

Official Irish Republicanism, 1962 to 1972



Sean Swan

*Official Irish
Republicanism:
1962-1972*

By

Sean Swan

Front cover photo: Detail from the front cover of the *United Irishman* of September 1971, showing Joe McCann crouching beneath the Starry Plough flag, rifle in hand, with Inglis' baker in flames in the background. This was part of the violence which followed in reaction to the British government's introduction of internment without trial on 9 August 1971.

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Dedicated to the memory of Johnny Doheny

1910 to 1990

RIP

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Seamus Rathigan
Marcus Fogarty
Seamus Costello
Dennis Cassin
Cathal Goulding
Liam Cummins

Oliver MacCall
Eamon Mac Tomais
Mairín de Búrca

This was the last Ard Comhairle meeting before certain events in Belfast were to cast their shadow over the republican movement as events flowing from the civil rights movement and the reaction to it, came to a traditional Belfast head.

Civil Rights, ‘Petticoat’ elections and violence

‘George Forrest, the Unionist Member for Mid-Ulster in the British Parliament, died on December 10th, 1968’.⁹¹ Two days after the 1968 Ard Fheis the question of abstentionism was to assume a new urgency. As early as December 1967 Republicans had been discussing the possibility of a by-election in Mid-Ulster. The question was whether or not to contest it.⁹² Mid-Ulster was a constituency which Tom Mitchell had won twice during 1955 – and being disqualified twice before losing to George Forrest, the Unionist candidate, when the Nationalists also entered the field in May 1956. Forrest had beaten Mitchell two to one in a straight fight in the October 1959 General Election, during the Border Campaign. The two met on the hustings again in the 1964 General Election. This time it was a three cornered fight with the NILP also fielding a candidate who took 5,053 votes, and Forrest once again emerged victorious. The pair clashed for a fourth time in the 1966 General Election. This time there was no third candidate in the field. Forrest’s vote

⁹¹ Devlin, B., *The Price of My Soul* (London, 1969) p. 159. Bishop & Mallie incorrectly date Forrest’s death as ‘early in 1969’, see Bishop, P., & Mallie, E., *The Provisional IRA*, p. 87.

⁹² Ard Comhairle minutes 10 December 1967.

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was virtually identical with what he received in 1964, but almost all of the 1964 NILP vote went to Mitchell. This was not, however enough to give the seat to Mitchell.

What was interesting about the Unionist vote in Mid-Ulster was its consistency. With only one exception, in the six contests between 1955 and 1966, it remained between 28,605 (when Forrest first stood as an independent Unionist) and 29,725. Third party interventions always cost the republicans votes, but never damaged the Unionist vote. The one anomaly was the 1959 General Election, during the Border Campaign, when in a straight fight, Forrest's vote soared to 33,093 and Mitchell's dropped to 14,170.⁹³ Forrest was a moderate Unionist – at one stage being beaten up by Paisley's supporters because of it – and one who appears to have been well thought of by nationalists.⁹⁴ But now Forrest was gone and history proved that it was possible for a republican to win in that constituency – provided the non-unionist vote was not split

The Catholic population of Northern Ireland, particularly in areas where Catholics were in a majority, had been politicised by the events surrounding the civil rights movement. Once the republicans could have been relatively sure of a clear run against the Unionists, but events were now radically changed: 'There was every indication that the Civil Rights Movement wanted a front candidate ... one who could carry the struggle to Westminster'. It also seemed that 'Austen Currie, the Nationalist MP at Stormont, sought the honour'.⁹⁵ Many Northern republicans were unhappy with the continued abstentionist policy.

Support for the civil rights movement was just one of many issues on which the republican movement had campaigned

⁹³ All figures relating to election results in Mid-Ulster are taken from Walker, B. M., *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, 1992) pp. 24-7.

⁹⁴ Bernadette Devlin described him as 'the kind of Unionist who didn't hate Catholics – an ordinary, friendly sort of fellow who wasn't prepared to come out with the anti-popey stuff which Orangemen like to hear on July 12', Devlin, B., *The Price of My Soul*, p. 163.

⁹⁵ Bowyer Bell, J. *The Secret Army*, p. 359.

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during the 1960s in search of popular support, from fish-ins, to co-operative movements to tenants' associations to the 'Save the West' campaign. But the civil rights movement took off and unleashed forces totally independent of republican control, both inside and outside of NICRA. It also helped to deepen the crisis within republicanism. When the crisis came the politicisation process had proceeded far enough that there was no military strategy to hand, but not far enough for a coherent political response.

NICRA was officially launched on 9 April 1967 when it adopted its constitution, but had existed in ad hoc form since 28 November of the previous year.⁹⁶ The concept itself had arisen from the reading of a document, (basically Coughlan's 'Our Ideas' article which appeared in *Tuairisc* later that month), by Eoghan Harris at the August 1966 Maghera conference of Wolfe Tone Societies held at Kevin Agnew's house.⁹⁷ Johnston's recollection is that there may have been two Maghera meetings, one purely WTS on August 6, and one involving both WTS and Republican Club people in October.⁹⁸ As the Cameron Report noted that 'the great majority' of NICRA 'are Roman Catholic', but adds

This is not surprising, as the greater part of the matters on which the Civil Rights Association concentrates are concerned with grievances or complaint which relate to Roman Catholic sections of the community.⁹⁹

Despite this 'It is dedicated to a policy of non-violence and is non-sectarian in origin and purpose'.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Purdie, B., *Politics in the Streets*, pp. 133, 132.

⁹⁷ Patterson, H., *The Politics of Illusion*, p.99.

⁹⁸ Johnston, R., *Century of Endeavour*, pp. 198, 213.

⁹⁹ Disturbances in Northern Ireland: Report of the Commission appointed by the Governor of Northern Ireland [Cameron Report] (HMSO, 1969, Cmd. 532) 2.12.192. Hereafter 'Cameron Report'.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Civil Rights - Theory

In October 1966 a memo was circulated within the Stormont Cabinet. The Inspector General of the RUC had requested that a copy of *Tuairisc*, the WTS newsletter, be passed on to the Cabinet Secretary, Harold Black. It was then shown to the Prime Minister, Terence O'Neill, with his attention being drawn specifically to 'the part from the bottom of p 6 to p 10 takes in pp 11-13'. It was suggested that 'we should send a copy of the first 10 pages to the Home Office', this, however, was deemed to be 'very risky'.¹⁰¹

The issue of *Tuairisc* which was so greatly exercising the minds of Stormont mandarins was *Tuairisc* No. 7 of 31 August 1966, and the two sections referred to were half an article by Tony Coughlan, 'Our Ideas', relating to British policy towards Ireland, unionism and civil rights, and an article by Jack Bennett, 'Paisley, O'Neill and Progress'. Coughlan, in 'Our Ideas', argued that there was a need for theory in the republican movement. The various tensions within the republican movement were tacitly acknowledged, but 'let us have no stupid counter posing of the "practical" men and the "intellectuals": the men of theory'. In case there was any doubt as to which side Coughlan was on, the "'practical" men' are dismissed as 'usually the unconscious slaves of some defunct theoretician' with minds which are 'rag-bags stuffed with dead men's theories, old saws, conventional wisdom, scraps of opinion and prejudice which in fact are only debased and outworn pieces of outworn and no longer effective theory'.

While traditionalists within the movement could be castigated for not understanding the need for theory, those dissidents who had already left and who had developed socialist theories of their own were 'fully aware of the importance of theory'. Their 'pseudo-revolutionary rhetoric and phraseology' was intended to 'gull the politically innocent'. Here, too, theory could serve 'to counter the false and confusing theories' of these

¹⁰¹ PRONI 25.10.1966 Cab/9B7201/14.

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‘dubious elements’. The reference here is almost certainly to the Cork group centred on Tower Books and the Irish Workers’ Group and its organ the *Irish Militant* in London. The term ‘Provisional’ did not yet exist to describe the traditionalists and ‘ultra-leftist’ would have jarred on republican ears at this stage in describing the ‘pseudo-revolutionary’ ‘dubious elements’, but these were essentially the two main poles of opposition to the Johnston/Coughlan line

The section that Stormont found so interesting began with an emphasis on the need for flexible thinking in rapidly changing situations. ‘For the Irish Republican such adaptability and mental acuteness is particularly called for in relation to the situation in the Six Counties at the present time’. Things were changing rapidly in the North and it could ‘no longer be looked on as of old’. Republicans must not ‘be caught napping by their British and Unionist opponents who will be trying to turn the situation there to their advantage’.

