle to the city centre. There was police intervention almost immediately; an NILP loudspeaker van, which was making announcements, was stopped and its three occupants were taken to Victoria RUC station where, one of them later told the *Belfast Telegraph*, they were charged with incitement to defy the ban on the march. At the head of the parade was a blue banner bearing the words 'Civil Rights March', which had been carried on the Coalisland–Dungannon march. In the front rank were Ivan Cooper, Eddie McAteer and Gerry Fitt. Behind them were Austin Currie, Proinsias Mac Aonghusa and David Green of Citizens for PR in the Irish Republic,<sup>24</sup> and three Westminster Labour MPs, Russell Kerr, Ann Kerr and John Ryan, who had travelled directly from the Labour Party conference with Gerry Fitt. Placards proclaimed such slogans as 'Police State Here', 'The Proper Place for Politics is in the Streets', 'Class not Creed', and 'A *Dhia Saor Éire*' (God free Ireland). The turnout was much smaller than for the Coalisland–Dungannon march, at about four hundred. County Inspector William Meharg of the RUC warned the crowd that no march was permitted in 'this part of the Maiden City'. He advised them, for their own safety and that of the women

and children present, to leave the area. He later reiterated the warning and told them that the police would have to see that the prohibition order was enforced. Ivan Cooper asked the crowd to behave responsibly and stressed that NICRA did not want any violence or bloodshed.

The original route would have taken the march up the steep slopes of Simpson's Brae and Distillery Brae to Spencer Road and then to the upper tier of Craigavon Bridge. The police had blocked this way and the marchers set off along Duke Street, trying to find another way onto the bridge. The police hastily threw a cordon across the end of Duke Street and here the first clashes occurred. Fred Heatley believes that he was the first marcher to be arrested. He had arrived late with other NICRA leaders from Belfast, and seeing the march moving off, he ran to its head. On reaching the front, he claims, he was kned in the groin by a policeman, dragged behind police lines and ordered into a Black Maria. Fergus Pyle saw a Young Socialist being hit on the head by a baton and a 'girl in a mini skirt carrying the Plough and Stars [flag] wrestling with a constable, and a few men grabbing and fighting with policemen'. It was at this point that Gerry Fitt, Eddie McAteer and Austin Currie were injured. Paddy Kennedy, an RLP councillor who was himself taken to hospital with suspected broken ribs, said that he had seen Fitt fall to the ground and he had appeared to be on his knees when he was struck by a baton. During these first scuffles the blue civil rights banner was seized and ripped by the police.

There was a brief attempt at a sit-down in front of the police lines, and a ragged snatch of 'We shall overcome' was sung. Then an impromptu meeting, on the model of what had happened in Dungannon, was held. Michael Farrell of the Young Socialists said that the protest was over housing, gerrymandering and discrimination: 'We are met by police with batons in their hands. Is that democracy?' Betty Sinclair said

it had to be made clear that the Civil Rights Movement was not anti-constitutional. In all the negotiations for the march and the meeting the police had been co-operative. The Association would have changed the day if the Minister had consulted them, but he had banned it without enabling them to change their plans. However, she declared, 'We want to make our case that, for certain people in Northern Ireland there are no civil rights. Have we made that clear?'

There were cheers when she added, 'There may be people here who think you have to spill blood for this. That would mean you are playing Mr Craig's game.'

Eddie McAteer repeated Betty Sinclair's plea for restraint: 'Join with me in wishing that no one should be exposed to hurt here today. I advise you to make your way in a wee walk to the Diamond.' Eamonn McCann said that events had shown that the old policies would get no one anywhere: 'I don't advise anyone to charge that barricade,' he said. 'I also want to make it clear as a private individual that I can do nothing to stop them.' Ivan Cooper and other speakers were less ambiguous in calling for restraint and Betty Sinclair came back to ask the crowd to disperse quietly. But almost immediately violence broke out again.

