

The History of the People's Democracy:  
civil rights, socialism, and the struggle against  
the Northern state, 1968-1983

Matthew Collins, BA, MA

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Supervisor: Dr Emmet O'Connor

I confirm that the word count of this thesis is less than  
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## Abstract

This thesis examines the history of one of the most active socialist organizations during the period commonly referred to as the Irish ‘Troubles’, the People’s Democracy (PD). It constitutes the first archive driven study of the PD, combining a rich body of primary sources with important oral testimony. Following an interdisciplinary approach and utilising work from various fields, including historiography, political science and sociology, this research covers some fifteen years of political activism, offering a unique look at the recent history of Northern Ireland through the prism of the radical left. The formative chapters consist of a detailed account of the emergence of the PD in 1968 and its role in the civil rights movement, showing how the PD drove forward the civil rights campaign in a radical direction. In doing so, these chapters strengthen our understanding of the socialist left in this complex social movement, they also challenge much of the existing academic literature, which tends to be under researched and suffers from a number of lacunas. The experience of repression that met the civil rights movement saw the PD radicalise, wherein it cohered into an organised political party, carrying out activity throughout some of the most tumultuous events of the Troubles, and helping to spearhead many of the most important campaigns of the 1970s and early 1980s, including the campaign against internment in 1971, and later protests around prisoners’ rights. This thesis chronicles the role of the PD in these movements and assesses the politics of the organisation, including its changing relationship with Irish republicanism. It provides a thorough account of the PD’s unique contribution to the history of the radical left in Ireland, from 1968 to the early 1980s, and therefore fills a significant gap in the historiography.

## Abbreviations

BICO – British and Irish Communist Organisation: a small but influential Stalinist organisation active in Britain and Ireland.

CDU – Campaign for Democracy in Ulster: a lobby group inside the British Labour Party that sought to challenge discrimination, founded in 1965.

CPNI – Communist Party of Northern Ireland: a member of the Communist International in Northern Ireland.

CSJ – Campaign for Social Justice: a pressure group set up to campaign against discrimination in Northern Ireland, founded in 1964.

HCL – Homeless Citizens League: a Dungannon based housing rights campaign in the 1960s.

INLA – Irish National liberation Army: a republican paramilitary group founded in 1974, armed wing of the IRSP.

IRSP – Irish Socialist Republican Party: a republican socialist organisation founded in 1974 by former members of the ‘Official’ republican movement.

IWG – Irish Workers’ Group: a small Marxist organisation in Ireland in the 1960s.

LAW – Loyalist Association of Workers: a militant unionist organisation of workers and trade unions, formed in 1971.

MSR – Movement for a Socialist Republic: a socialist and Trotskyist inspired organisation that united with PD in 1978.

NICRA – Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association: founded in 1967, NICRA was the largest coalition of civil rights groupings.

NRM – Northern Resistance Movement: founded in 1971 to campaign against internment and British military repression.

NILP – Northern Ireland Labour Party: the main labour and social democratic organisation in Northern Ireland, founded in 1924.

OIRA – Official Irish Republican Army: the second largest republican military organisation of the troubles.

PD – People’s Democracy: a student based civil rights organisation founded in 1968, which later morphed into a revolutionary socialist party.

PHRC – Political Hostages’ Release Committee: a campaigning organisation that agitated for prisoners’ rights.

PIRA – Provisional IRA: founded in 1969 after a split from the IRA, the PIRA was the most active republican paramilitary during the troubles.

RMG – Revolutionary Marxist Group: a Trotskyist group in Ireland founded in the early 1970s.

SDLP – Social Democratic and Labour Party: social democratic and Irish nationalist political party founded in 1970.

UDR – Ulster Defence Regiment: a regiment of the British Army in Northern Ireland, founded in 1970.

USFI – United Secretariat of the Fourth International: international Trotskyist organisation.

RAC – Relatives Action Committee: committee founded to campaign for prisoner's rights, established in 1978.

RCA – Revolutionary Citizens' Army: a small paramilitary organisation founded by PD members in the mid 1970s.

RRP – Red Republican Party: a small breakaway from the PD in 1976.

RSSF – Revolutionary Socialist Student Federation: a radical student organisation launched in Britain in 1968.

RUC – Royal Ulster Constabulary: the majority Protestant police force in Northern Ireland, established in 1922.

UDA – Ulster Defence Association: the largest loyalist paramilitary organisation during the troubles and founded in 1972.

UPV – Ulster Protestant Volunteers: a loyalist paramilitary group founded by Ian Paisley in 1966.

UVF – Ulster Volunteer Force: a loyalist paramilitary organisation founded in 1966.

UWC – Ulster Worker's Council: a loyalist workers' movement established in 1974.

YS – Young Socialists: the youth section of the Northern Ireland Labour Party.

YSA – Young Socialist Alliance: founded in 1968 by leftwing activists in Queen's University.



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### 1.1. Introduction: the changing question

Those remotely versed in the contentious history of Anglo-Irish relations should be familiar with the well-worn adage—which, if taken literally, must be recognized as containing a hint of colonial cynicism—that, ‘Every time the English tried to solve the ‘Irish question’, the Irish changed the question.’ Perhaps no grouping in the history of the Irish left sought to change the terms of the Irish question more fundamentally than the People’s Democracy (PD). First emerging as a loosely organized student protest movement in October 1968—during the height of civil rights agitation in Northern Ireland, and on the eve of the tumultuous and protracted period of violence now commonly known as the ‘Troubles’—the PD would become central to some of the most significant and contentious events in recent Irish history, including many that continue to be a source of dispute among historians and political scientists today. As a radical student ‘ginger group’, the organization played a key role in the Northern Ireland civil rights movement—a broadly supported campaign, seeking a series of reforms from the Unionist government—operating as its most militant and uncompromising wing, causing it to clash with its more moderate leaders in the process, and often providing the impetus for some of the period’s best known demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience.

The PD was an Irish expression of an international phenomenon, having been formed by a generation of young radicals inspired by the rebellious spirit of the sixties then sweeping the globe. It was born in the dormitories and halls of Queen’s University, exploding onto the streets of Belfast in 1968 through a series of marches and sit down protests, before entering the electoral field the following

year wherein it began to cohere into a more rounded political party with its own program and structure, and later going on to have a significant influence over a wide range of campaigns and social issues, including the mass resistance to internment and the removal of rights for prisoners, through to the intense period of political activity surrounding the hunger strikes. The PD, during this period, valiantly attempted to change the terms on which the Irish question could be answered, and sought a radical socialist solution to the century's old conundrum. In doing so, however, the group also began to radically change themselves as much as they altered the question; a key theme that I will explore throughout this thesis.

No understanding of the PD is possible without placing it within the wider material and political context that it emerged. Undoubtedly, however, chief amongst the precipitating factors was the emergence of the civil rights movement in the late sixties, that sought to challenge and dismantle the discrimination against the minority Catholic community. In 1933, Lord Craigavon, the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, described his government as 'a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant state,'<sup>1</sup> insinuating that the priority of his state was the welfare of the majority Protestant community, to the detriment of its Catholic minority. By the 1960s, the general feeling among Catholics was that little had changed since Craigavon uttered those infamous words, and there were increasing efforts to challenge discrimination. As television stations and local papers began to circulate news of the civil rights movement in America, a number of groups took inspiration from the black civil rights struggle and decided that a similar movement should be launched here. In 1967 the Northern

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast, Black Staff Press, 1992), p. 539.

Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was born: campaigning to reform the Northern state, through mass peaceful protest. Many of the leading figures within NICRA came from the more established political formations in the North, including the trade unions, the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP)<sup>2</sup>, the Nationalist Party<sup>3</sup>, and the Communist Party of Northern Ireland (CPNI)<sup>4</sup>. These organisations tended to be led by older, experienced political operatives, often quite cautious in their political approach, and wedded to an ideological outlook that had been formed over many decades. By contrast, the PD was almost exclusively made up of people in their teens and twenties, whose political worldview was likely to be more radical, possibly even less patient than the established left in the country.

It can be said, therefore, that the PD was both the youth wing of the civil rights movement, and also its far-left section. Among the generation of young people that formed the grouping, there was an almost universal belief that the old political questions were the property of the previous generations. Historic disputes over national reunification and the border, it was thought, were no

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<sup>2</sup> Formed in 1924 the NILP coalesced the most important political labour forces in the North. It had initially refused to take a position on the question on the border, but by 1949 the party voted in favour of the union with Britain. Aaron Edwards, *A History of the Northern Ireland Labour Party: Democratic Socialism and Sectarianism* (Manchester University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> The Nationalist Party in Northern was a successor to the Irish Parliamentary Party. Traditionally its elected representatives followed the policy of abstentionism, refusing to take their seats in the Northern Ireland parliament. In 1965 the party became the official opposition to the Unionist government. Brendan Lynn, *Holding the Ground: The Nationalist Party in Northern Ireland, 1947-1972* (Ashgate, Hampshire, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> The CPNI (later the Communist Party of Ireland) was the main organisation of the radical left entering the late 1960s. A member of the Communist International, it would play an important role in the civil rights movement. Mike Milotte, *Communism in modern Ireland: The pursuit of the Workers' Republic since 1916* (Dublin, Gill and MacMillan 1984).

longer relevant. The old political world was dying and the new one was being born. The PD was more interested in radical mass action. The first mass student ‘sit-down protests’ in Belfast were PD demonstrations, and civil rights activists would go on to utilize various forms of civil disobedience including marches, strikes and non-violent actions.

In the heady days of 1968, the PD began more as an idea than as an organization. It initially emerged as a ‘spontaneous’ student movement, bearing all the hallmarks of campus revolts in 1968—for example, a rejection of formal structure, organization, leadership and even, at times, politics itself—though at its core was a group of socialist activists who were distinguished by their emphasis on the *primacy of class politics and class struggle* in addressing the problems of sectarian division and discrimination in the North of Ireland. From the beginning, the organisation was built upon the ideal of ‘Protestant and Catholic’ unity, advancing from its outset the strategy of uncompromising, mass mobilization as a means to bring this to fruition. This thesis will argue that whilst the PD was not always successful in this goal—and indeed occasionally made mistakes that made it more difficult to achieve it—it was nevertheless one of the most ardent and sincere proponents of anti-sectarianism during the 1968-69 period, and that the tangible if temporary growth and success that it achieved was testament to the enduring possibility of socialist politics, even as the dark clouds of communalism gathered around them.

The PD began life, therefore, as a loose grouping with an aversion to ‘green’ and ‘orange’ politics. The experience of repression and sectarian violence that met the civil rights movement throughout 1968-69, however, would precipitate a major ideological transformation in the group, and an abandonment

of its earlier refusal to take a position on the national question. During the most violent years of the troubles—as the struggle to reform the state transformed into a struggle to overthrow the state—the PD began to see the solution to the crisis in the North as being one that necessitated a struggle to ‘smash the Northern state’ by any means necessary, as a prerequisite to the pursuit of a socialist Ireland. This did not automatically lead the group to abandon the ideal of class politics and Protestant and Catholic unity—though as this thesis will argue, this was ultimately its trajectory. But it did cause the group to confront all of the major questions that have historically faced the left in Northern Ireland. This thesis will focus around a number of these questions and the most pertinent are laid out below.

- How can class politics develop and can it overcome sectarian division? Examining the socialist left inside the civil rights movement, this thesis will address its potential in offering a different direction to oppositional politics in the North of Ireland in the late 1960s, and ask to what extent was the PD successful in pursuing class politics?
- Did the PD contribute to the rise of sectarianism during the crisis of 1969? By providing an in-depth look at political agitation from 1968 onward, this thesis will explore the strategies of tactics deployed by the PD and assess its role in the movement for civil rights.
- Is Protestant and Catholic unity possible within the Northern Ireland state? The Unionist state’s response to civil rights mobilisation centrally stoked opposition to the movement.

Research will chart this process and assess what approach should socialists take towards the Protestant working class.

- To what degree, if any, should the left support republican campaigns of armed struggle? Through a detailed look at the PD, this research will address the complicated connections that existed between the PD and the Irish republican movement.
- Exploring the broad theoretical standpoints central to leftwing politics during the troubles is crucial to this work. How did the PD define the Northern Ireland state? What was their approach toward British military intervention? How did they characterise the loyalist movement?
- Finally, this thesis will examine the relationship between the pursuit of socialist politics and the republican goal of Irish reunification; consequently, it will ask what was the relationship between class struggle and the national struggle during the most contentious period of the troubles?

In addressing these questions, this thesis offers a fresh assessment of the left in contemporary Northern Irish history. An examination of the role of the PD in the civil rights movement will show how the tension between class and communal politics existed at the centre of events during the outbreak of conflict. From 1968-69 the PD attempted to push class politics to the fore of the movement. Research contends that the politics and tactics of the PD were a central driving force to the civil rights movement, largely contributing to the movements' anti-sectarian character. Although the PD genuinely strove to put working class unity

at the heart of the civil rights movement, it ultimately ended amidst sectarian division and violence.

This thesis explains this process and highlights the problems that wracked the PD as political crisis developed across the North. Foremost among these was the sectarian opposition that faced the movement from the outset, a detailed account of which is presented ahead. Yet while this thesis places a significant focus on the challenging objective conditions that confronted the PD, it also contends that no history of the organisation will be complete without recognition of the subjective difficulties that imbued the movement; for example, in identifying how the loose and unorganised nature of the PD meant the group found it hard to offer practical leadership to the mass upsurge that erupted in the late 1960s, and in assessing how the PD was politically ill-equipped to confront the crisis that met the civil rights campaign.

In charting the role of the PD during the outbreak of the troubles, this research pays significant attention to the political shifts that the PD undertook during its efforts to build a current of socialist politics, and such an approach allows one to address many of the issues that have historically confounded the left. A principal challenge for the left has been to understand the nature of the Northern Ireland state and its relationship to the Protestant working class. The PD developed a notable critique of the Northern state, which defined it against other currents on the left, and which this thesis will explore.

The violent reaction that met the PD and the wider civil rights movement caused a serious re-think on the part of the PD, and led them to a position that the 'Orange state' must be challenged. Subsequently, the PD became defined by an



anti-partitionism and a rejection of Protestant working class agency, which was an inverted version of their earlier insistence that the national question did not matter. This thesis will document how the PD came to redefine the problem as originating from the strength of militant Unionism and its relationship to the British state. The fight against loyalist power and British imperialism thus necessitated an anti-imperialist struggle that was primarily geared toward national reunification.

This shift coincided with the upsurge of armed republicanism, and the relationship between the PD and Provisional republican ranks among the most interesting chapters in the interweaving history of socialist and republican movements in Ireland. Throughout the late 1970s, as the conflict continued and the republican movement waged a long military campaign, the PD saw the problem as lying with the failures of the 'anti-imperialist movement' and agitated for a left orientated mass national liberation struggle to pursue a 32-county socialist republic. In the post 1972 period horizons shrank for the radical left, and prospects for mass struggle waned. However, in the early 1980s the Northern state faced another period of instability brought about by mass popular protest against prison repression. The campaign against the H-Blocks represented the last significant outing of the PD, and the organisation played a pioneering role in this movement, which this thesis will document. The wider context was one where the republican movement began to embrace 'politics', and indeed adopt long held left-wing positions that the PD had previously championed, posing serious questions of identity for much of the 'anti-imperialist' left in Ireland. Ultimately, this process dwarfed the PD in the early 1980s, contributing to its long demise.

The main contention of this thesis is that the PD exercised an important influence over oppositional politics inside the Northern state throughout the recent conflict. Despite its small size the PD often punched above its weight, largely because it forwarded an approach that emphasised widespread social and political mobilisation. This allowed the PD to put mass protest at the centre of events, and an appreciation of this approach tells us something fundamental about how political change was enacted throughout the troubles. It also helps illuminate the importance of the politics of the PD, by drawing out the wider ideological influences that the organisation exercised upon larger forces. An account of the PD's role in the civil rights movement will show that the organisation was a crucial component to the social movement that erupted in the late 1960s. Further, this thesis will argue that the PD was among the most anti-sectarian political forces that existed in this movement, and against some of the most authoritative literature on the civil rights campaign, which advances a critical view toward the 'provocative' tactics of the PD— an ostensibly new approach, but one that, in regards to the PD at least, does not stray far from the official British government view of disturbances in the late 1960s<sup>5</sup>— this thesis suggests that any appreciation of the civil rights movement ought to assimilate the non-violent and anti-sectarian politics of the PD.

The impact of the PD is not, however, confined to its notable role in the civil rights movement. As the organisation developed it formed into an organised party and went on to have influence over a variety of campaigns and struggles. This thesis argues that PD continued to have relevance right up until the early

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<sup>5</sup> For the most authoritative recent interpretation of the civil rights movement, see, Simon Prince, *Northern Ireland's '68: Civil Rights, Global Revolt and the Origins of the Troubles* (Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2007).

1980s, when it influenced sections of the Irish republican movement. Ultimately, however, the form of socialism developed by the PD rendered the organisation incapable of sustaining itself amidst the changing political environment in which it operated. To draw out this history, this research combines a rigorous examination of political activism with oral testimony from former PD members.

The central rationale behind the thesis is that the PD has not been given sufficient academic attention. The history of the PD sheds light on a number of crucial junctures in Irish history, and this thesis seeks to illuminate its unique contribution, and to critically assess its impact on the history of Northern Ireland, and the politics of those behind it. Among a huge body of historical work that looks at the recent conflict in Northern Ireland, there is a tendency to overlook the ideas and role of the radical left. This is an obvious reflection of the historic weakness of the left in Ireland, but it also illustrates the attraction of narratives developed by the dominant nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist traditions surrounding the outbreak of conflict. Moreover, there exists an assumption that oppositional politics inside Northern Ireland is essentially torn between the armed tradition of republican militarism and constitutional parliamentary politics that rejects violence. This has been reinforced by a near two-decade long peace process that claims to have solved the Northern crisis, and asserts constitutional parliamentary politics above all else.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This has been popularized in the decades since the institutions established after the signing of the Belfast Agreement, which counter posed the violence of previous generations to new constitutional methods of politics, 'The Belfast Agreement' (1998), available online, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/136652/agreement.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/136652/agreement.pdf), accessed on 10/11/2016.

Yet any serious look at the history of Northern Ireland will show that political change is not as simple as that. The major moments of instability during the troubles saw widespread forms of political participation and action, the most obvious being the civil rights movement between 1968-69, but also during the mass civil disobedience movement from 1971-72, and later during the movement in support of republican prisoners from 1979-81. The PD is one political current that connects all of these periods and was defined by its emphasis on class politics and popular struggle from below as an alternative to either constitutional reform or armed deeds. PD activists played an important role in grassroots politics for over a decade during the Northern troubles and in charting this journey this thesis offers a critical assessment of the recent development of the Irish left and provides a new lens through which one can view the history of the troubles. That alone should justify this study.

Lastly, it should also be recognized that many of the issues that the PD sought to confront are still with us, and a critical understanding of their activities should be of both historical, and contemporary interest. On 6 May 2016, 73-year-old veteran socialist Eamonn McCann was elected to the Stormont Assembly. A central figure on some of the most contentious PD marches, McCann first ran for election to Stormont under very different circumstances in 1969 as a member of Derry Labour Party, during an election that propelled the PD onto the national political stage. McCann's election agent in 2016 was Bernadette McAliskey (née Devlin), the PD founding member who became an international figure in 1969 when she was elected to the Westminster parliament during the civil rights movement. Reflecting on his election McCann told one journalist,

I contested my first election in February 1969. Before this election I went into the attic in the house and found one of my original election posters. I campaigned then for a proper university for Derry, for improved railway travel, for an improved roads infra-structure and for more jobs. They were the exact same issues that I campaigned on almost fifty years later.<sup>7</sup>

The continuity that McCann suggests here brings new verve to the necessity of reassessing an organization like the People's Democracy, and breaking what McCann himself has described as the 'chronic insularity' of historiography surrounding the civil rights movement and the organisations that were part of it.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Irish Times*, 6 May 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Eamonn McCann, 'Civil Rights in an International Context', in *Spirit of '68: Beyond the Barricades*, ed. Pauline McClenaghan (Derry, Guildhall Press, 2009), p. 16.

## 1.2. Structure and methodology

The structure of this thesis is both chronological and thematic, interweaving key ideological, political and historical themes with more than a decade of PD activity, helping to illuminate the extent to which PD and its ideas impacted on society, then in turn exploring the impact of events on PD and its ideas. In doing so, this thesis will cover the PD's activity during a period of social and political instability—running from the birth of the civil rights movement and the founding of PD, through the beginning of the 'Troubles' and its relationship to the emerging violence in the North and related events such as internment, finishing with an assessment of its activity in the run up to the 1981 hunger strike—whilst providing an account of specific actions of the group, including its instigation of hundreds of marches, demonstrations and political actions, and the scores of campaigns (of varying size and influence) that it either launched or was central to. The PD also produced regular publications including a newspaper, pamphlets and journals, all of which provided a running commentary on the unfolding conflict in the North, and the changing perception of the group. This thesis, therefore, will critically assess how PD's ideas underwent a transformation, and will explore the factors that led to these important changes.

While this research lays the basis for an authoritative history of the PD, this thesis has not attempted to chart every element of PD activity, instead focusing on ideas, events, and campaigns that have a wider historical significance, providing a clear, critical and detailed account of PD's relationship to them. This research, therefore, is primarily concerned with the areas in which PD had social weight and was able to influence events, and ultimately the course

of history. Consequently, a significant portion of this thesis is devoted to the early years of PD, a period where the organisation had a greater impact on society than any other time, while the final chapter offers a longer summary of the demise of the group.

This chapter introduces the thesis and explores the methodology utilised ahead. The following subchapters offer an analysis of the literature on the PD, which are broadly broken up into two sections; the first assesses historiography on the PD during the upsurge of 1968 and the civil rights movement, while the second considers literature concerning the PD after the civil rights movement and into the later period of the troubles. The final section of this chapter offers a short historical introduction to the PD. Chapter 2 looks at the emergence of the PD in 1968; it considers the social and economic changes that gave rise to a student revolt in Belfast and analyses the international influences that shaped the group and the wider civil rights movement. Chapter 3 addresses the most widely discussed and controversial period of PD activity, including its role in the now infamous ‘Burntollet’ march. The crisis that followed this march would expose the sheer lack of strategy of the civil rights movement, and this is the focus of Chapter 4, which addresses the division among civil rights activists and how the PD related to this and the emerging violence of 1969. Chapter 5 begins by looking at the formation of the PD as a more explicitly socialist organization and its attempts to assert class politics against rising sectarian tensions. The second major phase of mass political activity during the troubles came to the North after the introduction of internment in 1971, and Chapter 6 charts the role of the PD in reigniting civil rights demonstrations through its contribution to the mass civil disobedience movement during this time. The final chapter takes a longer look at

the demise of the PD, and also pays considerable attention to the extent in which the PD influenced the changing politics of the Irish republican movement in the early 1980s.

Although the history of the left in the North of Ireland has not been subject to a high level of historical scholarship, there exists a rich body of activist accounts that encompass some of the most interesting books to emerge from the early troubles, though coloured by the particular political outlook of the individual authors. This fits into a wider continental trend, as Dr Chris Reynolds notes in regard to the broader European experience of 1968,

Given the immediacy of the urgency to understand, in many cases, it has been the very protagonists who have been central in forging the dominant narrative. This has inevitably led to a situation whereby, in each national setting, a specific representation, largely infected by former militants and actors from the time, has come to dominate how these stories are told.<sup>9</sup>

Many of the most popular accounts of socialist politics from 1968 onward come from the activists themselves, often in autobiographical form. Eamonn McCann's *War and an Irish Town* (1981) offers a lucid and highly readable account of the civil rights movement in Derry and the emergence of the troubles, from perhaps the most notable socialist activist in the city.<sup>10</sup> Bernadette Devlin's *The Price Of My Soul* (1969) gives the raw personal story of the young PD student activist

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<sup>9</sup> Chris Reynolds, *Sous les Pavés... The Troubles: Northern Ireland, France and the European Collective Memory of 1968* (Frankfurt am Main; Bern, Peter Lang, 2014), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (London, Pluto Press, 1981).



who inspired a generation, and offers important insights into the thinking of one of the PD's most known members.<sup>11</sup> Anniversaries of 1968 have also provided opportune moments for activists to reflect on that momentous year and the events that followed. PD leader Michael Farrell's *Twenty Years On* (1988) delivered an important retrospective of the civil struggle from various quarters, including; the radical left, republicans, student activists and the women's movement.<sup>12</sup> In similar manner the fortieth anniversary in Derry led to the publication of *Spirit of '68: Beyond the Barricades* (2009), which provided further reflections from participants in the civil rights movement.<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, some of the first academic authors who tried to come to terms with what happened in 1968-1969 were products of the post-war generation who came through the ranks of university in the 1960s and often were participants in PD activity, their contributions to the literature are considered ahead.<sup>14</sup> All of these works provide useful contributions to historical study in their own right, even though they present different, and at times conflicting, perspectives on events. But the passing of time, the opening up of state archives, and the more general body of sources that exist surrounding the PD allows a much more detailed and considered treatment of the PD.

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<sup>11</sup> Bernadette Devlin, *The Price Of My Soul* (London, Pan Books, 1969).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Farrell, *Twenty Years On* (Kerry, Brandon Books, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Pauline McClenaghan, *Spirit of 68': Beyond the Barricades* (Derry, Guildhall Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Both Paul Bew and Henry Patterson, two of Northern Ireland's most renowned historical scholars, participated in PD activity and went on to write serious contributions to the outbreak of the troubles. See, Paul Bew, Henry Patterson and Peter Gibbon, *The Northern Ireland State 1921-72, Political Forces and Social Classes* (Manchester University Press, 1979).

This thesis is the first archival-based history of the PD. It presents an interdisciplinary approach, utilizing secondary research from a variety of fields, including historiography, political science and sociology. It employs a wide-range of sources and primary material that form the basis of this research, including various newspapers from the period, personal memoirs, student documentation and government and police files. These are complimented by open-ended interviews conducted with surviving activists and members of the PD.

The bedrock of this thesis is made up of sources and documents from the PD itself, which traverse the different periods of the movement's development. Student documentation, leaflets, newsheets and personal papers pieced together in detail help illuminate the early phases of civil rights mobilization, which was decentralized and uncoordinated by its very nature. Newspaper reports from the period provide a wealthy source of information surrounding PD activity throughout a huge number of protests, demonstrations and other actions. Later, when the PD became a centralized organization, it began its own regular stream of publications and these provide the crucial sources from which one can ascertain the organizations activity, and its political line or perspectives. A plethora of PD publications exist that have received little academic scrutiny. The most pertinent of these include the organization's newspapers, which contain some of the first attempts at developing a Marxist understanding of the crisis in Northern Ireland in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> For all historians concerned with Northern

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<sup>15</sup> The most pertinent PD sources are those located in the Linenhall Library, including: *Free Citizen* (1969-71), *Unfree Citizen* (1971-79), *Socialist Republic* (1979-83), *PD Voice* (1969), *People's Democracy bulletin* (1985),

Ireland's troubled past, Belfast's Linenhall Library hosts a highly valuable and much utilised archive, in its Northern Ireland Political Collection, which has amassed hundred of thousands of files related to all areas of the conflict from 1968 onward. The collection includes various boxes related to the PD and other civil rights bodies, including campaigning material such as leaflets, newsletters, posters and internal documentation.

At governmental level the opening up of state archives over the past number of decades has released a large body of sources that provide an intricate look at both the inner workings of the Unionist state, and the role of the police force and security services during the civil rights upsurge. Records of the Northern Ireland Cabinet provide an internal view of what was happening at the highest level of the Unionist government, and the Ministry of Home Affairs files offer us insight into perhaps the most controversial branch of the state, which exercised wide responsibility for parading and public order affairs. Many of these sources are located in the Northern Ireland Public Record Office (PRONI), and police documentation is of particular importance in this regard. Extensive RUC files offer a snapshot of the security service's thinking throughout 1968-1969 illuminating the most contentious demonstrations, and the way in which the state treated both the civil rights movement and loyalist counterdemonstrators.

A crucial body of primary sources are the many interviews that contributed to the Cameron Inquiry, the British government's official

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*Andersonstown citizen* (1972), *West Belfast newssheet* (1972), *PD Hunger Strike bulletins* (1981), *An Reabhlóid* (1982, 1986), *Armagh Peoples Bulletin* (1971-1972), *Northern Informer* (1969), *Northern Star* (1972), *Resistance* (1972), *The People's Press* (1971), *People's Democracy London Bulletin* (1975), *Billy Liar* (1968), *Action for freedom* (1969), *Journal of Armagh PD* (1971), *Socialist Action* (1982-1987).

investigation into civil rights disturbances in 1969, of which the majority of files are now accessible in PRONI<sup>16</sup>. This inquiry was based upon scores of formal interviews with participants in events during 1968-1969, including civil rights activists, politicians and police officers, which constitute some of the most significant sources that illuminate what happened during the civil rights movement. The *Cameron Report* (1969) has been heavily cited throughout historiography, however, scholars have generally engaged with the findings of the published report—which are often accepted uncritically—as opposed to interrogating the many interview transcripts that are now deposited in archives, thus investigating the methodology and findings of the inquiry. This thesis has taken a different approach, and has benefited from a detailed examination of the Cameron interviews, which help expose the limitations to the conclusions contained in the Cameron Report surrounding the PD. This effort helps illustrate one of the central arguments made ahead; that historiography on the PD has been strongly influenced by the Cameron Report.

An obvious strength of this topic is that it covers a period of history within living memory, and this research has benefitted from 13 open-ended interviews conducted with surviving members of the PD and other civil rights activists. The generation who led civil rights agitation would go on to make an impressive contribution to Irish society, and today's former PD activists populate a variety of fields; they include, writers, journalists, solicitors, political activists and academics. The majority of those approached were open to being

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<sup>16</sup> *Records of the Governor of Northern Ireland*, Cameron Commission evidence submissions (1962-1969) PRONI, GOV/2.

interviewed about their time in the PD. Yet the nature of the Northern Ireland conflict confronts oral historians with obvious problems, and activists from various political traditions are often wary of being interviewed. The ongoing legal battle over the *Boston College Tapes*, the Belfast based academic project launched in 2001, in which a number of former republican and loyalist paramilitaries gave a series of candid interviews surrounding their role in the conflict, has created a somewhat hostile environment toward future oral archives concerning paramilitary activity during the troubles.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of the PD, the level of violence inflicted on civil rights activists remains an emotive subject for some. More importantly, the PD's later flirtations with paramilitarism meant that some participants were cautious of going 'on record' about certain elements of PD activity, and some would agree to do so only on the basis of remaining anonymous. Unfortunately, some of those approached were not willing to participate in this thesis, and these included key figures in the PD. Nevertheless, the pursuit of interviews proved fruitful and this thesis had managed to amass a notable body of oral testimony, all of which have complied with the universities ethical requirements.