While ‘Britain’s strategy towards Ireland has changed’ the aim had not ‘namely to maintain her domination over the island as [a] whole and to keep the whole country in a weak and dependent position’. Fianna Fáil, under Lemass, had abandoned any pretence at genuine economic independence. As a result of this, Britain had changed her tactics, the aim now being ‘to snare Lemass back into the United Kingdom. The Free Trade Agreement will do the trick’. Britain had nothing to fear from the improvement in North/South relations in this context. It had, after all, always been ‘open to the Irish people to end partition effectively by agreeing to return to the United Kingdom’.

What was not so convenient for imperialism was the fact that the discriminatory nature of the Stormont regime was beginning to attract a bad press in Britain. Thus the

far-seeing leaders of British imperialism saw that the bright young men of Fianna Fáil might prove a better bet for preserving British influence in Ireland in the long run than the bigoted fanatics of the North. Hence O’Neill has been given his orders to play down discrimination and brush the corruption of his

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regime under the carpet while Britain snares Lemass back into the United Kingdom. (emphasis in original)

The tensions within the new situation had caused unionism to divide, and this division found expression in the ‘conflict between Paisley and O’Neill’ which was ‘basically a political one, a division over policy in the Unionist camp’. But it was possible that the new situation would lead to the releasing of ‘the political energies of the people, and particularly the Catholic people and the Protestant working class’. It was even possible that ‘the orange worker may see that he can get by alright without dominating his Catholic neighbour’. They might eventually ‘join forces in the Labour movement, and where would Unionism be then? How can Unionism possibly survive when Protestant and Catholic are no longer at one another’s throats, when discrimination has been dealt a body-blow?’. This was the rationale behind the demand for civil rights. O’Neill had to be forced

to CONCEDE MORE THAN HE WANTS TO DO 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 (emphasis in original).

Despite this call for extremism, Coughlan also argued for the inclusion of ‘as wide a section of the community as possible’, the ‘maximum number of people’, as ‘broad sections of the people as possible’, and securing ‘the maximum and broadest unity of action’. There was an obvious contradiction here: O’Neill was to be pushed beyond what he could give without risking being overthrown, yet the proposed civil rights campaign was to be a broad-based movement.

The dangers in the situation were outlined. There might be some who thought ‘that it may be a good thing to throw a bomb

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at some orange hall because Orangemen have thrown bombs at the Catholic halls', but to do so would be to play into the hands of the enemy. A guard should be maintained 'against provocateurs ... out to precipitate some incident which would give the Unionists an excuse for a pogrom'. The possibility of Paisley overthrowing O'Neill was raised, as was the question of how the British Army would react 'if they were told to put down a pogrom instituting virulently bigoted 'Protestant' government'. Such dangers were 'not wild fantasies' but 'real and dangerous possibilities inherent in the present situation'. But Coughlan's conclusion was optimistic 'O'Neill will carry the day' because if Paisley were 'opposed by both the British Government and the main Unionist leadership ... how can he possibly win?' A 'long term possibility' was opening up of 'getting in touch with the Unionist orange masses ... explaining the real nature of Britain's imperialist policy ... enlightening them as to the reasons for the current changes and winning them to support a movement for independence'.

Patterson's critique of the approach outlined here hinges on pointing out the 'unreconstructed assumptions that survived from the traditional nationalist project' and the overlooking of the 'internal dynamics of the Unionist movement ... in favour of a largely externalist explanation' in which 'Orangeism was seen as a phenomenon that existed for the convenience of the British state'.¹⁰² Purdie deals with this article largely without comment as part of an examination of 'the political strategy of the republicans in the mid-1960s'.¹⁰³ He also highlights the fact that NICRA, as it eventually emerged, differed from that outlined in *Tuairisc*. 'The form which NICRA took ... was determined by the coalition of forces which actually came together to create it, of which republicans were only one element'.¹⁰⁴ Milotte points out how the analysis here 'paralleled those of the CPNI'.¹⁰⁵

The second article, 'Paisley, O'Neill and Progress - a view from Belfast' by Jack Bennett, is shorter and more hard hitting.

¹⁰² Patterson, H., *The Politics of Illusion*, p. 101.

¹⁰³ Purdie, B., *Politics in the Streets*, pp. 124, 127-8.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p. 151.

¹⁰⁵ Milotte, M., *Communism in Modern Ireland*, p. 267.

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He argues that ‘Paisleyism is not an ultra-virulent strain of Unionist bigotry – it is merely the uninhibited expression of the fundamentals of Unionism’. The Paisleyites ‘are not the wild men on the outskirts; they are the hardcore of Unionism “per se”’. It was thus a fallacy to respond to attacks on O’Neill by attempting to save him. To do so would be to suggest ‘that the existence of Paisleyism should be exploited to bolster up Unionism’. Thus ‘genuine progressives’ opposed O’Neill and Unionism. They included ‘those who already recognise the fundamentally anti-democratic and abnormal nature of the Six-County set-up itself, and those who, for the moment, are merely concerned that specific, internal abuses associated with the set-up should be swept away’. The latter group might well learn as they went along ‘just how far it may be necessary to go’.

The answer for Bennett, as for Coughlan, was ‘an intensification of the pressure on O’Neill and the Unionist regime’. He, also, advocated ‘a broadly based movement for civil rights’, as a result of which ‘many lessons might be learned by the broadest sections of real progressive Protestantism. Many more might discover just who is the more reactionary, Paisley or O’Neill’

The tension, contradiction, even, in the strategy outlined in *Tuairisc* was between the desire for a ‘broad based’ movement which would, at least eventually, incorporate sections of the Protestants, and the perceived need to demand more than O’Neill could deliver. It appears that greater emphasis was laid on the latter than the former. Tony Coughlan admitted that ‘it was not so much about getting through to the Protestant working-class as dividing the Unionist Party’.¹⁰⁶

Civil Rights – Practice

Despite the establishment of NICRA, ‘nothing happened for a year and a half’,¹⁰⁷ until the first march on 24 August 1968 from Coalisland to Dungannon. This march appears to have been

¹⁰⁶ Interview, Tony Coughlan Dublin October, 2004.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

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the idea of Austin Currie ‘put forward by Michael McLaughlin [CSJ] and John Donaghy’,¹⁰⁸ at a NICRA meeting in late July 1968, held, once again, in Kevin Agnew’s house. Finbar O’Doherty’s claim that the ‘Campaign for Social justice in Dungannon ... called on the NICRA executive to hold its first civil rights demonstration’,¹⁰⁹ is thus accurate, and is repeated by Liam O Comain :‘the Dungannon-based Campaign for Social Justice placed pressure on the NICRA leadership to hold a march from Dungannon to Coalisland’.¹¹⁰ But the idea of a march appears to have originated with Currie¹¹¹. This is an important point: the concept of civil rights had come from the WTS – and arguably ultimately from C Desmond Greaves, though the CSJ and various groups in Derry were thinking along similar lines – but the marching tactic, which was to give the civil rights movement its effectiveness, appears to have originated with Currie via the CSJ. It should also be pointed out that this was 1968, the year of student revolt and marches, the Prague Spring had been ended by a Soviet invasion only days before the Dungannon march and the Black civil rights movement in the US had already provided a ready made civil rights marching tactic to be copied.

Republican tactics at this time did not include marches (marching being used for commemorations) but included, in Derry ‘squat- ins, occupation of the city corporation chambers, sit-downs, street blocking, etc’.¹¹² To this could be added the

¹⁰⁸ McCluskey, C., *Up Off Their Knees*, pp. 106-7.

¹⁰⁹ Ó Dochartaigh, F., *Ulster's White Negroes: From Civil Rights to Insurrection* (Edinburgh, 1994) [Chapter Three, ‘The homeless revolt’ Cain online edition. ‘<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/crights/odochart.htm>’] Hereafter ‘Ó Dochartaigh, F., *Ulster's White Negroes*, online’.

¹¹⁰ *Towards Revolution: The Memoirs and Thoughts of an Irish Republican* — by Liam O Comain ‘The Birth of the Provisionals’ Extracts from a work in progress.... [source <http://irelandsown.net/liamocomain2.html>]. Hereafter ‘*Towards Revolution: The Memoirs and Thoughts of an Irish Republican* —by Liam O Comain, online’.

¹¹¹ Purdie, B., *Politics in the Streets*, p. 135 & Cameron Report 2.12.188.

¹¹² *Towards Revolution: The Memoirs and Thoughts of an Irish Republican* — by Liam O Comain, online.