Some of the crowd attempted to strike up with 'We shall overcome' but they were interrupted by a police loudspeaker announcement, which was shouted down; this was probably an order to disperse but very few could have heard it. At this point some of the protesters started to throw their placards over the heads of those in front at the police. Then the police, with batons drawn, advanced on the crowd. Retreat for marchers fleeing them was blocked by a cordon at the other end of Duke Street, where police also charged the demonstrators. After the action had lasted for a few minutes, County Inspector Meharg, through a loud-hailer, ordered: 'The police will hold their hands, please.' Fergus Pyle reported:

Instead of a pause, this announcement was the prelude to a methodical and efficient movement forward by the police, hitting everything in front of them. Some people in the crowd tackled them back and poles from the placards were flying through the air. From my vantage point I saw nothing in the few seconds between the County Inspector's announcement to have incited what appeared to be a concerted start by the police.

The police carried on down Duke Street, clearing the crowd in front of them as demonstrators screamed hysterically. Detachments of police went after individuals and when the street was nearly clear, water cannon were brought in. Later it was alleged that the RUC sprayed not only those who remained on the road but also groups sheltering in shop doorways and the first-floor windows

of houses, some of which were open. Passers-by, and others who had taken no part in the demonstration, were also soaked. Kenneth Orbinson, an Ulster Television cameraman, gave evidence at the trial of those arrested on 5 October: he said that he had been sprayed while filming from the window of a flat in Duke Street; but his film was not admitted as evidence.

A small number of demonstrators followed McAteer's advice and took a 'wee walk' to the Diamond on the city side of the river, infiltrating in groups of two or three. A Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament banner was unfurled and carried round the war memorial before one of those carrying it was arrested. A crowd gathered and shouted at the police, provoking another baton charge which forced them down towards Butcher Gate and the Bogside. Stones were thrown at the police and a number of shop windows were broken. By this time the original confrontation between marchers and police had given way to a general battle between the police and young residents of the Bogside, most of whom had taken no part in the march. A barricade was built in Fahan Street and set on fire and a continuous fusillade of stones was thrown at the police sheltering behind Butcher Gate. Attempts were made to disperse the stone throwers with a water cannon, but its progress was halted by a barricade; police trying to clear the obstruction returned fire with stones which had been thrown at them. The battle lasted for several hours and at about 10.30 p.m. there was a further clash as a crowd charged the police and was dispersed by a counter-charge. After this a section of the crowd marched to the Guildhall, from where they were driven back up Shipquay Street towards the Diamond, where two baton charges were needed to disperse them. Violence continued into the following afternoon and evening; petrol bombs were thrown and shops looted.

There were many stories afterwards of what appeared to be gratuitous police violence. A young Derry woman was walking past a group of police who were pushing and kicking a man. As she passed, she said, a policeman had struck her in the face with a baton, 'and I hadn't opened my mouth to him'. John Ryan MP claimed to have seen a policeman remove a woman's glasses and then strike her on the head; she had appeared, to him, to be over sixty years of age and a bystander. Other stories of bystanders who

suffered included that of a man going home from his work in a bookmaker's shop in the Waterside when he was set upon and batoned. A railway worker, also making his way home, was caught up in the riot and, as a result of baton blows, was deafened in one ear and had to have sixteen stitches to his head.<sup>25</sup> Martin Cowley, a reporter with the local nationalist newspaper, the *Derry Journal*, was put into the police van beside Fred Heatley, his head streaming with blood. He told Heatley that he had been walking along the footpath when the police had made a baton charge. He had shouted that he was a reporter but he was struck several blows on the head and shoved into the police tender.

The *Irish News* reported that the police had struck at the testicles of male demonstrators but none of the other papers reported this. However, a medical certificate was read out in Stormont some days later, which reported that a medical examination of Eddie McAteer had found an oval bruise below his right groin, about one inch away from the scrotum. McAteer could not remember having been struck there and made no claim as to how the injury had been caused.<sup>26</sup> A famous film clip, which has been shown countless times, shows a NICRA supporter in front of the police line, appealing for restraint before suddenly doubling up, apparently in agony. At his trial in December, Eamonn Melaugh, a prominent Derry republican, testified that he had seen a demonstrator struck in the groin.<sup>27</sup>

The most bizarre story concerned Margaret Healy of Anne Street, Derry. She was a polio victim and only four feet nine inches tall, with curvature of the spine. She was running down Duke Street, away from the baton charge, when she was arrested. Both the nationalist *Irish News* and the middle-of-the-road *Sunday News* reported what happened. She told the former:

I lifted a broken placard that was lying in the centre of the road to throw it into the side when two policemen pounced on me. They accused me of going to hit one of them with it . . . they put me in a police van and took me to Victoria Barracks where they kept me for two hours.