The use of interviews warrants some engagement with the large body of literature surrounding the theory and practice of oral history. This thesis broadly accepts Paul Thompson's analysis of the subject, which presented oral history as a potentially radical method that can compliment a form of history from below. As Thompson put it, oral history can give a voice to those whose views and experiences may not normally be recorded or given preference; 'History

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<sup>17</sup> *What are the Boston College Tapes?* BBC News, available online, accessed on 2/1/17, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-27238797>.

becomes, to put it simply, more democratic.’<sup>18</sup> This seems evident even when looking at the limited development of oral history in the North of Ireland. In 1987, Munck and Rolston noted how oral history was in its infancy, not least because of how the historical establishment tended to ‘frown on oral evidence, clinging still to the apparent security of the archive and the public records office.’<sup>19</sup> Their work went on to help rediscover the social history of the 1930s in Belfast, and drew out the role of the radical left throughout that decade.

Such works angled against a well-established opinion within the academy— one that is often summarised by A. J. P. Taylor’s sceptical comment that oral history amounted to ‘Old men drooling about their youth’<sup>20</sup>—, and formed part of a wider generational shift that championed the importance of oral history as a tool to compliment and strengthen the discipline. Ronald Fraser argued that oral history should be seen, not as a substitute ‘but an adjunct of, traditional history; it functions with the interstices of the latter.’<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Thompson contended that many modern social and political upheavals were almost impossible to analyse solely through written records, citing the outbreak of the Irish troubles as a specific case.<sup>22</sup> Van Voris’ *Violence in Ulster: An Oral Documentary* (1975) was a pertinent example of how the history of the late 1960s and 1970s in Northern Ireland was brought to life through a range of fresh

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (New York, Oxford University, Press) p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Bill Rolston and Ronnie Munck, *Belfast in the thirties: an oral history* (Belfast, Blackstaff, 1987) p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: An Oral history of the Spanish Civil War* (London, Pimlico, 1994) p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 83.

interviews with political actors in this period. Since then, many studies concerning the political history of the troubles have utilised oral interviews.<sup>23</sup>

The use of oral history, however, also poses questions surrounding the reliability and accuracy of evidence. As Thompson points out there are general rules to be utilised in order to ensure a rigorous examination of information gathered through interviews, such as cross-referencing with other sources to seek clarification, to look for internal consistency, or to ascertain bias.<sup>24</sup> In many ways interviews present advantages to a researcher, for example, the subject can be cross-questioned and asked to expand on particular points of interest.<sup>25</sup> In approaching interviewees as 'living sources', one should be aware of the 'two way process' that exists between researcher and participants.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, the accuracy of the oral interview fundamentally rests upon the reliability of the memory process, and the further the subject period from the present, the higher the possibility of distortions, perhaps influenced by subsequent changes in norms or values, which might unconsciously alter perceptions.<sup>27</sup> There is a high level of consideration of these problems among academic literature, as interviews carried out some three to four decades after the event contain many potential pitfalls. Perceptions of the past are often influenced by historical hindsight and filtered through contemporary political viewpoints. However, provided one recognizes these potential weaknesses and allows such recognition to inform the interview process, oral testimony can provide us with a

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<sup>23</sup> W. H. Van Voris, *Violence in Ulster: an oral documentary* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1975).

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 102.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 149.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 110.

powerful tool to strengthen the practice of historical discovery.<sup>28</sup> It is also worth noting that although information ascertained during these interviews has been used throughout this thesis, oral testimony has not dictated the central arguments presented ahead, and therefore the ‘problems’ alluded to above are perhaps not posed as acutely within this research as they are in research primarily dictated by oral evidence. Finally, it is useful to quote Lynn Abram’s advice offered to oral historians embarking on the interview process, as a way of capturing the approach followed ahead:

The best we can do is create an environment in which a respondent can call up memories in a state of comfort, to provide the cues to the recall of memories which aid us in our research. Most respondents will do their very best to remember; they may struggle to recall every detail and have difficulties with chronology, but they come to the interview prepared to remember in a helpful way. The interviewer’s task is to facilitate their remembering and then, in our analysis, to consider the various influences that have shaped their recall. The important point here is that memory is not just a source; it is a narrator’s interpretation of their experience and as such it is complex, creative and fluid.<sup>29</sup>

Through such an approach one can glean relevant information that helps shed light on the history of an organisation such as the PD. There are obvious

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<sup>28</sup> For two of the best works on oral history see, Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, and Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (New York, Routledge Press, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 105.



limitations to relying solely on PD publications; this was a small organization, one that was continually ‘on the move’ politically, and reacting to events as they unfolded. One is therefore often forced to rely on a limited number of sources, perhaps a short newspaper article, for example, to glean the PD’s analysis at any given development. In this context oral testimonies can provide a rich source to illuminate or further develop areas of research. Testimonies from activists have been used to further draw out aspects of the development of the PD that have been primarily ascertained from documentary research. Of course all sources are susceptible to bias. Just as a party’s publication has its own political line to present, so does an established newspaper have its own editorial line and social influences, so too do government sources reveal perceptions associated with their own actions, interests and ideological standpoints.

Recognizing this is a central part of all historiography and the problems associated with research concerning a controversial movement such as the civil rights campaign are obvious. For example, a recurring feature that arises when researching civil rights demonstrations is the question of numbers on demonstrations, and one can often find contradictory claims of numbers of participants on any given protest, march or demonstration, which often reflects the source of the claim. Put crudely, establishment media outlets or oppositionist politicians tended to downplay numbers on marches, while civil rights activists had a tendency to over estimate numbers— presumably a result of each respective party’s own particular bias. The reality of numbers perhaps lies somewhere in between these claims, but the wider point is that a piece of research that covers many demonstrations runs into an obvious and recurring problem.

However, the primary intention of this research is not to ascertain accurate numbers for each demonstration, or to reveal the full story behind every political initiative, although this has been attempted to the extent in which the sources permit. Rather, it is to identify the political and ideological thinking behind such actions, what strategies informed the PD as they embarked on their actions, and to what extent were these successful? In combining how the ideas and actions of the PD influenced the process of historical change, this thesis offers a novel approach to the political history of Northern Ireland and fills a substantial gap in the existing literature.

### 1.3. Literature review: Interpreting the civil rights movement

There is a vast and impressive body of literature on the most recent phase of conflict in Northern Ireland, covering a range of disciplines.<sup>30</sup> By contrast the historiography surrounding the role of the left during this period is notable for its dearth and lack of scope. The size and influence of the radical left in Ireland has been limited by western European standards and although there exists a socialist and communist tradition stretching back decades, the social weight and strength of the organized left has been comparatively low, not least because of the seemingly insurmountable national divide and the extent of sectarian conflict in the North.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, in unison with much of Europe in 1968, the North saw a revitalization of the radical left and the grouping most politically and ideologically associated with this period of resurgent socialist activism was the PD.

Central to understanding the emergence of the PD is the international context. Although the global aspect of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement was obvious— Irish student activists were clearly inspired by the tactics of other European student revolts, which reached its peak in Paris during May 1968, and civil rights marches were consciously modelled on the black civil rights movement in the US—this relationship has rarely been investigated with any serious rigour, and there has been a lack of attention given to Northern Ireland in wider studies of the European experience of 1968. In his comparative

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<sup>30</sup> For a substantial review of literature surrounding the troubles, see, John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (New York, Oxford University Press 2003).

<sup>31</sup> For a contemporary appreciation of Ireland's revolutionary tradition see, Kieran Allen, *1916: Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition* (London, Pluto Press, 2016).

account of the student upsurge in Paris in 1968 and the revolt in Northern Ireland, Reynolds notes that while there has been a proliferation of scholarship around 1968 in Europe, Northern Ireland has largely been left absent from these works. Reynolds continues to provide a useful rectification of this trend.<sup>32</sup> There are other notable exceptions, including Ronald Fraser's *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt* (1988). This work shows how the PD represented the Irish version of a much wider international radical phenomena, but as the title suggests it specifically focuses on the role of students, and therefore neglects the role of other social forces in the radical movements that were emerging at his time.<sup>33</sup>

The most widely recognized influence upon the Northern Ireland civil rights movement was the black civil rights movement in the United States (US). Brian Dooley's *Black and Green: The Fight For Civil Rights in Northern Ireland and Black America* (1998) is not a work of academic history, but it goes some way to exploring the links between the Irish civil rights movement and its main source of inspiration in the US, although it perhaps overstates the point.<sup>34</sup> The connections between civil rights activists in Northern Ireland and other protest movements across the globe in the 1960s were always tentative, but they were most expressed in the radical student current that emerged in the PD. It was PD activists who made the most effort to study and model their actions upon the US civil rights movement, and they who were most clearly inspired by the internationalist movements of this period; from the anti-Vietnam War movement

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<sup>32</sup> Reynolds, *Sous les Pavés...* p 15.

<sup>33</sup> Ronald Fraser, *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt, An International Oral History* (Pantheon, New York, 1988). Also see, Prince, *Northern Ireland's '68*.

<sup>34</sup> Brian Dooley, *Black and Green: civil rights struggles in Northern Ireland and Black America* (London, Pluto Press, 1998).

to revolts in the Eastern Block, and new left challenges to free market capitalism in the western world.

Despite being an active organization throughout the most turbulent years of the Irish troubles, historical literature on the PD is noticeably undeveloped. What scholarship does exist is generally limited to looking at the PD in relation to the civil rights movement between 1968 and 1969, when the student movement was at its peak. Almost every academic work that examines the outbreak of conflict in Northern Ireland has made some form of reference to the PD, particularly with regard to its militant role in pressing ahead with civil rights protests at the beginning of 1969. No history of the period could pass over the high points of the PD protest movement, in particular the infamous ‘Burntollet march’; a key moment of the early civil rights movement.<sup>35</sup> Although the civil rights period has been accorded a respectable level of academic attention, this rich social movement is also conspicuously understudied. There are few major historical works addressing the civil rights movement, its origins, social roots and global influences.<sup>36</sup> The most authoritative accounts of the movement are dated and recent scholarship has tended toward focusing on how civil rights mobilization emerged more broadly, and later spilled over into violent conflict,

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<sup>35</sup> For a survey history of Northern Ireland, see, Jonathon Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast, Blackstaff, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting that the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association is yet to be the subject of a substantial academic publication, despite being one of the most important organizations of the late 1960s and early 1970s. For the organizations own official history see, NICRA ‘*We Shall Overcome*’... *The History of the Struggle for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland* (published by Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, 2 Marquis Street, 1978), available online, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/crights/nicra/nicra78.htm>, accessed on 8/8/2015.

as opposed to the actual political organizations that led the movement.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, within historical literature the PD arises as an important reference point, often focused on at key junctures, but there has been very little effort to focus specifically on the organization, taking its ideas and actions seriously. Any work that addresses the PD should have some sense of how the ‘new left’ experiments that emerged across Europe at this time made a significant mark on the body politic of various states. Italy and France in particular saw major civil disturbances, which included mass student protests and strikes, but across Europe, for example, in Spain, Greece and Portugal resurgent left movements emerged that often involved a rise of socialist activism on campuses that orientated to working class communities.<sup>38</sup> The PD did not rise on the same scale as many of these movements, not least because the major dynamic in Northern politics was not class politics, but sectarian division. Nevertheless, the PD joined a generational wave of protest and resurgent leftism that helped shape European politics for over a decade.

The only monograph devoted to the PD is Paul Arthur’s *The People’s Democracy 1968-73* (1974). Written by a former PD activist, this details the early years of the movement and contains an account of the PD’s origins and its contribution to the civil rights campaign. The book is useful for its documentation of a range of activism that was carried out by the PD in its early

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<sup>37</sup> Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites, Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles* (Cork University Press, 1997). Also see, Lorenzo Bosi, *Truly Days of Hope and Anger: the Northern Ireland civil rights movement as a case study in the development, outcome and legacies of social movements*, unpublished PhD thesis (Queen’s University Belfast, McClay library, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Chris Harman, *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After* (London, Bookmarks, 1998). Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth, *1968 in Europe: a history of protest and activism, 1956-1977* (New York, Palgrave and Macmillan, 2008).

years. However, it also suffers from the lacunas highlighted above. Although Arthur's study claims to be an analysis of the PD until 1973, in reality the book is heavily focused on the first two years of the PD's existence and the longer life span of the organization is deprived of serious historical treatment, with the post-1970 period being dealt with in a short postscript and conclusion. This is problematic in that it vastly overlooks some of the most significant periods of PD activism, particularly in relation to internment and its aftermath in 1971, and thus it fails to root the changing politics of the PD in its historical context. Instead, Arthur utilizes a somewhat abstract sociological model in order to explain the radicalization of the PD, which seems superimposed upon the movement and disconnected from the reality of the historical process. There is also a tendency to focus primarily on the PD's own actions during the civil rights period in order to explain the organizations fate, in a way that both downplays the repression that met the PD, and ignores the strategies of others on the left and thus the possibility of contingent outcomes during the civil rights movement.

Through this type of approach Arthur presents the PD as having transgressed from a legitimate 'fragment of that strong wave of civil rights agitation which protested against genuine grievances in a dignified manner', to being led by naïve radicals and ideologues who 'lacked a sense of proportion and perspective.'<sup>39</sup> The PD thus began life as an 'organization to be reckoned with', but as the civil rights campaign intensified it negated its original progressiveness,

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<sup>39</sup> Paul Arthur, *The People's Democracy 1968-73* (Belfast, Blackstaff Press, 1974), p. 101.

embarking on a ‘slow and ponderous’ journey toward the isolation of radical left politics.<sup>40</sup>

Ultimately the analysis presented by Arthur of the early period of the PD is a common one that is concurrent with many of the main academic works on the civil rights movement. Those works that have aimed to explain the role of the PD are almost all based on a similar perspective; advancing a hostile interpretation toward the politics and tactics of the PD that views the movement’s role as counterproductive, serving to push the civil rights campaign to the brink of disaster and provoke a violent response from both the state and the Protestant community. The dominance of this consensus itself says something about the way that historiography has drawn a final line under the role of radical socialists in the civil rights movement.

Among an academic community that was strongly shaped by the conflict that raged in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, much debate has ensued over the causes of the ‘troubles’ and historians have been keen to attach culpability to those seen to have brought about sectarian violence; toward this end the PD present an easy target.<sup>41</sup> On a basic level this seems to rely upon a process of victim blaming, in which civil rights activists are denigrated for having provoked sectarian violence, but it also involves a more specific

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>41</sup> Dan Finn provides an excellent critique of this tendency in, ‘The Point of No return? The People’s Democracy and the Burntollet march’, *Field Day Review* (Dublin, Field Day Publications, 2013).



argument that views the PD as having impeded the possibility of peaceful political transition at the beginning of the troubles.<sup>42</sup>

A brief survey of the literature illustrates this point. In his history of Ireland since 1939, Henry Patterson entertains the argument that reform of the state may have been realized through the administration of Terence O'Neill, which possibly contained the potential to appease Catholic grievances. The PD, which is said to have pressed too far ahead with civil rights protests, ruined this opportunity. The central moment here is of course the 'Burntollet march' when the PD rejected the truce agreed to by NICRA, and led the most controversial demonstration of the early civil rights period. Burntollet emerges at the centre point of criticism against the PD, with historians presenting it as a moment when, through either misguidance or malice, civil rights activists provoked sectarian reaction.<sup>43</sup> The single most authoritative account of the civil rights movement is Bob Purdie's *Politics in the Streets— The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland* (1990). A former leftwing activist, Purdie was sympathetic to the civil rights movement, yet singled out the PD for direct criticism. This

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<sup>42</sup> The former point is taken up by Michael McCann in a review piece that looks at Thomas Hennessey's take on the origins of the troubles. McCann points out how, 'The "tragedy of modern Irish history" can be traced back to the civil rights agitation of the 1960s, Hennessey suggests: not to partition or the extraordinary policing structures and discrimination required to sustain it, but to those who challenged the status quo. "The left-wing agitators of Derry might protest about the oppressive nature of the Orange state but it was they who unleashed the forces of sectarian violence", Hennessey writes. At some level this is a book about blaming the victims.' Available online, <http://www.irishdemocrat.co.uk/book-reviews/origins-troubles/>, accessed on 2/8/2016. Also see, Thomas Hennessey, *Northern Ireland: The Origins of the Troubles* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> On the question of Burntollet Henry Patterson argues that, 'If the march had not taken place, he might have least been forced to grasp the nettle of franchise reform.' Henry Patterson, *Ireland Since 1939: the persistence of conflict* (Dublin, Penguin Ireland, 2006), p. 209.

narrative argues that the PD naively adopted an unsuitable and counterproductive method of protest from the US, which was at odds with local circumstances.<sup>44</sup>

Street marches in Northern Ireland had an inevitable sectarian significance, 'with vast potential for upsetting the tacit understanding between the two communities'. Therefore, although those among the ranks of the PD may have been 'perfectly sincere' in their non-sectarian ideals, 'It was a perception that was not widely shared.'<sup>45</sup>

This has been taken up by more recent historians who are less nuanced in their approach, arguing that the PD provoked violence. In his *Northern Ireland's '68: Civil Rights, Global Revolt and the Origins of the Troubles* (2007), Simon Prince draws an overt connection between the politics of the left with the sectarian polarization that challenged the civil rights movement. Prince counterpoises the moderates of the civil rights movement with the PD, who are unequivocally charged with trying to bring about a violent situation. For example, PD leader Michael Farrell is seen to have been directly at variance with those in NICRA who advanced peaceful means: 'a violent confrontation, however, was exactly what Farrell wanted to provoke...'<sup>46</sup>. Ultimately for Prince, 'The leftists had acted like sorcerers' apprentices: they had unleashed powerful forces that they little understood and that ultimately mastered them.'<sup>47</sup> Thus, the left had, 'been battling the plague while at the same time carrying the bacillus themselves. The struggle against imperialism, capitalism, and

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<sup>44</sup> Bob Purdie, *Politics in the Streets: the Origins of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland*, (Belfast, Blackstaff Press, 1990), pp. 244-45.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 244.

<sup>46</sup> Prince, *Northern Ireland's '68*, p. 205.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 211.

bureaucracy brought in its train Leninist sects and terrorist cells.’<sup>48</sup> The implication that the left contained the seeds of sectarian violence is a prevalent one, but as Dan Finn has pointed out in a hard hitting rebuttal of this consensus, ‘Much of the criticism directed at the student militants is unfounded, basing itself on a caricature of their motives and a largely speculative view of the potential for reform under O’Neill’s leadership.’<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, the tendency to blame the PD for provoking violence is common, and it should firstly be recognized that this echoes an establishment view that developed during the period. Indeed, the real genesis of this narrative is not to be found in academic histories, it is to be found in the *Cameron Report*, which has greatly shaped the historical reading of the civil rights movement. It is the contention of this thesis that the conclusions Cameron presented regarding the PD are somewhat problematic; further, historiography has largely accepted these conclusions and repeated them without sufficient examination or criticism. For this reason some comment on the *Cameron Report* is useful, in order to contextualise the historical interpretation of the PD that has been drawn out above.

Established by the Unionist government in 1969 in order to investigate the causes of disturbances associated with the early civil rights period, its findings have set the acceptable terms of academic interpretation of the civil rights movement and have strongly influenced historiography surrounding the PD, particularly in regard to the Burntollet march. In effect, Cameron concluded that while the civil rights movement was a genuine project for reform, it

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 215.

<sup>49</sup> Finn, ‘The Point of No return?’ p. 7.

contained within it a cabal of radical militants who held unrealistic aspirations and were in large part responsible for directing the movement down a path of sectarian unrest. Therefore in relation to the Burntollet march at the beginning of 1969, the PD emerges as a target to direct criticism at the civil rights movement, and in the end Cameron directed his major criticism toward civil rights activists not at republicans, nor at the moderate forces in the campaign. It was the PD who are presented as having explicitly set out to ‘increase tensions’.<sup>50</sup>

Cameron’s analysis of the PD has major shortfalls.<sup>51</sup> The methodology and line of questioning deployed by the inquiry seems to have been premeditated with a view that the PD played a harmful role in the civil rights movement. Cameron himself at times comes across overly interested in the role of the PD, their finances and support, and the political persuasions of their leading members

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<sup>50</sup> *Cameron Report - Disturbances in Northern Ireland, report of the commission appointed by the Governor of Northern Ireland* (Belfast, Published by Her Majesty’s Stationery Office 1969), para. 100. The report concludes with negative assessment of the PD’s role in the civil rights movement: ‘There was early infiltration of the Civil Rights Association both centrally and locally by subversive left wing and revolutionary elements which were prepared to use the Civil Rights movement to further their own purposes, and were ready to exploit grievances in order to provoke and foment, and did provoke and foment, disorder and violence in the guise of supporting a non-violent movement... People’s Democracy provided a means by which politically extreme and militant elements could and did invite and incite civil disorder, with the consequence of polarising and hardening opposition to Civil Rights claims.’ Summary of conclusions on causes of disorders, 10- 12, available online, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/hmso/cameron2.htm#chap16>, accessed on 13/6/2016.

<sup>51</sup> As Finn observes, ‘When we approach Cameron’s report [...] it soon becomes clear that it arranges the evidence in line with a particular agenda. The authors of such reports often camouflage their personal leanings by adopting the voice of an omniscient narrator, as is the case with Cameron: although we are given a list of the people who submitted evidence to the inquiry, we are not told whose evidence has been granted priority, and on what basis. Such literary devices cannot be taken at face value.’ *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*, p. 42.

when he interviewed them.<sup>52</sup> Further, his own hostility toward the left is easy to glean from interview transcripts. When questioning the Derry socialist Eamonn McCann about his role in civil rights protests, Cameron was forthright in challenging McCann's account and offering his own opinion, stating that his consistent exposition of non-violent tactics and opposition to violence were simply 'intellectual language', and that 'you were really encouraging an outbreak of violence'.<sup>53</sup> This is easily contrasted with his treatment with leading figures in the Unionist government, which are subject to a much more lenient and friendly form of interview.<sup>54</sup> Such a contrast is not particularly surprising; the report was initiated by the British government and led by Lord John Cameron, a Scottish Judge who likely approached the investigation with ideological coloration that reflected and informed the British establishment's approach toward both the Unionist state, and the spectre of student radicalism that was gripping Britain in the late 1960s. Although the *Cameron Report* is a crucial historical source its conclusions should not be accepted uncritically. This research has benefitted from an in-depth reading of the inquiry, which has been cross-referenced with a plethora of other sources available from the period, and such a process allows one to challenge the central thesis presented by Cameron surrounding the PD.

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<sup>52</sup> This comes across strongly in Cameron's interview with Betty Sinclair, a leading member of the Communist party in Northern Ireland, yet someone who exercised a moderate influence on civil rights affairs. Evidence Submitted to the Cameron Commission by Belfast and District Trades Council, Miss Betty Sinclair Submission, PRONI, GOV/2/1/130. Also see, Evidence submitted to the Cameron Commission by Michael Farrell, PRONI, GOV/2/1/218.

<sup>53</sup> Evidence submitted to the Cameron Commission by Eamonn McCann, PRONI, GOV/2/1/218,

<sup>54</sup> Evidence submitted to the Cameron Commission by Robin-Chichester Clark MP, PRONI, GOV/2/1/251.

While the *Cameron Report* provides much that is useful in analysing the PD, it concluded that the PD contained subversive, ‘extremist’ and ‘violent’<sup>55</sup> elements, which were not out for reform but were out to ‘destroy the constitutional structure of the state’.<sup>56</sup> The hostility is again easily contrasted with the apologetic treatment of the police and security services, which although criticised for their evident bouts of violence, are as an institution exonerated for their actions.<sup>57</sup> In contrast, the PD is presented as a central cause of disorder.<sup>58</sup> The historiography has endorsed Cameron’s conclusions on PD. Joseph Lee’s *Ireland 1912-1985, Politics and Society* (1993), almost repeats Cameron’s conclusion verbatim, stating that the intention of the PD was to ‘increase tension’ at the beginning of 1969.<sup>59</sup> One obvious problem, however, is that these conclusions run counter to almost everything that PD members said about themselves. The PD explicitly claimed to be non-violent, anti-sectarian, and interested in appealing to both sections of the community. Indeed, it is somewhat suspect that the PD has been subjected to this much criticism for helping to create a type of conflict that was undoubtedly counter posed to its very *raison d’être*. So what were the motives of the PD and what assessment should we have of the movement during the civil rights campaign? To answer this question this

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<sup>55</sup> *Cameron Report*, Summary of conclusions on causes of disorders, 10- 12. Also see, para. 150.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, para. 235.

<sup>57</sup> Thus, while the RUC are criticized, particularly during 5 October (1968) and 5 January (1969) in Derry, they are on the whole exonerated for having ‘acted with commendable discipline and restraint under very great strain and provocation from various quarters’, *Cameron Report*, Para. 168.

<sup>58</sup> Again to quote the report directly; ‘People’s Democracy provided a means by which politically extreme and militant elements could and did invite and incite civil disorder, with the consequence of polarizing and hardening opposition to Civil Rights claims’. *Ibid*, conclusions: 10- 12.

<sup>59</sup> Joseph Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985, Politics and Enmity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 423.

thesis presents an in-depth account of the PD's role in the civil rights movement, highlighting the non-violent and anti-sectarian strands of thought that influenced the movement and the rationale of the PD inside the civil rights campaign. Moreover, this thesis will illustrate the systemic opposition that emerged against the civil rights movement inside the Unionist state throughout 1968-1969, which directly met the PD, serving to expose the undemocratic nature of the Northern Ireland state and ensure the emergence of a sustained conflict.

### 1.4. The pursuit of socialism after 1968

In Karl Marx's writings on class struggles in France in 1848, he distinguished between the 'beautiful revolution' of February and the 'ugly revolution' that followed in June:

The February revolution was the *beautiful* revolution, the revolution of universal sympathy, because the contradictions which erupted in it against the monarchy were still *undeveloped* and peacefully dormant, because the social struggle which formed their background had only achieved an ephemeral existence, an existence in phrases, in words. The *June revolution* is the *ugly* revolution, the nasty revolution, because the phrases have given place to the real thing, because the republic has bared the head of the monster by knocking off the crown which shielded and concealed it.<sup>60</sup>

Marx himself took a keen interest in revolutionary Ireland during his lifetime, and his insight into France provides a useful lens through which we can view the Irish civil rights movement over a century later. The 'beautiful revolution' of 1968— one of universal sympathy and ephemeral existence— gave way to the ugly revolution of 1969, exposing the real contradictions central to the Unionist state and baring the sectarian division and repression on which the state relied to exist. The history of the PD in the aftermath of this period is in one sense the history of an organization that tried to make sense of the 'monster' revealed by the civil rights movement. Moreover, it is the history of an organization that

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<sup>60</sup> Karl Marx, *Class Struggles in France 1848-1850*, available online, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/class-struggles-france/ch01.htm>, accessed on 04/12/ 2016.



consistently tried to shape events as Northern Ireland was engulfed in a tumultuous conflict for over a decade.

Literature on the PD stops when the civil rights movement was met with widespread repression, which is an obvious reflection of the way that the PD no longer occupied a significant role in history against the increase in violence from the early 1970s onward. But this also presents a gap in the historiography of the left. Although the PD dropped from the centre stage of politics after 1969, the organization did not cease activity. If anything, PD activists increased their activity and after forming into an organized socialist party at the beginning of the 1970s, its members would continue to play an active role in politics for over a decade, cultivating a socialist tradition that informed and overlapped with various aspects of the ‘anti-imperialist movement’ in the North. Indeed, when popular protest re-emerged in the aftermath of internment, or later during the period of mobilization for prisoners’ rights, the PD was central to political campaigning and instigating civil disobedience. The period of political mobilization after internment deserves attention in its own right, and although this thesis will not attempt a full blow by blow account of what is termed the mass ‘civil disobedience campaign’, it will chart the role of the PD in pressing ahead with mobilization in this period. That such a major period of grassroots activism has received little academic attention illustrates the extent to which forms of politics that broke beyond the boundaries of either paramilitary initiatives or constitutional politics has been neglected by historiography.

The three decades of violence and instability that followed the civil rights movement have, however, been subject to a litany of historical works looking at different features of the troubles, many of which overlap with the history of the

PD. The republican and socialist traditions have been an obvious focus for attention, and recent scholarship has informed this thesis. Hanley and Millar's *The Lost Revolution: The story of the Official IRA and the Worker's Party* (2010), delivered an in-depth history of 'Official republicanism', charting its influence within the civil rights movement and the movements long tension between the armed struggle and electoral politics.<sup>61</sup> The PD did not occupy as central role in history as the Official republican movement, but this thesis forwards an historical account that is similar to Hanley and Millar's in its methodology and its subject area, although it considers a movement with a different form of politics.

Throughout this thesis the assessment of the PD is often strengthened by examining the strategy of the PD against the larger battalions of the Irish left, for example, the Communist Party of Northern Ireland (later the Communist Party of Ireland) and the Official republican movement. The division between the PD and these currents reflected one of the major junctures of the international left, namely, the division between Communist movements who viewed the Eastern Block as offering some form of actually existing socialism that could be worked toward in the western world, generally through a strategy of gradual, state centred reform in what the American Marxist Hal Draper described as 'socialism from above', and 'Trotskyist' influenced organizations adhering to a revolutionary form of politics centred upon the emancipatory power of the working class, and the tradition of 'socialism from below'<sup>62</sup>. The PD would not

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<sup>61</sup> Brian Hanley and Scott Millar, *The Lost Revolution: The story of the Official IRA and the Worker's Party* (Penguin Ireland, 2009).

<sup>62</sup> Hal Draper, The Two Souls of Socialism, *New Politics* 5, no.1, winter 1966, pp.57-84. Available online,

officially become a Trotskyist organization until the late 1970s, but such influences were evident from its beginning.

These divisions surrounding socialist thought and action are important when discussing the history of socialist and republican movements in Ireland. Indeed, among the modern republican movement its socialist content entering the late 1960s was predominately informed by a current of thought that, in an Irish context, fit Draper's category of socialism from above. Kieran Allen, in his appraisal of Ireland's revolutionary tradition since 1916, points out how the strongest influence of socialist philosophy on the republican movement in the late 1960s came from the communist tradition, which postponed a struggle for socialism until after a united Ireland had been achieved. It was known as the 'stages theory' and forwarded a strategy of first democratizing the Stormont state through its institutions as the first stage in achieving a united Ireland through political as opposed to military means.<sup>63</sup>

But 1968 ushered in a new left that articulated a vision and strategy of fighting for socialist politics in the here and now, based on a mass upsurge of working class struggle across both states. The breakdown of democracy from

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<https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/>, accessed on 14/05/2016.