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fish-ins and mass trespassing in the South, with action on housing, for example by the National Association of Tenants' Organisations (NATO) in Dublin, being similar to that in Derry. The spur to this idea came in Caledon, in June 1968. A house, 9 Kinnard Park, was allocated to a single 19 year old Protestant woman, Emily Beattie, who 'happened to be secretary to the local [Unionist] councillor's solicitor',¹¹³ above Catholic families with children. The Branry Republican Club then squatted a family, the Gildernews, in 11 Kinnard Park and were evicted 'in full view of television cameras'.¹¹⁴ Austin Currie, a Nationalist Stormont MP, raised the matter at Stormont with John Taylor, 'but received no satisfaction'.¹¹⁵ Currie then, with members of the Branry Republican Club 'occupied the house in protest and was evicted and fined'.¹¹⁶ Cathal Goulding later stated that

the Caledon incident ... was ours completely. After that we called a meeting in Belfast with the C[ommunist] P[arty], and decided to take over. The first march from Coalisland to Dungannon was completely ours.¹¹⁷

The proposed march was the next step in the campaign. The Coalisland to Dungannon march passed off relatively uneventfully, apart from the fact that it was not allowed enter Dungannon due to a Paisleyite counter-demonstration. While the PD's march in January 1969 is often criticised, it is interesting to note that Desmond Greaves, while labelling the PD march a 'disaster, was also to come to the conclusion that the Dungannon march 'went too far'.¹¹⁸ But what it had succeeded in doing was

¹¹³ Taylor, P., *Provos: the IRA and Sinn Fein* (London, 1998) p. 38.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 39.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 39.

¹¹⁶ Ó Dochartaigh, F., *Ulster's White Negroes*, online.

¹¹⁷ Goulding, quoted in Rooney, E P., *From Opposition to Legitimacy? A Sociological Analysis of the Official Republican Movement*, p. 94.

¹¹⁸ Greaves, CD., *Reminiscences of the Connolly Association* (Connolly Association) p. 33.

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setting an example – and it was an example which radicals in Derry were quick to follow

Derry

Niall O Dochartaigh has written a valuable study¹¹⁹ of the role of Derry in events in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He writes that in ‘a conflict situation, local politics and activism take on an unaccustomed importance and become central to the political process’.¹²⁰ While this may be a universal truth, it was particularly true with regard to Derry. Liam O Comain states that ‘parallel with’ the development of NICRA ‘a reorganising of the republican movement was taking place’. He and Malachy MacGurran ‘were appointed full-time organisers of the movement in the north of Ireland’. In addition to the task of organising republicans ‘our task was to include the involvement of rank and file republicans in the civil rights campaign’ and to cooperate ‘with individuals and groups in the establishment of housing action committees and branches of the civil rights movement’. O Comain ‘was given the task of forming a coalition between members of the local James Connolly Republican Club and local radicals’. This led to meetings of a group of people, the ‘core’ of which were ‘Norman Walmsley, Eamon McCann [NILP], Janet Wilcox [NILP], Johnny White, Matt O’Leary [independent radical ‘Christian communist’¹²¹], Dermie McClenaghan’ and O Comain himself. These meetings ‘usually took place in the Silver Dog Bar’.¹²² McCann gives the leading individuals in the ‘ad hoc alliance between the left of the Labour Party and the left of the Republican club’ as ‘Johnnie White, Liam Cummins [O Comain] and Finbar Doherty from the Republican Club’ and ‘Charlie Morrison, Dermie McClenagh’ and McCann ‘from the Labour Party’, plus ‘Matt O’Leary of the

¹¹⁹ O Dochartaigh, N., *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles* (2005, 2nd Edition, Palgrave).

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 1.

¹²¹ see Purdie, B., *Politics in the Streets*, p. 180.

¹²² *Towards Revolution: The Memoirs and Thoughts of an Irish Republican* — by Liam O Comain, online.

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Housing Action Committee' and 'Eamonn Melaugh, a free-wheeling radical who had ten children and a bizarre vocabulary'.¹²³

The question of timing is significant here. Purdie states that an attempt to form a branch of NICRA in Derry was made in September 1967, and that DHAC was launched 'about two months later'.¹²⁴ But Ó Dochartaigh asserts that 'The inaugural meeting of the DHAC was held at the City Hotel on St Patrick's Day weekend [1968]'.¹²⁵ This date, March 1968, is also given by McCann for the foundation of the DHAC.¹²⁶ McGurran was appointed Republican Clubs/ Sinn Féin organiser sometime shortly prior to 23 March 1968,¹²⁷ but O Comain was not appointed organiser for West Ulster until sometime prior to 3 March 1969.¹²⁸ However it is entirely possible that O Comain already held this position in relation to the IRA. Arguing in favour of this interpretation is the fact that when Sean Garland was appointed National Organiser for Sinn Féin in December 1967 he had already 'been appointed to organise on behalf of the Army and the United Irishman'.¹²⁹ A further factor relevant to timing is that McCann was still 'living in London in the beginning of 1968'.¹³⁰ But if the chronology cannot be established with absolute certainty, a cross-section of the membership of the DHAC and their ages, is provided in an issue of their publication, *Reality*, in relation to a court case in July 1968, arising from what Frank Curran described as 'a significant event' in the Bogside¹³¹ involving homelessness and a caravan:

¹²³ McCann, E., *War and an Irish Town* (London, Pluto, 1980) pp. 30, 32.

¹²⁴ Purdie, B., *Politics in the Streets*, p. 180.

¹²⁵ Ó Dochartaigh, F., *Ulster's White Negroes*, online.

¹²⁶ McCann, E., *War and an Irish Town*, p. 27.

¹²⁷ Ard Comhairle Minutes 23 March 1968.

¹²⁸ Coiste Seasta minutes 3 March 1968.

¹²⁹ Ard Comhairle minutes 9/10 December 1967.

¹³⁰ McCann in an interview with Margot Gayle Backus in "Not quite Philadelphia, is it?": an interview with Eamonn McCann – Interview *Eire-Ireland: Journal of Irish Studies*, Fall-Winter, 2001 by Margot Gayle Backus [p. 3].

¹³¹ Curran, F., *Derry: Countdown to Disaster* (Dublin, 1986) p. 68.

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George Finnbar O'Doherty (23) our Hon. Secretary and Editor, John White (21) a leading member of the Young Republican Association; Eamonn McCann (25) a journalist; Eamonn Melaugh (35) a community worker, Matthew O'Leary, an engineer; John Wilson (28) whose family's 'home' had blocked the road; Jeremiah Mallett (43) a life-long labour activist and a leader of the unemployed; John McShane (35) a Waterside businessman, as well as Pat J. Coyle (33), and Robert Mitchell (19).¹³²

The 'caravan' incident was also reported in the IWG publication *Irish Militant*,¹³³ but while there was Trotskyist sympathy and involvement (McCann), the DHAC's newspaper, *Reality*, 'was kindly printed on the Communist Party presses at their Albert Bridge Road offices in Belfast, a detail known only to the chosen few'.¹³⁴ The suspicion of communist involvement in the DHAC had been voiced by the Nationalist Alderman James Hegarty who expressed the opinion that they were 'under the control of card-carrying members of the Communist Part'.¹³⁵ Any reading of the accounts given by those involved at this period leaves the distinct impression that these radicals were not under the 'control' of anybody but were acting in a largely spontaneous manner based on meetings in pubs. Such an approach to politics proved highly successful in terms of publicity, but must have filled more 'disciplined' political organisations with horror.

O'Doherty recalls that:

Within the Left there was of course the usual antagonism between those who considered themselves Trotskyites and others whom they termed Stalinists etc. These factional disputes

¹³² *Reality* No. 7 quoted in Ó Dochartaigh, F., *Ulster's White Negroes*, online.

¹³³ *Irish Militant* Vol. III No. 6.

¹³⁴ Ó Dochartaigh, F., *Ulster's White Negroes*, online.

¹³⁵ McCann, E., *War and an Irish Town* (London, Pluto, 1980) p. 27.

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remained genuinely comradely and were not disruptive to the broader movement as a whole.

There appears to have been some tension between O Comain and O'Doherty in May 1968, relating to the *United Irishman*, with the Coiste Seasta assuring O Comain that 'that further articles by Finbar O Doherty would not appear in the paper [*United Irishman*]'.¹³⁶ An Ard Comhairle meeting on 12 April 1969 heard that 'An application for re admittance to the movement was received from Finbar O'Doherty, Derry'.¹³⁷ This was granted, but it indicates that there must, some time before this, have been some parting of the ways. All this indicates that the Derry radicals were less easy to control than in other areas; not only were they young, but they were exposed to ideas beyond the control of the republicans or of the communists.

Those involved in housing agitation in Tyrone looked to the Derry activists 'for guidance and solidarity' and the 'the CSJ approached the DHAC for support'¹³⁸ for the Dungannon march. A bus load of supporters was dispatched from Derry and the DHAC featured prominently in the Dungannon march.¹³⁹ The DHAC now called on 'the NICRA executive, to host a similar demonstration' in Derry. Conn McCluskey recalls how the Derry Civil Rights Association was 'little more than the [Derry] Housing Action Committee wearing other hats'.¹⁴⁰ In fact the idea of a civil rights march in Derry seems to have come from Eamonn Melaugh and NICRA agreed to the route proposed because none of them were from Derry and thus did not understand 'that it was unheard of for a non-Unionist procession to enter' the Diamond.¹⁴¹ Here once again the political consequences of an ignorance of local conditions were to play a key role.