At the police station, she said, she was told first that she would be charged with assault and then that she would be charged with disorderly behaviour. But eventually she was released without a

charge being made. Later, relatives of another polio victim told the *Derry Journal* that he had been beaten up by a group of policemen when he went to buy cigarettes on the evening of Sunday 6 October.

Not all policemen behaved brutally. Fergus Pyle reported that 'many of the officers, probably local men, went no further than duty required. I heard one man say "bastards" as a group of policemen went past him. One of them rounded on him, grabbed him by the arm, but only asked him for his name and address.' A QUB woman student, a member of the NDP, recalled having told a group of policemen early in the events that their conditions were as bad as those the demonstrators were protesting about. Some had been hostile but others were quite friendly. Later, after a friend had been batoned, she approached a group of policemen and remonstrated with them. One had raised his baton but the others opened a gap for her and let her through. After the first clash, when the crowd was halted in front of the police cordon, some of the women had argued with the police and told them that they too were victims of the 'system'. This was either ignored or taken with good humour. According to Fred Heatley, the demonstrators who were detained in Victoria RUC station were well treated.

The Cameron Report found that four policemen were injured during the clashes in Duke Street and a further seven during the later clashes at the Diamond and on the fringes of the Bogside. The total number of civilian casualties was seventy-seven, most of whom had suffered bruises or lacerations to the head. Only four people – two policemen and two civilians – were detained in hospital. The report suggested that there were severe shortcomings in police tactics. Lord Cameron came to the conclusion that there had not been a baton charge in Duke Street but that many policemen had drawn their batons individually and when ordered to disperse the march, had then used them indiscriminately. The situation was made worse by the fact that the officers who had originally been blocking Simpson's Brae moved down to the rear of the march and then, unaware that their colleagues were dispersing the head of the demonstration, were confronted by protesters running towards them. Here too, the report found, there was indiscriminate use of batons. The use of water cannon was criticised as having been unnecessary and for affecting members of the public who had not been involved in the march.

The march organisers can also be criticised. The choice of the Waterside railway station as an assembly point only made sense if the sole criterion was the convenience of demonstrators coming from other parts of Northern Ireland. The Coalisland–Dungannon march had given everyone a good day out and had used up a lot of their energy by the time the moment of confrontation arrived. The confrontation was predictable and planned, therefore relatively easily controlled. The organisers were well prepared and able to maintain their authority. In Derry things were very different.

The incipient differences between NICRA and the DHAC had never been resolved and the Derry radicals and their allies in the Belfast Young Socialists were determined to provoke a more drastic challenge to authority than had occurred in Dungannon. Gerry Fitt, too, seems to have had aims at variance with those of NICRA. He had brought three British Labour MPs to Derry and may have thought that the opportunity to expose the RUC should not be wasted. The key leaders of NICRA arrived late, after the march had already started; if they had any plans for preventing a clash with the police, they were unable to put them into operation. The demonstrators' tactic of walking into the police lines, while it was a principled assertion of their right to march, invited the violent response that followed and made further violence much more likely. The throwing of placards by the Young Socialists provoked the RUC without damaging its capacity to inflict punishment on the crowd. McCann's speech, with its suggestion that the police lines ought to be charged, while refusing to actually call for such action, seems to have typified the confused militancy of the radicals, who were suddenly precipitated into a conflict for which they were quite unprepared. In later years the events of 5 October were to be polished into simplified and incompatible propaganda versions; it has to be stressed that the whole affair was a series of blunders and the violence resulted from a breakdown of control by the leaders of the march and the controllers of the police, and not from any pre-existing plan.