<sup>63</sup> As Allen observes, 'First, the movement should focus exclusively on civil rights within the Northern state. At a later stage, the achievement of these demands would create the space for pursuing the idea of a united Ireland by purely political means. Talk of socialism would have to be postponed until after a united Ireland had been won. This was the 'stages theory'... When the struggle for civil rights escalated into a confrontation with the state itself, these beliefs became straitjackets. Instead of recognising the unreformable nature of the Orange state, the leadership of the Official Sinn Féin began to blame the 'ultra-left' and the 'sectarian Provos' for provoking a backlash from loyalism.' Allen, *1916*, p. 140.

1969 onward was seen to confirm that the Northern state could not be reformed, and those who based their politics on mass struggle from below were now forced to confront the question of the state. In doing so they increasingly backed the resurgent republican movement's efforts to smash the 'Orange State'. Therefore, while the 'moderate' socialists of the civil rights movement developed a relationship with the Official republican movement, the radicals in the PD would increasingly support the Provisional republican movement.

The best treatments of the Provisional movement encompass both academic histories and works of investigative journalism, including Richard English's *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (2012), and Peter Taylor's *Provo's: The IRA and Sinn Féin* (1997). Both works offer an insightful internal and external view of the movement, making them two of the most important pillars in a wider canon of literature on Provisional republicanism, against which the history of the PD can be measured, honed and illuminated.<sup>64</sup> The growth of the Provisional IRA was the first time that Irish republicanism emerged substantially among urban working class communities in Northern Ireland—during a period that saw widespread social unrest off the back of the upsurge of civil rights struggle. Although the PD criticized the politics and strategy of the republican movement, it viewed the movement as a progressive component in the fight against repression and for national liberation. PD members interacted with republican organizations, for the most part at a rank and file level, and this

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<sup>64</sup> For the best histories of the Provisional IRA see, Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London, Pan Books, 2012), Peter Taylor, *Provos: The IRA and Sinn Féin* (London Bloomsbury, 1997), Ed Moloney, *The Secret History of the IRA* (London, Penguin, 2007), Henry Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion: a political history of the IRA and Sinn Féin* (London, Serif, 2015), John Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army: The IRA* (New Brunswick, Transaction publishers, 2003).

reached its height in the post internment period during the eruption of civil disobedience action. This mass movement still awaits a full historical investigation, —anti-internment activity reached almost every town and city in nationalist Ireland and saw involvement from significant sections of the populace—but the importance of this campaign has been appreciated by Martin McAleery in his forensic look at internment and its impact across Ireland, *Operation Demetrius and its aftermath: A new history of the use of internment without trial in Northern Ireland 1971–1975* (2015).<sup>65</sup>

Although the activist tradition developed by the PD following the demise of the civil rights movement has to some extent been neglected, the politics of the PD has attracted significant attention throughout academia. The resurgence of socialist activism in 1968 brought about a resurgence of Marxist theory and the ‘anti imperialist’ tradition of the PD has been recognized as a contributing force to the political history of Ireland. In his landmark study *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (1990), John Whyte attributed Marxist interpretations of the Northern conflict with as much significance as traditional Unionist and Nationalist considerations, noting that the current of Marxism that emerged with the PD in 1968 updated Connolly’s account to cover the five decades that had passed since his execution.<sup>66</sup> McGarry and O’Leary have also commented upon the influence that this generation had among the republican tradition in Ireland, particular in relationship to Sinn Féin in the early and mid-1980s, observing that this was

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<sup>65</sup> Martin J McCleery, *Operation Demetrius and its aftermath: a new history of the use of internment without trial in Northern Ireland, 1971-75* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015).

<sup>66</sup> Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, p. 179-180.

most visible in the writings of Gerry Adams, the current Sinn Féin President and de facto leader of modern Irish republicanism.<sup>67</sup>

The Marxism developed by the PD—in particular what is contained in the writings of Michael Farrell—has indeed strongly influenced sections of the republican movement in Ireland. It has also attracted its share of criticism, mostly from academic writers whose Marxism was of a different hue. In order to draw this out, it is worth briefly delving into the broad theoretical strokes that came to shape the socialist tradition in Ireland. There is some truth to the claim that the PD was to the forefront of revitalising and updating the Connollyite tradition of Irish Marxism in the late 1960s and 1970s. The life and legacy of James Connolly is a hotly contested subject, which there is only scope to touch upon here.<sup>68</sup>

For the purpose of this thesis, it is suffice to say that Connolly's main contribution to Irish Marxism lay primarily in his belief that the national and social question should be fused, establishing a Marxist position that viewed the pursuit of Irish independence as central and necessary to the development of socialism. A product of the radical traditions of the Second International, Connolly castigated the Irish nationalist movement, which he viewed as being tied by a 'thousand economic strings' to British capitalism through the native Irish bourgeoisie, and therefore not to be trusted to carry out a social

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<sup>67</sup> John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland, Broken images* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1996), p. 63.

<sup>68</sup> For a recent biography of Connolly see, Lorcan Collins, *James Connolly* (Dublin, O'Brien, 2012). For different perspectives on Connolly from the left see, Kieran Allen, *The Politics of James Connolly* (London, Pluto, 1990), and Austen Morgan, *James Connolly: a political biography* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988).

transformation of society in the interests of the labouring classes.<sup>69</sup> Instead, Connolly looked to the then emerging Irish working class as the ‘incorruptible inheritors of the fight for Irish freedom’<sup>70</sup>. This led to a unique framework for understanding Ulster through the prism of anti-imperialism and anti-partitionism, and a rejection of the pan-class nature of the ‘Orange’ and Unionist projects that were deepening their grip upon the north, and the advocacy of a 32-county socialism based upon revolutionary class politics, and Protestant and Catholic workers’ unity.<sup>71</sup>

Although Connolly offered a comparatively consistent Marxist position on Ireland, his ideas have been subject to challenge and differing interpretation since his death. A perennial point of ambiguity on the Irish left, from Connolly onward, has been the relationship between radical republicanism and revolutionary socialism. Indeed, as labour historian Conor Kostick notes, Connolly himself ‘left open the question of how Marxists should analyze radical Irish nationalism’<sup>72</sup>. This question would continue to wrack generations to come and this thesis will explore how the those who founded the PD and went on to rediscover the socialist tradition five decades after Connolly’s death did so often with this uncertainty at the centre of their problems.

The proliferation of research into the conflict that erupted in Northern Ireland also saw a different current of Marxian scholars, which could be

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<sup>69</sup> James Connolly, *Labour in Irish History, Foreword* (1910), available online, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1910/lih/foreword.htm>, accessed on 11/6/2015.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Allen, *The Politics of James Connolly*, pp. 108-113.

<sup>72</sup> Conor Kostick, ‘Marxism in Ireland’, *Rethinking Marxism, a journal of economics, culture and society*, Vol 9, Issue 3 (2009), p. 87.

appropriately described as a rise in ‘academic Marxism’, due to its development being primarily driven within the academy rather than from within political organisations or social movements. Much of this literature sought to challenge the theoretical positions forwarded by Farrell and popularised by the PD. The most important work that attempted to do this was *The State in Northern Ireland, 1921-1972* (1979), by Paul Bew, Henry Patterson and Peter Gibbon, which offered a revised Marxist analysis of the Northern state.<sup>73</sup> This work essentially tried to locate a progressive working class agency within the confines of the Protestant community in the North. Taking aim at Farrell in order to counter his critique of the ‘Orange State’, it contested that ‘the pre-1972 state in Northern Ireland was in many respects an ordinary bourgeois one’.<sup>74</sup> The authors thus argue that the major dynamic inside the Unionist state was not the dictates of an all-class block, but was in fact the outworking of tension between a populist form of Unionism—which reflected and mediated the concerns of the Protestant working class—and ‘anti-populist’ Unionism, which reflected the sectarian and regressive agenda inside the Unionist class alliance.<sup>75</sup>

This work provided a useful contribution to the historiography of Northern Ireland, particularly in the way that it considered the internal dynamics of Unionism. However, as Paul Stewart points out it is built upon a weak theoretical foundation. The Marxism of Bew et al used the advanced industrial base of the Protestant working class to justify a primary orientation to this constituency. Protestant workers were thus equated with a more progressive form

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<sup>73</sup> Bew, Patterson and Gibbon, *The state in Northern Ireland*.

<sup>74</sup> Bew, Patterson and Gibbon, ‘Some Aspects of Nationalism and Socialism in Ireland 1968-1978’, *Ireland: Divided Nation Divided Class*, E.d. Austen Morgan and Bob Purdie (Pluto Press, 1980), p. 154-155.

<sup>75</sup> Bew, Patterson and Gibbon, *The state in Northern Ireland*, p. 211.



of labourism; the assumption being that the ideology of the Protestant working class is more progressive than that of its Catholic counterparts.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, the role of Catholic labour in the North is at times ignored as is the structural sectarianism within the Protestant labour movement, which is a result of its attachment to the state.<sup>77</sup> The result is a theory that bases its strategic orientation toward a politics that, at heart, is ‘exclusionary rather than all-encompassing’.<sup>78</sup> It is an approach that favours a reformist method inside the Northern state and thus almost invariably supports the status quo. Through looking at the role of the PD during the outbreak of the troubles, this thesis will draw out the difficulties in asserting class politics in this period, which ought to be deeply considered by all who hope to construct a theoretical framework of the Northern state, and better understand those who tried to challenge it.

Other literature relevant to this study includes the work of Austen Morgan, who offered a pessimistic summation of the state of Marxism in Ireland some ten years after the emergence of the PD. Clearly jaded by the violent events of the 1970s, Morgan argued that the crisis in the north and the re-emergence of the national question essentially destroyed much that was progressive about Marxism in Ireland. Arguing that ‘red socialism’ had been eclipsed by forms of ‘green’ and ‘orange’ socialism —each of which latched on to competitive nationalisms—and with the PD being the most pertinent group among the former

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<sup>76</sup> Paul Stewart, ‘The Jerrybuilders, Bew, Patterson, Gibbon – The Protestant working class and the Northern Ireland state’, *Ireland’s Histories: Aspects of State, Society and Ideology*, e.d. Paul Stewart and Sean Hutton (London 1991), p.178.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p. 181.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p. 200.

category.<sup>79</sup> Again, this approach seems problematic in that, at best, it equates both ‘Orange’ and ‘Green’ positions and assumes that the demands of both anti-imperialists and pro-imperialist leftists to be mutually regressive.<sup>80</sup> In terms of the PD, Morgan does not sufficiently explain why the organisation took the very positions that he criticises, and this seems evident in the conclusions that Morgan draws surrounding socialist strategy in Ireland. Therefore, the PD is charged with ‘exploitation’ of the Catholic struggle and their anti-imperialist trajectory is seen to be an exercise in dressing nationalism up in Marxist clothes.<sup>81</sup> Morgan then goes on to conclude that the development of a progressive left in Ireland demands socialists reject the national question in all of its forms.<sup>82</sup> This conclusion seems both disconnected from the actual process of political practice in the north, but also somewhat obtuse to the changing politics of the PD and its own professed strategic orientation. As this thesis will show, the PD approach towards the Northern state was largely a product of recognising the necessity of the left to make itself relevant to the national question in Ireland. This thesis does not propose that the PD sufficiently responded to this problem; however, it does hope to present a more in-depth analysis of the history and politics of the PD than what has hitherto been offered.

Ultimately, this thesis does not focus solely on the ideological terrain traversed by the PD in the style of much of this academic literature. Instead, it

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<sup>79</sup> ‘... the crisis of the Northern state has been responsible for the erosion of red socialism by green and orange’, Austen Morgan, ‘Socialism in Ireland- Red, Green and Orange’, *Ireland: Divided Nation, Divided Class*, p. 210.

<sup>80</sup> ‘In the North, red socialism has largely given way to green socialism and an antithetical orange socialism... After a decade of crisis, the left has reproduced the North’s indigenous sectarian theory and practice within the socialist subculture.’ *Ibid*, pp.187-188.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 190-192.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, p. 219.

will chart the history of the PD and draw upon these ideas in so far as they emerged as relevant to the development of the organization and informed the activity of the PD, therefore making the important connection between theory and practice. In this regard this thesis shares much in common with two recent works that focus heavily on the political perspectives deployed by the PD and shows how they influenced social and political mobilization. Stuart F Ross's *Smashing H-Block, The Rise and Fall of the popular Campaign against Criminalization 1976-1982* (2011) and Dan Finn's *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism: The Official Republican Movement, People's Democracy and the Irish Republican Socialist Party, 1968-98* (2013) have both provided timely and important works that address the history of the PD, through their own respective approaches. Finn's work constitutes one of the most powerful scholarly accounts of the radical left during the troubles and its treatment of the PD is particularly insightful, serving to 'peel back layers of misunderstanding' surrounding the PD and the civil rights movement and charting the ideological influences of the grouping throughout later years.<sup>83</sup> This thesis is informed by Finn's work, and aims to strengthen and build upon some of the conclusions that it draws. Ross's account of the prison movement in the early 1980s focuses on the role of popular protest in enacting political change during this period, and it pays sufficient attention to the role of the PD and revolutionary left more generally in their efforts to build a broad based movement in support of republican prisoners in the early 1980s. It shows that although the PD was a small group, the ideas and strategy deployed by its activists allowed it to punch above its weight during the

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<sup>83</sup> Dan Finn, *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism: The Official Republican Movement, People's Democracy and the Irish Republican Socialist Party, 1968-98*, unpublished PhD thesis (National University of Ireland, Cork, 2013), p. 6.

Smash H Block/Armagh campaign.<sup>84</sup> This thesis extends this type of analysis toward the PD's wider history of socialist activism.

The PD is an organization that uniquely links the different phases of mass mobilization and mass political action that engulfed nationalist Ireland during the troubles. Beginning with the civil rights movement in 1968, throughout the campaigns for civil disobedience in the early 1970s and during the mass movement to support republican prisoners in the early 1980s, the PD was consistently found to be a small but central player amidst the different forms of social and political agitation, often in a pioneering way.<sup>85</sup> This thesis therefore presents a novel look at the history of grassroots activism during the troubles through one of the most active organizations of the radical left.

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<sup>84</sup> F Stuart Ross, *Smashing H-Block, The Rise and fall of the Popular Campaign against Criminalization 1976-1982* (Liverpool University Press, 2011).

<sup>85</sup> Finn, *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*, pp. 137-140.

### 1.5. A short historical introduction

Any historical work addressing the period known as the Northern Ireland troubles must begin with at least some recognition of the states troubled beginnings. The origins of the Northern conflict were rooted in events during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which saw the partition of Ireland and the birth of the Northern Ireland state. Although Ireland had been Britain's oldest colony—a relationship that ensured a long line of almost generational struggles against the colonial power—the Northern Ireland state emerged after a profound national and constitutional crisis that swept Britain and its oldest subject, culminating in the Irish War of Independence and Irish Civil War, between 1916-1923. The story of Ireland's revolutionary period is far beyond the scope of this introduction. Important for this study, however, is some understanding of the origins of the Northern state and the decades that preceded the 1960s. The partition of Ireland arose as the last best hope for the British state, and its Ulster Unionist allies in the North of Ireland, to maintain the most politically loyal and economically important parts of Ireland within the British Empire in the face of popular revolution and anti-colonial resistance.

From the perspective of Ireland's socialist tradition, the establishment of two partitioned states in Ireland represented a major setback for the working class and labour movement, which had played a considerable role in the revolutionary period.<sup>86</sup> The outlook has been immortalised in James Connolly's well-known warning that partition would create a 'carnival of reaction' on both

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<sup>86</sup> For an appreciation of the role of popular militancy and class struggle in this period, see, Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland: Popular 1917-1923* (Cork University Press, 2009).

sides of the border.<sup>87</sup> The two states that emerged after partition reflected one another in social conservatism and power structures, with an Irish state in the south based around the power and influence of the Catholic Church, and an Ulster Unionist state in the North built upon Protestant majority rule. The Northern Ireland state was established in the image of Unionist Party and the Orange Order. It was based on the ideology of Unionism and the position of the minority Catholic community was always insecure, with strife commonplace from the beginning.

The extent to which partition represented the maintenance of a colonial project was illustrated by the military support that the new state could call upon in any hour of need. This included a number of battalions of the British army, the newly formed RUC, and the formation of the Ulster Special Constabulary, an all-Protestant quasi-paramilitary police force that essentially absorbed the membership of the pre-partition loyalist movement of the UVF. The USC was made up of three categories; A Specials, numbering 2,000, B Specials, numbering 19,500 and an unknown number of C Specials.<sup>88</sup> One Nationalist MP would remark in the House of Commons that the formation of the USC was an effort to ‘arm pogromists’.<sup>89</sup> The warning was not an exaggeration, between 1920 and 1922 large-scale pogroms and sectarian violence occurred,

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<sup>87</sup> Connolly warned that partition would lead to ‘the betrayal of the national democracy of industrial Ulster would mean a carnival of reaction both North and South, would set back the wheels of progress, would destroy the oncoming unity of the Irish Labour movement and paralyse all advanced movements whilst it endured. To it Labour should give the bitterest opposition, against it Labour in Ulster should fight even to the death, if necessary, as our fathers fought before us.’ James Connolly, *Irish Worker*, 14 March 1914, available online, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1914/03/laborpar.htm>, accessed on 23/4/2016.

<sup>88</sup> Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster*, p. 475.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, p. 476.

predominately directed at the Catholic community, although ‘rotten prods’, i.e. those deemed to be disloyal to the new state such as Protestant socialist activists were also targeted. In Belfast Catholics made up only one quarter of the population but had suffered 257 civilian deaths out of 416 in a two-year period. Historian Jonathon Bardon notes that between 8,700 and 11,000 Catholics had been driven out of their jobs, that 23,000 Catholics had been forced out of their homes and up to 500 Catholic businesses had been destroyed.<sup>90</sup> While the violence represented the extreme end of repression, sectarian dominance became enshrined into the state in more permanent ways. The year 1929 saw the abolition of the proportional representation voting system, ensuring that parliamentary oppositional forces, such as labour and nationalist, were pushed aside in a first past the post system.<sup>91</sup> Afterward, each election effectively took the form of a referendum on support for the new constitutional status of the state. Further, election boundaries were designed in a way that ensured the Unionist Party would return solid majorities in areas where the Catholic community dominated. The government itself boasted an all-Protestant membership that included a high ratio of members of the Orange Order, and preferential treatment toward Protestants was often encouraged.

Challenging discrimination was the central *raison d’être* of the civil rights campaign, and the academic literature has seen differing interpretations as to the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p. 494.

<sup>91</sup> John Whyte, ‘How much discrimination was there under the unionist regime, 1921-1968?’ *Contemporary Irish Studies*, ed. Tom Gallagher and James O’Connell (Manchester University Press, 1983), available online, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/discrimination/whyte.htm#chap1>, accessed on 21/02/2016.

extent of such practice.<sup>92</sup> Leaving aside some of the intricacies of these debates, it is reasonable to suggest that discrimination against the Catholic community happened on a significant level in three key areas, electoral practice, employment and public housing. The most authoritative assessment of discrimination is John Whyte's study of the Unionist regime, in which he illustrated how discrimination was particularly evident in Unionist controlled local authorities west of the river Bann. The city of Derry became the classic example of electoral discrimination:

The fate of Londonderry County Borough aroused the most bitterness. It had a substantial, and growing, Catholic majority - by 1961 Catholics were more than 60 per cent even among the adult population... Yet unionists won back control under the ward division imposed in 1923, and when, after some years, it looked as if the nationalists might capture one of the unionist wards, the boundaries were redrawn so as to perpetuate unionist rule...<sup>93</sup>

At local government level Unionists had significant command over the arrangement of the franchise, with nationalists manipulated out of control in a number of councils where they had a majority of electors, 'This is one of the clearest areas of discrimination in the whole field of controversy'.<sup>94</sup> Regarding employment practices, a system existed which marginalised the Catholic

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<sup>92</sup> For an important debate on this subject, see, Kassian A. Kovalcheck, Catholic Grievances in Northern Ireland: Appraisal and Judgment, *The British Journal of Sociology* (Vol 38, No. 1, 1987) pp. 77-87.

<sup>93</sup> Whyte, 'How much discrimination was there under the unionist regime', available online, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/discrimination/whyte.htm#chap1>, accessed on 21/02/2016.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.



community and often confined them to lower skilled and lower paid jobs. This happened to some degree in both the public and private sector, but was most acute in the former. Therefore, in one assessment of local government employment in 1951, those from a 'nationalist' background made up 40 percent of manual labouring jobs, but of the 1,095 senior posts, 'nationalists' held only 130, or 11.8 percent.<sup>95</sup> The divide was even more acute within the higher echelons of the state. Thus, at senior civil servant level only one Catholic reached the rank of Permanent Secretary between 1921-1968, and in the judiciary no Catholics were appointed to the Supreme Court from 1925 to 1949.<sup>96</sup> In 1971 the Northern Ireland census gave an overall working figure where of 1,383 government officials only 11 percent reported themselves as Catholic. At this time the Catholic community made up 31.4 percent of the population, indicating the extent to which it fell short of such appointments.<sup>97</sup>

The other major area of grievance centred on housing. This was inextricably linked to the restricted voting franchise that existed inside the Northern state, where a small number of property owners had more than one vote, and a much larger number of the population, amounting to over a quarter of the parliamentary electorate in 1961, were not able to vote at all, due to the franchise being restricted to owners or tenants of homes, or to the spouses of such owners or tenants.<sup>98</sup> The lack of public housing provision in the interwar period meant that complaints were relatively scarce, as there were so few houses to allocate. It was in the context that arose after the Second World War, however,

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

that grievances around housing intensified. The building of public housing after 1945 saw Unionist controlled local authorities hold significant sway over the allocation of new homes. In many areas 'loyal' Unionist voters were favoured for new builds. The Cameron Report would later conclude how there existed 'many cases' where planning permission had been withheld in order advantage Unionists electorally. It went on to document the 'mass of evidence' that in 'Unionist-controlled areas it was fairly frequent for housing policy to be operated so that houses allocated to Catholics tended, as in Dungannon Urban District, to go to rehouse slum dwellers, whereas Protestant allocations tended to go more frequently to new families.'<sup>99</sup> Thus, for the next number of decades the minority community found itself in a precarious position at the helm of a Protestant dominated Unionist government.

Although Unionist ideology implied that all Protestants had interests in common, living standards for both Catholics and Protestants at the poorer end of the social and economic spectrum were on the whole lower than the British average, and class antagonisms often developed within the state.<sup>100</sup> The most notable instance was the outdoor relief riots of 1932, a moment of sustained class struggle when, amidst global depression, unemployment and poverty reached such a height that it united Catholic and Protestant workers in bitter struggle for

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<sup>99</sup> *Cameron Report - Disturbances in Northern Ireland, report of the commission appointed by the Governor of Northern Ireland* (Belfast, Published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office 1969), para. 140, available online, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/hmso/cameron2.htm#chap16>, accessed on 13/6/2016.

<sup>100</sup> As Seán Mitchell points in an important history of class struggle in the 1930s: 'In the 1930s Northern Ireland was the poorest region of the United Kingdom: by every standard of measurement living standards in Northern Ireland were far below the British average, and by the end of the 1930s average income per head in the North was just £64.7 compared with the UK average of £111.' Seán Mitchell, *Struggle or Starve: working class unity in Belfast's 1932 outdoor relief riots* (Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2017), p. 40.

outdoor relief. This represented the most intense period of class struggle in the post-partition era, and it would impact significantly upon the politics of the 1930s.<sup>101</sup> However, when class politics did emerge it always foundered against the strength of communal division, which had long confounded the small and marginalized forces of the organized left in the North of Ireland.

Across Europe, the growth of both social democratic and communist forces had been a common theme during the interwar years, and although Northern Ireland was not immune to this pattern, it did not happen on any great scale. The NILP had been formed in 1924 and although its potential to form a substantial electoral opposition had been restricted, it built a notable base in Belfast and Derry over some decades. In 1925, the party saw an electoral breakthrough, taking three seats in parliament, but this would be reduced to one after the introduction of the first past the post system. From its inception the party was categorised by its refusal to take a position on the ‘border question’, and while the NILP at times appealed to a cross section of both Catholics and Protestants, this non-committal stance ultimately left it dazed and confused in the face of re-emerging sectarian division.<sup>102</sup>

The different traditions inside the Belfast labour movement co-existed in the NILP during the interwar period, and were illustrated in the rivalry between two leading figures, Jack Beattie and Harry Midgley, the former a proponent of Irish unity, and the latter essentially a ‘labour unionist’, who would go on to join the Unionist Party and serve as a Minister in the Brookeborough government

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> For the most detailed account of the NILP, see Aaron Edwards, *A History of the Northern Ireland Labour Party: Democratic Socialism and Sectarianism* (Manchester University Press, 2009).

(1949-50).<sup>103</sup> Events came to a head, however, in 1949 when the NILP's conference voted in favour of support for the union with Britain, signalling an end to the non-committal position on the national question and triggering a decline in Catholic support. The economic, social and political climate that followed into the late 1950s and 1960s allowed the NILP to grow its base, and the party pulled a large section of unionist voters toward it. In both the 1958 and 1962 general elections the NILP returned four MPs to the parliament, and in 1965 it became the official opposition to the Unionist government.<sup>104</sup>

To the left of the NILP, the communist movement had historically been the main organisation of left radicalism; it could claim credit for instigating and leading the aforementioned struggles of the unemployed during the 1930s and it enjoyed a modest growth in this period. The Communist Party of Ireland was launched in 1933 by the Revolutionary Workers' Groups, which had rose to prominence during the agitation of the great depression era in Belfast. The period also saw important shifts to the left in the republican movement, with communists and republicans founding the Republican Congress (1934).<sup>105</sup> Yet if the early 1930s displayed important moments of class unity, the decade was later gripped by communal strife, most notably in the sectarian riots of 1935. Any gains the communists had made in Northern politics were lost amidst these circumstances, and the organisation remained a marginal force.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> For a biography of Harry Midgley, see, Graham Walker, *The politics of Frustration: Harry Midgley and the failure of Labour politics in Northern Ireland* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1985).

<sup>104</sup> Bardon, *A History of Ulster*, pp. 611-615.

<sup>105</sup> See, Richard English, *Radicals and the republic: socialist republicanism and the Irish Free State, 1925-1937* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>106</sup> Mitchell, *Struggle or Starve*, pp. 117-119.

The political trajectory of the communist movement in Ireland over the course of its existence was one that was strongly aligned to the Russian Comintern, and much like its global counterparts, Irish communism often shifted its strategy and tactics to adapt to the changing perspectives and foreign policies espoused by Stalin's Russia.<sup>107</sup> As Mitchell shows, the Irish communists were certainly capable of political self-initiative, but ultimately, their activity was 'geared toward an overall political perspective that was set elsewhere'<sup>108</sup>, and this meant that their position on the Irish question often vacillated. For example, when the Communist Party began life it did so as an anti-partitionist organisation that stood for independence and worker's socialism in the tradition of James Connolly— as distinct from the reformist social democracy espoused by the NILP—, but, by the late 1930s, the 'popular front' strategy of the Comintern, which emerged in response to rising fascism across Europe, was heavily adopted by the Irish organisation and it had significant implications toward its politics in the North. This perspective favoured unity with 'progressive' bourgeois forces, and thus the Northern communists essentially dropped all reference to the national question for a period, instead uniting uncritically with social democratic and labour organisations that were supportive of the Northern state.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> See, Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern* (London, Bookmarks, 1985).

<sup>108</sup> Mitchell, *Struggle or Starve*, p. 144.

<sup>109</sup> Mike Milotte summarizes the movement's twists and turns in this period as such: 'The sectarian riots in Belfast in 1935; the anti-communist campaign in the Free State during the Spanish Civil war; the unflinching hostility of the Labour Parties, North and South; and the deepening economic depression— all had undoubtedly taken their toll on the Communist Party. But the pursuit of the ever-elusive Popular Front through the abandonment of militancy, coupled with the subordination of all theory and practice to the foreign policy requirements of the Soviet Union, had also contributed much to the near-collapse of the communist movement in Ireland.' Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland*, p. 181.

When Russia entered the Second World War Stalin's foreign policy drastically shifted again— away from his previous non-aggression pact with Hitler, to supporting the war effort— and as the communists were now the most vociferous opponents of fascism, their representatives in the North of Ireland essentially became pro-British in both deeds and words. As Milotte argues, the party 'was able to build on British chauvinism; support for the party was one expression of patriotism— British patriotism.'<sup>110</sup> This even went as far as agitating against the industrial militancy of workers in the war industry in Belfast, who were taking strike action against conditions imposed by the wartime government.<sup>111</sup> In 1941, the Communist Party of Ireland suspended activity south of the border and its northern operation was renamed the 'Communist Party of Northern Ireland' (CPNI). By the time the Second World War had ended, then, the CPNI had a small following in Protestant working class areas and was confronted with the problem of having to appear 'anti-imperialist without being anti-partitionist',<sup>112</sup> so as to retain this base. Membership of the CPNI only reached a couple of hundred by the early 1950s, but the organisation would go on to develop an important foothold in the trade union movement.<sup>113</sup> As we shall see, it would exercise an important political influence during the civil rights campaign in this regard.

The left had therefore experienced a relatively stagnant existence throughout the decades after partition up until the 1960s. The two main traditions of oppositional politics that existed within the Catholic community were the

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, p. 200.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p. 204.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 221.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p. 222.

constitutional nationalism of the Irish Nationalist Party, and the republican tradition of the IRA. Both traditions were based near solely upon the nationalist constituency and both essentially espoused a form of anti-partitionism, albeit through very different means. By the 1960s neither could claim much success in their respective endeavours— either through advancing the position of the minority community through constitutional politics, which was often debilitated by the long-standing tactic of parliamentary abstentionism, or through the republican pursuit of armed struggle. The IRA had embarked on an ill-fated ‘border campaign’ between 1956-1962, but even the organisation itself recognised it failed miserably in winning popular support.<sup>114</sup> By the late 1960s then a political vacuum had emerged and oppositional politics in the North was reaching an impasse, as the traditional methods of politics had failed to achieve significant advances.

Underlying the vacuum were profound social and political changes that swept Northern Ireland in the aftermath of the Second World War. The Unionist project had emerged as a burgeoning part of the British Empire, where pillars of industry including linen, textiles and shipbuilding provided the sustained economic ties that helped define Unionist ‘Ulster’, and its unique relationship to Britain. The state that emerged after partition reflected this economic relationship, but the irony was that although the Unionist state had seemed powerfully intact since partition, the underlying economic trends were ones that

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<sup>114</sup> The IRA’s own public statement drafted to announce the end of the campaign stated that, ‘The decision to end the Resistance campaign has been taken in view of the general situation. Foremost among the factors motivating this course of action has been the attitude of the general public whose minds have been deliberately distracted from the supreme issue facing the Irish people- the unity and freedom of Ireland.’ Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army*, p. 334.

pointed to the historic decline of the traditional base of the state. From 1921 to 1968 the only real period of economic boom occurred in the context of increased production for the Second World War. It was a brief exception fuelled by the war economy, and the broader picture was one of steady economic decline since partition.<sup>115</sup> By the 1950s the linen industry had virtually collapsed, and shipbuilding entered permanent decline in these years.<sup>116</sup> Economic regression saw factory closures and higher unemployment, and as permanent decline loomed in the 1960s the historic position of the Protestant working class looked to be increasingly under threat.