¹³⁶ Coiste Seasta minutes 27 May 1968.

¹³⁷ Ard Comhairle minutes 12 April 1969.

¹³⁸ Ó Dochartaigh, F., *Ulster's White Negroes*, online.

¹³⁹ *United Irishman*, September 1968.

¹⁴⁰ McCluskey, C., *Up Off Their Knees*, pp. 110-1, see also Moloney, E., *A Secret History of the IRA*, p. 354.

¹⁴¹ McCann, E., *War and an Irish Town* (London, Pluto, 1980) p. 37.

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It was in immediate reaction to the baton-charging of the Derry march that the People's Democracy was established on 9 October.¹⁴² The unrest in Derry also led to the foundation of the Derry Citizens' Action Committee (DCAC) –also on 9 October¹⁴³ - which brought into being the nucleus of what would become the Social Democratic and Labour Party¹⁴⁴. New political formations were emerging. As Finbar O Docherty put it 'October 5th 1968 would be entered in the pages of history as a major watershed' because 'at long last the local people of Derry would arise from almost fifty years of relative slumber'. And this awakening was very far from being under republican or communist party control. If the civil rights movement was understood as a republican/ communist conspiracy, not only is it true, as Purdie concludes, that 'no conspiracy, no matter how subtly conceived, could have foreseen the consequences',¹⁴⁵ but the actions of the key initial actors, many of whom were republican or socialist (as likely to be Trotskyist as Stalinist), were far more spontaneous, 'localist' and informed by the *Zeitgeist* of '68, as being inspired by the theoretical ruminations of C Desmond Greaves, Tony Coughlan or Betty Sinclair. As former senior Stormont civil servant Ken Bloomfield has written, 'just as in the Europe of 1848 and 1989, something in the Europe of 1968 was stirring'.¹⁴⁶ Politics were taking on a momentum of their own.

The *United Irishman* of January 1969 announced in front-page banner headlines 'Republicans to contest mid-Ulster'. It reported that Kevin Agnew, 'a member of the Executive of the Civil Rights' Movement' had been unanimously selected as the candidate at a Convention in Cookstown on 23 November. It was pointed out that Tom Mitchell had won the seat twice previously. Austen Currie's intention to stand 'on a vigorous

¹⁴² Cameron Report 2.12.194 & Purdie, B., *Politics in the Streets*, pp. 205-7.

¹⁴³ Cameron Report 2.12.205 & Ó Dochartaigh, F., *Ulster's White Negroes*, online.

¹⁴⁴ Ivan Cooper was first chair of the DCAC, John Hume was vice chair.

¹⁴⁵ Bob Purdie 'Was the civil rights movement a republican/communist conspiracy?' in *Irish Political Studies* (1998, Vol. 3, pp. 32-41) p. 40.

¹⁴⁶ Bloomfield, K., *Stormont in Crisis: A Memoir* (Belfast, 1994) p. 98.

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attendance policy' was noted – and condemned as appearing 'as if the Nationalist Party want to repeat the spoiling tactics of 1956 and prevent the assured victory of a Republican abstentionist candidate'. Currie's offer to stand down in favour of an agreed candidate was also condemned as an attempt to make himself 'the kingmaker in Ulster politics'.¹⁴⁷

Unfortunately the type-setting at the *United Irishman* made a mess of the dates here. The Cookstown Convention was actually held on 23 December,¹⁴⁸ and had not gone according to plan. At the first Ard Comhairle meeting following Forrest's death the question of the by-election had been vigorously debated. Malachy MacGurran, the organiser for Ulster, explained that a meeting of the Regional Executive had issued a statement saying that the Republicans were contesting Mid-Ulster and that a convention to choose a candidate would be held in Cookstown on Monday 23 December.

Tomas MacGiolla reminded him that six months previous when the possibility of a by election in Mid-Ulster had first arisen, it had been decided then to try to find a candidate acceptable to all non Unionist opinion. Kevin Agnew gave it as his opinion that 'if a Republican Abstentionist candidate were put forward there would be no Republican Movement in Mid-Ulster in a month's time'.¹⁴⁹ Tom O'Connor, Dennis Cassin, Liam Cummins and Tomas Misteil concurred with this analysis. However there was a problem as Sean Garland pointed out - it was not possible under the Sinn Féin Constitution to put up an attendance candidate and suggested that an agreed candidate be sought.

Tomas MacGiolla pointed out that not just Mid-Ulster but the movement in the whole country would be split if an attendance candidate stood, and that the Ard Comhairle had to make decisions on a national, not local basis. However he agreed that 'it would be political suicide to put up an Abstentionist

¹⁴⁷ *United Irishman*, January 1969.

¹⁴⁸ Bowyer Bell, normally a well informed source, probably using the *United Irishman* as his source, also gives the mistaken date of 23 November for the meeting, See Bowyer Bell, J. *The Secret Army*, p. 359.

¹⁴⁹ Ard Comhairle minutes 22 December 1968.

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candidate'.¹⁵⁰ He suggested that a candidate be sought such as Fred Heatley or Frank Gogarty 'who would be amenable to Republican policy, of good standing in the Civil Rights movement and not member of any particular party, who would get the support of both Nationalists and Republicans'.¹⁵¹

Eamon MacTomais wanted Tom Mitchell to stand on an abstentionist ticket. While Seamus Costello, almost inevitably, 'suggested the convening of an Extraordinary Ard Fheis to discuss the whole question and decide for or against abstention'.¹⁵² He was supported by Paddy Callaghan and Derry Kelleher.

After further discussion it was proposed by Sean Garland seconded by Roy Johnston that

After the convention in Cookstown we issue a Press Statement to the effect that a Convention had been held and election machinery set up but that we are anxious to preserve the unity of the anti-Unionist forces which has been demonstrated in the Civil Rights campaign, we are prepared to meet other interested parties before announcing the name of our candidate and his policy.¹⁵³

The purpose of this was to allow time to meet the other interested groups to try and find an agreed candidate. It would also discourage other non unionist parties from putting forward candidates. It was also proposed that the Ard Comhairle would empower Tomas Misteil, Cathal Goulding, Malachy MacGurran, Liam McMillen, Tomas MacGiolla, Frank Donnelly and Pat Coyle, together with two others to be selected at the Cookstown Convention, to arrange meetings with other interested groups to try to get an agreed candidate. The Ard Comhairle was to have final decision on the acceptance of the candidate.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

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An amendment to this was proposed by Eamon MacTomais, seconded by Marcus Fogarty, 'that the Republicans contest Mid-Ulster on an abstentionist policy'.¹⁵⁴ This amendment was lost by 5 votes to 13 and the original proposal was carried by 12 votes to 5. Seamus Costello, seconded by Paddy Callaghan, then proposed that 'if the Convention in Cookstown asks for an extraordinary Ard Fheis to discuss the abstentionist policy that this request be granted by an Ard Comhairle at the earliest possible date'.¹⁵⁵ However, this resolution was lost by 7 votes to 12. The following Ard Comhairle meeting, on 4 January 1969, was to learn that things had not gone to plan in Cookstown.

A report was given of the Convention in Cookstown. The Convention had not accepted the Ard Comhairle decision but had decided to contest the seat on an abstentionist basis with Kevin Agnew as the candidate. According to Bernadette Devlin, who went to the convention but was refused entry, Tom Mitchell had 'refused to stand, except as an attendance candidate. The abstentionist tactic had been overplayed, he said ... a lot of the delegates followed Tom Mitchell's line, and the arguing went on for hours ... When stalemate between the abstentionists and the attendance faction was reached, one of the big guns of the party got up and said the official policy was still abstention and anyone who worked against it should get out. Rather than risk a split, everyone fell into line'.¹⁵⁶ The Ard Comhairle also heard that three people from the constituency, unnamed in the minutes, had come to Dublin for discussions. They had met Tomas MacGiolla, Seamus Costello and Cathal Goulding and were anxious to put up a Civil Rights candidate. It is possible that they had John Hume in mind. Hume, according to Devlin, 'might have been accepted by all the disunited forces of the opposition', but had 'blotted his copybook' in republican eyes by standing 'against the socialist programme of Eamonn McCann', in the Stormont election in Foyle.¹⁵⁷ Austin Currie had also come

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Devlin, B., *The Price of My Soul*, p. 160.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 161.