However, the judgement of the London *Times* of 7 October on the affair was probably widely shared by political and public opinion in Britain:

The refusal of Mr William Craig . . . to hold an inquiry into police methods in Londonderry cannot be the last word. His assurance that the police used no undue force echoes exactly that of Mayor Daley in Chicago last month. Nonetheless Mayor Daley had to submit to an inquiry and the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland should now persuade his colleagues to agree. The reports of police brutality to individuals and loss of self-control in general are too uncomfortably convincing to be waved away by Mr Craig.

The *Guardian* asked: 'If the police practice is to strike obstructive demonstrators on the legs, as Mr Craig claims, how did heads happen to be bleeding?'

In the aftermath of the events in Derry, Craig, members of the Government and other Unionists strenuously defended both the ban on the march and the actions of the RUC. In an interview with William Hardcastle on BBC Radio 4's 'The World This Weekend', the text of which was published in the *Irish News* on 7 October, Craig introduced two themes which were to be repeated over and over during the next few days. Challenged about the ban, he claimed:

'The civil rights march was banned because they were proposing to march through areas that would provoke serious riot.' He said that in Derry, down through the years, it had been established that Loyalists could parade in certain places, Republicans in certain places.

Mr Hardcastle: 'But they don't regard themselves as a sectarian group either?' Mr Craig: 'This absolutely astonishes me. We can see little or no difference, and indeed yesterday we unfortunately failed to arrest some very prominent IRA men, including Cathal Goulding from Dublin.<sup>28</sup> There is little doubt in police circles that it is, in fact, a Republican front.'

The *Irish Times* quoted Craig as claiming that a reason for banning the march had been that it posed a threat to the United States military base in Derry:

'The authorities in Northern Ireland were quite satisfied that a substantial amount of explosives was in the area, and it might only be a matter of time until this sort of activity was renewed.' The Minister said that all of the activities of the civil rights movement had indicated that it was predominantly a Republican body, and activities in Derry did not disprove that. Genuine supporters of civil

rights in principle were extremely ill-advised to associate as they were doing with the IRA and Communism.

In the Stormont debate on the events of 5 October, Craig referred to NICRA as 'an *omnium gatherum* made up of members of the Londonderry Housing Action Committee, the majority of whom are also members of the Connolly Association, of the Republican Party which includes well-known members of the IRA and Sinn Féin, of the Young Socialists and of the Communist Party'.<sup>29</sup> He went on to stress the likelihood of sectarian clashes had the procession followed the original route and he defended the actions of the RUC as necessary to avoid even worse violence. Other Unionist speakers – the debate was boycotted by the opposition parties – who supported his judgement on the ban included the liberal Phelim O'Neill. Several speakers also repeated Craig's claims about links between NICRA and both republicanism and Communism.

Many commentators pointed out later that there was, in fact, no trouble between the demonstrators and the Protestant residents of the Waterside. The only confrontation in Duke Street, or later at the Diamond, was between police and civil rights marchers or their supporters. It should also be noted that on this occasion the march was not accompanied by nationalist bands. This is not proof, of course, that there was no reasonable expectation of trouble; the late announcement of the ban, however, gave credence to the assumption that it had only been prompted by the Apprentice Boys march, and that the Government, as in Dungannon, was allowing a loyalist organisation to manipulate the situation so that an opposition demonstration would be banned. NICRA also had a reasonable complaint that the lateness of the ban gave them no time to negotiate any alternative date or route.

Craig and other ministers were at pains afterwards to make it clear that irrespective of the likelihood of a rival parade, the march would not have been allowed to proceed through the Waterside or the walled city. This cut little ice with NICRA, which rejected the claim that the march was in any way provocative and accused the Government of suppressing free expression. Craig seems to have been determined to undermine the association's credibility and to brand its members as troublemakers. The accusations of republi-

can and Communist links were significant, and Craig obviously believed that it was reasonable to assume that the motives of NICRA were subversive. It is important, therefore, to examine the nature of republican and Communist involvement in NICRA, and their motives, strategy and tactics within the association.