For the Northern Ireland government these economic changes demanded a new consensus, precipitating a form of liberalising Unionism heralded by Terence O'Neill, who was elected in 1963. O'Neill tried to revitalize the Northern economy through a strategy that entailed attracting international investment, and this meant appealing to sections of foreign capital that were outside of the traditional employment patterns of the Northern state. Demand for economic change in the North coincided with the southern state moving away from a protectionist economic structure and opening up to British and foreign capital. Therefore, by the late 1960s the economic and material basis for the historic partition of Ireland was beginning to erode and this was expressed in attempts at new political relations. The meeting between Terence O'Neill and Sean Lemass in 1965 signified the changing economic tides of the two states.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Bardon, *A History of Ulster*, p. 516.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 627-628.

<sup>117</sup> Allen, *1916*, pp. 136-138.



The 'post-war consensus' that characterized Britain therefore also saw a realignment of consensus in Ireland. Another major contributing factor to this generational shift was the introduction of the welfare state. Proposed by a British Labour government and reluctantly implemented by the Unionist party, the new welfare state delivered a large expansion of the public sector, including homes and jobs. Particular importance in regard to the emergence of the civil rights movement was the expansion of the education sector, which contributed to a growing Catholic middle class capable of raising its voice against the grievances practiced by the Unionist state. Post-war housing schemes saw more public homes being built and these were distributed through local authorities. But in particular areas where Unionist majorities were marginal, serious discrimination was at times exercised in order to maintain gerrymandered boundaries, and in a context where housing was already scarce this became a central focal point for the civil rights movement.<sup>118</sup>

Therefore the 1960s brought about a contradictory process; social and economic changes intensified the practices of discrimination against the Catholic community, but they also created the conditions that saw a challenge to Unionist rule being mounted. The Catholic community began to sense an opportunity for advancement, while sections of the Protestant community were gripped by a sense of regression, due to the decline of the traditional economy and the

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<sup>118</sup> As John Whyte explained, 'Housing policy in individual areas, such as Fermanagh or Dungannon, could be very unfair. The civil rights agitation of 1968 was sparked off by the allocation of a house at Caledon, in Dungannon Rural District, to an unmarried Protestant girl who, as the Cameron report said (1969: para. 28), could 'by no stretch of the imagination . . . be regarded as a priority tenant' when there were Catholic families in the area badly in need of housing.' Whyte, 'How much discrimination was there under the unionist regime?'

emergence of a confident minority community. This contradiction was central to the emergence of the civil rights movement and would continue to define the period that followed.

External political changes also seemingly shifted favourably toward those who would assert grievances against the Unionist government. After thirteen years of uninterrupted Conservative Party rule the election of a British Labour government in 1964, led by Harold Wilson, heralded an administration that was ostensibly more susceptible to efforts articulating the hardships that impeded the Catholic community.<sup>119</sup> This emboldened those who sought to highlight the injustices practiced by the Unionist state during the first phase of civil rights action, when activists publicised the issues of housing, jobs and voting discrimination. The emerging confidence of the minority community had been expressed in early efforts at exposing housing inequality in Dungannon, an area that was evenly balanced between Catholics and Protestants, but where housing was firmly under the control of Unionist representatives. In May 1963 the Homeless Citizens League (HCL) was formed, which was predominately made up of Catholic women who initiated some of the first instances of direct action of the 1960s; pickets were launched outside the local council and afterward the HCL took the situation into their own hands by occupying empty homes with squatting families.<sup>120</sup> HCL activity ranks among the first efforts to take up localised grievances in this way, and it precipitated a wider and more generalised

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<sup>119</sup> ‘... violence occurred in the late 1960s after a period of rising economic expectations within the Catholic community, and rising political expectations generated by the choice of a new Unionist Prime Minister, Terence O’Neill, in 1963, and the election of a Labour government in 1964, led by a sympathetic Prime Minister, Harold Wilson’. McGarry and O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland*, p. 257.

<sup>120</sup> Purdie, *Politics in the Streets*, pp. 82-88.

campaign, with the founding of the Campaign for Social Justice (CSJ). Launched in 1964 by two leading figures of the HCL, Patricia and Conn McCluskey, it functioned as a pressure group and focused on gathering the extent of discrimination across the North, its membership was solidly of the professional Catholic middle class.<sup>121</sup> The CSJ essentially appealed to the British government to exercise its legal authority and intervene decisively in the affairs of Northern Ireland, producing a number of important publications documenting discrimination against the minority community.<sup>122</sup> These efforts were strongly complimented by the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster (CDU), formed in 1965; it was largely a lobby inside the British Labour Party made up of MPs who were sympathetic to the cause of challenging discrimination. The formation of the CDU signalled a more serious step in raising awareness surrounding the Irish question in British politics; it gained impressive support, including from a number of prominent Members of Parliament, including Michael Foot and Roy Hattersley.<sup>123</sup> However, despite the ‘hard hitting’ propaganda forwarded by the CDU it had little success in forcing action, with one historian going as far to conclude that it ‘had no discernible effect on the Labour government’<sup>124</sup>.

Although these organisations played a crucial role in documenting and publicising Unionist abuses of power, any success they had in doing so was outweighed by frustration at the lack of action to address their complaints. The

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

<sup>122</sup> For example, *Northern Ireland: The Plain Truth*, Issued by the Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland (Dungannon, 1969).

<sup>123</sup> Michael Foot was an MP and later a leader of the Labour Party (1980-83). Roy Hattersley was an MP and later a Deputy leader of the Labour Party (1983-92).

<sup>124</sup> Geoffrey Bell, *Troublesome Business, The Labour Party and the Irish Question* (London, Pluto Press, 1982), p. 104.

strategy of both the CSJ and the CDU was essentially one of highlighting and documenting discrimination in order to urge constitutional action. Yet as Bob Purdie shows in his examination of the civil rights movement, these efforts were largely in vain. Early efforts at redressing the sectarian imbalance faced considerable obstacles; such as the parliamentary convention at Westminster that ensured issues related to Ireland would not be raised in the house, and a system of legal redress that lacked any real avenue for change and greatly lagged behind the movement that would soon begin to gather on the streets.<sup>125</sup> It was against these obstacles that the best known of all civil rights organisations was born, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA).

The initiative behind the establishment of NICRA had initially come from the republican movement, which had undergone a political realignment after the failed border campaign. A rethinking had taken place among a section of republicanism, categorized by a rejection of armed struggle and a championing of reform, or ‘democratisation’ of the Northern state as the first process in establishing socialism in Ireland. Two intellectuals, Roy Johnson and Anthony Coughlan, who were influenced by the aforementioned stages theory of Communist Desmond Greaves, which forwarded a form of state led communism that gained traction inside the republican movement, were central to driving the shift in republicanism. Coughlan in particular was close to Greaves’ line of thinking, the central assumption being one of ‘working-class unity developing through the struggle for bourgeois democracy’ in the north.<sup>126</sup> This ‘six-county

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<sup>125</sup> Purdie, *Politics in the Streets*, pp. 118-120.

<sup>126</sup> Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland* pp. 266- 267. Also see Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, p. 38.

reform strategy' was crucial to those republicans taking a political turn toward civil rights agitation in the mid-late 1960s.

The idea of setting up a broad civil rights body was first raised at a conference of the Wolfe Tone societies over the 13-14 August 1966.<sup>127</sup> However, the aims and objectives of the organisation were far from what would have been considered traditionally 'republican', saying nothing about the British presence in Ireland nor even the concrete grievances of the minority community, and instead focusing on issues of civil liberties such as freedom of speech and assembly.<sup>128</sup>

NICRA itself was formally launched in 1967 and its broad basis appealed to a coalition of forces, including nationalists, sections of the Catholic middle class, republicans who had moved away from the tactic of armed struggle and elements of the organised left and labour movement. It also had some tentative support and involvement from liberal Unionists.<sup>129</sup> In its early formation NICRA espoused an agenda of defending citizens rights through documenting legal abuses. The organisations' own history would later explain:

For the first 18 months of its existence NICRA was nothing more than a pressure group. Its main activity was writing letters to the Government, mainly to Bill Craig as Minister of Home Affairs, complaining about harassment of political and social dissidents

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<sup>127</sup> Purdie, *Politics in the Streets*, p. 123.

<sup>128</sup> The key demands were: 'To defend the basic freedoms of citizens. 2. To protect the rights of the individual. 3. To highlight all possible abuses of power. 4. To demand guarantees for freedom of speech, assembly and association. 5. To inform the public of their lawful rights.' *Ibid*, p. 133.

<sup>129</sup> Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland*, p. 264.

ranging from Republicans to itinerants. But it rarely went beyond the stage of dignified written protest.<sup>130</sup>

This was an approach that the organised left had signed up to inside NICRA. Both the CPNI and the NILP were represented on the NICRA steering committee. Throughout the early period of NICRA's existence these groups had been united in urging caution with regards to political mobilisation around the civil rights issue, with both advancing distinct strategies that warned against openly challenging the anti democratic practices of the Unionist state. These reflected ideologically reformist methods that sought to use the state structures as an arena to transform society. For example, the NILP had essentially advocated a parliamentary solution to the social question and the issue of discrimination, arguing that a return of a Labour majority in elections would best secure the civil rights demands.<sup>131</sup> The CPNI favoured an effort to reform or 'democratise' the Northern state along traditional 'bourgeois' lines as the first step towards a socialist society. As Milotte points out, the CPNI saw NICRA 'as the first step towards a broad electoral alliance for replacing the Unionist regime with a 'progressive' government at Stormont.'<sup>132</sup> This meant an acceptance of the constitutional position of the Northern state and a postponement of raising questions such as partition or workers' control until a later date, presumably until after Northern Ireland had experienced a stage of democratic reform.

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<sup>130</sup> NICRA, "*We Shall Overcome...*" available online, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/crights/nicra/nicra78.htm>, accessed on 08/08/2015.

<sup>131</sup> As Aaron Edwards explains, 'Arguably, the NILP was ill equipped to meet the challenges posed by the transformation of politics in the late 1960s... because it was deeply wedded to the process and fundamentals of British parliamentary democracy. As such, it could not (and would not) fathom or condone a turn to street politics or civil disobedience.' Edwards, *A History of the Northern Ireland Labour Party*, pp. 145-146.

<sup>132</sup> Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland*, p. 264.

Such positions existed inaudibly inside NICRA since its inception and reflected conservatism among the left with regard to direct action. However, this cautious approach would be superseded as small signs of public protest began to find a much wider resonance. Therefore, while the early campaign for civil rights had hitherto been conducted through respectable and acceptable means, the potential for a new kind of movement soon emerged out of changing local conditions and the powerful influence that the global revolts of the late 1960s had on Northern Ireland. In these circumstances the student movement at Queen's University in Belfast would provide a powerful catalyst for civil rights action.

## Chapter 2: Global revolt and the birth of the People's Democracy

### 2.1. Introduction

Much like the rise of student struggles across various parts of Europe in 1968, the birth of radical student protest in Belfast was a watershed moment that represented a rupture in contemporary politics. It was a rupture that had its roots in economic and social changes in the post-WWII period. The PD emerged in October 1968, bearing many hallmarks of the global revolt associated with the late 1960s. A mass student movement that originated in Queen's University, the PD surfaced as the militant edge of the civil rights campaign in Ireland and would steer the movement in an increasingly radicalized direction, contributing to the destabilization of the Unionist state in early 1969.

In its early formation, the PD functioned on the basis of mass student assemblies and direct action, embarking on a series of protests that embodied the 'street politics' and civil disobedience of the late 1960s, against the practices of the Unionist government. Throughout the heady days of October 1968 members of the PD marched, picketed, organized 'sit-ins' and 'teach-ins' and produced a range of political propaganda against the government in order to champion their cause. The appearance of this form of student protest in Belfast was met with a hostile reaction from sections of the extreme right inside the Protestant community, in the form of counter mobilizations, but intense opposition also came from the centre of the Unionist state. The adverse reaction and repression directed at the PD would later prove a major factor in increasing communal tension and sparking the most contentious moments of violence in 1969.



This chapter considers the social and economic changes that swept across Northern Ireland in the post-war era and impacted upon student life and politics, qualitatively changing third level education and laying the basis for a student revolt. Research charts early civil rights agitation among the student left in Belfast and analyses the explosion of activity among the student population at Queen's University in 1968, including the first major PD protests. The politics of protest and non-violent civil disobedience that inspired a generation of activists represented a break from past forms of oppositional politics in the Northern Ireland state. For a brief period, it seemed to offer a way forward from the cul-de-sac both of traditional nationalism and the discredited militarism of the republican movement.

These developments have at times been downplayed within an academic community that tends to view the civil rights movement as representing a straightforward rise of nationalist or republican aspirations.<sup>133</sup> Although historiography on Ireland's troubled past is limited in its appreciation of the global influences on politics in this period, recent scholarship has highlighted

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<sup>133</sup> This consensus runs through much of the academic literature surrounding this period. For the foremost attempt to paint the civil rights movement as an expression of nationalist grievances, see, Hennessy, *A History of Northern Ireland*. Hennessy offers this conclusion on the civil rights period: 'What the evidence, from survey data and perceptions of the participants themselves, suggests is that many of the old fears, myths and prejudices that Protestants and Catholics held of each other at the state's formation survived well into the second half of the twentieth century. While many of the leading actors might perceive themselves as adopting new perspectives, they were not only prisoners of the fears of their own communities but were also, as we shall see, fundamentally governed by traditional interpretations of their opponents ideology.' Hennessy, *A History of Northern Ireland*, p. 170.

how in 1968, Northern Ireland emerged as part of the European wide revolt that served to challenge existing ideologies.<sup>134</sup>

This chapter builds on this emerging literature and argues that the rise of the PD— its politics, organization, ideological influences and associations— represented a juncture in oppositional politics inside Northern Ireland. Through emphasizing the global context and international influences that shaped the civil rights movement and by examining the aims, values and actions of the early PD, this research charts the role of the radical left in the civil rights movement.

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<sup>134</sup> Simon Prince, *Northern Ireland's '68*.

## 2.2. The Roots of the Student Revolt

There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part; you can't even passively take part, and you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all - Mario Savio, Berkeley Free Speech Movement.<sup>135</sup>

We were born into an unjust system; we are not prepared to grow old in it<sup>136</sup> - Bernadette Devlin, Queen's University student.

The roots of the student revolt in 1968 lie in the intersection of changing local conditions and the powerful influence of the global revolts of this period. The year 1968 would see Britain and Ireland engulfed in a wave of radical activism that drew parallels and connections with movements across the globe. From Paris to London, Rome to Berlin, Prague to Chicago, student and worker mobilisations emerged in an explosive fashion to challenge established orders and to radicalise a new generation of left wing activists. In Northern Ireland, October 1968 would see the civil rights movement burst onto the streets of Belfast and Derry in what would become the Irish dimension to the global revolt.

Underlying the eruption of civil rights agitation were the economic and social changes that swept the post-war Northern Ireland state and created the conditions in which a militant student population could flourish in 1968. The rapid expansion of education was a central feature to the emergence of student

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<sup>135</sup> From a famous speech delivered by Mario Savio, leader of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, on 2 December 1964, available online, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mariosaviosproulhallsitin.htm>, accessed on 03/02/2014.

<sup>136</sup> Bernadette Devlin, 'Foreword', *The Price Of My Soul*.

revolts in the 1960s. The French May is the most profound example, but this development occurred on a global level, in the US, Italy, Germany and Britain.<sup>137</sup>

In Northern Ireland, this took place on a smaller scale but contributed directly to the rise of the civil rights movement.

Historically, the student population in Northern Ireland was not known for its radicalism or political militancy. In 1935 students from Queen's University infamously intervened in a nation-wide railway strike on behalf of employers, by breaking picket lines. The role of the students in breaking the strike gained them much rancour from the most militant section of Belfast's working class.<sup>138</sup> Moreover, this footnote in the history of Ireland's labour movement illustrates the traditional social composition and character of the student population in Northern Ireland, from its founding years in the 1840s, until the post-WWII era.

Traditionally, universities were the preserve of the ruling elite in Britain and Ireland and reflected the acute class divide that characterised pre-WWII capitalism. The university performed a function as a training ground for sections

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<sup>137</sup> Tariq Ali, *1968 and after- Inside the Revolution*, (London, Blond and Briggs 1978), pp. 10-15. Also see Harman, *The Fire Last Time*.

<sup>138</sup> 'The scabs were drawn mainly from railway management and from the Queen's University student body, and were paid twice the normal rate for a rail worker. The students were treated especially well for their service: special provisions were made for them at a local hotel, and detectives were put in place to guarantee their protection. The use of students as strike-breakers received widespread condemnation. NILP politician Harry Midgley moved a motion that the Belfast Corporation should rescind the £7000 per annum that the Corporation gave Queen's University in grants and remission of rates because of its role in the strike. Other students at Queen's were also critical of the scabs: the University's Literary and Scientific Society passed a resolution condemning students for involving themselves in "a purely private dispute between railway companies and their employees.' Mitchell, *Struggle or Starve*, pp. 122-123.

of the middle classes and the higher echelons of the establishment. Thus, in its early years the small student population of Queen's College was exclusive to a certain middle and upper class that was predominantly Protestant in religious composition, reflecting the high level of Catholic disenfranchisement in the state.<sup>139</sup> Throughout the 1850s and 1860s Catholics made up roughly 4-5 percent of the student body.<sup>140</sup> As late as 1909 Catholics accounted for less than 6 percent of students and although the percentage increased somewhat during the interwar years it remained low.<sup>141</sup>

Queen's University in Belfast was an elitist institution; this was reflected in both the composition of students and lecturers but also in the very nature of the university experience. As one Liberal Unionist commentator, writing in the 1890s about Queen's, expressed it,

The Queens' College graduate is not a visionary: the education he receives stimulates him to make his way in the world, and especially in the services of our Colonial and Indian Empire.<sup>142</sup>

This greatly changed in the mid twentieth century for a variety of reasons. By the late 1960s the education system had vastly expanded in line with the changing needs of industry and capital in Northern Ireland. In the post-WWII era the economic power base of Ulster had shifted away from the traditional industries

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<sup>139</sup> The university was originally chartered as 'Queen's College' in 1845.

<sup>140</sup> Theodore William Moody and James Camlin Beckett, *Queen's Belfast, 1845-1949-The History of a University* (London, Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 194.

<sup>141</sup> Liam Clarkson, *A University in Troubled Times- Queen's Belfast, 1945-2000* (Four Courts Press, 2004), p. 132.

<sup>142</sup> Quoted in Owen Dudley Edwards, *The Sins of Our Fathers- Roots of Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1970), p. 252.

central to Unionist power, toward British, American and continental firms.<sup>143</sup>

This shift coincided with the development of the welfare state and an increased level of integration between the free market and the government.<sup>144</sup> Such transformation demanded a more modernised education system in order to accommodate the new economic and social order. Therefore, Queen's, the main centre for higher education, experienced an increase in government grants from £216,000 in 1948/9 to almost £24 million in 1965/6.<sup>145</sup> The major piece of legislation that led to this transformation was the *Robbins Report* (1963)<sup>146</sup>, which heralded large-scale investment in higher education in Britain. Its Northern Irish parallel, the *Lockwood Report* (1964) had much of the same effect, yet it also illustrated the evident sectarian dynamics to such investment. The report led to the establishment of a new university in Northern Ireland based at Coleraine, much to the dismay of large sections of the community in Derry— the North's second biggest city— who felt that their hometown was far more deserving of investment, and that the decision reflected the Unionist desire to both disinvest and maintain dominance in the majority Catholic city. The decision precipitated the launching of a widespread campaign for a university in Derry, which is often seen as a forerunner to the campaign for civil rights in the city.<sup>147</sup>

The pattern of investment that was brought with these changes was central to the emergence of the student revolt across both Britain and Northern Ireland. In

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<sup>143</sup> Farrell, *The Orange State*, p. 229.

<sup>144</sup> Harman, *The Fire Last Time*, p. 39.

<sup>145</sup> The figures were announced by then Prime Minister Terence O'Neill, see the *Irish Times*, 14 March 1968.

<sup>146</sup> The 'Robbins Report' was a report of the committee on Higher Education in 1963, led by Lord Robbins. It recommended immediate expansion of the education sector and its conclusions were accepted by the government on 24 October 1963.

<sup>147</sup> See, Niall O'Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites*, pp. 22-24.

its most basic form it had a quantitative effect on the number of entrants into third level education. At the outbreak of the Second World War there were only 69,000 students in Britain, but by 1964 it had reached 294,000: 'In 1900 students had been 1 percent of their age group; in 1950 they were still only 1.5 percent, but by 1972 they were 15 percent.'<sup>148</sup>

In Belfast this had the combined effect of introducing more students from a working class background into the university system but also, crucially, further opening up access to education to the Catholic community. Therefore, at the beginning of the academic semester in 1968, Queen's, which was home to roughly 5,500 students overall, could claim an influx of 1,574 new undergraduates the great majority of whom were from Northern Ireland.<sup>149</sup> In the same semester the Catholic chaplaincy at Queen's welcomed 440 new students into its ranks.<sup>150</sup> By 1968, Catholics made up nearly 30 percent of the student body at Queen's.<sup>151</sup>

The education system took on a much wider societal remit and this transition had a cumulative effect on the university and student life in general. Entry into university was no longer a pathway into the future ruling elite and students' place in society was ill determined, uncertain and subject to many variables. The social composition of the student body became defined by this 'transitional situation', in that students now made up a substantial group engaged in education, whose future pathway and role in society was yet to be fully

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<sup>148</sup> Harman, *The Fire Last Time*, p. 39.

<sup>149</sup> *Irish News*, 9 November 1968.

<sup>150</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 October 1968.

<sup>151</sup> Clarkson, *A University in Troubled Times*, p. 132.

established.<sup>152</sup> In this respect Northern Ireland had experienced many of the general preconditions for the rise of a student revolt.<sup>153</sup>

The University experience in Belfast was thus opened up to a hopeful generation of young Catholics who later ensured that demands for further empowerment gained traction. Significantly, these same developments would also produce a layer of young Protestants who, for a brief period, identified more strongly with the cause for civil rights and the ‘global student rebellion’ than with the conservative Unionist state. Indeed, the early student protests of the PD saw a notable level of involvement from the Protestant student body and those who were at the centre of it testify to the way in which a variety of factors— not least the liberalizing climate of the 1960s— helped them with break away from the ideological dogmas of ‘their community’.

PD activist John Gray provides a good example that was indicative of the wider experience.<sup>154</sup> Born in raised in Belfast to Protestant English parents, Gray humorously describes the self contained and largely middle class community around Queen’s University, where he came of age, as being akin to the ‘legation quarter in Imperial Peking’. As a teenager Gray recalled knowing only one Catholic— an English friend of Irish origin— and reminisces that at some point he felt it bizarre that he had reached the age of sixteen without really knowing anyone from the local Catholic community. Gray’s upbringing coincided with

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<sup>152</sup> Alex Callinicos and Simon Turner, ‘The Student Movement Today’, *International Socialism Journal*, No.75 (London, 1977), pp. 9-15.

<sup>153</sup> Gareth Jones, ‘The Meaning of the Student Revolt’, *Student Power, Problems, Diagnosis, Action*, Ed. Alexander Cockburn and Robin Blackburn (Penguin Books, 1969), p. 41.

<sup>154</sup> John Gray played a central role in the PD between 1968-1972. Active in both Belfast and London Gray launched the Anti-internment League in 1971 and acted as its chairperson.



the ‘truly terrifying’ rise of Ian Paisley; and he recalls going along to Paisley’s early rallies in Belfast’s Ulster Hall, initially as a joke in order to put Italian Lira in the collection plate, and being completely hostile to the content of the meeting. Overall Gray reflects that ‘I had a perception certainly by 16, 17, that there was shall we say... something rotten in the state of Denmark.’<sup>155</sup> Initially these perceptions would manifest politically with involvement in the Liberal Party<sup>156</sup>, but as more radical movements emerged he would become heavily involved in leftwing activism.

Such liberalization and radicalization in young people was reflected in attitudes, and there is much evidence to show the growing disconnect between young people and traditional communal politics. Generally, young people had become apathetic toward traditional politics with a major survey indicating that they were moving away from ‘Orange and Green’ issues and were, for example, less concerned with the issue of partition than ever.<sup>157</sup> In November 1968 the *Belfast Telegraph* carried out an in-depth opinion poll among young people in Northern Ireland. Its findings were an example of the ideological ripples within the student populous. Of those surveyed, participants expressed support for ‘liberal’ leaning policies and such attitudes were much higher among those who remained in education. For example, two out of three young people expressed the view that the Orange Order had a harmful impact on society and those who

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<sup>155</sup> Interview with John Gray, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

<sup>156</sup> The Ulster Liberal Party was a liberal organisation in Northern Ireland that was linked to the British Liberal Party. It was founded in 1956 and had one MP in the 1960s, Sheenagh Murnaghan.

<sup>157</sup> Richard Rose, *Governing Without Consensus- An Irish Perspective* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971), pp. 475-77.

stayed in education were far more critical of the Order.<sup>158</sup> On the question of the Vietnam War, the acid test for student radicalism across Europe, a 57% majority of young people voiced opposition to the war. Again, the longer one stayed in education the more likely one was to be against the war.<sup>159</sup> The survey also highlighted another important factor to early student life, the global awareness that was developing among young people.

As movements for change swept across the 'Global Village' of the 1960s, activists in Northern Ireland drew inspiration from international events in a way that they had never done before. Technological advancements played a part in this, and the introduction of television had a major impact in bringing international issues to the lives of those in Ireland. In terms of the PD the major influences were the black civil rights movement in the US, the French May, the campaign against the Vietnam War and the Prague Spring<sup>160</sup>. Of all the struggles that were taking place across the globe it was the movement against racial discrimination in the US that provided the major influence on activists here; and although the comparisons have been sometimes overstated, it is obvious to see how the connections were drawn at the time when we consider the level of Catholic discrimination that existed in the Unionist state.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 October 1968.

<sup>159</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 October 1968.

<sup>160</sup> The 'Prague Spring' was a popular movement against repression and censorship in Czechoslovakia in 1968. It led to an intense struggle against the Russian military and signaled an important moment of opposition to the form of rule prevalent in the Communist Eastern block.

<sup>161</sup> See Dooley, *Black and the Green*, for an in-depth appraisal of these connections. The most obvious case of discrimination was in Derry. As John Whyte put it, 'when it comes to gerrymandering of local government boundaries... Nationalists were manipulated out of control in a number of councils where they had a majority of electors. This is one of the clearest areas of

For those instigating civil rights action in the North these connections were at first simply drawn through the medium of television and newspaper reports, which provided examples of successful direct action. On the first housing protest of the HCL in Dungannon in 1963 demonstrators carried placards that read, ‘They talk about Alabama, Why don’t they talk about Dungannon?’ and ‘If our Religion is against us, ship us to Little Rock.’<sup>162</sup> As agitation increased in 1968 the links would become more direct and all of the leading activists in the civil rights movement would later testify to the influence of the black civil rights struggle in the US. John McAnulty, a working class Catholic from the Falls Road area in west Belfast, one of the ‘48’ generation who entered Queen’s in this period recalled, ‘Everybody on the nationalist side—who ten years ago would have had a mild tinge of racism around them—all of a sudden saw themselves as black, they looked at Martin Luther King, they looked at the marches.’<sup>163</sup>

Nor were the comparisons confined to those out to challenge the Unionist state. As late as April 1970— at a time when the British government’s sympathy with the plight of the civil rights movement had generally waned — the UK

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discrimination in the whole field of controversy.’ Whyte, *How much discrimination was there under the unionist regime 1921-1968?*

<sup>162</sup> Dooley, *Black and Green*, p 30.

<sup>163</sup> Interview with John McAnulty, Belfast, 23/07/2015. Fionnbarra O’Dochartaigh, a native of Derry explained further: ‘Many of us looked to the civil rights struggles in America for our inspiration. We compared ourselves to the poor blacks in the US ghettos and those suffering under the cruel system of apartheid in racist South Africa. Indeed we viewed ourselves as Ulster’s White Negroes— a repressed and forgotten dispossessed tribe within a bigoted and partitionist statelet that no Irish elector had cast a vote to create.’ Fionnbarra O’Dochartaigh, *Ulster’s White Negroes, from Civil Rights to Insurrection* (AK Press, Edinburgh, 1994), p. 14.

representative in Northern Ireland, Ronnie Burroughs, would write to then Prime Minister James Callaghan that,

The most casual observer of the Northern Ireland scene cannot avoid drawing parallels with the Southern states of America; the 'poor white' Protestant is convinced that if the Roman Catholic minority is given an inch it will take an ell, become 'uppity', and encroach on his entrenched and often minimal prerogatives.<sup>164</sup>

Burroughs continued to draw the parallels with the Unionist Party, which in his view contained 'people whose views can be with difficulty distinguished from those of Governor Wallace and Senator McCarthy.'<sup>165</sup> The tentative inspiration that was evident from the mid 1960s would become more established as campaigns developed and activists borrowed strategies and tactics from their global counterparts, making direct connections with the black freedom struggle. Indeed, it would be student activists in Belfast, members of the PD, who went furthest in taking influence from the militancy of the US movement. This was largely down to the way in which the US experience seemed to give direction to a movement that was, by its very nature, disorganised and lacking in ideological clarity. But if the US movement was important in giving political direction to the PD, it also owed a great debt to the experience of student protest campaigns

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<sup>164</sup> Letter from Ronnie Burroughs to James Callaghan, 28 April 1970. Reports of civil unrest in Northern Ireland, 1970 Jan 01-1970 Dec 3. National Archives of the United Kingdom (NAUK), FCO 33/1075.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

across Europe, most particularly the awakening of student radicalisation in the Sorbonne in Paris, May 1968—the high peak of student radicalism in Europe.<sup>166</sup>

The changing composition of the student community drawn out above was a feature throughout western capitalism. But it was most profound in France, where the huge expansion of education partly laid the basis in which widespread struggle— combining students and workers— brought the country to a halt and almost threatened revolution, nearly toppling the government of Charles De Gaulle. The French '68 began with relatively small-scale student protests that were met with hard levels of repression from the police and university authorities, provoking mass student strikes, occupations and protests, which culminated in the 'night of the barricades', when up to 30,000 students fought pitched battles against state forces.<sup>167</sup> The student revolt precipitated a much wider wave of workers struggle culminating in a mass general strike, during which De Gaulle temporarily left the country. Politically, the events in France had a major impact on even the smallest forces of the European left, as they signified a new fusion between student and workers struggles. One major influence was the idea of the 'spontaneity of resistance'; it was best expressed by the most known leader of the French student revolt, Daniel Cohn-Bendit.<sup>168</sup> The new student revolts rose rapidly and moved fast, and Cohn-Bendit counter posed this with the old left's models of patiently building a Party with a structure and leadership, contesting that 'our movement does not need leaders to direct it... it

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<sup>166</sup> The Sorbonne building in the Latin Quarter of Paris became the focal point of student assembly during the upsurge of May 1968.

