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UP OFF THEIR KNEES

THE SPIRIT of resistance of the Dungannon Homeless Citizens League, of the newly elected councillors of the town, of the Campaign for Social Justice and later of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, gave new heart to the minority community. The first success was undoubtedly when Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-Operative Society gained control of the Toome Eel Fishery. This valuable resource had been owned by London eel merchants who required local men to obtain permits to fish the Lough. Many boats operated illegally. The conflict between water bailiffs and the fishermen had been going on for nearly three hundred years.

Mainly through the efforts of a Dungannon solicitor, Paddy Duffy, a Co-Operative was formed in midsummer 1965. It obtained a twenty per cent stake in the Toome Eel Fishery. In 1971 the 300 fishermen were in the last stages of a negotiation to buy the syndicate outright when the Government stepped in and, with enabling legislation virtually in place, was about to take over the remaining eighty per cent of the shares. Father Oliver Kennedy, a local curate, who had been playing a major role in the affair, aided by Paddy Duffy, took a strong line with the Government who, rightly estimating that if they tried to railroad the fishermen they would have a stiff fight on their hands, withdrew their bid. On 15 December 1971 the fishermen become the sole owners of the eel fishery. Since then it has grown from strength to strength.

Searching around for a project to give employment to the many Dungannon jobless, a local curate, Father Austin Eustace, hit on the idea of a cut glass factory. After months of research he was in a position to ask people to invest in his idea. This they did with exceptional generosity, money

coming in from rich and relatively poor. Before long Tyrone Crystal was in operation, ambitiously working all the procedures from the original 'gather' of molten glass to the lead crystal wine glasses, decanters, vases, bowls and other novelty items.

Unfortunately Father Eustace was trained to preach the Gospel and not to run a modern factory. The inevitable happened. The financial position deteriorated to over a million pounds of debt. At this stage the British authorities, through the Ulster Office, took a hand, and promised that they would pay the bills provided an efficient management was in charge. Closure was thus prevented when Edendork Co-Operative took over. The managing director of this concern was a dynamic young man, Pat Killen, who had put the parent company on its feet. Supported by a progressive Board of Directors, his almost unlimited energy was matched by his co-director and personnel manager, Patsy McCooey's deep understanding of what made Dungannon tick. The result has been that Tyrone Crystal is now a factory with an almost world-wide market. The workers are now well paid and the investors are receiving dividends.

Quietly and almost unnoticed, a third concern was forging ahead. Named Powescreen, its first activity was the fabrication of elevators and sand screening equipment. However, this multi-million pound company, employing a large workforce, now has interests in the United States and also engages in real estate deals.

These are Tyrone successes but all over Northern Ireland nationalist men and women were moving upwards in Government offices such as Departments of Environment, Economic Development and the Health and Social Services. Older supporters of the civil rights movement have noted that these thrusting younger people are slow to admit that their progress was only made possible by the exertions of the movement. Talent in the old days before Britain took over from Stormont was seldom rewarded in the minority community.

The injustices in local authority housing had long been generating anger in Northern Ireland and here again Dungannon led the field. Father Eamonn Casey, founder of the Catholic Housing Aid Society in England, visited us. For the first time we became aware of Housing Associations, which

were common in England. There they receive government approval and support, local authorities sometimes vesting land on their behalf. Dungannon and District Housing Association was formed in 1963 when nine business and professional men from the area got together. They included in their number an architect, a solicitor, a builder and an accountant. The organisation joined the British National Federation of Housing Associations. Four pieces of ground were purchased in Dungannon and Coalisland. We expected obstruction from the Urban Council and it was not long before it surfaced. At Cunningham's Lane the plan for 100 houses was rejected on a question of density. At appeal, at which density was fixed, neither the Council's architect nor their engineer made any mention of a difficulty about sewage disposal, yet when the house plans were again submitted with the amended density they were rejected because of alleged sewage problems. After a great deal of pressure and delay, permission was granted for thirty-six houses on this site. This small number was all that was allowed on the seventeen acres which the Association had purchased. The fact that these houses were not opened till December 1970 is some indication of the obstruction which had to be overcome. Meanwhile two pieces of ground in the Dungannon area were obtained in the rural area. Running true to form, the Tyrone County Council refused the planning application and was so obstructive that these sites had to be abandoned. Sixteen houses were planned for Coalisland and these went ahead. But the show piece of the early efforts, involving self help, was undoubtedly the Cunningham's Lane houses, named the Gortnasaor estate. Building began in March 1969. Each of the thirty-six lucky residents, several of whom belonged to the Homeless Citizens League and had taken part in the squatting operation, worked fifteen hours a week to reduce the costs. Each home had three bedrooms, a garage, central heating, and cost about half the usual market price. In ten years time all loans were to be repaid and the residents would own their homes. The opening was performed with a great flourish by Cardinal Conway who referred favourably to the £70,000 in loans granted by the Ministry of Development, loans which I am quite sure would not have been available in 1963 when we started. Later, houses were built at three other sites in rural Tyrone. The

Housing Association is still in being and active, and the idea has now been taken up all over the North. There is an interesting postscript to the whole affair. The members of the Housing Association have watched with enormous satisfaction how very many of the original builders of Gortnasaor, who had slaved so hard in their off-time to build the houses, have now sold them and gone up-market, several to luxury homes. The desire of Peter Gormley, Brian Gregory and the others 'to get the people up off their knees' has been well justified, although there is still a considerable way to go.