The Cameron Report found evidence of republican involvement in NICRA, but in a famous passage praised the way in which IRA stewards had kept order on demonstrations. But the report missed the fact that the republicans, through the Wolfe Tone Societies, had been largely responsible for creating NICRA in the first place and some commentators have accused Cameron of naïveté about republican influence. One of these, Patrick Riddell, asks:

If the sole intention of the Association were to secure civil rights for Ulster Catholics while accepting and loyally supporting the constitution of the Ulster state . . . why has it admitted to its counsels and membership, as it undoubtedly has, a number of men from an organisation pledged to the destruction of that state?<sup>30</sup>

Riddell partly overstates the extent to which NICRA claimed to accept the constitution of Northern Ireland. There is a difference between 'accepting and loyally supporting' the constitution and acting within legal boundaries to press demands for reform within the existing constitutional framework. Riddell verges on suggesting that an organisation may be deemed subversive not simply if it works to undermine the state, but if its members have any mental reservations about the constitution. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to question the motives of IRA members and supporters in NICRA, and whether their influence might, at some future date, have led the association into subversive activities.

Cathal Goulding gave an interview to the *Belfast Telegraph* of 10 February 1969 in which he readily admitted that republicans were involved in the civil rights movement. However, he was anxious to stress that

we have not organised the civil rights movement and we have not infiltrated it . . . We have issued no directive about it. But we have encouraged Republicans to be active in it, always accepting the directives of the CR [civil rights] committees. We have emphasised . . . that peaceful demonstration along the lines of CR is the true way to support its aims. The Republicans are in the civil rights

movement the same as they are in the trade unions. They are members of the community being denied civil rights. It is not a specific IRA assignment. Our attitude is that we want to see everyone in the six counties, whether Protestant or Catholic, active in the movement to attain civil rights for the people there.

The republican documents quoted show that the republican movement was much more centrally involved in the creation of NICRA than Goulding suggests. They also show that political activity had by no means ousted the republicans' commitment to armed force; indeed it was seen as a necessary preliminary to the resumption of the military campaign. But they do not prove that NICRA was a front for the preparation of such a campaign or that it was reasonable or wise to treat it as such. Quite simply, the concept of agitation on civil rights, far less the creation of a movement to carry out such agitation, is missing from the documents. They propose broadly based agitation on social and economic issues but nowhere do they contain blueprints that correspond with the objectives, structure or activities of NICRA. There is also clear evidence that the republicans were not actually in control of NICRA in the period up to and including the 5 October march. This can be adduced from the fact that their internal document, *Ireland Today*, speculated about the replacement of some of the leadership of the association at a future date. This would hardly have been necessary if at that time they were in a position to dictate the policy and actions of the association.

It is also necessary to distinguish between different sections and levels of the republican movement. Although the civil rights strategy could not have been adopted by republicans without the approval of the leadership of the IRA – and Roy Johnston stressed the importance of its involvement in the Maghera meeting of 1966 – this does not mean that the army council initiated the setting up of NICRA or that it paid any detailed attention to the work being done by republicans within the association. Seán Mac Stíofáin indicates that the first time the leadership discussed the civil rights movement was when

a proposal arrived at Dublin HQ from the Tyrone unit of the IRA. It asked that members of the Republican Movement be permitted to take part in a civil rights march to Dungannon from Coalisland . . . The leadership unanimously gave permission and word was sent out

to all Republican units in the North to encourage as many people as possible to participate. I emphasise 'encourage' because the leadership did not make it compulsory. It was also decided that no known members of the IRA from the South would participate.<sup>31</sup>

Even the Wolfe Tone Societies, the one section of the republican movement which had a well-worked-out strategy for the civil rights movement, were unable to implement their plans exactly as they had intended. NICRA, in its early stages, differed in two important respects from the model proposed by the societies in August 1966. They had emphasised agitation on the concrete issues of electoral reform and discrimination in housing and employment, but NICRA originally operated as a body which made representations on the broad issues of civil liberties and took up individual cases of infringement of rights. Undoubtedly the republicans were influential in steering the association towards public marches but they had to persuade others within NICRA; they could not determine the matter in advance. The other difference was in the way in which the association was organised. *Tuairisc* proposed the creation of

local committees and groups . . . on the widest possible basis throughout the towns and villages of the North . . . Civil Rights committees, electoral reform groups, community development associations, friendship clubs, it matters not what they are called, or how diverse they are in structure and organisation. They should seek to organise the maximum number of people at local level to bring pressure to bear on local authorities, on Stormont, but particularly on Westminster.

