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THE DUNGANNON AFFAIR

IF ON the morning of Tuesday 28 August 1963 the citizens of Dungannon had known the implication and the upshot of what had happened the night before in their town, the temptation would have been, either to have pulled the bedclothes over their heads and stay where they were or to think of changing their place of residence forthwith. As it was, they arose for the day and gradually picked up some very odd vibrations from the community. It happened like this.

In the centre of the province of Ulster, Dungannon was an average country town with, at that time, a population of around seven thousand, half Protestant, half Catholic. There were two textile factories, both Protestant owned, and the upper echelons of the workforce were virtually all Protestant. The larger shops were mainly Protestant owned and staffed. A few Catholic owners were in business in a smaller way. The best and largest farms were owned by Protestants. There were four Protestant banks and one Catholic. Protestants dominated the health services and the hospital, the Ministry of Labour, Post Office and Electricity Board. Most lower-status nurses, lesser artisans and labourers were Catholic. There was a reasonably mixed spread of schoolteachers, solicitors, and medical practitioners in private practice, but no Catholic accountants. Only in the Golf Club did the middle class of both persuasions associate as equals. Boys going to the famous Dungannon Royal School, founded in 1615, could look forward to a more promising future than the students of the corresponding Catholic grammar school. Needless to say the outcome of all this was that Catholics were inferior creatures and felt themselves to be 'second class citizens'. During the emotive annual July marching season Catholics withdrew

further into their shells, and were frequently reminded by the Orange brethren of their subordinate position.

The most crushing handicap of working-class Catholics at that time was the housing shortage. The town's gerrymandered electoral system consisted of three wards, two of which were controlled by the Unionists (Protestants). There was no points system for housing allocation, tenancies being assigned in the Unionist ward by the Unionists, and in the one anti-Unionist ward by the Nationalist (Catholic) councillors. Since no new houses had been built in the Catholic ward, the only houses on offer there were re-lets. This arrangement invited abuse because there was no local government election of anti-Unionist councillors. They were merely selected by the local Nationalist MP to the Stormont Parliament, the late Joe Stewart. The position was that, to control voting strength, no Catholic family had been allocated a permanent house for thirty-four years. Young newly-weds were compelled to move in with in-laws and keep their wedding presents under the bed. This usually worked until the second child arrived, when family tensions began to mount. In some cases families had been waiting as long as twelve years for a home. As a medical practitioner myself, I had close contact with several of these people and could clearly observe their suffering. There was one particularly bad case of overcrowding in the town where a large private house had been indifferently converted into eight flats. In one of these, ten people were living in one room. The strain on young mothers trying to maintain order and a degree of quiet, where most facilities had to be shared, was very great. Men on night shift work found it impossible to sleep. One young mother took a drug overdose and was removed to hospital. Something had to be done. A few married women called a meeting which was chaired by a local curate. Banded together as the Homeless Citizens League, a committee was formed, led by a dynamic and personable young woman, Mrs Angela McCrystal. It was agreed that statistics should be assembled and a further public meeting should take place in a week's time. The gathering assembled but neither the curate nor the public representatives turned up. After a delay of an hour, by which time the mothers were becoming distraught, my wife, Patricia, fearing that the impetus of the new movement might be lost, decided to take a hand. She had

attended the meeting only as a concerned person and never spoken before in public. In a state of righteous anger she mounted the stage and called the meeting to order. A new era of public protest was born!

The sixty-seven members of the Homeless Citizens League began to mount pressure against the Council. First there was a picket outside the Urban Council offices, placards were carried, television and newspaper reporters were on hand, the police did not interfere and the atmosphere was cordial. A deputation from the League was heard by the Council but was refused any of the 142 council houses just completed in a Unionist ward. These were subsequently allocated mainly to Protestant newly-weds. There was nothing for it but to begin protest marches around the town. The first of these took place in June 1963. They were sad but impressive turnouts, the women in their Sunday best, children walking and in prams. Stragglers were marshalled by Patricia. Here and there was the odd husband looking hangdog in his unwelcome notoriety. Police permission had been obtained and the demonstrators were led by the Irish National Foresters brass band. Regrettably the marches were not supported by the Catholic middle class. They obviously could not bring themselves to associate closely in those testing times with the 'lumpenproletariat' of the housing estates.

By now Ireland, North and South, was aware of the problem but still the Council stubbornly resolved—no houses for Catholics. This could no longer be borne.

At this stage it was being put about by hardline Unionists that the Homeless Citizens League was a bunch of ragamuffins. The Unionist local newspaper, the *Tyrone Courier*, on 6 June 1963 published an interview with the eight committee members and included a large photograph where it was plain to see that these were dignified and attractive women.

There was an estate of pre-fabricated bungalows at Fairmount Park, just vacated by those who had been allocated new houses. The 'prefabs' were to be dismantled and sold as outhouses or henhouses, although they were in a reasonable condition, neatly painted and papered inside. There was water laid on with a back boiler in some. In fact they were in as good condition as hundreds of similar ones occupied by families in Derry, Belfast and many other towns. The League

held a late-night meeting on 27 August, chaired by Patricia, at which a decision was taken to do nothing. At about two o'clock the following morning Brian Morrison, a Nationalist councillor rang Patricia, 'Mrs McCluskey, Mrs McCluskey, the whole town is on the move!' The next morning when we awoke we were told that seventeen families had squatted in the 'prefabs'. Horror, astonishment, elation!