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down with two councillors. He wanted the republicans to withdraw their candidate in favour of himself.

There were two questions to be decided by An Ard Comhairle

- (1) Whether we wanted the election contested.
- (2) Whether we accepted the candidate selected.¹⁵⁸

After some debate it was proposed by Seamus Costello seconded by Mairín de Búrca

That we adhere to our own decision that we use the fact that Kevin Agnew is standing as a bargaining weapon and that we carry on looking for the best unity candidate. If we fail to find an agreed candidate we do not contest the seat. That the Coiste Seasta now take over the task of seeking an agreed candidate.¹⁵⁹

This would have been a popular move with broader non-unionist/civil rights opinion, but attracted an amendment proposed by Eamon MacTomais, seconded by Sean Garland, ‘That if we do not get an agreed candidate we do not leave the field open to the Nationalists in general and to Currie in particular and that we contest on an abstentionist policy’.¹⁶⁰ The amendment was put to a vote and carried by 9 votes to 8, despite the twin dangers inherent in it of being highly unpopular and of handing the seat to the unionist candidate. The motivation could have been either dislike for the nationalists, or a simple desire to contest a seat that republicans had consistently contested in the last six elections in that constituency. The former seems more likely given the ‘personal animosity’¹⁶¹ that existed between Agnew and Currie. The RUC, on the other hand, were ignorant of this ‘animosity’. A police report dated 29 August 1968 was

¹⁵⁸ Ard Comhairle minutes 4 January 1969.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ard Comhairle minutes 4 January 1969.

¹⁶¹ Devlin, B., *The Price of My Soul*, p. 162.

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prepared for the Minister of Home Affairs, William Craig, by the then inspector general of the RUC Albert Kennedy 'It has become clear that Mr Currie has aligned himself with noted republicans in this area... It is at times difficult to determine where his loyalties lie'.¹⁶²

A Coiste Seasta meeting on 27 January heard that some movement had taken place in relation to an agreed candidate. It was reported that a Frank Morris had sought an interview with members of An Ard Comhairle to discuss Mid-Ulster by-election. (This may well have been Frank Morris from Donegal, formerly of Saor Uladh and an early Provisional.¹⁶³) Seamus Costello and Malachy MacGurran 'would see the proposed agreed candidate at the weekend to ascertain if she would agree to stand for Mid-Ulster'.¹⁶⁴ The pronoun is revealing. Although 'she' is not named, 'she' could only have been Bernadette Devlin.¹⁶⁵ Despite possibly having found an agreed candidate it was also agreed to ask Kevin Agnew to hold an initial election meeting to start his election campaign. This may have been too much for some. On 28 January, 1969, six prominent republicans from Co Tyrone resigned. They gave as their reason their 'disillusionment with the leadership' over its

inability to face up to the present political situation in the six counties and from the complete disregard for the advice of the Northern leadership when decisions concerning the area are being taken.

They felt that 'the abstentionist policy bears no relevance to conditions in 1969 and that an abstentionist candidate in Mid-Ulster would hand the seat to the Unionists, which 'would be a

¹⁶² Quoted in *The Irish News*, 2 January 1999.

¹⁶³ See Bowyer Bell, J. *The Secret Army*, pp. 316 & 368.

¹⁶⁴ Coiste Seasta minutes 27 January 1969.

¹⁶⁵ Devlin herself states that 'from Christmas to February 1969 hints were being dropped [by republicans] that Bernadette Devlin might be the person to force a wedge between Agnew and Currie and hold the seat'. Devlin, B., *The Price of My Soul*, p.162.

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disaster for the Civil Rights movement'.¹⁶⁶ As Bowyer Bell points out these 'were no fair-weather Republicans. Tomas O Connor was a member of the Ard Comhairle of Sinn Féin and the others held significant Republican offices'.¹⁶⁷ Tomas O Connor had, in fact, been Chair of the election convention that had chosen Agnew. Patsy McDonald and Brian Quinn were members of the Six County Republican Executive, and McDonald was secretary of the Mid-Ulster election committee. Aloysius Molloy had stood as a republican in the 1964 Westminster General Election in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Paddy Coyle was vice chair of the Mid-Ulster election committee, and 'Kevin Malone [sic] Chairman of the Coalisland branch of the Republican movement'.¹⁶⁸ Patterson argues that Abstentionism 'was not a point of principle'¹⁶⁹ for all those who resigned, citing the example of Kevin Mallon who subsequently joined the avowedly abstentionist Provisional republican movement. This may be an accurate assessment, but it is also possible that other factors, such as the events of August and later, had some bearing on this. What these resignations do reflect is northern disaffection with the leadership.

Support for ending Abstentionism did not always, paradoxically, equate with support for left-wing politics. Agnew himself had also been opposed to an abstentionist standing in Mid-Ulster, but appears to have been of a decidedly nationalist bent and his most celebrated comment during the Mid-Ulster by-election campaign was that he would prefer to see grass growing in the streets of Cookstown than see British forces there¹⁷⁰. He

¹⁶⁶ *United Irishman*, February 1969, *Irish Times* 29 January 1969, quoted in Bishop, P., & Mallie, E., *The Provisional IRA*, p. 87 & Bowyer Bell, J. *The Secret Army*, p. 359. The six involved were Tomas O Connor, Patsy McDonald, Paddy Coyle, Brian Quinn, Kevin Mallon and Aloysius Molloy.

¹⁶⁷ Bowyer Bell, J. *The Secret Army*, p. 359.

¹⁶⁸ *United Irishman*, February 1969.

¹⁶⁹ Patterson, H., *The Politics of Illusion*, p. 108.

¹⁷⁰ There is some disagreement as to whether he said this in relation to Maghera or said it at a meeting in Magherafelt in relation to Cookstown. See Devlin, B., *The Price of My Soul*, pp. 160-1 & McCluskey, C., *Up Off Their Knees*, p. 72.

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was also reputed to have said that he did not want to see factories in Mid-Ulster if the Union Jack was flying over them.¹⁷¹

Before Bernadette Devlin could be asked if she would stand, she had to be contacted, but Seamus Costello reported to the Coiste Seasta meeting on 10 February 'that he had been unable to contact either Bernadette Devlin or Malachy MacGurran in Belfast so that it was still unknown if she would stand for Mid-Ulster'. At the same meeting Sean Garland reported on a meeting in Tyrone. 'There was, he said, little sympathy for Tom O'Connor but some support for Austin Currie'. This meeting also 'unanimously agreed that the Northern directorate should issue a statement saying that the People's Democracy programme was worthy of support with qualification on their outlook on Partition'.¹⁷²

The Coiste Seasta had wanted a meeting with the Six-County Regional Executive on Friday February 28, but this had been cancelled 'on request of the Northern members'. The northerners had instead suggested that the Coiste Seasta should meet them in Derry on Sunday March 16. This meeting had also to be postponed due to security concerns about the entire Coiste Seasta going North. Seamus Costello proposed instead that 'the meeting take place on Sunday March 23rd in the Oriel Hotel, Monaghan',¹⁷³ and this was agreed

Things were to change somewhat in the interval. Tomas MacGiolla was able to tell the next Coiste Seasta meeting on 11 March that Bernadette Devlin had been 'contacted and asked if she would stand as a Unity Candidate for Mid-Ulster. She had declined to do so'.¹⁷⁴ Devlin herself records that 'two delegates from the Republican Party' visited her 'early in March' with a proposition: if she would say she would stand 'Kevin Agnew would withdraw and they would see that Austin Currie did too'.¹⁷⁵ At some stage between Forrest's death and 16 December

¹⁷¹ McCluskey, C., *Up Off Their Knees*, p. 72.

¹⁷² Coiste Seasta minutes 10 February 1969. For PD Policy see *Irish News* 10 February, 1969

¹⁷³ *Ibid.* 3 March 1969.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 11 March 1969.

¹⁷⁵ Devlin, B., *The Price of My Soul*, p.162.

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1968, an approach to Conor Cruise O'Brien to stand in Mid-Ulster was considered.¹⁷⁶ O'Brien, in his memoirs, refers to 'four senior republicans from Derry' inviting him 'to run for mid-Ulster in the coming elections'.¹⁷⁷ O'Brien claims that he 'was tempted' and 'might have accepted', but then Devlin herself sent a message 'Tell that man to keep his hands off my seat', in response to which O'Brien's backers, 'faced with Bernadette's wrath', withdrew.¹⁷⁸ This is unclear but seems to indicate that the election in question was not the 1969 by-election, but a subsequent General Election. Tony Coughlan, however, has a clear recollection of talk of O'Brien standing in the by-election.¹⁷⁹

An indication of discord in the civil rights leadership was the resignation from the NICRA, on March 14, of John McAnerney, secretary, Fred Heatley, treasurer and founder; Betty Sinclair, former chairman and Dr Raymond Shearer, on the question of NICRA support for a proposed PD march. The route of the march, on March 29, was through Belfast to Stormont and was in opposition to the Public Order (Amendment) Act.¹⁸⁰ 'Heatley later admitted that he had acted on impulse and McAnerney, shortly before his death in 1970, also agreed that the resignations were foolish and unnecessary at that time'.¹⁸¹ Sinclair had stood for re election as Chairman at the AGM on February 16th and 'received only two votes. One of the PD people got it (Frank Gogarty)'. The republican members of NICRA had 'voted against Betty'. This was despite the fact that Cathal Goulding had assured Mick O'Riordan of republican support for Sinclair, 'it had the status of an "order" but they

¹⁷⁶ Johnston, R., *Century of Endeavour*, p. 239.