This was a proposal for a loose federation of locally based groups; NICRA, however, was a centralised organisation based mainly in Belfast. Had the *Tuairisc* model been adopted, there would have been no question of NICRA initiating demonstrations in Dungannon or Derry; this would have been the responsibility of purely local groups. The form which NICRA took, therefore, was determined by the coalition of forces which actually came together to create it, of which the republicans were only one element. Since a number of different initiatives on the issue of civil rights took place between 1962 and 1966, it was probably fortuitous that the one which led to the creation of an organisation was the Wolfe Tone Societies

conference, and even without their intervention, something very like NICRA would probably have emerged in any case.

The CPNI was involved in NICRA from the start. From the early 1960s the party had seen the issue of civil liberties as a key area of agitation. Its 1962 programme, *Ireland's Path to Socialism*, said:

In no other aspect of public affairs has the authority of the Executive been abused as much as in Civil, Religious and Democratic Liberties. This is the outstanding feature which has enabled the Unionist Party to create divisions and govern unchallenged since the foundation of the Northern Ireland Parliament . . .

Abolition of all anti-democratic laws, an end to civil and religious discrimination, and an end to the rigging of electoral areas in the interests of the wealthy, can be accomplished by the united action of the people. The organised Labour Movement is the force to lead the struggle for democracy and the rights of the individual to participate with equality in public affairs. The Communist Party has this struggle as its foremost aim.<sup>32</sup>

The 1966 congress of the CPNI adopted a 'Democratic Programme for Unity', which included demands for the electoral law in Northern Ireland to be brought into line with that in Britain, except for the reintroduction of proportional representation and the abolition of cash deposits by candidates.

The CPNI was not instrumental in creating NICRA but it was well represented on its first executive committee: Noel Harris of AUEW TASS, a CPNI member, was the first chairman; Derek Peters of the CPNI was secretary; and Betty Sinclair of the Belfast trades council was elected to the committee. At the meeting which adopted the constitution, Ken Banks of AUEW TASS was added to the executive committee; he was close to the CPNI, although not actually a member. However, at the first annual general meeting in February 1968, Banks and Harris were not returned to the executive committee and although Sinclair replaced Harris in the chair, Peters was replaced as secretary by John McAnerney of the CSJ. Banks, Harris and Sinclair were probably elected because of their trade-union connections, but precisely because of these existing responsibilities, the first two could not devote much time and effort to what appeared to be a marginal group making little impact. There is not much evidence of a determined drive by the Communists to control NICRA and even less that they had a great deal of influence.

The one member of the CPNI who was centrally involved in NICRA was Betty Sinclair; as secretary of the Belfast trades council she had more time to devote to it than trade-union officials like Banks and Harris. Her involvement led one Unionist MP to comment after the events in Derry:

Last but not least we have the Communist Party led by that veteran Miss Sinclair, who is the chairman of the whole civil rights movement. When we hear of the Communist Party appealing for law and order it seems to me that it is a matter of Satan rebuking sin. There is no doubt about it that this programme is an Irish Republican Army programme sponsored and inspired by Communism.<sup>33</sup>

In fact, Sinclair was a strong advocate of caution and moderation. Her opposition to what she regarded as adventurism and ultra-leftism was shown in 1969 when she resigned from the executive together with Conn McCluskey, John McAnerney and Fred Heatley in protest at NICRA involvement with the People's Democracy (PD). Eamonn McCann, in his letter to Michael Farrell describing the joint DHAC-NICRA meeting of September 1968, said:

The meeting was chaired by Betty Sinclair. I brought up the question of bans and proscriptions and Sinclair finally stated that no red flags or 'unauthorised' slogans will be permitted. I said, to push the point, that having talked to some of the YS [Young Socialists] . . . I had no doubt that there would be a YS contingent with a red flag and that I would 'react physically' to any attempt to remove it. Sinclair steered the discussion away into safer waters, but not before herself and McAnerney had agreed that 'the Young Socialists are the biggest problem'.