The Council cut off electricity and water supplies but the latter was reconnected when the illegality of this action was pointed out. Relatives of the squatters rallied round and also a small number of middle-class people provided food, blankets, bedding and oil heaters, the last being very necessary since there were small children and a few infants amongst the new tenants. Soon the squatters, looking youthful and tidy, were joyously explaining their position to the newspapers and television interviewers. During the following fortnight, under cover of darkness, groups of two or three families loaded their belongings on vans and lorries and moved in by the light of candles. They carried children and furniture into the first real home most of them had possessed since they were married. The Unionist Council chairman, the late Senator William Stewart, blustered and threatened to remove the squatters from the housing list. The Council contemplated ejection proceedings. At this juncture the Stormont Government agreed to become involved, and a delegation from the squatters was invited to the Parliament buildings to meet the Minister of Health and Local Government, Mr William Morgan. The delegation consisted of Maurice Byrne a local dentist, the late Christopher Mallon, solicitor, and myself. We were armed with a detailed and carefully researched dossier.

To satisfy the press and more especially to reassure the squatters we took a formal departure from the Fairmount Park estate. All the new residents and their friends were assembled to see us on our way. There was an intense sense of occasion to be savoured and relished by Patricia and the three delegates. The shining eyes of the mothers showed that they were aware they were being swept along into an entirely new situation. Even the older children knew that something different was in train, while the younger ones were strangely quiet. The men, standing closely together, were talking and

smoking furiously. Also present was an occasional sombre grandparent. As we drove off a cheer went up.

Meanwhile the number of houses taken over had risen to thirty-five, accommodating 120 people. The *Belfast Telegraph*, a Unionist evening newspaper, which had recently become more liberal, produced a leader supporting the squatters. Mr Morgan could do nothing but allow them to remain. A new housing estate in the Nationalist ward was to be hurried to completion and the squatters were promised houses there.

Shortly after the 'prefabs' were taken over I had occasion to bring one of the local hospital consultants to visit a patient. It was a measure of the fear and distrust existing between the two communities in the town that he seemed fearful of entering the area—afraid to go amongst what were in reality a group of gentle matriarchs and their inoffensive families.

There was a happy sequel to the squatting operation when the Homeless Citizens League held a social to which Patricia and I were invited; Patricia was presented by them with an inscribed silver plate tea service, which, needless to say, she has come to regard as a valued possession.

General resentment had now built up, especially amongst the younger people, about the absence for the past forty years of any opportunity for the anti-Unionists to choose their councillors by election. Patricia went to see a resident of the town, Patsy McCooley, known even in those early days for his integrity. He suggested John Donaghy, a telephone engineer, and secondary school teachers Bríd McAleer and Peter Finnegan, as potential councillors. A public meeting was called in St Patrick's Hall where a strong impulse for change was indicated. The following were chosen to contest the seven seats in the anti-Unionist ward at the forthcoming election—Patricia, John Donaghy, Bríd McAleer, Patsy McCooley, James Corrigan outgoing member, Peter Finnegan and Angela McCrystal. The candidates selected as their slogan—'Vote for justice, vote for the team'. Opposing them were the Nationalists and Northern Ireland Labour.

The election itself, held in May 1964, was the most exciting and heartwarming event that Dungannon had seen for many a year. Turnout was just 97 per cent of the total voting population, Catholic and Protestant. As a man on a stretcher

was being carried past her, Sergeant Owens of the local RUC remarked to Patricia: 'There are as many miracles here as during biblical times!'

McCooney, Donaghy, Corrigan and Patricia were elected, as were James Donnelly and P.G. McQuaid, for the Nationalists, and John Murphy, Independent Labour. From then on, ordinary meetings of the Urban Council were to prove tempestuous affairs, with the Unionists using their gerrymandered majority, and not conceding a quarter of an inch in the matter of housing and council jobs. For example, by January 1967 only thirty-four Catholic families, compared with 264 new Protestant families, had been accommodated in permanent houses by the Urban Council since the last war. A points system for housing allocation was repeatedly rejected.

Bias at times bordered on farce. The newly elected Council met in 1965 to choose the members of the various Committees. Patricia's colleagues, indeed everyone else locally, were aware that she and I had done a reasonable amount of foreign touring, thus they proposed her name as the Council's representative on the Tourist Development Body for Northern Ireland. The Unionists rejected her, appointing instead a man whose claim to suitability was that he was an employee of Ulsterbus, and was involved in running the half-day Mystery Tours from Dungannon.

There was one very dramatic incident. Some houses were to be let. A large crowd had gathered outside the Council offices which were located on the first floor of a building in Dungannon Market Square. Police and the army were present. Senator William Stewart rose to propose an all-Unionist letting, and as he stood he was taken ill with an apoplectic seizure, and collapsed to the floor. Councillors rushed to throw open the window to give him air. This was done with such vigour that the glass shattered and fell to the street below. The public thought a fight had broken out. An ambulance arrived and removed the Senator to hospital.