¹⁷⁷ O'Brien, CC, *Memoir: My Life and Themes* (London, 1999) p. 326.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ "I do remember that there was a lot of searching for a possible candidate for mid-Ulster. There was even serious talk of approaching Conor Cruise O'Brien to stand as a unity candidate! I remember Desmond Greaves hearing this somewhere and chortling at it". Tony Coughlan to Sean Swan, 27 October 2005.

¹⁸⁰ Arthur, P, *The People's Democracy, 1968-73* (Belfast, 1974) p. 61.

¹⁸¹ "We Shall Overcome" *The History of the Struggle for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland 1968 - 1978 (NICRA, 1978)*.

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disobeyed'.¹⁸² It is worth noting in passing that the Ard Comhairle had considered Frank Gogarty as a possible candidate for Mid-Ulster as he 'would be amenable to Republican policy, of good standing in the Civil Rights movement and not member of any particular party'.¹⁸³ Gogarty was, in fact, a member of the Belfast WTS.¹⁸⁴ On 19 January the Coiste Seasta had, while discussing the upcoming NICRA AGM, agreed that 'it was vital that 15 radical marchers be elected to the Executive of the NICRA at its AGM'.¹⁸⁵ Two interpretations are possible here: either the northern republicans active in NICRA ignored, or disobeyed Dublin, or the republicans were not being truthful with the communists.¹⁸⁶

At the Coiste Seasta meeting following the meeting in Monaghan it was reported that members of the Coiste Seasta would be 'meeting representatives of interested parties to discuss implications of the recent resignations from the NICRA Executive'.¹⁸⁷ According to Roy Johnston these 'interested parties' would 'undoubtedly have been the Communist Party trade union activists, on whom we were dependent for the preservation of the fragile cross-community composition of the NICRA executive'.¹⁸⁸ Tony Coughlan's view is that one of the weaknesses of NICRA was that the communists kept it at arms length, 'leaving it all to Betty Sinclair'.¹⁸⁹ It was also reported to the Coiste Seasta 'that the Republican Movement should

¹⁸² C Desmond Greaves' diary, quoted in Johnston, R., *Century of Endeavour*, p. 252.

¹⁸³ Ard Comhairle minutes 22 December 1968.

¹⁸⁴ Purdie, B., *Politics in the Streets*, p. 130.

¹⁸⁵ Coiste Seasta minutes, 19 January 1969.

¹⁸⁶ Tony Coughlan has made the following comment on this point: "You remark . . . : "Either the northern republicans active in NICRA ignored, or disobeyed Dublin, or the republicans were not being truthful with the communists." My opinion, for what it is worth, is that neither of those explanations is true, but that what actually happened on the ground was a result of much confusion and it may well be that we do not know all the relevant facts. I do not think that what happened bears the weight of your generalization above". Tony Coughlan to Sean Swan, 27 October, 2005.

¹⁸⁷ Coiste Seasta minutes 24 March 1969.

¹⁸⁸ Johnston, R., *Century of Endeavour*, p. 253.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with Tony Coughlan, Dublin, October, 2004.

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withdraw from the [Mid Ulster] election without indicating support for any other candidate'.¹⁹⁰

The convention to select the candidate was finally held on Wednesday April 2. The Coiste Seasta had decided that 'Kevin Agnew should not attend ... but republicans could attend as private individuals without claiming to speak for the Movement' The Coiste Seasta also issued 'a statement to the effect that no member of the Mid-Ulster election committee or Kevin Agnew had been invited ... and that Republicans were not taking part in it'.¹⁹¹ In fact the republicans 'steered clear of the Unity Convention, but they had no intention of seeing political initiative escape them. They went to the electoral division meetings, voted for Kevin Agnew, and got themselves elected as delegates to the convention'.¹⁹² Two days before the convention the Coiste Seasta 'agreed that Kevin Agnew should withdraw ... It was also agreed that Sean Garland & Tomas MacGiolla should attend the conference'.¹⁹³

At the conference the names of the candidates were taken alphabetically. A man read a letter from Kevin Agnew.

In view of the disunity which has been created in Mid-Ulster in recent weeks by the activities of some people ... who are intent on nominating a candidate to oppose me – thereby splitting the anti-Unionist vote – with the authority and consent of the Republican movement and the Mid-Ulster Election Committee, I have decided to withdraw from the contest.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Coiste Seasta minutes 24 March 1969.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 11 March 1969.

¹⁹² Devlin, B., *The Price of My Soul*, p. 168.

¹⁹³ Coiste Seasta minutes 31 March 1969.

¹⁹⁴ Quoted in McCluskey, C., *Up Off Their Knees* (Conn McCluskey and Associates, 1989) p. 73.

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In response to this Currie, who was present, announced that ‘in the light of Mr Agnew’s withdrawal, I also will withdraw’.¹⁹⁵ This only left Devlin, who was duly nominated.

Easter Sunday fell on April 6 and the orations given provide an interesting snap-shot of republican thinking at this time. Speaking in Belfast Sean Garland stressed the need of the Civil Rights movement to ‘attract into its ranks people from all sections of the community regardless of class or creed’. He went on to stress the need for Protestant/Catholic unity:

Unless and until the NICRA is able to re-create that unity of purpose and discipline of action as the Protestant and Catholic working-classes of this city of Belfast in particular showed in the early part of this century and as they again showed in 1932 when Orangemen and Republicans fought shoulder to shoulder against their common enemy there can be no hope of success.

He went on to add that

Fully supporting all the demands of the Civil Rights movement, Republicans must press on with the primary task facing the Republican Movement – that of ending British domination of our country and to force the withdrawal, by any and every means in our power, of British troops and to smash for ever the suffocating stranglehold of both a native and foreign class over our particular economic affairs.
¹⁹⁶

An obvious question is how compatible were the twin aims of uniting the Protestant and Catholic working classes, and breaking the link with Britain? The previous November the PDs had accused Jack Lynch of attempting ‘to make capital out of the

¹⁹⁵ Devlin, B., *The Price of My Soul*, p. 168.

¹⁹⁶ *United Irishman*, May 1969.

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civil rights issue in Northern Ireland by linking it with the question of partition'.¹⁹⁷

Cathal Goulding made clear the republican view of the civil rights movement. It had 'succeeded, in a matter of months in causing widespread division within the Unionist party' and of attracting to itself 'the notice of a sympathetic world'. The success of the civil rights movement had 'been due more to the brutal and repressive response of an arrogant regime than to any other single factor'. Thus the 'place for civil rights is in the streets'. Goulding's view of marches and the desirability of moderation differed markedly from that of those who had resigned from NICRA. He warned that the 'Danger of betrayal must be recognised and this comes from those who appeal for moderation'. It was the 'green Tories', not Betty Sinclair and co, who were Goulding's target, but in condemning 'moderation' he was, intentionally or not, condemning both.

Goulding stated that 'the words "civil rights" have a meaning outside the Six County context', and called on republicans, trade unionists and others to 'unite with the recently formed Citizens for Civil Liberties and fight the Criminal Justice Bill and the anti Trade Union Bills'. This was an attempt to extend civil rights agitation to the South.

The March issue of the *United Irishman* had declared on its front page that the 'scene of action for civil rights may soon switch from the North to the South'¹⁹⁸ in reaction to three controversial pieces of legislation then before the Dáil: the Criminal Justice Bill, the Trade Union Bill and the Industrial Relations Bill. In fact, a PD civil rights march from Belfast to Dublin was due to arrive in Dublin the following day, Easter Monday¹⁹⁹. The Coiste Seasta had been aware of this march since at least March 11, but its attitude to it is uncertain.²⁰⁰ The *United Irishman* claimed that Dublin had expected that the

¹⁹⁷ Arthur, P, *The People's Democracy*, p. 53. See also Purdie, B., *Politics in the Streets*, pp. 220-1 for PD disapproval of the linking of civil rights to partition.