An article based on interviews with Betty Sinclair shortly before her death in 1981 discussed her attitudes during the early months of NICRA:

During this time she wanted to exploit all the constitutional possibilities and consolidate a broad-based support around the civil rights demands. This was why she initially opposed the first march from Coalisland to Dungannon, but the arguments of the Nationalists and the Republicans on direct action tactics had become dominant and she was outvoted.<sup>34</sup>

She may actually have pressed her case with less vigour than is indicated above, since by mid-1968 it was abundantly clear that 'broad-based support' was not emerging and she may have suspended her earlier judgement in view of the success of the first march. But in any case, her prominence in the preparations for the 5 October march, and her leading part in it, did not mean that she intended that it should lead to a violent outcome, and the mere fact of her CPNI membership cannot be taken as evidence for the existence of a violent conspiracy.

Accusations of republican and Communist domination of NICRA and attempts to link the civil rights movement to subversion and violence were to some extent understandable responses by Unionists to the events in Derry. But they were a gross oversimplification. Craig had been monitoring developments within the republican movement since 1966, when he had obtained intelligence from RUC, Garda Síochána and British sources about the IRA's turn to agitation on social and economic issues. He had, correctly, seen the civil rights movement as a realisation of one aspect of the new republican strategy and he had observed that the turn to legal and open political work had not resulted in an elimination of the IRA's military capacity. He had concluded that the new strategy would eventually lead to a resumption of the armed struggle, but, more dubiously, had gone on to suppose that civil rights activities could be treated as if they were an armed insurrection.

Twenty years later Craig was still convinced that he had been right. In a BBC Radio 4 programme about the civil rights movement he said:

It gives me some satisfaction that those who laughed at me and poked fun at me now have evidence in front of their very eyes. It's a pity it had to happen that way. If people had taken me as a sincere, genuine man who was worried, I think we could have avoided all that has happened. We've created in Ulster and Ireland a monster that will terrify the island for a good many years to come.<sup>35</sup>

This is a typical conspiracy theory, which adduces the fact that something *did* happen as evidence that someone *meant* it to happen. It also supposes that vigorous enough action in the early stages of the civil rights movement would have nipped it in the bud and restored Northern Ireland to stability.

In fact, Craig's actions contributed significantly to destabilising the situation. His response was predicated on the idea that he was dealing with an IRA insurrection when he was actually faced with a group of unarmed demonstrators who posed nothing more than a difficult public order problem. The chaotic and often brutal policing of the march contributed to the very problem which the RUC was supposed to control. At the trial of those arrested on 5 October the police gave confused evidence about whether or not stones, as well as placards, had been thrown. No coherent explanation was given as to why demonstrators, running away from the confrontation at one end of Duke Street, were met by a line of police barring their way at the other. It also emerged that the police assumption that it was an offence to begin marching in the prohibited area was wrong. No law had been broken until the demonstrators disobeyed the order to disperse, following the meeting in Duke Street. This was a warning which, as Fergus Pyle reported, very few of them could have heard. The result of all this was that the Government's claims about the march and its defence of the actions of the police carried very little conviction outside the ranks of its own supporters. The events discredited the Government and fuelled the discontent that had created the civil rights movement in the first place.

Proof of republican involvement in NICRA prior to 5 October 1968 actually says very little about the civil rights *movement*. NICRA was a small, self-selected group of activists, not a movement. In theory, members of the executive committee were representatives of affiliated organisations and the committee was supposed to co-ordinate the efforts of the groups which supported it. In fact, the executive *was* the association. Executive members did all the organising work and very largely constituted the activists within NICRA. Members of the CSJ, the NILP, the CPNI, the Belfast Wolfe Tone Society, the Republican Clubs and private individuals worked together because they had developed a personal commitment to the association, and not because they were directed by any outside agency.