<sup>167</sup> Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism, The Leftwing Alternative*, (New York, McGraw-Hill book company, 1968), p. 63.

<sup>168</sup> Daniel Cohn-Bendit, known as 'Danny the Red', was the most notorious leader of the student uprising in Paris and was a central figure of the French left for some period. Today he is a Green MEP.

can perfectly well express itself without the help of a ‘vanguard’.<sup>169</sup> The problems arising from such an approach will be drawn out later in this thesis, for now it is sufficient to note that the French example clearly influenced the PD. One year on from ‘Mai 68’, Michael Farrell insisted that the PD was a ‘revolutionary association’, one that was ‘considerably influenced by the Sorbonne Assembly and by concepts of libertarianism as well as socialism.’<sup>170</sup> Throughout Europe in 1968 sections of the burgeoning student community entered a process of radicalisation, it often began with a realisation that that their governments and those who ran their education system did not live by the ‘liberal’ ideology with which they tried to justify their existing societies.<sup>171</sup> In Northern Ireland the first signs of student protest would emerge in opposition to the repressive apparatus of the Unionist government.

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

<sup>170</sup> ‘Discussion on the Strategy of People’s Democracy’, *New Left Review*, May-June 1969. Available online, <https://newleftreview.org/1/55/liam-baxter-bernadette-devlin-michael-farrell-eamonn-mccann-cyril-toman-discussion-on-the-strategy-of-peoples-democracy>, accessed on 19/03/2016.

<sup>171</sup> Harman, *The Fire Last Time*, p. 41.

### 2.3. Early student activism

Among the new generation who benefitted from post-war reforms there had been early efforts to investigate the issue of civil rights at Queen's University. Indeed, it was here that a number of individuals who would later make their mark in the PD gained their first real experiences of political activity. In 1964 a group centred on student activists including Bowes Egan, Eamonn McCann, and Michael Farrell embarked on a fact-finding mission under the auspices of the 'Working Committee on Civil Rights in Northern Ireland'. They collected oral evidence and researched the level of discrimination in towns across the north.<sup>172</sup> It was an example of the type of activity that was carried out by small groups of socialists at Queen's, many of whom found an ephemeral home in the QUB Labour Group.

Of all the activists that emerged from the leftwing student milieu in the mid 1960s, Michael Farrell would prove to be the most influential in the PD. A glance at his early political record reveals an already notable history of activism; a former member of the Trotskyist Irish Workers' Group<sup>173</sup>, at undergraduate level he had been chairman of the QUB Labour Group, Vice President of the Union of Students Ireland 1965-6, External Relations Officer of QUB Students Representative Council and an executive member of the Northern Ireland Labour Party. His potential was recognised early by the university when he won the

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<sup>172</sup> Purdie, *Politics in the Streets*, pp, 199-200.

<sup>173</sup> The Irish Workers' Group was a small socialist organization in Ireland that drew a number of activists into its orbit, including, Farrell, Eamonn McCann and Gerry Lawless. By 1967 it was mainly based in London where it produced the paper, the *Irish Militant*.

Queen's Orator award for two successive years.<sup>174</sup> Many of his contemporaries had moved in similar circles; Eamonn McCann, a native of Derry, also claimed a record of leftwing activism. A former chairman of the QUB Labour Group between 1962-1963, McCann was another notable orator who served as President of the university debating club, the Literific society. After a stint living in London, where he was active in the IWG and served as editor of its paper the *Irish Militant*— a role that saw him organise support for workers struggles and partake in Campaign against Nuclear Disarmament (CND) marches— McCann returned to Derry just in time for the outbreak of civil rights activity.<sup>175</sup> Bowes Egan and Cyril Toman had been active in the QUB Labour group of 1963. Toman had visited Moscow in 1964 and was a member of the NILP. Egan became a founding member of the PD and a leading activist at Queen's. He would later move to London to practice law. A similar type of recruit had gravitated to socialist labour politics in small numbers by 1968. 'Red' Rory McShane was a member of the NILP and was active on the Student Representative Council at Queen's. He had also written for the *Irish Militant*.<sup>176</sup> Although the influence of the student left was marginal throughout the early to mid 1960s, these activists would prove capable of making a much wider impact when a mass movement erupted in 1968.

Generally, the political climate at Queen's was seen as liberal in comparison to the entrenched traditions that existed outside the university's walls. The largest student political society was the QUB Labour grouping and the other main political societies included the New Ireland Society and the National

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<sup>174</sup> Arthur, *The People's Democracy*, p. 24.

<sup>175</sup> Interview with Eamonn McCann, Derry, 04/06/2015.

<sup>176</sup> Arthur, *The People's Democracy*, p. 142.



Democratic Group, and the main Unionist grouping, the Conservative and Unionist Society, was dominated by ‘O’Neill’ supporters. Around this time the society even elected a Catholic, Louis Boyle, as its chairman.<sup>177</sup> Despite the tolerant political atmosphere sectarian divisions still shaped student politics at Queen’s. One former student from the mid 1960s remembered the sharp social cleavage that was present throughout the entire university system. Students’ social lives were divided on religious lines and there were ritualised communal confrontations, such as the annual ‘border debate’, when factions from each community voted ‘for’ or ‘against’ partition.<sup>178</sup> Another student, Ciaran McKeown recalled that those societies who controlled the student council, and therefore the purse strings of student politics, were almost all Protestant, while Catholic societies tended to participate in ‘powerless’ debates.<sup>179</sup>

Within this atmosphere there was little radical left wing tradition, nor evidence that an explosion of student radicalism was imminent in the mid-late 1960s. In hindsight, Michael Farrell described Queen’s’ political climate pre-‘68 as being one of the ‘most docile campuses in western Europe’<sup>180</sup>, and Bernadette Devlin, a Celtic studies student with an increasing appetite for radical politics, found on her entry into Queen’s that most of the political societies remained disconnected from the realities of Northern Ireland: they were interested in abstract ideas not action and gave her little opportunity for expanding her political worldview. Although radical organisation was lacking at Queen’s, songs of the counterculture were beginning to travel across the globe:

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<sup>177</sup> Purdie, *Politics in the Streets*, p. 201.

<sup>178</sup> Michael McKeown, *The Greening of a Nationalist* (Dublin, Murlough, 1986), p. 6.

<sup>179</sup> Ciaran McKeown, *The Passion of Peace* (Belfast, Blackstaff, 1984), p. 11.

<sup>180</sup> Michael Farrell, ‘Introduction’, *Twenty Years On*, p. 14.

There was more real politics in the Folk Music society than any of the parties. They sang black civil rights songs in the folk music society before anybody else in Queen's was interested in the race problem, and they were singing songs about unemployment in Belfast long before the civil rights movement took it up.<sup>181</sup>

The first instances of student mobilisation emerged behind the cause of free speech and freedom of political assembly. On 7 March 1967 the Minister of Home affairs, William Craig, authorised a banning of Republican Clubs across Northern Ireland under the Special Powers Act, labelling them as subversive fronts for the IRA. The actions of the government in restricting republican organisation and the university's acquiescence to the ban would spark a notable reaction within the student community at Queen's, initiating protests for freedom of speech and showing the potential for student mobilisation.

In reaction to the ban, a group of young republicans immediately set up a Club the following day at Queen's. On 10 March a small demonstration of 80 students held a protest march, and on 11 March the Young Socialists<sup>182</sup> marched through the city centre in support of their republican counterparts.<sup>183</sup> That May the Republican Club was approved by the Student Representative Council, but the following semester the University's Academic Council banned the Club, in compliance with the government's orders. It provided the catalyst for the first instances of major student protest reaching Belfast.

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<sup>181</sup> Devlin, *The Price Of My Soul*, p. 76.

<sup>182</sup> The Northern Ireland Labour Party Young Socialists was a NILP youth grouping that campaigned vigorously for Labour representation in Northern Ireland.

<sup>183</sup> *Irish Militant*, Vol 2, No 4, April 1967.

The University's acquiescence to Craig's order was met with hostility by sections of the wider student populace and in a late night session of the Student Representative Council, on 6 November, the issue was debated and a resolution against the ban was passed by 108 votes to 5, with 8 abstentions.<sup>184</sup> Two days later, the Union's debating society passed a motion by 315 votes to 1, declaring that students had a right to organise under whatever banner they chose.

Opposition to the ban was organised within a Joint Action Committee of various groups, including the New Ireland Society, the Republican Club, QUB Labour grouping and the Young Socialists. It gathered hundreds of students and agreed to organise a protest to Unionist Party headquarters in Glengall Street on Wednesday 15 November.<sup>185</sup> Among those who led the students was Rory McShane, chairman of the QUB Labour group. McShane conveyed the concerns of the students when he asserted; 'the crux of the matter is not the support of the Republican Club, but that public representatives could ban a word.'<sup>186</sup>

The ban epitomised the irrational opposition to any political grouping that challenged the basis of Unionist power. In reality, the Republican Club was inactive and politically innocuous, its only real meeting was held months later on 13 March 1968; it was a discussion on the Special Powers Act. The futility of the Club was recognised by both the police and the Minister of Home Affairs' legal advisors. When tasked with investigating the issue the Attorney General, E. W. Jones, concluded that the ban was wholly unjustified and that the Republican Club at Queen's had no connection with the IRA. The claim was even supported

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<sup>184</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 7 November 1967.

<sup>185</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 November 1967.

<sup>186</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 7 November 1967.

by County Inspector of the RUC, Bill Meharg, who went on to state that he found, 'no evidence before me that this Republican Club has any affiliations or connections with Sinn Fein or any other Republican Club who might be engaged or interested in subversive activity'<sup>187</sup>. Despite these later revelations on behalf of state officials the ban was enforced, its result was to polarise the student body and bring to light the question of freedom of political organisation inside the university.

Opposition to the ban inside the campus was countered by support for the government from hard-line loyalists, with the Unionist Labour Association calling on supporters to 'educate these so called intellectuals.'<sup>188</sup> Ian Paisley and his Ulster Protestant Volunteers<sup>189</sup>, who declared their intention to physically stop the march, led opposition to the students. Faced with the possibility of a direct confrontation, the police intervened to re-direct the student march. Instead of passing through Shaftesbury Square, where Paisley supporters were gathered, the students marched to the home of the Minister for Home Affairs at Annadale Avenue. The march mobilised up to 1,000 people and student leaders then delivered a letter outlining their reasons for protest.<sup>190</sup> The march passed off as a jovial enough affair, but it was in many ways a practice run for events to come and had served as an example of student activists acting within a semi organised structure. If anything, the students had displayed a willingness to avoid confrontation and abide by the direction of the police.

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<sup>187</sup> Sinn Fein and Republican Clubs, 1967-1969, *Ministry of Home Affairs files*, PRONI HA/32/2/13,

<sup>188</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 November 1967.

<sup>189</sup> The Ulster Protestant Volunteers were a loyalist paramilitary group established by Ian Paisley and active between 1966-69.

<sup>190</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 15 November 1967.

Apart from this instance of mobilisation, student politics remained muted throughout the early months of 1968. Outside the campus, however, the forces that would begin to coalesce civil rights activity were beginning to be established. By the summer of 1968 the NICRA strategy of lobbying was becoming exhausted, and sections of the association were realising the necessity of direct action. On 19 June, MP Austin Currie raised a specific case of discrimination in housing in the area of Caledon, a small village in Tyrone. The case concerned a nineteen-year-old unmarried Protestant woman and secretary of a Unionist parliamentary candidate, who had been allocated a home despite a number of more qualified Catholic families in need. Currie joined a group of local republican activists and squatted in the home in an effort to highlight the issue. The action worked and local newspapers and television crews descended on the home sparking a formidable interest in the issue.<sup>191</sup>

Currie returned to the NICRA leadership to propose a public civil rights march. Although the call was supported it was met with caution from some on the NICRA leadership, with long-standing communist Betty Sinclair voicing the strongest opposition to the idea of a demonstration. Sinclair would become the most vocal opponent of efforts to mobilise civil rights marches whilst attempting to steer the campaign in a constitutional direction, thus maintaining moderate support from both Unionists and nationalists. Nevertheless, Currie's proposal saw support and the NICRA executive called Northern Ireland's first 'civil rights' march from Dungannon to Coalisland on 24 August.<sup>192</sup> The demonstration attracted a broad base of support from the nationalist community

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<sup>191</sup> Purdie, *Politics in the Streets*, p. 135. Austin Currie, *All Hell Will Break Loose*, (Dublin, O'Brien Press, 2004), pp. 96-98.

<sup>192</sup> Purdie, *Politics in the Streets*, p. 135.

and mobilised over 2,000 people.<sup>193</sup> Importantly, it also gave a handful of Queen's students, mostly centred on the Young Socialists, an opportunity to intervene in support of what was to become the defining political issue of their generation.

The Young Socialists had been sporadically active at Queen's throughout the year, particularly in organising solidarity around international issues such as the Vietnam War, but never managing to amass more than a small audience. On the day of the Dungannon to Coalisland march the group had organised their own demonstration in Belfast city centre, to protest against the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. The connection between the global and the local was not lost on the activists: 'For us it was a symbolic fusion of the international student rebellion with the smouldering revolt against the specific grievances of Northern Ireland'.<sup>194</sup> Padraigin Drinan, an undergraduate student at Queen's, recalled the efforts to produce material for the march: 'I was the person who made the posters, so I had placards that had double placards. On the front of them it said 'Russia Get Out of Czechoslovakia' and then you took that off and it said 'One Man One Vote'.'<sup>195</sup>

The group set off to Dungannon in cars from Belfast, but when they arrived their propaganda was not welcomed on the rally. Both their red banner and flags in support of the Vietnamese Liberation Army were a cause of

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<sup>193</sup> Bardon, *A History of Ulster*, p. 652.

<sup>194</sup> Farrell, 'Introduction', *Twenty Years On*, p 20.

<sup>195</sup> Quote taken from an interview conducted by *Northern Visions* (2014), available online, <http://ourgeneration.northernvisions.org/our-generation/personal-stories/padraigin-drinan/>, accessed on 13/08/2015.

grievance to the stewards who demanded their removal.<sup>196</sup> The efforts of march organisers to ‘keep politics out’ of the protest was an early sign of the division between the older left and a new generation of activists determined to further politicise the movement. Evidently, the march would not reach its destination and was blocked from entering the town centre of Dungannon by the RUC, in the face of a Paisleyite protest. In the middle of the march small scuffles broke out between the police and young demonstrators and at least four of the marchers were injured. Eventually appeals from some of the more moderate leaders of NICRA were accepted, and after speeches were delivered the march was wound down. However, not before the crowd began to sing ‘We Shall Overcome’.<sup>197</sup> The international anthem for civil rights had made its way to the streets of Northern Ireland.

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<sup>196</sup> Farrell, ‘Introduction’, *Twenty Years On*, p 20.

<sup>197</sup> NICRA, ‘*We Shall Overcome*’, available online, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/crights/nicra/nicra782.htm>.

## 2.4. October 1968

Civic unrest, particularly among the young, seems to be almost endemic around the world at present. Scarcely a day passes that sit-downs, teach-ins, parades, student protests etc, do not feature in the news in some country. It became the turn of Northern Ireland on 5 October, 1968, when a large scale civil rights protest was held in Londonderry, followed soon afterward by a student protest movement in Belfast and later other marches and meetings...<sup>198</sup> - *Northern Ireland information service, Stormont Castle.*

The events in Dungannon provided the opportunity for a group of radicals in Derry to call a civil rights march in their city. Derry had for long been the most explicit example of the Catholic community's grievances in the Northern Ireland state. For some months a loose network of socialists had been agitating with some success around the issue of housing and unemployment. Members of the Derry Labour Party, republicans and independent activists were leading local activity and much to the consternation of the Nationalist Party called a civil rights march for 5 October.<sup>199</sup>

The march was to pass directly through the main Unionist area, and after haphazard negotiations they managed to get the support of NICRA. On 1 October the Apprentice Boys announced a march on the same route as the civil rights demonstration, in what seemed an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the civil rights cause. William Craig reacted by banning both marches.<sup>200</sup> The ban on marching troubled the NICRA leadership who wanted to call off the demonstration. However, the radicals in Derry ensured otherwise, and with the support of the Belfast Young Socialists, informed NICRA that the march would

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<sup>198</sup> Press release from the Northern Ireland information service, Stormont Castle, 31 December 1968. NAUK, CJ 3/30.

<sup>199</sup> McCann, *War and an Irish Town*, p 27.

<sup>200</sup> For an account of the march from its principal organizer see, McCann, *War and an Irish Town*, pp, 39-41.



go ahead with or without their involvement.<sup>201</sup> In the event, NICRA agreed to march and thus, on 5 October, when hundreds of civil rights protestors marched up toward a police cordon, conflict of some form had become almost inevitable.

The demonstration saw a political shift from the previous civil rights march and with socialists at the helm of organising affairs, the march took on a distinctly class character that forwarded labour slogans. The placards distributed by Derry activists read, ‘Tories are Vermin’.<sup>202</sup> On this occasion a busload of the newly launched ‘Young Socialist Alliance’ (YSA) from Queen’s had attended the march. The YSA was essentially an independent version of the Labour Party Young Socialists, established by Michael Farrell in order to coalesce socialist activism at Queen’s and he took its name directly from its US counterpart.<sup>203</sup>

Despite arriving late, the activists joined the demonstration concurrent to a tense stand off occurring between the organisers and the police. While the civil rights activists held a public meeting, some of the more moderate leaders of NICRA, particularly Betty Sinclair, began to call on people to disperse. Michael Farrell describes what happened next from the perspective of the Young Socialists:

We were not having that. It was 1968, the year of student revolutions in Paris and Prague, of Mexico City and the Chicago Democratic

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<sup>201</sup> Farrell, ‘Introduction’, *Twenty Years On*, p. 21.

<sup>202</sup> Eamonn McCann, ‘The National Health Service and the struggle for civil rights’, *War and Peace in Northern Ireland* (Dublin, Hot Press Books, 1998), p. 27.

<sup>203</sup> The YSA was launched informally at Queen’s in June 1968 and contained many members of the Labour Party ‘Young Socialists’, including those who on the Derry march. Its first chairperson was Michael Farrell and it publicly announced its presence on 5 October, see the *Irish News* on 5 October 1968 for their press release. They would form the hard socialist core inside the PD.

convention. We did not think of ourselves in quite that league but going home peacefully meant letting Bill Craig and the RUC walk all over us. We would have been angrier still if we had known that the RUC had already attacked the head of the march, batoning Gerry Fitt and Eddie McAteer, leader of the opposition in the Stormont Parliament, and the leaders' response had been the meeting and the plea to go home. We only heard all that afterwards. Our group of 30 or 40 protestors pushed to the front and up against the RUC. We did not attack them. In fact we lectured them about gerrymandering and how they were being exploited by the Unionist bosses too, and then we appealed to them to let us march. But we intended to stay put: if they wanted us to go home they would have to make us. Suddenly an RUC man rammed a baton into the belly of the man beside me. I did not even see the baton that hit me on the head and the next few minutes were hazy. I only know that in the TV film of the events I can be seen on the ground being belaboured by an RUC officer with a blackthorn stick. After that it was chaos.<sup>204</sup>

The RUC baton charged the protestors, including MPs, in a frenzied attack to break up the march. For the first time in Northern Ireland a water cannon was used to hose the demonstrators, and various eyewitness accounts from the march described the brutality of the police in attacking protestors without provocation.<sup>205</sup> The official government report into the disturbances in Derry would later admit that the police broke ranks and, 'used their batons

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<sup>204</sup> Farrell, 'Long March to Freedom', *Twenty Years On*, p. 55.

<sup>205</sup> The events of 5 October were published far and wide, for local coverage of the march see the *Belfast Telegraph* and *Irish News*, 7 October 1968.

indiscriminately' on protestors in Duke Street.<sup>206</sup> While a burden of blame was placed on the individual police officers that had attacked the demonstrators there was also a high level of blame directed toward the government who justified the attack. Three MPs from the British Labour Party who witnessed the violence went public with harsh criticism of the police and claimed to have seen innocent people being clubbed and police striking protestors on the testicles, among other acts.<sup>207</sup> In the aftermath, the Northern Ireland Cabinet released a statement 'deploring' the organisers of the march and speaking strongly in support of the RUC, whom they claimed had prevented 'an extremely dangerous situation from developing'.<sup>208</sup> The events of 5 October 1968 in Derry marked a turning point and acted as the catalyst to further civil rights action. The bloody scenes were broadcast on television sets across the country and covered in detail by most major newspapers. That evening the first major rioting began across the city and barricades began to appear in Catholic areas. A mass movement was emerging.

The reaction to Derry among the student population was angry and palpable, something that was immediately seized upon by those who had taken part in the march, and it was the Young Socialists who drove forward the PD

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<sup>206</sup> *Cameron Report*, para. 51.

<sup>207</sup> The MPs were Russell Kerr, Anne Kerr and John Ryan. Anne and Russell Kerr had just returned from the Democratic Convention in Chicago where antiwar activists and black civil rights protestors clashed with police. Their presence and comments after the march in Derry greatly exacerbated the global condemnation of the Unionist regime. 'Three Eye Witness Reports on Londonderry', PRONI, HA/32/2/30.

<sup>208</sup> 'Ministers are satisfied that the action of the police was timely and prevented an extremely dangerous situation from developing. The Government has decided to put down a motion, as soon as the House meets next week, deploring the conduct of the sponsors of the march and inviting the House to support the government and the police in the necessary action that was taken.' Press Release from Stormont Castle, 8 October 1968, *Records of the Cabinet Secretariat*, PRONI CAB/9/B/205/7.

from its beginning. As the students returned from Derry on the YSA bus, preparations were discussed for a march that Wednesday, and the following day a group of activists met in Michael Farrell's house where they arranged to further advertise the march. Cyril Toman explained the thinking behind the march to the Cameron Commission: 'it would be better supported if it was organized by a broader group than just the Young Socialists, so the joint action committee which had organized the protest to Craig's house over the banning of the Queen's Republican Club was reconvened and undertook to liaise with the Young Socialists in organizing the march'.<sup>209</sup> Fred Taggart, a moderate student activist who emerged as the official leader of the march, confirmed this narrative of events and added that in reality the Joint Action Committee played little role in calling the march:

I came home in the Young Socialist Alliance bus which left at 11pm and on the way home we arranged a march for the following Wednesday. This was done by the Joint Action Committee. I was the only office bearer of that committee left, and I therefore gave notice to the police about the march. There was really no Joint Action Committee organisation available.... In this way I emerged as the organiser of the march in the public eye but this was pure chance.<sup>210</sup>

On 6 October a group of 60 students picketed the home of the Minister of Home Affairs in protest at events in Derry,<sup>211</sup> Craig responded abrasively describing the

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<sup>209</sup> Evidence submitted by Cyril Toman to the Cameron Commission, PRONI, GOV/2/1/200.

<sup>210</sup> Evidence submitted by William Frederick Taggart to the Cameron Commission, PRONI, GOV/2/1/217.

<sup>211</sup> *Newsletter*, 7 October 1968.

students as a ‘bunch of bloody fools’<sup>212</sup>. The YSA released an immediate statement condemning the ‘dictatorial’ and ‘provocative’ actions of the police and called for all socialists and democrats to hold an immediate demonstration in opposition to police violence and Unionist dictatorship.<sup>213</sup> The call was heard.

On campus, there were two big meetings in the run up to the march, organised by the Union Debating Society and the New Ireland Society, both voted to support the march and individuals who had been involved in supporting the Republican Clubs the previous year got behind it. A leaflet printed by the students and distributed around the campus declared support for civil rights demands, including freedom of procession and freedom of speech. It read, ‘We will defy any further repression of protest against such flagrant and continuous injustice.’<sup>214</sup> On 9 October, J E Greeves, an official at the Ministry of Home Affairs, enclosed a copy of a leaflet sent to him by students in a letter to Harold Black. It forwarded the civil rights demands and, among other things, called for a full inquiry into the events of 5 October in Derry. In his correspondence, Greeves stated that he did not propose to send any formal acknowledgement to the students.<sup>215</sup> The indifference of the Northern Ireland state toward student protests would not last long.

The march had been planned to leave the university area and pass through Shaftesbury Square on route to the city centre, but predictably, Ian Paisley called a counter protest in the square. The evening before the march the RUC served a

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<sup>212</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 7 October 1968.

<sup>213</sup> *Irish News*, 7 October 1968.

<sup>214</sup> Miscellaneous leaflet, *Box of People’s Democracy Committee Papers*, PRONI, D3297/7.

<sup>215</sup> Correspondence from J E Greeves to Harold Black, 9 October 1968, PRONI, CAB/9B/205/7.

notice banning the march under the 1951 Public Order Act and student leaders agreed, for the second time, to a re-route of the march in the face of likely disorder. Rory McShane called on the RUC to intervene:

It seems that every time anyone decides to make a move concerned with anything so basic as human rights. Mr. Paisley's organisation raises its ugly head.... The time has come for the police to say to Mr. Paisley that he must turn away. It is up to the police to make sure that Mr Paisley is not there. It is up to the police to show that anyone can march anywhere in this city.<sup>216</sup>

That evening the students' union debating society held a discussion on the march and support was reaffirmed with 353 votes to 80 in favour of marching.<sup>217</sup> The march mobilised some 2,000 students, including up to 20 lecturers and teaching staff. The decision to re-route the march was put to vote, but the crowd voted in favour of defying the ban. In reaction the police proposed a more amicable path for the march, taking the students through University Street and the Ormeau Road and into the city centre. After another close vote, the alternative route was accepted and the students took off under the banner of the Joint Action Committee.

The students' placards mocked the political establishment, with slogans such as 'Royal Ulster Gestapo' and 'We want Craig's Head'.<sup>218</sup> At the other end of the route Paisley's crowd had marched from Shaftesbury Square to the students' destination point at City Hall, where he launched into a tirade of

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<sup>216</sup> *Irish News*, 9 October 1968.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> *Irish News*, 10 October 1968.

criticism of the government. Between the two stood the RUC, who formed a line in Linenhall Street at the rear end of the City Hall. In some of the students' eyes it further showed the partisan nature of the police in allowing Paisley's tactics to triumph. One student remembered a look of 'gleeful anticipation' on the faces of some police officers.<sup>219</sup>

Faced with another stand off, the students collectively sat down on the road in protest at their treatment. They were replicating well-used tactics from their counterparts across the globe. One lecturer recalled that they, 'sat down because that is what students did. They had seen it happening around the world.'<sup>220</sup> The scenes provided some of the most famous of the early civil rights period. Margaret Ward was a school student at the time and joined in on the protest. Her memory of the sit-down depicts both the innocence with which some attended the protest, but also the experience of street politics:

A collection was made to buy sweets to pass the time and relieve the tedium of this particularly non-violent protest. As we sat down someone placed a 'Smash Stormont' placard in my hand. At that time I don't think I had a clear idea of what Stormont was.<sup>221</sup>

After some time a vote was taken as to whether the demonstration should attempt to march ahead or return to the university. One journalist on the scene noted that the crowd was overwhelmingly in favour of moving forward against the Paisleyite counter demonstration, and as tensions flared the police joined ranks to

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<sup>219</sup> McKeown, *The Passion of Peace*, p. 50.

<sup>220</sup> Kevin Boyle quoted in Prince, *Northern Ireland's 68*, p. 197.

<sup>221</sup> Margaret Ward, 'From Civil Rights to Women's Rights', *Twenty years On*, p. 124.

form a solid wall across the street.<sup>222</sup> The whole scene was one of anger and frustration with very little political direction. Poet Seamus Heaney, then a lecturer at Queen's, watched in awe, and described 'embarrassed, indignant young Ulstermen and women whose deep-grained conservatism of behaviour was outweighed by a reluctant recognition of injustice.'<sup>223</sup>

After warning pleas from organisers the students eventually began to disperse back to the university, while a hardcore group of around 200 remained on the road. Significantly, Young Socialists such as Farrell saw the opportunity to give direction to the crowd and helped persuade the remaining students to turn their backs on the police and loyalists and return to the university in order to discuss future action.<sup>224</sup> On return to the campus, hundreds of students packed into the MacMordie Hall at the students union where an open-ended meeting was conducted through the night. The mass meeting was outside of the 'official' structures of student politics, indeed, some student representatives refused to participate in civil rights action. Ian Brick, President of the Students' Union, had already stated his opposition to the march and organised an alternative meeting at the university, which attracted a small crowd.<sup>225</sup>

To those who attended the meeting it was an explosion of political discussion and energy that replicated the democratic forums of debate thrown up by student protests across Europe. One anarchist newspaper compared it 'to the kind of free debate of which the Sorbonne in the May Days was the best

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<sup>222</sup> *Irish News*, 10 October 1968.

<sup>223</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Old Derry's Walls', *The Listener* (1968).

<sup>224</sup> Arthur, *The People's Democracy*, p 30.

<sup>225</sup> *Irish News*, 10 October 1968.



example'<sup>226</sup>. The crowd was intent on continuing civil rights mobilisation and decided to establish a movement to drive forward the campaign in Belfast. That night the PD was born, although its name would not be formally announced until later. What emerged was greatly in line with the new political forms thrown up by the 'New Left' across the globe in 1968. A central trait was their rejection of the dominant ideologies of the day, namely, western liberal capitalism and soviet state communism. In Belfast, the PD followed this pattern and rejected established ideologies and political traditions in favour of a vague, but sincere, aspiration to unite people behind their platform of social justice and equality. The US Marxist, Hal Draper, a keen observer of the American campus revolts of the 1960s noted that the 'non ideological' character of student uprisings accounted for their radical potential and unpredictability, 'This was the explosiveness of uncalculated indignation, not the slow boil of planned revolt...the first discovery of the chasm between the rhetoric of Ideals and the cynicism of Power among the pillars of society.'<sup>227</sup> It was uncalculated indignation and anger that would drive the PD forward in its early formation.

Organisationally, the PD embraced what could be described as an autonomist political formation. Instead of a formal leadership, the group, fearful of the influence of conventional political organisations, elected a 'faceless committee' of 10 activists who were chosen partly for their independence and lack of ties to other parties. The first committee included the following;

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<sup>226</sup> *Freedom Newspaper*, of the London Federation of Anarchists, quoted in Arthur, *The People's Democracy*, p. 30.

<sup>227</sup> Quoted in Harman, *The Fire Last Time* p. 42.