¹⁹⁸ *United Irishman*, March 1969.

¹⁹⁹ Arthur, P, *The People's Democracy*, pp. 52-5.

²⁰⁰ Coiste Seasta minutes 11 March 1969.

march 'would prove to be the spark which would ignite the flame' of civil rights in the South. But it 'did not happen'.²⁰¹ Goulding concluded his oration by conceding that there was 'a certain amount of truth' in the claim that the goal of a Workers' Republic 'may be said to be a new departure'. In the past republicans had 'made the mistake of concentrating on armed force to the exclusion of all other aspects of republicanism' As a result of this 'the fight for freedom became isolated from the philosophy of freedom'. For Goulding this was 'the greatest of our past mistakes and the main reason why we have failed to bring our fight to a successful conclusion'.

The IRA Easter Statement made no mention of Northern Ireland. It was entirely focused on the three Bills referred to above, the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement, the 50th Anniversary of the First Dáil and the 800th Anniversary of the conquest. It concluded with a call for support for its programme of 'economic resistance, political action and military action in pursuit of ... a 32 County Workers' and Small Farmers' Republic'.²⁰² There was little original in it except for the concept of a 'Workers' and Small Farmers' Republic'.

The Mid-Ulster Election Result

Writing of the February 1969 Stormont General Election, Purdie detects little sign of any cross-community support for civil rights candidates.²⁰³ Unfortunately his point is marred by a mistaken assertion that 'Bernadette Devlin in South Londonderry' got much the same vote as 'the Nationalist candidate who had fought the seat in the 1965 general election'.²⁰⁴ In point of fact the Unionist candidate, Major Chichester-Clarke, was returned unopposed in the 1965 general election.²⁰⁵ It is not easy to judge the degree of cross-community support for the PD in the February general election

²⁰¹ *United Irishman*, May 1969.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ Purdie, B., *Politics in the Streets*, pp. 219-20.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p. 220.

²⁰⁵ Walker, B. M., *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland*, p. 77.

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for a combination of reasons 1) Four²⁰⁶ of the eight seats in which they stood had been uncontested in 1965. This makes comparison of results impossible 2) In none of the other four seats were nationalists and unionists standing against each other 3) The unionist vote was split between pro and anti O'Neill unionists. In Down South there had been a straight fight between a nationalist and a unionist in 1965, while in 1969 it was between a nationalist and the PD. However, due to the low turnout of 54% (down from 58% in 1965) and the absence of a unionist candidate in the field, it is all but impossible to say what comprised the PD vote of 4,610. It is quite possible that this vote contained a Protestant element, but, given the low turnout it need not have. It was even possible, in Down South, that the entire 54% turnout was Catholic. Sinn Féin had, surprisingly, taken little interest in this election beyond instructing the Northern directorate to issue a statement saying that 'the People's Democracy programme was worthy of support with qualification on their outlook on Partition'. Republicans in Northern Ireland were instructed 'to support selected candidates'.²⁰⁷ It was the Mid-Ulster by-election, not the Stormont General election, which was exercising republican minds.

The Mid-Ulster by-election was held on April 17 1969. Due to the nature of the seat and the contest, it is possible to make something close to an empirical examination of the denominational factor in this election. The result was.²⁰⁸

	Vote	% of total electorate	% of turnout
Devlin	33,648	48.78	53.34
Forrest	29,437	42.68	46.66
Total	63,085	91.46	100.00
Majority	4,211	6.1	6.68

Mid-Ulster electorate in 1969: 68,973, turnout 91.46%

²⁰⁶ Three held by unionists, Bannside, Lisnaskea and Londonderry South; and one, Fermanagh South, by a nationalist.

²⁰⁷ Coiste Seasta minutes 10 February 1969.

²⁰⁸ All figures relating to election results in Mid-Ulster are compiled from Walker, B. M., *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland*, pp. 24-7.

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The question of how deep sectarian polarisation was at this stage is obviously relevant. There was a profound difference in comprehension as to what constituted ‘sectarianism’. There is intentional sectarianism and functional sectarianism. The former constitutes bigotry, the latter arises when an organisation or group is composed, even if unintentionally, almost exclusively of members of only one sect. Devlin was not intentionally sectarian in Mid-Ulster, but her support was functionally sectarian. Devlin proved her non-sectarian intent by speaking in Protestant areas. Protestants understood her presence not as a non-sectarian gesture, but as an invasion of their territory by the ‘other side’, and stoned her for her trouble.²⁰⁹ At one level Devlin appears to have been fully aware that, whatever the intention, her support was totally Catholic. She recounted how at the first Unity Convention ‘packed with Catholics ... a Protestant was discovered’, it was a member of the Liberal Party, Claude Wilton, who was not even from the constituency (in fact, Wilton, a solicitor, had stood as a Liberal candidate in the Londonderry City constituency in the February Stormont general election. He was also a member of the Derry Citizens’ Action Committee²¹⁰). Despite this ‘the hall went into raptures: “We’re not sectarian! We have a Protestant in our midst”’.²¹¹ A more thoughtful reaction would have been to ponder the fact that in a constituency where Protestants constituted around 47% of the population, a large ‘non-sectarian’ meeting attracted only one Protestant – and he a Liberal politician who was not even from that constituency. The anomaly of Wilton’s presence confirmed the functional sectarianism of the meeting at least as much as it disproved any intentional sectarianism.

Despite the non-sectarian aspiration, Devlin herself seems to have accepted – however reluctantly – that her perceived status was that of ‘the pan-papist candidate’.²¹² Paul Arthur makes a relevant point in relation to the limitations of the rather

²⁰⁹ Arthur, P., *The People’s Democracy*, p. 56.

²¹⁰ Ó Dochartaigh, F., *Ulster’s White Negroes*, online.

²¹¹ Devlin, B., *The Price of My Soul*, p. 165.

²¹² *Ibid.* p. 170.

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naïve ‘socialism’ of the PD (and others) and the rise of Paisleyism:

While it [PD] was prepared to accept credit for radicalising a section of the Protestant working-class it could not conceive that this radicalism need not be socialist.

[...]

What the PD argument succeeds in doing then is to knock away all the props of tradition and institution which gave the Protestant working class its sense of identity and dignity and replace it with an unsophisticated version of crude Marxism.²¹³

The fact that Northern Ireland was a creation of Protestant unionism and that much of its anti-democratic and sectarian nature was a function of the existence of a large non-Protestant, non-unionist minority within its borders made any attempt to democratise Northern Ireland necessarily ‘sectarian’ in function, whatever about intent. Democratisation, whether by NICRA, London or anybody else, would inevitably be viewed as an attack on Protestant interests and resisted as such. This was the contradiction at the heart of Northern Ireland in 1969

In 1969, Devlin wrote that the fact that the Civil Rights Association was ‘a Catholic movement’ had ‘been better appreciated by the Paisleyites ... than by the civil rights supporters’.²¹⁴ In fact ‘the civil rights campaign had never been [a] united working-class struggle’.²¹⁵ Eamonn McCann echoed this:

Everyone applauds loudly when one says in a speech that we are non sectarian we are fighting for the rights of all Irish workers, but really that’s

²¹³ Arthur, P., *The People’s Democracy*, p. 88.

²¹⁴ Devlin, B., *The Price of My Soul*, p. 154.

²¹⁵ Milotte, M., *Communism in Modern Ireland*, p. 283.

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because they see this as a new way of getting at the Protestants.²¹⁶

The Mid-Ulster electorate in 1969 numbered 68,973. There was a 'natural Catholic majority of about 4,000';²¹⁷ this would give a religious breakdown of Protestants 32,486 (47.1%) and Catholics 36,486 (52.9%). Turnout in the by-election was 91.46%. Assuming that turnout was evenly spread, the number of Protestants voting would have been 29,712 and the number of Catholics 33,370. These figures are not exact because the size of the Catholic majority is not known exactly, it is given as 'about' 4,000; it is also possible that there was a slight variation in turnout between Catholic and Protestant²¹⁸ given that Anna Forrest, the Unionist candidate, did not campaign, while Bernadette Devlin, the Unity candidate, campaigned extensively. To compensate for these factors it is best to allow a margin of error of plus or minus 0.5% of the turnout (that is, plus or minus 315) The Protestant vote can thus be best estimated as between 29,397 (29,712 minus 315) and 30,027 (29,712 plus 315), and the Catholic vote of between 33,055 (33,370 minus 315) and 33,685 (33,370 plus 315). Anything outside this range could be considered as indicating some deviation of the voting from a purely sectarian pattern.

The actual result was Devlin 33,648 and Forrest 29,437, which is within the margin of error and argues strongly that voting patterns followed denominational lines almost absolutely. Devlin herself claims that 'the election results showed quite clearly that I had about 1,500 Protestant votes',²¹⁹ but this is

²¹⁶ *New Left Review*, 1969, No. 55, p.6.