Before the events in Derry on 5 October, the civil rights movement did not exist; there was only a small, isolated group of activists. In the wake of 5 October, NICRA mushroomed into a movement with branches in most towns in Northern Ireland in

which there was a significant Catholic population. Contacts were established with supporting organisations in the Irish Republic, Britain, North America, Australia, New Zealand and various countries in Europe. Two other important civil rights groups emerged – the DCAC and the PD. NICRA was the largest and most representative civil rights organisation but it was only one part of the civil rights *movement* and the original, pre-October NICRA was swamped by hundreds of new activists and thousands of supporters.

The emergence of this new movement transformed the political situation in Northern Ireland, producing sectarian tensions, instability, conflict and violence. But responsibility for this should not, retrospectively, be fixed on the small group which initiated these events. It is manifest that they were too weak and uninfluential to produce such a major upheaval by their own efforts. In fact it was the television and newspaper pictures of police batoning demonstrators which proved to be the catalyst in transforming the situation. The events in Derry crystallised the feelings of frustration and discontent among Catholics and the dissatisfaction with the lack of progress towards reform felt by a wide range of opposition groups. They also put Unionists on the defensive, prompting them to make accusations about a republican and Communist conspiracy which stoked fears among their own rank-and-file supporters. The civil rights marches created an opportunity for Ian Paisley to put himself at the head of plebeian Protestant resistance to the civil rights movement.

The use of the term 'civil rights' by NICRA inevitably invites comparisons with the Black civil rights movement in the United States. The adoption of street marches, sit-downs, passive resistance and songs like 'We shall not be moved' and 'We shall overcome' are evidence that the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland saw a close parallel between its activities and the struggle of Blacks in the Deep South. However, on closer examination the parallel proves illusory, as Frank Wright points out:

Blacks were subject to far more drastic inequalities than were Catholics, therefore civil rights made far more difference to blacks than to Catholics. Integration – meaning equal access to public facilities, political participation and equal citizen rights – was a coherent objective for blacks because most of the denials of equality were sustained by segregation.

However, where blacks had no viable method of expressing nationalism when disillusion with the achievements of civil rights set in, Catholics could revert to a nationalism which already shaped much of their previous experience.<sup>36</sup>

Steve Bruce makes a similar point:

American blacks were always assimilationists because they had nowhere else to go. There was never a time when any more than a handful of eccentrics advocated the establishment of a separate black nation-state. The issue in America was, and still is, the relationship between two populations *within* a nation-state. Concessions to blacks, while they did amount to debits from poor whites, were not major threats to the continued existence of the state . . .

The Ulster situation has always been quite different. Perhaps some parts of the civil rights movement were genuinely, rather than tactically, assimilationist . . . However, the speed with which many of its leaders shifted to more traditional nationalist and republican positions suggests that a large part of the movement was always ultimately interested in dismantling Northern Ireland.<sup>37</sup>

These passages highlight some of the strategic and tactical problems involved in transferring the model of the Black movement in the United States to Northern Ireland. But their flaw – and this is particularly true of Bruce – is that they telescope the development of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement and retrospectively ascribe to it a coherence and a level of strategic thinking which it never had. After 5 October 1968 a poorly organised and deeply divided movement attempted to apply some of the methods used in the Deep South. But the situation had already run out of their – or anyone else's – control. By then the extent to which the Black movement was an appropriate model was irrelevant. Before 5 October 1968 the handful of NICRA activists had a very simple and extremely limited impression of what was happening across the Atlantic. Given the absence of any mass movement, the only activity which they could propose was street marches. This was risky and proved to be an extremely ill-advised tactic. But it was precisely the kind of initiative which could be expected from a small, isolated and frustrated group of political activists. It showed that they were ill-fitted to become the leaders of a mass movement, but no more than that. They were not in control of all the factors. They did not determine the actions of the

Ministry of Home Affairs nor of the RUC in Duke Street. Nor were they in control of the young hooligans of the Bogside or the Paisleyite counter-demonstrators. They were not, in other words, the leaders of a conspiracy to overthrow the Northern Ireland state.