Ann McBurnley (a recent graduate), Joe Martin (a recent graduate), Patricia Drinan (undergraduate), Eddie McCamely (undergraduate), Bernadette Devlin (undergraduate), Kevin Boyle (lecturer), Fergus Woods (a recent graduate), Malcolm Myle (worker), Ian Goodall (undergraduate), Michael O’Kane (undergraduate).<sup>228</sup>

The committee was conceived as ‘a body elected to administer and carry into effect the decisions of the people’, and was intended to possess solely coordinating powers.<sup>229</sup> The discussion produced a clear set of demands centred on the civil rights programme: One Man one Vote, fair boundaries, Houses on need, Jobs on merit, Free speech and repeal of the Special Powers Act.<sup>230</sup>

The PD captured the youth radicalism associated with worldwide student protests in this period; it embraced no formal ideology and showed a distain for traditional forms of politics and a distrust of bureaucratic structure and organisation. In lieu, it counterpoised spontaneity and militancy as their method to drive forward the civil rights movement. Power and authority was derived from the mass meeting, which would begin to occur on campus on a weekly basis and constituted a form of open participatory democracy. The Cameron commission later summed up the nature of participation in the PD:

People’s Democracy has no accepted constitution and no recorded membership. At any meeting any person attending is entitled both to speak and to vote: decisions taken at one meeting may be reviewed at the next - indeed during the currency of any given meeting. No

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<sup>228</sup> People’s Democracy Agenda, *Frank Gogarty Papers*, PRONI, D3253/4/5/1.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

subscription, entrance fee or membership qualification is required of members (if they can be so-called) of this movement, and the requisite finance is obtained from collections at meetings, subscriptions or contributions from well wishers and supporters both within Northern Ireland and elsewhere.<sup>231</sup>

The name itself conveyed the idea of mass people power. John Murphy, who was tasked with printing the first political material from the group, recalled that the name originated from the sit down protest in Linenhall Street, when he said, ‘This is the only democratic street in Northern Ireland. This is a People’s Democracy.’<sup>232</sup> The following morning leaflets were printed under the title ‘PD’ and by 11 October a mass meeting of students had approved the name. The first poster of the organisation depicted a lean, outstretched, red hand with the slogan ‘March for your rights’, it was a parody of the loyalist ‘Red Hand of Ulster’.<sup>233</sup> PD activists would prove very able in the usage of new medium to convey their ideas, their material punctuated with humour and satire directed at establishment figures such as William Craig, ‘Billy Liar’, the first of many politicians to be ridiculed.<sup>234</sup>

The launching of the PD struck a chord among a layer of students who had become alienated and frustrated at the situation in Northern Ireland. Politically ill defined, the PD emphasised anti-authoritarianism and set out to

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<sup>231</sup> *Cameron Report*, para 195.

<sup>232</sup> Quoted in Arthur, *The People’s Democracy*, p. 31. This story is also verified by Bernadette Devlin, see *The Price of My Soul*, p. 102.

<sup>233</sup> People’s Democracy poster, ‘march for your rights’ *Northern Ireland Political Collection*, People’s Democracy Papers, Linenhall Library.

<sup>234</sup> *Billy Liar*, newsheet, Political Papers relating to Northern Ireland and the Student Representative Council, PRONI, D3219/3/19.

further expose the Unionist government; its short term *raison d'être* was to mobilise students behind the six civil rights demands. Primarily made up of Queen's students, involvement in the PD was open to all and this allowed more seasoned activists, or recent graduates, to contribute to the meetings. The PD would in time become the main political and ideological pole of attraction for civil rights activists in Belfast.

When students at Queen's University began to make the headlines across Ireland the spectre of revolutionary 'student power' was sweeping Europe. Tariq Ali, a leading figure of the British new left, remembered that in 1968, 'Internationalism reached a new peak'<sup>235</sup>, as student movements rose that were inextricably linked to the social and political organisation of society outside of their respective campus.<sup>236</sup> In Belfast, the PD emerged as a direct result of events external to the university campus and was defined by its commitment to the campaign for civil rights. This has been contrasted with other student movements that initially mobilised around 'student issues' or matters related to university life.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Ali, *1968 and After*, p. 35.

<sup>236</sup> See Hal Draper, *Berkeley- The New Student Revolt* (Centre for Socialist History, 1965). Available online, <http://www.marxistsfr.org/archive/drapper/1965/berkeley/index.htm>, accessed on 10/02/2015.

<sup>237</sup> Arthur, *The People's Democracy 1968-73*. For example, the initial student protests during the 'French May' arose as a fight to allow mixed sex dormitories, this later generalized and transformed into a much wider student social struggle.

## 2.5. Street politics and civil disobedience

The immediate plan of the students was to return to the streets and march to the centre of Belfast, although there was uncertainty about when this should happen. The next march was postponed from 12 October to 16 October to prevent a clash with two Paisleyite counter protests.<sup>238</sup> At a meeting of at least 500 students, it was agreed to persevere with a march to City Hall and as the day approached Paisley called counter protests presenting a now familiar scenario, with the march being rerouted by the RUC.<sup>239</sup>

The march assembled over 2,000 students who gathered behind a newly fashioned 'People's Democracy' banner. The movement now attracted a formidable police presence, with up to five RUC vans in the vicinity adjacent to the students union; the police would flank the march throughout.<sup>240</sup> When the march reached its destination around 150 Paisley supporters gathered at the City Hall to taunt and jeer the students, with 200 police separating the two camps. Police reports documented the various speeches that were delivered, lecturer Kevin Boyle spoke on behalf of the 'faceless' committee, 'We are the future in the eyes of the workless, the homeless, those that have been misled by politicians. We are the future in fighting for civil rights'<sup>241</sup>, and Bernadette Devlin posed the question; 'Should people be deprived of their right to a day's work simply because they go to a different place of worship. Is this a healthy

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<sup>238</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 October 1968, also see *Newsletter* 12 October 1968.

<sup>239</sup> This figure is taken from the *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 October 1968.

<sup>240</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 October 1968.

<sup>241</sup> Speeches made at meeting of People's Democracy at Belfast City Hall, *Ministry of Home Affairs- Civil Rights Demonstration*, PRONI, HA/32/2/28.

society?<sup>242</sup> During the rally speaking rights were open to all, and at one point the loudspeaker was offered to the counter protestors, a proposition which none of them accepted. A consistent theme among those that did speak was the non-violent and anti-sectarian nature of the movement, and speakers continually appealed to the Paisleyite crowd to view their interests in common.<sup>243</sup>

The hopes of Protestant and Catholic unity were not unfounded. Early PD marches galvanised a notable level of Protestant support behind the civil rights demands, representing the highest point of cross-communal action in the movement. In a campus of roughly 5,500, the majority of whom were Protestants, the PD could claim to have mobilised a substantive layer of this constituency, a fact that was often stressed by those emerging as leaders of the movement. The wide-ranging involvement even extended to Unionists on campus. Louis Boyle, a Catholic and former chairperson of the Conservative and Unionist Society at Queen's, spoke at the PD rally on 16 October:

I am a Unionist and in company with a number of Unionist colleagues of mine I took part in this march today because I believe in civil rights. I took part in this parade, this march, today because this march is non-sectarian.<sup>244</sup>

Another notable feature of the PD was the changing gender dynamics that were signified in the movement. Indeed, the expansion of higher education had delivered a significant increase in women at university and they would emerge to the forefront of the PD. The first PD committee contained three women activists

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

and one student recalled a memorable meeting, when the crowd was uncertain about who would contact the police to seek permission to march. A young Bernadette Devlin raised her voice, 'If there's not a man in this hall with the guts to sign it, I will'.<sup>245</sup> It seemed to encapsulate the voice of a new layer of confident women activists before feminist politics had reached Belfast.

The extent to which the PD represented a break with past traditions was seen in the way that it approached the national question. Eamonn McCann explained how, 'The partition issue had for so long been the property of contending Tory factions that mere mention of it smacked of jingoism.'<sup>246</sup> For the new left, partition was seen as irrelevant and the notion that the border was the primary cause of strife was discarded by a layer of young people who could see the tenacity to which conservative clerics and politicians held on to this issue, on both sides of the sectarian divide. PD treatment of the 'Orange Tories' in the North was thus consistent with its criticism of 'Green Tories' south of the border. When Irish Prime Minister, Jack Lynch, was forced to address the crisis and declared that partition was the 'cause of all ills' the PD hit back against the record of the Southern state in securing civil rights.<sup>247</sup>

The logical conclusion of the PD demands was that reform of the Northern state was possible. In a letter to the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, the PD asked; 'Reform can be effected within the union. Why not?'<sup>248</sup> Later, the PD would explicitly assert that, 'the border is not the issue, civil rights

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<sup>245</sup> McKeown, *The Passion of Peace*, p. 46.

<sup>246</sup> *Irish Times*, 14 November 1968.

<sup>247</sup> *Irish News*, 2 November 1968.

<sup>248</sup> *Irish News*, 6 November 1968.

is.<sup>249</sup> To some extent this allowed for a critical mass of activists at Queen's to participate in PD, but it would subsequently prove problematic as the civil rights struggle intensified. The focus, therefore, was on 'bread and butter' issues as a way of uniting both communities. Throughout October the PD called weekly meetings and its early actions encompassed basic welfare campaigns, discussions proposed group fact-finding activities on issues such as company votes and the number of people with no vote in local government affairs. Other suggestions included helping couples find deposits for homes and helping voluntary bodies like the Citizens Advice Bureau, or turning old properties into flats and waste ground into playgrounds for children.<sup>250</sup>

Around the university campus members of the Unionist government were met by placard waving students whenever they entered the public eye. On 10 October the government Education Minister, Captain Long, was heckled and jeered at by students as he attempted to address the universities committee for civil rights.<sup>251</sup> The cat calling and ridicule thrown at the minister was the cause of consternation within the more respectable echelons of civil society. One Councillor and 'rate payer' conveyed his anger at a generation of children beyond the command of their parents. In the pages of the *Belfast Telegraph* he argued that student protests were a drain on ratepayers pockets; 'I have always regarded our students as sensible...but now I am beginning to wonder?'<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Why PD? - People's Democracy Papers, *Northern Ireland Political Collection*, Linenhall Library.

<sup>250</sup> *Irish News*, 17 October 1968.

<sup>251</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 October 1968.

<sup>252</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 October 1968.



More adverse criticism came directly from the government. On 16 October William Craig made a speech in Stormont in which he denied allegations of police brutality in Derry and hit out at the civil rights protestors who, he alleged, shared a similar agenda to the IRA. Craig blamed the Irish Workers' Group<sup>253</sup> for much of the student activity and named Rory McShane, Eamonn McCann and Gerry Lawless as leading members.<sup>254</sup> Alas, his information was inaccurate. The IWG was effectively defunct and had played no role in the student unrest or the PD.<sup>255</sup> Craig's claims echoed those of Paisley, who had gone to great lengths to portray the PD as an offshoot of militant republicanism. Paisley's main organ, *The Protestant Telegraph*, was littered with sensational sectarian propaganda against the civil rights movement and argued that the PD was nothing more than a 'Republican front pseudo-student organisation', intent on creating, 'disturbance, riot and bloodshed in Belfast'.<sup>256</sup> Despite the reaction of the hard-line loyalist right and the Unionist Party, the response to the PD in its early stages was largely positive. The students received support from Methodist Church leaders who complimented their 'restraint and non-violence', and the Liberal Party lauded their 'effective' and 'responsible' actions.<sup>257</sup>

The next major PD action involved taking the tactics of civil disobedience into the chambers of government. On 24 October a rally of almost

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<sup>253</sup> As we have already seen, the IWG was a predominately London based Trotskyist organization and although some PD members had spent time in it previously, including Michael Farrell, it was largely defunct by 1968 and had no presence in Belfast.

<sup>254</sup> Speech made by Minister of Home Affairs, House of Commons, October 16<sup>th</sup> 1968, PRONI, HA/32/2/26.

<sup>255</sup> *Irish News*, 18 October 1968.

<sup>256</sup> *Protestant Telegraph*, 19 October 1968.

<sup>257</sup> Arthur, *People's Democracy*, p. 32.

300 students descended onto the Stormont parliament buildings on the outskirts of East Belfast. The protest was planned to mark International Human Rights Day and after a section of the crowd listened to a parliamentary debate on civil rights, around 70 students occupied the great hall where a three-hour sit in took place and a 'mock Parliament' was conducted. Up to 200 students gathered outside the building and Unionist MPs were forced to run the gauntlet through the students in order to exit. Afterward, the students sat down on the road and blocked traffic.<sup>258</sup> When William Craig attempted to leave the parliament buildings a number of students tried to block the route of his chauffeur driven car. One student was knocked to the ground, as he arose to his feet shaken but unharmed, he told a journalist, 'I was sure the car would slow down, but instead it accelerated. The only thing I could do was to jump on the bonnet.'<sup>259</sup> The young man had no idea how symbolic his words were.

The PD emerged as a militant current of civil rights activity, but it also projected an 'anti political', or apolitical image. Bernadette Devlin spoke to a journalist with candid innocence in the early days of the movement:

We are not out to embarrass the government or cause civil strife or divide the people on any issue. Our movement is non-political, non-sectarian, and if we can get civil rights established we can return to our books and our studies with the satisfying knowledge that we have achieved something in the interest of the community.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 October 1968.

<sup>259</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 October 1968, also see the *Irish News*, 25 October 1968.

<sup>260</sup> *Irish News*, 21 October 1968.

This liberal outlook could not last long amidst a deeply repressive society. Moreover, as students searched for direction and a wider strategy the left would step in to further shape events. Throughout October mass PD meetings were occurring on a weekly basis and attracting up to 800 people. These meetings encompassed almost all strands of politics at the university, but the most ideologically coherent and organised group within the movement was the YSA. A process of radicalisation was taking place across the student body, in which militant action and ideas were debated and the student struggle was transforming into something more fundamental.<sup>261</sup> The first few weeks of October 1968 transformed student politics. Devlin herself expressed the change in the political climate:

People used to sit around and discuss their own subjects or criticise the other groups in the snack bar...Now it's fantastic, everywhere you go in the snack bar people are talking about civil rights and the People's Democracy, even if they're attacking it. I don't think Queen's can ever be the same again, because we've had such a rude awakening.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> The British leftist Alexander Cockburn described this process on a general level: 'At all events, the militants suddenly find themselves with the initiative, even though the moderates are already agitating for negotiations and concessions; in that sense the backlash already exists. The usual meetings, an hour and a half in length, once a week, term on term, are suddenly contracted into debates that last a day and a night. Under these conditions a terms political work can be done in a day: this is the crucial moment when the waverer, the usually "apolitical" person, living as he is in a system momentarily transparent, can be shown that system's fundamental premises.'" Alexander Cockburn, 'Introduction', *Student Power* p. 12.

<sup>262</sup> *Irish Times*, 23 November 1968.

This outburst of debate and discussion offered the small forces of the radical left a mass hearing and Michael Farrell was remembered as someone who consistently received a ‘thunderous applause’ from student audiences. The YSA presence in the PD is said to have numbered roughly about 70-100 activists, and although this figure may be an exaggerated claim, they nonetheless acted as a hard socialist core.<sup>263</sup> The YSA would come to have a significant role in pushing the movement forward and its inspirations again testify to the global influences on the Irish movement. The group was initially modelled on the Trotskyist Young Socialist Alliance in the US and took inspiration from the militant Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committees (SNCC). The YSA operated inside the PD alongside a much wider body of students in which political opinions varied, but it was the radical left who pushed ahead with protests at a time when activists were searching for a wider strategy. The group’s first newsheet, *Billy Liar*, demanded an escalation of action and a serious approach toward non-violent civil disobedience:

Militant Action by the People’s Democracy should receive much more consideration at meetings. Militant Action does not mean violence, but could be used in making the Establishment Unworkable i.e. by non-violent direct action. The idea of civil disobedience has been tossed around by many people, but there would not appear to be any organisation or groups of individuals prepared to set the ball rolling.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> McKeown, *The Passion of Peace*, p. 46.

<sup>264</sup> *Billy Liar*, PRONI, D3219/3/19.

In the coming months the PD would launch different initiatives in this direction. Already the organisation had taken the lead on civil rights activity in Belfast and the actions of the students had garnered the support and admiration of civil rights activists in Derry. Both the Derry Citizens Action Committee and NICRA welcomed the PD's initiatives and had sent messages of support to their demonstrations. The PD was also invited to attend marches in the city that included a march involving thousands of people on 2 November.<sup>265</sup> As the tempo of the civil rights movement increased, the PD would begin to spread the protest movement across the country.

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<sup>265</sup> *Irish News*, 31 October 1968.

## 2.6. Conclusion: a real change

October 1968 transformed the political landscape in Belfast. One striking feature about the early civil rights movement was its optimism. Seamus Heaney thought:

A real change is taking place under the thick skin of the Northern Ireland electorate. Catholics and Protestants, Unionist and Republican, have aligned themselves behind the civil rights platform to examine the conscience of the community. There are naturally vast resources of prejudice and complacency still around, but there are many shattered ivory towers among educated and articulated people who had opted out of political affairs from embarrassment or disillusion.<sup>266</sup>

The PD was just one strand of the civil rights movement, but it was distinguished by its emphasis on cross-communal politics. It had also begun to chip away at the isolated existence that had for long characterised the student left in Belfast. Through advocating mass political action— based upon Catholic and Protestant unity— in direct confrontation with the sectarian practices of the state, the PD had created a space in which activists could potentially reach wider numbers of people.

The emergence of the PD was the product of a growing generational gap, post-war education reforms, youth radicalisation, and anger against police repression in Derry. It reflected the global patterns of student revolts in the 1960s, but its emergence itself was contradictory. It included a broad plethora of

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<sup>266</sup> Heaney, 'Old Derry's Walls', *The Listener*, October 1968.

opinion ranging from radical socialist to moderate liberal, and although it posed many questions surrounding the nature of Northern Irish society, it did not provide many answers. Nevertheless, the PD briefly provided a political space that broke with past forms of political opposition within the Northern state, including the armed methods of the IRA and the parliamentary opposition of the Nationalist Party.

The PD shared many traits with global student movements in terms of its social and economic basis, its influences and ideological flexibility, and its tactics. Yet, unlike many student movements, the PD was not founded on predominantly student issues and thus did not assume a wholly student character. The PD emerged as a direct challenge to social and political grievances outside of the university campus. As opposition to it mounted, the PD would pursue an increasingly radicalised trajectory. Already, the students had helped push the grievances of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland to the forefront of politics and had garnered a level of support. The protest movement had been confronted both by the Unionist government's aversion to reform, and the reactive forces of loyalism. In the process, the PD had reached a wide audience, becoming a primary protagonist in the developing crisis of Irish politics. The following period would see that crisis unfold with the PD at its centre.

## Chapter 3: Civil Rights at the Crossroads

### 3.1 Introduction

The experience of October 1968 had a radicalising impact on the PD, as the centre of gravity shifted away from the University campus and into the mainly urban and working class communities across the North. The government was becoming increasingly unstable: caught between an intensified street agitation demanding civil rights and a loyalist backlash that sought to thwart it. Acquiescence was no longer an option, and O'Neill's government was forced to act. In late November the Prime Minister announced a series of reforms aimed at quelling the growing disturbances, including; a commission to take over powers of Derry Corporation, an ombudsman to investigate complaints against government, the introduction of a points system to allocate housing on need, a review of the Special Powers Act and the abolition of the business vote in elections.<sup>267</sup> The move was a significant climb-down by O'Neill, though the reforms fell far short of the civil rights movement's full set of demands. It was against this background that O'Neill gave his famous 'crossroads speech': an appeal for suspension of civil rights protests to facilitate a period of calm during which normality and presumed reform could ensue.

There was a mixed response within the civil rights movement to O'Neill's overtures. Within NICRA, the dominant reaction was one of accommodation and acceptance, and thus a winding down of protest was announced. The PD, however, would pursue a very different strategy, pressing

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<sup>267</sup> Patterson, *Ireland Since 1939*, p. 207.



ahead with civil rights agitation in early January 1969, and emerging as the only political current unwilling to abide by the truce. PD embarked on the so called 'Long March' from Belfast to Derry which was met by a high level of violence and signalled a new phase in the civil rights movement, during which the tactics of non-violent disobedience became marginalised. This set a precedent for later developments in 1969.

This chapter looks at the role of the PD from November 1968 until the aftermath of the 'Long March', in January 1969. By providing an in-depth account of PD activity it challenges existing interpretations of the PD, which are under researched and caricature the politics of the group, thus distorting the rationale of the radical left inside the civil rights movement. This research highlights the non-violent and anti-sectarian politics of the PD and shows how the sectarian reaction that met civil rights protests was widespread and systemic. This process revealed much bigger questions about the nature of the Northern state, and the level of repression that met the civil rights movement greatly superseded the brief moment in which the radical left had a small foothold in politics. This chapter argues that the role of the PD essentially exposed the contradictions that were already present inside the Northern Ireland state and were moving toward violent conflict.

### 3.2 After October

With the glare of the world's media firmly fixed on Northern Ireland, increasing pressure was being brought to bear on the Unionist government to enact reform; it found expression in the highest corridors of power. On 4 November Unionist leaders, including Terence O'Neill, William Craig and Brian Faulkner, met Harold Wilson in London where the British Prime Minister stated his unequivocal support for the Northern Ireland government, but also expressed a determination for electoral reform.<sup>268</sup> To coincide with the meeting, PD sympathisers in London held a small picket at Downing Street, and the Queen's students called their third march from the university to Belfast's City Hall. It is worth drawing out the sequence of events in order to illustrate the disparity between the way that the police treated loyalists compared to student protestors.

The march followed a similar pattern to the previous protests. The route was challenged by Paisley, who announced a public meeting organised by the Ulster Constitution Defence Committee along the direction of the march. It is likely that the student demonstrators had grown increasingly frustrated with the acquiescence of the police in allowing physical resistance to legal protest. This time the students refused to comply with the police dictum and pressed ahead with the march. The march met an RUC cordon along University Road resulting in scuffles with the police as students tried to filter past; in reaction police officers broke ranks and activists testified that some of them were assaulted and then arrested. Again, the students resorted to the tactic of sitting down on the road and began discussing their next step; they decided not to abide by the police

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<sup>268</sup> Meeting at 10 Downing Street on 4<sup>th</sup> November, PRONI, CAB/4/1413.

ruling and moved in small groups to the City Hall, where already about two-dozen students had entered to lobby councillors and the town clerk, only to be ejected from the building by police. Outside Paisley's crowd awaited them and one journalist noted that students were attacked.<sup>269</sup> Other sources testify to incidents of violence against the students. The local student newspaper interviewed one female who tried to enter city hall:

Several Paisley supporters and Mr Paisley himself jeered and insulted us. I approached him and said 'I hope you understand, Mr Paisley, that we are demonstrating for your civil rights as well as our own'. At that he kicked me in the shins and I stopped talking.<sup>270</sup>

When the bulk of the students gathered around city hall a meeting was held that decided on a mass sit-down. Initially, the police attempted to break up the protest and forcibly remove people from the road, but it was to no avail. Eventually, the RUC told the march organisers that if they ended the sit-down they would be allowed to return along the original route of their march. The students agreed, although as they returned the RUC again re-routed the march away from the square. The police appeared determined not to allow the students to march along the flashpoints most contested by Paisley's followers.

The protest witnessed increased levels of violence and affected student attitudes toward the RUC, whose heavy-handed response toward the march was contrasted with appeasement of Paisley's followers. Much hostility had come from Paisley's supporters; Rory McShane claimed that loyalists chased him

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<sup>269</sup> *Irish News*, 5 November 1968.

<sup>270</sup> *Gown March Supplement*, PRONI, D3219/3/18.

through Belfast city centre. Others reported being attacked by crowds with one student being beaten with a stick.<sup>271</sup> The threat also displayed itself in more sinister possibilities. After the march, Major Ronald Bunting, a militant loyalist and right hand man of Paisley, led a small occupation of the university's halls of residence on the Malone Road, where they warned of mass loyalist resistance.<sup>272</sup> The threat never materialised but it was a warning of things to come.<sup>273</sup>

According to some participants on the PD side, however, the most malicious treatment of the marchers came from the RUC. Students were angry that the police had failed to offer protection against the loyalist counterdemonstrators. They were aggrieved, too, about their own treatment at the hands of the RUC. One student claimed that an officer told him bluntly, 'We are not London policemen. Now you will get what you deserve.'<sup>274</sup> Others reported that they were aggressively handled and beaten by policemen. The perception that sectarianism was rife within the force was reaffirmed when one officer spat in the face of a student and said, 'You have not long to live, you Fenian bastard.'<sup>275</sup> Police handling of the demonstration undoubtedly impacted on the attitude of many—including those from a Protestant background—towards the RUC. One protestor expressed what was undoubtedly a section of student

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Major Ronald Bunting (1924-1984) was a close associate of Ian Paisley, a former British Army Officer, Bunting would feature prominently in early opposition to the civil rights movement. Although there is a tendency to present Bunting as a naive figure who was influenced and misdirected by Paisley, he certainly displayed a notable level of sectarian hostility and determination to thwart the civil rights movement in its early days.

<sup>273</sup> *Gown March Supplement*, PRONI, D3219/3/18. Also see, *Irish News*, 5 November 1968.

<sup>274</sup> *Gown March Supplement*, PRONI, D3219/3/18. This remark was most probably made in reference to the anti Vietnam War demonstrations that saw mass student participation at the US Embassy in London's Grosvenor Square.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

opinion in the aftermath of the march: ‘As a staunch believer in the principles of Unionism, I was not inclined to believe the allegations of police brutality in the past, but now my faith in the RUC is at a rather low ebb.’<sup>276</sup>

The protest resulted in the arrest of nine people, and up to 50 members of the PD protested in Belfast when they brought before the courts the next day. The legal implications for participants was not, however, the most significant result of the demonstration. A pattern was beginning to emerge throughout civil rights protests in which the actions of the students were continually restricted, contained and harassed by the police, whilst loyalists counter protests, who set out to challenge the students, were appeased. In the aftermath of the protest the PD questioned the role of the police and their sincerity in protecting their right to march from the Paisleyites, who had always numbered a much smaller crowd.<sup>277</sup>

There is evidence from a variety of sources, including newspapers and student documentation, that relations between police and PD activists were growing increasingly hostile and violent in this period. For example, on 13 November the PD hastily organised a picket of a Methodist College prize ceremony that Terence O’Neill was speaking at. The ceremony was disrupted with members of the Revolutionary Socialists Student Federation (RSSF) — a radical student organisation launched in Britain in 1968— being blamed for inciting disturbances that involved scuffles with the police. Although the RSSF did launch a brief newssheet at Queen’s, there is little evidence that the organisation developed in any serious way in Belfast. Nevertheless, moderate opinion inside the PD forced a public apology from the organisation, blaming the

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> *Irish News*, 6 November 1968.

trouble on a 'small number of militant students.'<sup>278</sup> The students on the ground that day claimed that the source of the trouble was the overreaction of the police, who, alongside Special Branch officers brandishing firearms, had assaulted students.<sup>279</sup> Others around this time also reported being violently attacked by police around the university campus.<sup>280</sup> Considering the evidence, it seems reasonable to suggest that the tension building between RUC officers and PD protestors was exacerbated by a police force that was deeply embedded into the sectarian machinations of the state. This happened during a period when the spectre of student protest had emerged more widely throughout Britain.

There existed some difference of opinion within the RUC about how the force should deal with the PD, with some in the leadership more cautious than the rank and file regarding the use of physical force. It reflected the necessity to avoid the negative media coverage that had followed police violence, particularly after the 5 October march in Derry. On 18 November Albert Kennedy, Inspector General of the RUC, wrote to county inspectors relaying instructions designed to ensure that force was a last resort. Kennedy's letter concluded, 'It therefore follows that the use of physical force by the police... would be difficult to justify in the present situation on which world attention is focused.'<sup>281</sup> It was a clear admission that the further use of force ought to be avoided due to the threat of 'world attention'. Although such pressure was felt at the top of the RUC command structure, the overall agenda of the security forces was to restore order

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<sup>278</sup> *Irish News*, 15 November 1968.

<sup>279</sup> *Detonator*, newsheet of the Revolutionary Socialist Student Federation, Belfast, No. 2, PRONI D3219/3/28.

<sup>280</sup> *Irish Times*, 24 November 1968.

<sup>281</sup> Police Action in Londonderry- 16 November 1968, Letter from A. H. Kennedy to County Inspectors, PRONI, CAB/9B/312/5.

and thereby reinforce the rule of the Unionist state. Professor John Newsinger, in his assessment of security policy in Northern Ireland, convincingly shows how successive governments had never relied on conventional methods of policing. Instead they depended on wide mechanisms of control and coercion, the latter of which included usage of the RUC, the B Specials, and the Special Powers Act.<sup>282</sup> As civil rights agitation increased their utilisation would become more prominent and this was precipitated by PD efforts to mobilise across the country.

PD was at its genesis a university-based movement. Yet the group had always sought to broaden its appeal, and PD members were keen to link their political demands with an agenda that could relate to the wider population. This political orientation was evident in PD's 'Plan to inform the people': a direct challenge to O'Neill's 'Programme to enlist the people'. O'Neill's programme represented the height of his civic outreach campaign, which attempted to appeal for cross community support through 'civic weeks' events. It was predominately taken up by the middle classes and largely based upon rhetoric, as opposed to any commitment to reform.<sup>283</sup> The PD plan counterpoised 'civic weeks' with 'civil rights' and it included meetings and protests in towns such as Omagh and Dungannon, and leaflet campaigns throughout Belfast. Central to this shift was a radicalisation of the demands of the civil rights movement to, 'one man- one

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<sup>282</sup> John Newsinger, *British Counterinsurgency, from Palestine to Northern Ireland*, (Hampshire, Palgrave, 2002), pp. 159-160.

<sup>283</sup> Historian Marc Mulholland offers this assessment: 'PEP was a kind of 'big society'. It did not envisage Unionists giving up their near monopoly on the symbolic accoutrements of the state. Nor did it require tangible concessions to meet the civil rights grievances of the minority. Catholics were being asked to participate in an unreformed polity to which they were traditionally hostile and alien.' *Terence O'Neill* (Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2013), pp. 55-56.

vote' and 'one family- one house'<sup>284</sup>. It was a conscious effort to direct the civil rights movement outside the Catholic community and appeal to Protestant support, representing a distinct class basis to the politics of the PD and driven by the Young Socialist core inside the movement. This, alongside a willingness to confront the state and opposition forces, began to define the PD against others in the civil rights movement. By organising in areas across the country the PD established new networks of support, including a Newry branch that acted as a future base for local civil rights activity in the city.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> *Irish News*, 22 November 1968.

<sup>285</sup> *Irish News*, 23 November 1968.



### 3.3. The November reforms

The early period of PD activity documented above is rarely a subject of dispute; it is seen as a modest contribution to a movement that had real grievances. It was in the changed situation after the announcement of the reform package in November, and in particular after Terence O'Neill's appeal for a period of calm in December, when the PD rejected the proposed truce and embarked on a march from Belfast to Derry, which has received criticism.