²¹⁷ Contemporary BBC news coverage, 17 April, 1969. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/april/17/newsid_2524000/2524881.stm.

²¹⁸ There is some tentative indications that Catholic turnout may have been higher than the 91.46% average, 'in Carrickmore there was said to be a 97 percent poll, in Gortin 98, in Pomeroy 95' McCluskey, C., *Up Off Their Knees* p. 74.

²¹⁹ Devlin, B., *The Price of My Soul*, p. 170.

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plausible only if almost exactly the same number of Catholics had voted for Forrest – an unlikely coincidence.

What the Mid-Ulster by-election demonstrated was a) that politics was polarised on sectarian lines, and b) that the electorate had been highly politicised (compare the 91.46% turnout in 1969 with 83.92 in 1966, 85.11% in 1964 and 70.96% in 1959). Even in 1955 when Mid-Ulster had witnessed two tightly fought straight fights between Sinn Féin and Unionists, turnout had not reached 90%. Because the increase in turnout seems to represent a fundamental increase in the non-Unionist vote (48.78% of the total electorate in 1969, as opposed to 40.07% in 1966 and 41.12% in 1964) it seems likely to conclude that the high turnout was a result of the Catholic electorate becoming energised. This was the reverse of the 1959 General Election when turnout was only 70.96% and the non-Unionist vote dropped to 21.27% of the total electorate.

If the intention was to unite the Protestant and Catholic working-class, it was not only failing, but having the converse effect. The aim of splitting the Unionist Party was being fulfilled, but only because this was part of the earthquake which was shaking all existing political structures. The Nationalists had suffered setbacks in the February Stormont Election. The republican movement itself was to succumb within a few months to the same disintegrative process, even Fianna Fáil did not escape unscathed. And none of this was a leap forward into a brave new world of modern politics. Rather it represented the resurgence of the traditional. Paisley was exactly what Jack Bennett had described him as – the embodiment of traditional unionism. The UVF had made a bizarre and bloody reappearance in 1966, and traditionalist republicans would shortly form the Provisional IRA. Mixed in with the traditional was the new and mixtures of the old and new. Without warning, the PDs had sprung up from nowhere. Coughlan's plan was fine, as long as everything stayed the same. When the pieces on the chessboard began to move independently, nefarious forces and 'agents' were deemed to be at work. The plan did not allow for autonomous social forces responding independently to changing social realities

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There are many explanations offered for this ‘awakening’ of northern nationalism at this particular time, but it is worth noting that nationalism was on the rise throughout the British Isles at this time. As a result of a series of by-elections²²⁰ in 1966 and 1967, it was becoming clear, particularly to Scottish and Welsh Labour MPs,²²¹ that ‘for the first time, both in Scotland and in Wales, nationalism has become a force to be reckoned with’.²²² Considerations of space did not permit a fuller exploration of this aspect, but, in one sense, the civil rights movement can be understood as part of a larger British, or, more correctly, *Celtic*, nationalist revival.²²³ And Unionism was far from immune to this, Chichester Clarke told Jim Callaghan that unionists were as determined to have their own government at Stormont as the South had been to have its own government in 1919, and that Callaghan should consider how the British had been unable to prevent them.

I assumed the implication of this was that the suspension of Stormont might lead to the sort of rebellion that the British Government had had to deal with from 1919 to 1921, only this time it would be the Ulster Volunteer Force who would be doing the shooting rather than the IRA.²²⁴

²²⁰ Particularly Carmarthen, in July 1966 when Gwynfor Evans of Plaid Cymru took a safe Labour seat; Hamilton in November 1967 when Winifred Ewing did the same for the SNP, and Rhondda West in March 1967, when Plaid reduced a Labour majority of 18,888 to 2,206.

²²¹ Two of whom raised the issue in the *Political Quarterly* - E. Hudson Davies ‘Welsh Nationalism’ in *Political Quarterly*. (1968, Vol. 39, Issue 3. pp. 322-333); and J P MacKintosh, ‘Scottish Nationalism’ in *Political Quarterly*. (1967, Vol. 38, Issue 4. pp.389-402).

²²² E. Hudson Davies ‘Welsh Nationalism’ in *Political Quarterly*. (1968, Vol. 39, Issue 3. pp. 322-333) p. 322.

²²³ The rise of Celtic nationalism was watched with approval by the communists, see ‘The Rise of Celtic Nationalism’ in the *Irish Socialist*, December 1968.

²²⁴ Callaghan, J., *A House Divided: The Dilemma of Northern Ireland* (London, 1973) p. 27.

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It is not altogether impossible to conceptualise Paisleyism as representing part of the wider nationalist awakening. If the similarity is not immediately obvious, it is because of the distorting nature of the balances of power at work which meant that Ulster Protestant nationalism, except *in extremis*, found functional expression in unionism.

Reaction

*A civil rights march from Burntollet Bridge to Derry had been banned, and as a token protest some people sat down in the street in the centre of the city. A few Paisleyites came out and the usual scuffles started.*²²⁵

This is Bernadette Devlin's account of the start of trouble in Derry on April 19, 1969. Within two weeks 'Free Derry' would have re-emerged, British troops would be sent to Northern Ireland, there would be a series of explosions at public utilities and Terence O'Neill, the Stormont Prime Minister, would resign. Responsibility for the explosions was unknown at the time, but some of them, such as 'Silent Valley', were carried out by the UVF and were designed to appear to have been the work of the IRA. 'Mr Porter [Robert Porter, Stormont Minister for Home Affairs] said last night [21 April] that the police had evidence that the IRA was responsible for recent incidents, particularly the explosions'.²²⁶ But they weren't.

Much of this was a prelude to August. The civil rights movement used "diversionary tactics" to withdraw the police from Londonderry ... at Belfast, Omagh, Lurgan and Dungannon'.²²⁷ According to the *Newsletter*, 'Belfast was the flashpoint where two police stations were stoned'. The demonstration had been organised by the Belfast Housing Action Committee.

²²⁵ Devlin, B., *The Price of My Soul*, p. 171.

²²⁶ *Belfast News Letter*, 22 April 1969.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

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Divis Street was the main point of civil rights unrest and just before 10 pm about 50 “enthusiasts” broke away from the marching 2,000 coming down after lodging a protest at Springfield Road police station. They stormed down on what looked like a defenceless station at Hastings Street and broke many windows ... Then out came about 50 members of the police riot squad ... and the mob ran back towards the main body at Divis Towers.

Belfast Housing Action Committee stewards who had organised the demonstration called on the runners to stand their ground and not be afraid of “the Paisleyites”.²²⁸

In the wake of the Derry violence, Bernadette Devlin and Ivan Cooper demanded the introduction of Direct Rule.²²⁹ Northern Ireland was on the brink of melt-down as it headed into the summer marching season. Frank Hegarty in the May 1969 issue of the *United Irishman* warned that the ‘ONLY danger is allowing the confrontation to develop into a direct Catholic-Protestant fracas’.²³⁰ But how could this be avoided, and what should be the republican response were it to occur?

Frank Hegarty in the June ‘Northern Letter’ pointed out that:

the Northern problem is more complex. It is not completely a class struggle: it is not singularly a religious divide. It is a mixture of both. People with a strong religious belief will often accept the crumbs from the better off so long as their particular beliefs are protected.²³¹

²²⁸ ‘Bombs hurled at riot police’, Ibid.

²²⁹ Walsh, P., *Irish Republicanism and Socialism*, p. 92.

²³⁰ *United Irishman*, May 1969.

²³¹ Frank Hegarty, Northern Letter, *United Irishman*, June 1969.

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This was a relatively new assessment. It gave some recognition to the power of identity as a political factor and to the fact that identity could over-ride economic considerations. But this still remained within the context of broader ‘civil rights’ thought. The solution was deemed to lie in raising social services in the South to the same level as in the North and deleting Article 44 from the southern Constitution.²³² This would remove some of the factors arguing against Irish unity in Protestant eyes, but still did not create any pull factors in favour of unity. The roots of these assumptions lay in a selective and wishful reading of Tone and Connolly – particularly of Tone – and in the failure to accept that the political and social factors at work in the 1960s were radically different from those at work in the 1790s. The communists could do little to bring clarity to this situation because ultimately they sprang from the same origins as did the republicans.

²³² Ibid.



A history of the Official Irish Republican movement, from the IRA's 1962 ceasefire to the Official IRA's permanent ceasefire in 1972. The civil rights movement, the outbreak of violence in August 1969, the links with the communist party, the Official IRA's campaign, the ceasefire, and later developments towards 'Sinn Fein the Workers' Party' are explored.

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