By November 1968 the civil rights movement had gathered an unprecedented momentum. Regular rioting was occurring in Derry in what was becoming an unacceptable and untenable level of discontent for the government. Increased pressure was also brought to bear on the Unionist Party by Harold Wilson, who at one point even threatened the 'liquidation' of 'financial agreements with Northern Ireland' if some degree of reform toward the electoral system was not delivered.<sup>286</sup> With the situation reaching a critical point O'Neill acted; on 22 November the Unionist government announced a five-point programme for reform, it was reached after discussions with the British government and much debate inside the Unionist cabinet. The package included; a points system for public housing allocation, a complaints ombudsman to be modelled on the British system, a review of the Special Powers Act to look at the possibility of its withdrawal 'when the situation permitted it', a development commission to implement the Londonderry Area Plan and the abolition of the company vote.<sup>287</sup> It was a significant development that served to vindicate and justify the actions of the civil rights movement. In a matter of weeks the

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<sup>286</sup> Meeting at 10 Downing Street on 4 November 1968, PRONI, CAB/4/1413/9.

<sup>287</sup> Prince, *Northern Ireland's '68*, p. 185.

campaign had secured a better political advancement for the minority community than decades of political stalemate. But although it was a significant climb-down by O'Neill, the package fell short of the programme of reform envisaged by the civil rights movement; in particular, the fundamental grievance of 'one man one vote' would not be addressed, as the manipulated electoral boundaries remained intact. Furthermore, the notorious SPA was to remain for all intents and purposes.

Indeed, if the reforms were intended to placate the civil rights movement there was initially little indication that they would be successful. Speaking in the confines of his cabinet, O'Neill himself acknowledged that the reform package would be unlikely to satisfy the civil rights movement. His inhibitions were proved correct.<sup>288</sup> When the package was announced it was rejected by all of the main civil rights bodies as insufficient.<sup>289</sup> Central to O'Neill's concerns would also have been the hostile reaction among loyalist grassroots and the right wing of the Unionist Party, some of whom had clear intentions of challenging his leadership, including Craig and Brian Faulkner. Viewed in this context the

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<sup>288</sup> Conclusions of a meeting of the cabinet held at Stormont Castle, 20 November 1968, PRONI, CAB, 4/1418/11.

<sup>289</sup> NICRA rejected the proposed reforms arguing that the proposals were a 'surrender to the Right-wing of the government', their statement read: 'After thorough examination of the details so far released, we can only express our disappointment that the measures contain so little which will help to remove the evils which exist in our community'. *Irish News*, 25 November 1968. The official NICRA history is also critical of both Wilson and O'Neill: 'As Wilson later said in the Commons he thought that political reform in Northern Ireland had been "a bit too moderate so far", but in a five point plan of reform sent to O'Neill on November 21, Wilson proved that he too was moderate on the issue. The "reforms" included the abolition of the company vote in local government elections, the appointment of an Ombudsman at some future date, re-organisation of local government by 1971, a recommendation -nothing stronger - to local authorities to reform their housing allocation procedures and the establishment of a commission to run Derry in place of the Corporation. It was an empty gesture by Wilson.' NICRA, *We Shall Overcome*'.

‘balancing act’ of Terence O’Neill seemed doomed to failure, indeed, as Michael Farrell would later reflect the reforms package was ‘enough to enrage the Loyalists without satisfying the civil rights movement at all.’<sup>290</sup>

As civil rights protests continued in the aftermath of O’Neill’s announcement, PD members were soon to find out how enraged the opposition was. Events that occurred at a PD protest in Dungannon on 23 November—one day after the reform package was announced— provide a snapshot into how the backlash against the civil rights movement was emboldened by the idea of marginal reform, and how the forces of law and order were centrally involved in stoking violence against protestors. The PD attempted a public rally in the town’s market square, which was forced to disperse after it was confronted by a large crowd of 300 loyalists, led by Major Bunting. Bunting’s assemblage then directed their fire at more known local figures, targeting the workplace of Jack Hassard, a local NILP councillor and NICRA supporter. In political terms Hassard was a moderate social democrat. A military veteran and former member of the USC, he himself proclaimed that he was, ‘quite willing to die in support of the constitution of Northern Ireland...I am a 100% supporter of the union with Great Britain.’<sup>291</sup>

Hassard’s support for civil rights cast him as an enemy of local loyalists who surrounded the post office where he worked. Meanwhile, the PD activists, now numbering roughly 250, moved to a nearby restaurant, they were joined by Conn McCluskey and here a local branch of the PD was founded. When the

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<sup>290</sup> Farrell, *The Orange State*, p 248.

<sup>291</sup> Letter from Jack Hassard to William Long, Minister of Home Affairs 16 January 1969, PRONI, HA/32/2/27.

loyalist crowd entered the restaurant, mayhem ensued; windows, doors and furniture were broken and the owner's pregnant wife was punched in the face. Later that night there was several other violent incidents reported.<sup>292</sup> In the aftermath Hassard filed various complaints to the government regarding the role of the RUC and the USC, who he claimed joined with the crowd to abuse and intimidate civil rights activists. Hassard reserved his strongest criticism for the local sub district commandant of the USC, Mervyn Patterson, seen to be, 'the main agitator and organiser. He agitated physically by mass hysteria. He abused me by shouting terrible names at me.'<sup>293</sup> Hassard brought complaints about Patterson, and a number of other RUC officers, to the highest level of the Unionist government. Yet they were to no avail and no action was taken to investigate them. Indeed, County Inspector of the RUC, William Meharg, likely conveyed the perspective of the government when he defended the police force and dismissed Hassard as a 'trouble maker.'<sup>294</sup>

Mervyn Patterson later appeared in front of the Cameron Commission to offer evidence about these disturbances. Although reluctant to talk about the events in Dungannon, Patterson admitted being in the town's Market Square on 23 November. His testimony shows a local commander who presented himself as a staunch defender of the practices of the Unionist state displaying a deep level of anti-Catholic sectarianism. A supporter of Paisley's efforts to uphold 'Protestant rights', Patterson's attitude toward civil rights protests revealed the level of sectarian opposition amongst the police force. He told the commission

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<sup>292</sup> *Irish News*, 25 November 1968.

<sup>293</sup> Letter from Jack Hassard to Ministry of Home Affairs, 12 March 1969, PRONI, HA/32/2/27.

<sup>294</sup> Letter from RUC County Inspector William Meharg to the Ministry of Home Affairs, 31 January 1969, PRONI, HA/32/2/27.

that he wholly disagreed with the civil rights movement, attesting that houses were allocated fairly and that counterdemonstrators were justified in taking action to stop civil rights rallies in town centres. Endorsing the position of the Unionist state he declared himself in favour of ‘one rate-payer one vote’, and displayed distrust of the Catholic community; he did not think it acceptable for any Catholics to be recruited to the USC, nor did he think that any members of the USC should be permitted to engage in mixed marriages. Incidentally, if these things were to occur he claimed that current members would refuse to serve with them.<sup>295</sup> In articulating a traditional Unionist response to the civil rights movement, militant loyalists had begun to win the support of members of the police force; it was this type of scenario that continually confronted the movement and laid the basis for a protracted period of civil unrest.

Faced with such opposition PD members began to think more seriously about the application of non-violent tactics in the run up to a major NICRA march in the city of Armagh on 30 November. The Armagh demonstration pulled a broad range of civil rights forces together in protest at O’Neill’s limited reforms, and those attending were forced to recognise the increased possibility of violence. In one document produced in preparation for the march, titled ‘Guidelines for Armagh’, Kevin Boyle emphasised the necessity of non-violence and offered advice on how to practice this philosophy. Marchers were encouraged to form into small groups so as best account for one another. They were advised to wear heavy and suitable clothing to protect against attack, but Boyle warned, ‘protection for heads is good, but not crash helmets which are

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<sup>295</sup> Although this source is anonymous it is clear through cross-referencing the evidence that it is Mervyn Patterson, Evidence *submitted by unnamed individual, Ulster Special Constabulary, Co Tyrone, PRONI, GOV/2/1/189.*

construed as provocation by onlookers and police'. If the march was bombarded by Paisleyites, PD members were encouraged to go through without retaliation, 'Non violence means, in practice, hands down and it means a great deal of frustrating self discipline for the marchers.'<sup>296</sup>

The document offers some insight into how the PD approached potential violence, and events in Armagh meant such an approach was more necessary than ever. Up to 5,000 civil rights protestors gathered to march, but their path was blocked by some 1,000 Paisley supporters, who had descended on the town earlier that morning. Paisley's crowd resembled an insurrectionary challenge to both the police and civil rights demonstrators; shops and businesses were forced to close as the loyalist crowd assembled, heavily armed with cudgels and wooden planks. Paisley himself carried a blackthorn stick.<sup>297</sup> A PD activist who ventured amongst the loyalists recorded the scene in which police officers chatted amicably with loyalists 'who carried broken off planks and vicious six inch nails protruding from their ends, with young girls and boys of 15 who had metal bars and lead piping and with men who sported bill-hooks, axe handles and table legs.'<sup>298</sup> The march was thus prevented from reaching the town centre and sporadic scuffles broke out throughout the day. At the end of the day five people were held in connection with firearms, while eight police officers and twenty civilians were reported injured.<sup>299</sup>

Ultimately, the day had been one in which a legal march had been blocked by an armed loyalist force, to which the police had been, at best,

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<sup>296</sup> *Guidelines for Armagh*, PRONI, D3297/ 7.

<sup>297</sup> *Sunday News*, 1 December 1968.

<sup>298</sup> *Detonator newssheet*, No. 3, PRONI, D3219/3/28.

<sup>299</sup> *Sunday News*, 1 December 1968.

incapable of challenging. As hard-line opposition to the civil rights demands strengthened, the Unionist Party itself was bitterly divided over the reforms. William Craig led the charge, and in the aftermath of the November announcement made sweeping sectarian speeches, attacking the Catholic Church and blaming the civil rights demonstrators for the violence in Armagh.<sup>300</sup> Therefore, when O'Neill appeared on television on 9 December to give the defining speech of his political career, it was amidst circumstances of intense polarisation; with right-wing Unionists infuriated at the prospect of reform and civil rights activists increasingly alienated from his premiership. However, the violence that categorised the previous few weeks also created the context in which calls to reassert order found a hearing.

In declaring, 'Ulster is at the Crossroads', O'Neill appealed for calm toward the civil rights demonstrators, arguing for a cessation of activity and an acceptance of a timeframe to implement the November reforms. Hitting out at a 'minority of agitators determined to subvert lawful authority' within the civil rights movement. To the Paisleyite current he denounced the 'bullyboy tactics', of Armagh and articulated the need for some form of democratisation within the state.<sup>301</sup> The speech brought events to a head inside the Unionist Party, and by 11 December William Craig was forced to resign his position of Minister of Home Affairs. One of the PD's demands had been fulfilled.

The yearning for calm had a resonance. On 12 December the majority of MPs at Stormont backed O'Neill, and over 100,000 people lodged support for

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<sup>300</sup> *Irish News*, 3 December 1968.

<sup>301</sup> Ulster is at the crossroads-Television broadcast by Terence O'Neill, PRONI, CAB/9/B/205/8.

O'Neill in a poll conducted by the *Belfast Telegraph*. At Queen's 2,000 students also handed in a message to support the Prime Minister's efforts.<sup>302</sup> It matched the mood of many of the moderates inside the civil rights movement, some of who had been cautious of action from the very beginning; both NICRA and the Derry Citizens Action Committee declared a suspension of civil rights mobilisation.<sup>303</sup> On 11 December in the university campus the PD met to consider the situation. It was a long and contentious meeting, in which liberal voices were loudly broadcast. In his evidence to the Cameron commission some months later, Michael Farrell recalled that the meeting had been packed by the University Unionist Association, who handed out a leaflet requesting that the march be called off.<sup>304</sup> One leaflet reasoned that the students should back Captain O'Neill's 'sincere request' for restraint.<sup>305</sup> After a heated debate during which the students debated the merits of the 'truce', it was decided by a narrow majority to call off a planned rally in Belfast on 14 December and a 'long march' to Derry the following week, on 21 December.

For the socialist left of the PD, the call to cease mobilisation was a capitulation to the Unionist Party, who had given no commitment to fundamental reform. In effect, the civil rights movement was being asked to help stabilise the Unionist state by putting their faith in O'Neill. Leaving aside O'Neill's wider

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<sup>302</sup> *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 December 1968.

<sup>303</sup> NICRA, 'We Shall Overcome'.

<sup>304</sup> 'Well, the meeting which called off the march in Belfast had, it was generally believed, been packed by the University Unionist Association. A leaflet had been put out by a gentleman in the Unionist Association requesting that people go to this meeting and call off the march. So it was felt that this was not a terribly democratic decision.' Evidence submitted by Michael Farrell to the Cameron Commission, PRONI, GOV/2/1/218

<sup>305</sup> Student leaflet '*A call to moderates*', available online, [http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/ephemera/leaflet/all\\_mods\\_101268r.pdf](http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/ephemera/leaflet/all_mods_101268r.pdf), accessed on 17/03/2015.



record— he had led an administration since 1963 that did almost nothing to remedy Catholic grievances— O’Neill’s record on reform since the beginning of civil rights protest was open to question and speculation about it should be tempered with a recognition of this.<sup>306</sup> O’Neill had staunchly defended police violence against the civil rights movement since its beginning, and had consistently stalled against full reform. Responding to one journalist in late 1968, on the question of immediate electoral reform, O’Neill replied ‘I think immediate is a silly word to use in this context.... Sensible reforms come out of careful study.’<sup>307</sup> His attitude was further revealed in an exchange of letters between himself and representatives of the NILP. After being pressured to introduce electoral reform by NILP representative William Boyd, O’Neill replied on 17 October; ‘I have no intention of committing myself, or my colleagues, to the making of any statement in Parliament within a period to be prescribed by you.’<sup>308</sup> O’Neill had shown little appetite for reform until the civil rights movement gained momentum. The reason was obvious; implementation of the full civil rights demands called into the question the basis of Unionist Party power. O’Neill had been forced to concede ground, but to dismantle the apparatus of electoral dominance could have split the Unionist Party and threatened his leadership.

Michael Farrell looked back on his decision to call another meeting in order to press ahead with civil rights mobilization. Farrell was the most persistent advocate of action, and felt that the previous meeting had been stacked against

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<sup>306</sup> Finn, ‘The point of no return?’ p.7.

<sup>307</sup> Extracts from a journalists interview with Terence O’Neill, PRONI, CAB/205/9B/205/7.

<sup>308</sup> Letter from Terence O’Neill to the Northern Ireland Labour Party, 17 October 1968, PRONI, CAB/205/9B/205/7.

his position, 'it was like playing an away game' contended Farrell, 'My feeling about it was that if this is the way that mass democracy works, then OK, let's have another meeting!'"<sup>309</sup> It took place on 20 December, when the Christmas break ensured a lower turnout of students. In the meeting the YSA, who had already announced their intention to organise a demonstration with or without the PD, argued for a march to Derry immediately in the New Year.<sup>310</sup> Anne Devlin, then a school student from west Belfast who supported the march, attended both meetings and recollected that this second meeting felt like it had been made up primarily of the militant working class elements of the PD, observing that the moderate, and perhaps middle class, elements had stayed at home.<sup>311</sup> Others recalled that the manoeuvre by Farrell to call another meeting meant that 'obviously it was a bit rigged'.<sup>312</sup> The whole affair reflected the nature of the PD; it was a movement with no real fixed programme or objectives, in which any decision could easily be overturned in the next meeting and the most militant 'leaders' could set the agenda. Thus, it was agreed to launch a four-day march from Belfast to Derry, commencing in the New Year on 1 January.

The decision to march on 1 January has been presented by historians as one that had the support of a tiny minority of students, who were warned against marching by the great and the good of the civil rights movement. For example, Henry Patterson has stated that the PD march was, 'Criticised by the mainstream leaders of the civil rights movement and with the support of only a few dozen

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<sup>309</sup> Fraser, *1968*, p. 238.

<sup>310</sup> *Cameron Report*, para 89.

<sup>311</sup> Interview with Anne Devlin, Belfast, 26/06/2015

<sup>312</sup> Interview with Fergus Woods, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

students...<sup>313</sup> It is a frequent misrepresentation.<sup>314</sup> The only public caution came from Eddie McAteer, who had a track record of opposing civil rights mobilization.<sup>315</sup> Certainly, there was private disagreement within NICRA and other civil rights bodies, with Betty Sinclair and John Hume undoubtedly among the most wary of marching. Yet much of the criticism of the march was only revealed in hindsight. At the time there was significant support and indeed admiration. NICRA and the DCAC had committed to a month's long truce, until 11 January, and therefore physically joining the march was ruled out, but they did support the students in other ways. NICRA donated £25 to help fund supplies for the duration of the march and its general secretary, John McAnerney, publicly supported their endeavour, stating, 'Captain O'Neill has not produced the goods, and we must keep up the pressure. We are wholeheartedly behind the People's Democracy in this.'<sup>316</sup> The DCAC, under the leadership of John Hume, announced that it would meet the marchers when they arrived in Derry, and the Dungannon Civil Rights Committee urged its supporters to take part in the PD march. Both the Falls Divisional Labour Party branch in Belfast, and the Derry Labour Party voiced support for the students.<sup>317</sup> NILP chairman, Paddy Devlin, who was soon to be elected as an MP, also supported the march and organised

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<sup>313</sup> Patterson, *Ireland Since 1939*, p. 209.

<sup>314</sup> For example, Bew and Gillespie virtually repeat this line, stating that 'There was little support for the march from the outset— only a few dozen left Belfast—and proscribing it might have brought little reaction.' Bew and Gillespie, *Northern Ireland, a Chronology of the Troubles*, p. 12.

<sup>315</sup> McAteer did not support the march in Derry on 5 October and warned that it 'isn't good marching weather in more than one sense', *Irish News*, 30 December 1968.

<sup>316</sup> *Sunday News*, 29 December 1968.

<sup>317</sup> *Irish News*, 31 December 1968.

food for the marchers along their route.<sup>318</sup> Therefore, although a small contingent set off on the march, they could claim a wider level of support, something that increased over the course of the march.

The politics of the demonstration were shaped in a socialist direction. Eamonn McCann, who joined the march to his native city, stressed that they were marching, ‘conscious of the class nature of the issues that we are attempting to dramatise...we march against Tories of both Green and Orange variety.’<sup>319</sup> One the eve of the march the PD released a statement, it conveys a message that is as relevant to contemporary interpretations of the march as to those it was originally addressed. Its opening lines read, ‘To those of you who talk of provocation we can only say that a non-sectarian protest against injustice can offend only those who uphold injustices’, the statement continued:

We are marching because nothing has really changed since the Government’s package of reforms in November, which was condemned as inadequate by the entire Civil Rights Movement and even the British Prime Minister, Mr Wilson. Captain O’Neill’s television performance may have impressed some, but we have had too many fine words from the Captain. This time we want action. It is, perhaps, as well to repeat that we are demanding not privileges but rights and that in marching to Derry we are merely exercising another fundamental democratic liberty.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Paddy Devlin, *Straight Left: an autobiography* (Belfast, Blackstaff, 1993), p. 93.

<sup>319</sup> *Irish News*, 30 December 1968.

<sup>320</sup> *Irish News*, 31 December 1968.

The march was modelled on the Selma to Montgomery march, led by Dr Martin Luther King, in Alabama in 1965. A pivotal moment in the US civil rights struggle thus inspired what would become the most eventful march in the Northern Ireland civil rights movement.

### 3.4. The Long March; four days that shook Northern Ireland

Flashing for the warriors, whose strength is not to fight,  
 Flashing for the refugees, on the unarmed road of flight,  
 An' for each and ev'ry underdog, soldier in the night,  
 An' we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing- Bob Dylan.

The 'long march' to Derry constituted a 75-mile trek across Northern Ireland. Its route traversed both Unionist and nationalist areas; its intention was to reinstate the central aims of the civil rights movement, showing that the reforms offered by O'Neill were both insufficient and largely promissory. Beginning at Belfast City Hall at 9am on 1 January 1969 the small gathering of mainly students, numbering no more than 50, were flanked and observed by police from the outset and special branch officers identified some of the most known activists, including Michael Farrell, Kevin Boyle, Paul Arthur, Ronald Bunting (junior)<sup>321</sup>, Paul Campbell, Patricia Drinan, Eilish MacDermott, Rebecca McGlade, John McGuffin, Loudon Seth and Cyril Toman.<sup>322</sup> This motley crew of activists and those who would later join them, were to face obstruction, intimidation, harassment and violence throughout the course of the next four days during events that would expose the deep backlash that was developing against the civil rights movement. The determination of the marchers to maintain non-violence in the face of continual attack gained them much emotive support, one ballad commemorates their efforts:

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<sup>321</sup> Ronnie Bunting Jnr, son of Major Bunting, played an active role in the civil rights movement and was sporadically involved in the PD. He would later go on to become an important figure in the INLA and was assassinated in 1980.

<sup>322</sup> Letter and report from W. Meharg, 13 January 1969, PRONI, HA/32/2/26.

It was on the first day of the year in 1969,  
We gathered at the City Hall, the weather being fine.  
With McCann in front to lead us, Michael Farrell in the van,  
Off on the long march to Derry.

As we marched to Antrim Town, the bridge we found was blocked,  
There stood a certain major with a feather in his cap;  
“No Fenian foot shall e'er pollute this sacred ground we hold,  
We'll soon stop your long march to Derry”.

They ambushed us at Irish Street and at Burntollett, too,  
And the air was thick with stones and bricks, and the missiles fairly  
flew.  
But we got up and struggled on, though battered black and blue,  
To finish the long march to Derry.<sup>323</sup>

The demonstration was billed as an ‘anti-poverty march’ and banners led the procession reading, ‘Houses and Jobs for All’, ‘Anti Poverty March’ and ‘Civil Rights 1969’. Surviving participants remember it beginning with an almost comical atmosphere. As they gathered they were confronted with loyalist protestors, led by Major Bunting, who shouted sectarian chants and rushed ahead of the march flying the Union Jack, giving the impression that they were leading the students out of the city.<sup>324</sup> The violence that would face such an innocuous protest was revealed early on when scuffles broke out as some loyalists tried to

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<sup>323</sup> The Long March To Derry, civil rights song.

<sup>324</sup> Interview with Fergus Woods, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

seize a PD banner; afterward a group of cameramen were manhandled with one reportedly being assaulted.<sup>325</sup>

The march departed Belfast relatively amicably, but the first confrontation came as they approached Antrim Town, where a Paisleyite crowd made the first of many attempts to prevent it from continuing. At a bridge entering the town loyalists gathered to block the march and a long stand off ensued, which was later described as a situation teetering ‘from pantomime to near pogrom’ by civil rights activists. The marchers testified to the hostile attitude of the police, and some claimed to have been physically assaulted by officers.<sup>326</sup> Criticism from PD marchers was strongly directed at the leading officer on the ground outside Antrim, County Inspector Cramsie, who was said to have displayed a hostile attitude from the beginning.<sup>327</sup> RUC reports of the march contrast to the story told by PD marchers, with claims of police hostility and indeed violence continually absent from police reports. County Inspector Cramsie’s report of this phase of the march is notable in this sense, and although he was critical of the role of Bunting in the whole affair, he did state that by that

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<sup>325</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 1 January 1969.

<sup>326</sup> Egan and McCormack, *Burntollet* (London, LRS Publishers, 1969), p. 3. After these events a participant in the first day of the march, who was visiting Northern Ireland from England, wrote to the *Irish News* documenting the regressive role of the police: ‘The ever enthusiasm of a small element within the ranks of the RUC suggest unquestionably that there are members of it whose extreme political prejudices renders them unfit to be used in such delicate situations. The behavior undermines the very object for which they are being paid.’ *Irish News*, 4 January 1969. Also see, *Belfast Telegraph*, 2 January 1969.

<sup>327</sup> Egan and McCormack, *Burntollet*, p. 3.



evening he had suggested to the Deputy Inspector General of the RUC that consideration 'to a ban on the continuance of the march' should be given.<sup>328</sup>

At Antrim, Unionist MP Nat Minford had arrived on the scene where he helped convince the RUC to facilitate the transport of the marchers to their resting place for the night, a community hall in Whitehill. That night the RUC entered the hall to evacuate the premises, claiming that a bomb alert had been raised. Evidently no explosives were in the hall, but that morning a bomb did explode in Toome, destroying a statue of Roddy McCorley.<sup>329</sup> On 2 January the students made their way from Antrim to Maghera. Before setting off they were informed by the RUC that armed gangs were now gathering at points along their route, particularly in Randalstown. Indeed, if the police had been caught unaware by the counter protest at Antrim, opposition to the march was now known and expected, yet once again the loyalists were able to disrupt the march with no real opposition from the police.

The first major obstacle gathered at Randalstown, where hundreds of counter-demonstrators gathered and awaited the students.<sup>330</sup> The dubious relationship between Unionist politicians and the loyalist mob continued at

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<sup>328</sup> Cramsie's report ended stating that 'The main purpose of this report is to give an overall picture of the progress of the march through this County. When it entered the County it was a singularly unimpressive affair and I think it might well have remained so had its significance not been magnified out of all proportion by the physical obstruction offered to it by Major Bunting and his followers.' Civil rights march through County Antrim on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> January 1968, letter to A. Kennedy, then Inspector-General of the RUC from County Inspector (County Antrim) PRONI, HA/32/2/25.

<sup>329</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 2 January 1969.

<sup>330</sup> 'I did hear some talk that a few of the Unionist element were carrying sticks but I did not see this for myself and certainly none were used against the police.' Civil rights march through County Antrim on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> January 1968, letter to A. Kennedy, then Inspector-General of the RUC from County Inspector (County Antrim), PRONI, HA/32/2/25.

Randalstown, where under pressure from constituents Nat Minford arrived to speak to counter protestors. Minford's association with the police decision to re-route the march the previous night meant that he was initially met with hostility, but this was short-lived. Speaking to the loyalist crowd, Minford stated that he had asked the Minister of Home affairs to ban the march; he was met with 'roars of approval'.<sup>331</sup> Randalstown saw another long stand off against a potentially violent crowd, and after discussion the marchers decided to travel in cars provided by supporters to Toome. When the loyalist crowd realised that the marchers were leaving they surged forward and scuffles broke out with the RUC. Police reports testify that Nat Minford and his wife were at the forefront of this melee alongside Major Bunting.<sup>332</sup> By the time the marchers were making their way to Toome it had become clear that their legal right to march would not be protected or enforced with any serious vigour on behalf of the RUC. The *Belfast Telegraph*, a paper that had initially spoken out against the PD march, offered a critical line on the days events; it amounted to a hard-hitting critique of the police:

After three months of counter-demonstrations of this sort, the police should have no difficulty in picking out and detaining the ringleaders around whom the 'bully boys', of whom Capt. O'Neill and Mr. Wilson have spoken, gather. There is a risk, to be sure, but it is not to be evaded indefinitely if the principle of 'one law for all' is to be preserved.

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<sup>331</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 2 January 1969.

<sup>332</sup> 'The Unionist element suddenly surged up at the police making for the side road. In the foreground of this rush was Major Bunting, and, to my astonishment, Mr. Minford and his wife.' Ibid.

Already it has become questionable whether this right has been defended with sufficient determination by the police, first in Antrim and again in Randalstown. On each occasion the route approved by the Minister of Home Affairs has been blocked by so-called 'loyal citizens', and on each occasion this has been enough not only to stop the march, but all traffic going about its ordinary business....

If the 'loyal citizens' are still capable of rational thought, they should realise that, by preventing the passage of peaceful procession, they are providing living proof that their loyalism, as well as the prevailing standard of social justice, is suspect. Their loyalty cannot be to Stormont or Westminster, which they are defying, but only to their grotesque conception of Protestantism.<sup>333</sup>

Toome was a majority 'nationalist' town and the marchers arrived to a rousing reception from locals, likely due to the previous days bomb attack. From Toome the march continued to Maghera. Up ahead were two strongly 'loyalist' areas in which organised opposition would have been more likely, Hillhead and Knockloughrim. Confronted with this the police were able to persuade the marchers to re route through the town of Bellaghy. However, when the march ventured in this direction it was once again met by Major Bunting, and a large crowd of his supporters. Participants in the march, who travelled the original route to inspect the threat, including Inez McCormack, testified to the fact that no loyalists were gathering along the areas of Hillhead and Knockloughrim. Instead, Bunting's assemblage was massing to face the march head on in what had the

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<sup>333</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 2 January 1969.

hallmarks of a premeditated trap. Bowes Egan and Vincent McCormack, who later pieced together a forensic analysis of the march, presented much evidence in favour of their central conclusion: that the police consistently facilitated loyalist counterdemonstrators in challenging the march throughout its route. Another stand off ensued, and again the marchers rallied to discuss what their next move would be. It was agreed to use ‘concerted peaceful action’ and as the marchers linked arms, pressing ahead, they were hemmed in from front and back by lines of RUC officers. Eventually the police did try to move the loyalist counter protest.<sup>334</sup> One PD activist explained how when the march took off a few hundred yards along the road, Bunting’s men and their local supporters were able to stand beyond an ‘inadequate’ string of police to toss abuse and objects at the marchers: ‘Showers of nails, and nuts and bolts rained down as men openly pulled handfuls out of bags. A shower of six-inch nails rained on me. No attempt was made to stop them. And no one was arrested.’<sup>335</sup>

The RUC account of this phase of the march again contrasts with activist accounts. It was provided by a local District Inspector, M. Forde, who penned a detailed report of this part of the march; Forde had earlier helped persuade the marchers, through discussion with Michael Farrell, to divert along this route as a safer option. The above attack is suspiciously absent from Forde’s report, which instead contested that this phase of the march ‘continued unimpeded for a distance of two and a half miles’ and that, ‘no incident, save-booing, jeering and

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<sup>334</sup> Egan and McCormack, *Burntollet*, p. 12-13.

<sup>335</sup> Egan and McCormack, *Burntollet*, p. 14.

cat-calling took place as the marchers passed'.<sup>336</sup> The marchers were growing increasingly concerned that the police were not only offering no defence against counterdemonstrators, but were in fact acquiescing in loyalist attack along the route. As they proceeded on to the village of Gulladuff, en route to Maghera, their own skirmishes along the intended destination of travel confirmed this. PD activists who had travelled in cars to meet the march ahead in Maghera observed scenes in which crowds of loyalist counter protesters gathered armed with sticks and cudgels. One eyewitness testimony recalled an RUC officer openly fraternising with the crowd.<sup>337</sup>

The loyalists used Maghera Orange Hall as a base for their activity, and that evening Major Bunting gathered with some 700 supporters, having declared an intention to march through Maghera.<sup>338</sup> Bunting's march did not materialise, but the potential for serious trouble was evident, and thus the PD marchers decided to travel by car to the other side of the town. Their cars were attacked along the route, and up to 1,000 people were reported to have been involved in mass rioting, which saw damage to property and attacks on the press.<sup>339</sup>

The next day, 3 January, the PD march took off to Dungiven, and then made its way to Claudy in what was the most peaceful section of the march. The temporary reprieve was likely a result of the fact that Ian Paisley and Major Bunting had made their way to Belfast to meet the Minister of Home Affairs,

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<sup>336</sup> People's Democracy march from Belfast to Londonderry, M. Forde, then District Inspector of the RUC to A. Kennedy, 11 January 1969, PRONI, HA/32/2/28.

<sup>337</sup> Egan and McCormack, *Burntollet*, p. 14.

<sup>338</sup> People's Democracy march from Belfast to Londonderry, M. Forde, then District Inspector of the RUC to A. Kennedy, 11 January 1969, PRONI, HA/32/2/28.

<sup>339</sup> *Cameron Report*, para, 94. Egan and McCormack, *Burntollet*, p. 15.

Captain Long. That evening Long appeared on television to commend the ‘congenial’ and ‘courteous’ nature of the two men and their non-violent opposition to the march, a contrast to what he saw as the non-peaceful actions of the students, who had ‘thrown pepper, at police’.<sup>340</sup> It was another significant political intervention from the Unionist government, which undoubtedly emboldened the gangs of loyalists who were following the PD along their route. The Dungannon civil rights committee responded in kind:

Whatever doubts a few faint-hearted may have had about the necessity of this march, Capt Long most certainly must have dispelled them. His conduct on this programme was in keeping with the partisan conduct of the police along the route when they refused to clear a path for the marchers and allowed cudgel waving extremists to roam the roads and streets.<sup>341</sup>

Outside Dungiven, the police warned of a suspected ambush in the townland of Feeny and proposed a different route. By now the marchers had grown suspicious of the RUC agenda in re-routing the march, besides, their claims of a loyalist counter protest conflicted with testimonies from PD members who had scouted the area. Not trusting the RUC’s proposed route, the marchers decided to link arms and push ahead, after which they made their way through Feeny, where no organised opposition emerged.<sup>342</sup> The march then settled in Claudy that night to what seemed a reasonably hospitable atmosphere, but the quiet reception only

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<sup>340</sup> Long spoke on the BBC ‘24 Hours’ programme. A report can be found in *Belfast Telegraph* 4 January 1969. It is likely that a student did throw pepper at the police as it is reported in a number of sources, including Egan and McCormack’s account.

<sup>341</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 January 1969.

<sup>342</sup> Egan and McCormack, *Burntollet*, pp. 22-23.

masked more serious efforts to mobilise opposition miles ahead of their route, in Derry, where Paisley and Bunting had organised a packed rally inside the Guildhall in order to preach opposition to civil rights.

Although the precise details of the meeting are vague as journalists were denied entry into the Guildhall and little eyewitness testimony exists, it is clear that in the meeting effort was made to organise opposition to the march the following day, near Burntollet Bridge. The *Cameron Report* notes that it was here that Bunting encouraged people to gather with the Ulster Protestant Volunteers to help ‘see the marchers on their way’<sup>343</sup>. While the level of organisation among loyalists is almost irrefutable, the claims from civil rights activists that the police force was complicit in either the planning or the execution of attack have been open to question. After the attack many civil rights activists contended that the police had essentially led the march into an ambush. One activist told a journalist that ‘the only feasible construction that can be placed on the sequence of events is that the march was led into an ambush. The police formation was such that the march became extremely vulnerable to an ambush.’<sup>344</sup> Historians have not investigated such claims with any rigor and Cameron rejected them as ‘wholly unjustified... baseless and indeed ridiculous’.<sup>345</sup> Testimonies from the *Cameron Report* itself, however, suggest that undercover police officers were in the Guildhall that night, where they were made aware of a planned attack the next day. The commission explained to Unionist MP, Robin Chichester Clark, that they had found evidence that Bunting

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<sup>343</sup> *Cameron Report* para 96.

<sup>344</sup> *Irish News*, 6 January 1969.

<sup>345</sup> *Cameron Report*, para 183.

had urged all of his supporters to ‘concentrate the following morning in the neighbourhood of Burntollet Bridge’, Cameron continued;

We know that there was at least one Special Branch officer, if not a number of others, in the audience that night taking a note of what was being said and the position then was that they regarded the situation as being so serious that they carried out a reconnaissance in the vicinity of Burntollet Bridge. The obvious idea of which was to spot any snipers that there might be in the area on the day in question. Obviously they were afraid or must have been afraid that people would not only concentrate there with something like scatter guns but that there would be something there which would be much more lethal. At this time there was information available to the RUC of possible very serious consequences.<sup>346</sup>

The actions of the civil rights activists in Derry that evening contrasted to that of the loyalists. While Bunting and Paisley were encouraging opposition to the march inside the Guildhall, civil rights leaders intervened outside in an effort to diffuse the volatile situation as Catholic crowds gathered in the Guildhall Square. Eamonn McCann, who had participated in the march for three days, travelled up to his hometown and delivered a speech that encapsulated the intention behind the PD demonstration.

You know I am not a moderate. I want to see a lot of radical changes in our society, and I want them as soon as possible. Tonight I would

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<sup>346</sup> Evidence submitted to the Cameron enquiry by Robin Chichester-Clark, MP, PRONI, GOV/2/1/252.



achieve these if it could be done. But nothing, nothing whatsoever, can be gained by attacking or abusing the people in the Hall. Don't you see, that this kind of action is precisely what the clever and unscrupulous organisers expect and hope will happen? Paisley and Bunting will be delighted if there is uproar and disturbance here tonight. It will give strong support to the idea that the Civil Rights movement is anti-Protestant, set on destroying one section of the population on sectarian grounds.<sup>347</sup>

Inside the Guildhall that evening, Major Bunting conferred with the RUC District Inspector on duty, where he reiterated his plans to oppose the march the following day and threatened 'that his party would carry loaded shotguns if necessary'.<sup>348</sup> Eventually, after negotiation with the police, the loyalists emerged from the hall, many were armed with chair legs, chair backs and staves, and serious clashes ensued between loyalists and civil rights supporters.<sup>349</sup> Further rioting broke out that night in Claudy and as the march entered its final leg it looked certain to be met with serious opposition.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Egan and McCormack, *Burntollet*, p. 26.

<sup>348</sup> Letter from District Inspector McGimpsey to Londonderry County Inspector, 14 January 1969: Incidents at Guildhall Square, Londonderry, on the evening of Friday, 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 1969, when a meeting was being held in Londonderry Guildhall, PRONI, CAB/9B/312/5.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>350</sup> *Newsletter*, 4 January 1969.

### 3.5. The ambush at Burntollet Bridge

‘As I stood in Derry on Saturday a People’s Democracy marcher fell like a log at my feet when a stone bigger than a mans fist smashed on to his head and blood poured down the side of his face’— Rob Batsford, *Belfast Newsletter*.<sup>351</sup>

As the march set off on its fourth day its ranks were swelled by an influx of supporters who had watched events transpire over the previous days. Television crews and journalists who covered the last leg of the demonstration would follow them. Outside Claudy, the march was again halted and the demonstrators were warned of potential violence up ahead. Early that morning police information once more indicated that Major Bunting and his supporters were gathering in the area of Burntollet Bridge. Warning the marchers that ‘they would be stoned and some people may be hurt’, the RUC nevertheless informed the PD that ‘if they wished to proceed the police would endeavour to escort them past the opposition’.<sup>352</sup> The directive was a marked difference to previous police tactics in dealing with confrontation to the march. Up until now, the RUC had consistently tried to re-route the march and although a different route to Derry was present at this point, through the Ardmore Road, it was not enforced by the RUC. After the marchers asserted their wish to continue along their intended route, the RUC instead moved to escort them through; two police platoons donned steel helmets and protective shields along the front of the march.<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> *Newsletter*, 6 January 1969.

<sup>352</sup> Letter from District Inspector Harrison to County Inspector: Civil Rights March from Belfast to Londonderry, 1<sup>st</sup>—4<sup>th</sup> January 1969. PRONI, CAB/9B/312/5.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*

Roughly seven miles outside Derry, at Burntollet Bridge, the march passed adjacent to a hill on the right, to the left ran the river Faughan. Acting on police advice, the marchers kept to the right-hand side of the road, where a large hedge would provide some cover from anticipated missiles; it also obscured the size and scale of the loyalist crowd that gathered in the surrounding field, who were equipped with weaponry and at whose feet lay tonnes on stones, which were likely transported beforehand.<sup>354</sup> The attack began with a fusillade of stones and missiles raining down upon the marchers from the adjacent field. Then, as they pressed ahead an armed and organised loyalist crowd emerged from behind the hedge line, within whose ranks were individuals carrying bats, cudgels and sticks spiked with nails. The assailants wore white armbands, presumably to distinguish themselves from the civil rights marchers and although those at the front of the march passed through relatively unscathed, the bulk of the marchers were cut off and therefore left to the mercy of the loyalist mob.<sup>355</sup> One journalist described the scenes as young men and women pledged to the policy of non-violence were ambushed:

They were scattered screaming into the fields near the road. Some of those near the river were grabbed and thrown over the bridge to fall eight feet into knee deep icy water. Many were then unable to leave

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<sup>354</sup> ‘The Burntollet affair bears the marks of careful preparation... The place was well chosen for an ambush; ammunition in the shape of supplies of stones and other missiles including pieces of old iron had been provided and, in case of stones, piled in the adjacent fields ready for use; and the wearing of white armbands - presumably for identification - had obviously been arranged beforehand among the attackers, many of whom were armed with cudgels or clubs of various kinds.’ *Cameron Report*, para 99.

<sup>355</sup> *Irish News*, 6 January.

the river because of men stoning them on each side, and they had to wade for about half a mile before reaching comparative safety.<sup>356</sup>

That weekend television stations were lit up with scenes of the attack, one young woman in a state of distress described how there was ‘not one policeman in sight’ as marchers were beaten, and witness after witness would later testify to the experience of violence that was inflicted upon them at Burntollet Bridge.<sup>357</sup>

Judith McGuffin, a school teacher from Belfast, was amidst the crowd who were pelted with rocks, as she cowered to avoid injury she recalled how,

... a middle aged man in a tweed coat, brandishing what seemed to be a chair leg dashed from the left-hand side of the road, hit me on the back, then pulled down the hood of my anorak and struck me on the head. I then tried to crawl away, but, teeth bared, he hit me again on the spot of my skull.<sup>358</sup>

McGuffin’s ordeal was far from unique and a variety of sources documented both the severity and the sheer volume of such attacks.<sup>359</sup> The consensus among marchers was that the police had walked them into the ambush. Police reports paint a different picture by presenting their role as being caught in the middle of

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> ‘Not one policeman in sight’, *Peoples Democracy march exhibition*, RTE archive. Available online, <http://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/1031-civil-rights-movement-1968-9/1039-peoples-democracy-march-belfast-to-derr/319670-eyewitnesses-describe-attack-day-4/>, accessed on 10/10/2014.

<sup>358</sup> Egan and McCormack, *Burntollet*, p. 33.

<sup>359</sup> Local newspapers provided detailed commentaries of the Burntollet march and television stations captured footage of the attack. See, *Irish News* 6 January 1969, *Belfast Telegraph* 6 January 1969 and *Newsletter* 6 January 1969. For video footage see, ‘There is a good possibility that some stone may be thrown’ RTE archive. Available online, <http://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/1031-civil-rights-movement-1968-9/1039-peoples-democracy-march-belfast-to-derr/319668-civil-rights-march-attacked-day-4/>, accessed on 10/10/2014.

the attack, and contesting that the RUC strove to bring the marchers to safety. The RUC report of the final stage of the march was penned by District Inspector Harrison and submitted on 6 January, after news of the attack at Burntollet Bridge had exploded throughout the media. Harrison explained that no arrests were made because ‘the police were fully engaged with getting the marchers through and crushing the attack’, he also claimed that, ‘the loyalists were attacked and baton charged by the police’.<sup>360</sup> The credibility of the RUC reports ought to be called into question considering such claims, as no other sources testify to a police baton charge against the loyalist attackers, or anything that resembled a ‘crushing’ of the attack. The overwhelming evidence testifies that the violence at Burntollet was directed at PD marchers, and violence continued as they made their way into Derry.

After walking the gauntlet of violence along Burntollet Bridge the marchers regrouped and, while some were immediately transported to hospital, the rest stumbled on. When they made their way to the boundaries of Derry they were again victim to attacks, the scale of which again clearly involved a level of organisation and pre-planning. As the march passed through Irish Street and Spencer Road, bricks, bottles and petrol bombs reigned down at the marchers and another crowd brandishing sticks attacked the demonstration.<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Letter from District Inspector Harrison to County Inspector: Civil Rights March from Belfast to Londonderry, 1<sup>st</sup>—4<sup>th</sup> January 1969, PRONI, CAB/9B/312/5.

<sup>361</sup> ‘The final stage of the march was interrupted by further violence. This occurred at Irish Street, on the outskirts of Londonderry. Among those present was the Rev. John Brown, a District Commandant, as we have previously noted, in the U.S.C. The part taken by him in the events here is subject of controversy. Here there was even more stone-throwing than there had been at Burntollet. Some Londonderry people who had joined the march replied in kind to a limited

Eventually, the marchers made their way over the Craigavon Bridge and into Derry City, where, by now, a crowd of at least 3,000 had swelled into the Guildhall Square launching a major civil rights rally.<sup>362</sup> It was met by up to 500 loyalists and various clashes ensued, soon a riot developed between the police and civil rights supporters in the Bogside. PD members entered Derry labelling it the ‘capital city of injustice’<sup>363</sup>. Their perception was reinforced that night when a large section of off duty B Specials descended into the Bogside smashing windows and doors and assaulting residents. In the aftermath of the attack local youths gathered in the Bogside to prepare defence against the police, barricades were erected and residents vowed to take control over the area. A makeshift piece of graffiti was dabbed on a gable wall entering the Bogside, ‘You Are Now Entering Free Derry’; it was a slogan coined by Eamonn McCann, and inspired by the campus revolt in Berkley College during the US civil rights movement.<sup>364</sup> That night Free Derry was born.

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extent.’ *Cameron Report*, para, 100. Also see, Egan and McCormack, *Burntollet*, pp. 46-47. Adrian Kerr, *Free Derry, Protest and Resistance*, (Derry, Guildhall Press, 2013), p. 59.

<sup>362</sup> Kerr, *Free Derry*, p. 59.

<sup>363</sup> This phrase was coined by Bernadette Devlin from the platform outside Guildhall Square on Saturday 4 January 1969.

<sup>364</sup> Eamonn McCann took the slogan from ‘You are now entering Free Berkeley’ in Berkeley College, 1965.

### 3.6. Civil rights reignited

To blame non-violent marchers for attacks launched on them by thugs is ludicrous. To say that marchers destroy good community relations is sententious when all they do is reveal the hatred and bitterness that lie so little below the surface in Northern Ireland. - Michael Farrell.<sup>365</sup>

In the aftermath of Burntollet many PD activists held the view that they had fallen victim to an attack that had the tacit support of the RUC. Despite the presence of ‘two county inspectors, two district inspectors, seven head constables, seventeen sergeants and one hundred and sixteen constables’<sup>366</sup>, who were aware of oppositional movements, no physical defence was provided to the marchers. Incidentally, it later emerged that scores of the attackers were off duty B Specials.<sup>367</sup> The identity of many of the assailants was an open secret, and when effort was made to highlight their role in parliament by MP Paddy Devlin it was met with hostility by the Unionist government.<sup>368</sup>

Opposition to the PD was not confined to the hard-line loyalists that populated the route of the march, or to sections of the RUC and B Specials.

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<sup>365</sup> *Irish Times*, 10 January 1969.

<sup>366</sup> These figures were provided to civil rights activists by the Ministry of Home Affairs. See, Egan and McCormack, *Burntollet*, p. 41.

<sup>367</sup> The estimation from PD members stated: ‘But what is the overall conclusion? We can name individual after individual, but the sum of our researches indicate that about three hundred and twenty people took part in the attack. Of these we have identified two hundred and fifty-seven. Nearly a hundred have records of service with the constabulary. And these people uniformly appear to have had direction and control of the attack.’ *Ibid*, p. 52.

<sup>368</sup> Devlin’s daughter, Anne, was one of the PD marchers and was beaten unconsciously into the river Faughan at Burntollet. Throughout May, June and July, he took to parliament over the issue, and named many of the attackers that civil rights activists had identified, he also offered this evidence to the Cameron commission, but it was rejected, see, Paddy Devlin MP- Evidence submitted to the Cameron Commission, PRONI, GOV/2/1/240.

Important figures in the Unionist government had continually sided with those attacking the march, and their role further illustrates how opposing loyalists were given free reign to challenge the PD. For example, both Robin Chichester Clark, MP for Londonderry, and William Anderson, former Mayor and then MP for the City of Londonderry, were open about their opposition to the march, and both were present to monitor its progress. The testimony given by both men to the Cameron Commission reveals much about their knowledge of the attack, Anderson admitted that ‘I had heard there was likely to be trouble for the march and I and Chichester-Clark went out to Burntollet, where we heard there was going to be some trouble.’<sup>369</sup> Later, Anderson backtracked on this initial statement and offered an abridged version, stating,

I went to Derry that day and I met a certain gentleman who told me certain things in conversation. I asked him what he thought would happen that day and if there was any chance of any trouble taking place. He said that there was a possibility of trouble when the march was coming in ... Among these places he mentioned he did name Burntollet.<sup>370</sup>

More revealing were Chichester Clark’s comments, who knew of ‘more extreme Protestant groups’ in the community who had began counter activity, adding ‘I have no intention of naming them but I was pretty certain that for various reasons there were some of them who were about at that particular time.’<sup>371</sup> One does not

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<sup>369</sup> Evidence submitted by Commander A. W. Anderson MP, to the Cameron inquiry, PRONI, GOV/2/1/102.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> Evidence submitted by Robin Chichester Clark MP to the Cameron inquiry, PRONI, GOV/2/1/252.



need to engage in speculation surrounding these comments to draw two conclusions; firstly, that high-ranking Unionist politicians were aware of an attack and its location, but also, that they were privy to the identities of those implicated in the attack. Taken alongside the evidence already presented that suggests the police knew about the planned attack, it seems feasible to conclude that the ambush happened with the knowledge of key elements of the security forces and the government. Of course it does not necessarily follow that every RUC officer on duty, or every member of the Unionist Party, was guilty of such action, but the institutions of the state had clearly acquiesced in the attack. Although the sources of violence and sectarianism were evident, an immediate backlash developed against the PD, which has strongly influenced the historical reading of the march. The *Cameron Report* laid down the now conventional interpretation of the long march when it concluded:

We are driven to think that the leaders must have intended that their venture would weaken the moderate reforming forces in Northern Ireland. We think that their object was to increase tension, so that in the process a more radical programme could be realized. They saw the march as a calculated martyrdom.<sup>372</sup>

The claim that organizers intended to ‘increase tension’ is an arguably contentious one when measured against the above account of the march. Further scrutiny of both the words and actions of those on the march contradicts this claim. On the final leg of the march, not long before the ambush on Burntollet Bridge, Eamonn McCann spoke to the crowd emphasizing the need to maintain

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<sup>372</sup> *Cameron Report*, para, 100.

non-violence and avoid conflict no matter what the circumstances; 'I am afraid this is the policy we must support to a lunatic extreme,' said McCann, arguing that not one single person must retaliate against attack and that a policy of pacifism must be adhered to for the duration of the march,

Physical intervention by a marcher must only be employed in order to save another whose life is in danger or who may suffer serious injury without your help. And even then your intervention must be confined purely to giving aid to those in danger, and not to retribution...I have no enemy on the road to Derry, except those in influential positions who have created this false hatred of us.<sup>373</sup>

Michael Farrell expressed similar sentiments, even after being beaten unconscious during the attack at Irish Street, when he returned from hospital to speak to the mass crowd who awaited the marchers in Derry:

Since January 1st, we have been attacked and harassed by groups of people who think they are hostile to what we represent. Today our marchers have been stoned and beaten, and right now many are in hospital. But these attackers are not our enemies in any sense. Largely, they are the Protestant people who are impoverished under the same predatory system. Impoverished they are, and wholly misled. We must show that we have no quarrel with them, but work

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<sup>373</sup> Egan and McCormack, *Burntollet*, p. 26.

only for the kind of society that will allow the deprived people, irrespective of religious views, to combine for their common good.<sup>374</sup>

Farrell's words were consistent with his role throughout the march and recollections from surviving participants confirm this. Fergus Woods recalls events in Maghera, while being urged by the RUC to accept a third reroute, the socialist republican activist, Gerry Lawless, made a 'really war like speech' that encouraged confrontation. Woods remembers how 'Michael Farrell got up and he just made one of the greatest speeches I've ever heard, you know, where he said that is so ridiculous and counterproductive and he swayed the whole thing'.<sup>375</sup> The continual efforts of the organisers to avoid provocation contradict the claim that they intended to increase tension, but what was the overall motivation behind the march?

The march was modelled on the Selma to Montgomery marches of 1965. A seminal moment in the black civil rights struggle in the US; the first march was beaten back and brutalised by the racist police of the Southern state, but afterwards federal courts intervened and upheld the right to march. This instigated the process that led to the Voting Rights Act (1965), a landmark piece of legislation that granted voting right to blacks in the Southern states of the US. PD activists took inspiration from the march, their statement in the run up to the demonstration posing the question 'Is Northern Ireland worse than Alabama?'.<sup>376</sup> Michael Farrell, the principal organiser of the march stated that he wanted to replicate a similar process by forcing the British government to intervene and

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid, p. 48.

<sup>375</sup> Interview with Fergus Woods, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

<sup>376</sup> *Irish News*, 31 December 1968.

enact reform over the heads of the partisan Unionist Party.<sup>377</sup> The effort to reform the state through appealing to the British government was a central strategy of the civil rights movement since its inception, and the actions of the marchers indicate as much. For example, on the first night of the march Bernadette Devlin and Fred Taggart slipped off to a nearby house in order to make telephone contact with Harold Wilson's government and appeal for help. There they demanded, however naively, that Wilson send British troops to safeguard their passage to Derry.<sup>378</sup> The request that the British state intervene militarily in the crisis was not what would be expected from those attempting to subvert and destroy the constitutional status of the Northern Ireland state, but it was a logical demand from a movement that sought 'British rights for British citizens'<sup>379</sup>.

Of course the intentions of the marchers were not to be realised and the opposition they met far outweighed their expectations. However, this does not mean that they desired such a response.<sup>380</sup> The PD had wagered that O'Neill could not be relied upon to deliver fundamental reform, and the actions of the government both during and after Burntollet suggest that the little faith the PD had in the agency of the Unionist Party as a vehicle for reform was vindicated. Sympathy flooded toward the marchers from various quarters, but the Unionist establishment pushed a tough line against the PD. On 5 January O'Neill, who

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<sup>377</sup> Dooley, *Black and Green*, p. 53.

<sup>378</sup> Evidence submitted to the Cameron inquiry by Fred Taggart, PRONI, GOV/2/1/107.

<sup>379</sup> As Purdie notes, 'The civil rights movement was innovatory precisely because it did restrict itself to demanding legal and constitutional rights within the United Kingdom.' *Politics in the Streets*, p. 2.

<sup>380</sup> As Finn concludes: 'The effect of the march and all that it precipitated may have been to raise sectarian tensions, but it does not follow that this was its intended goal'. *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*, p. 47.

had been silent throughout the duration of the march, released a statement that was primarily critical of the PD:

The march to Londonderry planned by the People's Democracy was, from the outset, a foolhardy and irresponsible undertaking... It is also high time that certain students returned to their studies for which they have the support of the taxpayer and learned a little more about the nature of our society before displaying such arrogance... Enough is enough. We have heard sufficient for now about civil rights, let us hear a little about civic responsibility.<sup>381</sup>

The statement dedicated the majority of its attack to the PD and reaffirmed support for the police force. It has been at times portrayed as an ill thought out statement, and one that did not reflect O'Neill's attitude toward the civil rights movement, but was it? Clearly, O'Neill had already shown little sympathy with civil rights demonstrators, and even less gumption in dealing with loyalist opposition to peaceful protest. Internal British governmental files indicate his attitude to the problem in December 1968. In a private letter to the Foreign Office, from Andrew Gilchrist, UK Ambassador to Ireland, Gilchrist summarised a meeting with O'Neill which took place on 8 December, one day before the Prime Minister took to the airwaves in his ill-fated call for calm. Gilchrist noted that O'Neill was 'extremely tired and depressed' that all of his work over the years had been undone overnight and that the IRA had achieved 'remarkable success through its new strategy of working on 'civil rights' through penetration

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<sup>381</sup> *Irish News*, 6 January 1969.

and incitement of student and other left-wing groups.<sup>382</sup> For O'Neill, this was driving ordinary decent Protestants to arms and onto the streets with people like Paisley.<sup>383</sup>

The impression is that O'Neill had identified the PD as a major source of trouble. Indeed, if this source is accurate it seems that O'Neill had in private repeated the most outlandish of slurs against the PD, that of IRA infiltration. O'Neill had consistently placated opposition to the civil rights movement and while briefly this took subterranean form in late 1968, it came to the surface in early 1969. Burntollet indicated how opposition to the civil rights movement was systemic—uniting militant loyalists with sections of the police force, including the RUC and USC, and hard-line representatives of the Unionist government.

It also reignited the civil rights movement. Both NICRA and the DCAC announced an end to the truce after the violence in Derry, and January saw a succession of marches. The PD called a major demonstration in Newry on 11 January. Immediately, Bunting announced plans to prevent marchers walking down what he termed 'Unionist streets' in Newry. But Newry was a majority nationalist town and there was no popular local opposition to the march, indeed, cross community calls to the Paisleyites to 'keep out' of Newry included two leading Unionist councillors, who circulated a statement stating that they had no objection to the PD march, which they claimed 'almost everyone' along the route supported.<sup>384</sup> Two days before the march Bunting met the RUC, where he agreed

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<sup>382</sup> Report from Andrew Gilchrist to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 9 December 1968, NAUK, CJ 3/30.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>384</sup> *Irish News*, 10 January. Evidence submitted to the Cameron Commission by Unionist councilors in Newry UDC, PRONI, GOV/2/1/163.

to call off his counter protest, seemingly content that the march would not be allowed to proceed.

Thus, when up to 6,000 civil rights demonstrators met police lines to be denied their march route along sympathetic ground, and in the aftermath of Burntollet, small scale rioting broke out against the RUC. By the end of the day police tenders were up in flames.<sup>385</sup> One journalist noted that the local Newry PD branch did not have enough stewards to control the crowd, eventually, PD members tried to offer some direction by instigating sit-down protests and an occupation of a post office. Some 17 PD activists would later be summonsed with disorderedly behaviour related to the occupation.<sup>386</sup>

The *Cameron Report* later concluded that a major cause of disturbance in Newry was the police decision to force a restriction on the march.<sup>387</sup> The PD went further, arguing that the only feasible explanation was that senior RUC officers had struck a bargain with Major Bunting. ‘Bunting had been promised that his counter-demonstration would be unnecessary. The RUC were determined to keep their bargain, even at the expense of the people of Newry.’<sup>388</sup> The demonstration lost the PD some authority over the civil rights movement, some time later the PD committee that had organised the march would elect a new leadership and change its name to the ‘Newry and district civil rights

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<sup>385</sup> *Cameron Report*, paras 113-116.

<sup>386</sup> See, *Irish News*, 13 January and *Irish News* 15 January 1969.

<sup>387</sup> *Cameron Report*, para, 117.

<sup>388</sup> *PD Comments on Cameron: a prepublication version of the detailed examination of the ‘disturbances in Northern Ireland’* prepared by People’s Democracy, Linenhall Library, NIPC, para 47.

association'.<sup>389</sup> It signalled a wider problem surrounding the lack of political coherence of the organisation, since October 1968 the PD had grown rapidly but not tightly, and the activists who continued to press ahead with action were unable to channel their newfound support base into a lasting organisation.

On the wider political front the resumption of civil rights activity precipitated crisis in the Unionist Party. When O'Neill announced a government inquiry into the disturbances, key figures in the government resigned, including Brian Faulkner.<sup>390</sup> When twelve MPs met in Portadown to rally against O'Neill it was clear that a parliamentary backlash was underway. O'Neill announced a general election for 24 February. It would become the most contested election in the history of the Northern Ireland state. It also presented the opportunity for the PD to take their message from the streets to the ballot box.

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<sup>389</sup> Meeting of the People's Democracy- Newry branch, PRONI, CAB/9B/312/5. Also see, *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 January 1969.

<sup>390</sup> Faulkner claimed that he had resigned over the way in which O'Neill was introducing reforms and even said that he was in favour of one-man one-vote. However, two weeks after he had resigned he stated that he 'did not accept that the minority had suffered grave social injustices.'... 'It is nonsense to talk of Roman Catholic ghettos and second class citizens,' Andrew Boyd, *Brian Faulkner and the crisis of Ulster Unionism*, p. 50.



### 3.7. Conclusion

The PD has since been blamed by the right and the reformist left for deliberately provoking sectarianism. It needs to be said that the PD leadership were the most determined anti-sectarians of the time.<sup>391</sup> -  
Eamonn McCann.

Eamonn McCann's words, written on the twentieth anniversary of 1968, were a refutation of the established narrative that had emerged surrounding the role of the PD. Near three decades on and the effort to blame the PD for provoking sectarianism has become common across historical literature. As this thesis has argued, this often reflects the narrative conveyed by the political establishment in the immediate aftermath of the civil rights movement.

Thus, former Prime Minister Terence O'Neill— whose term of office ended amidst the crisis and instability generated against the civil rights campaign— would state in his autobiography some three years after his political downfall that, 'Any Liberal-minded person must admit that the Civil Rights movement brought about reforms which would otherwise have taken years to wring from a reluctant Government...but I doubt whether the history books will show that 'People's Democracy' played a useful role in the advancement of necessary reforms.'<sup>392</sup> The then 'Lord O'Neill of the Maine' was not far off on his latter point when he sat down to pen these words. Many historians that have since tried to make sense of the transition from civil rights protests to violence have constructed a similar perspective; holding the PD responsible for bringing

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<sup>391</sup> Eamonn McCann, 'The roots of revolt', *Socialist Worker Review* (No. 114, 1988, London, Bookmarks). Available online, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/mccann/1988/11/derry.htm>, accessed on 17/01/2016.

<sup>392</sup> Terence Baron, O'Neill, *The Autobiography of Terence O'Neill* (London, Hart-Davis, 1972), p. 112.

about violence and wrecking the possibility of reform, in an extremist effort to precipitate a radical uprising. This research has shown that much of this literature contains a number of lacunas and misrepresentations, which are consistently repeated in the most authoritative historiography on this period. In offering a different perspective, this research has highlighted the non-violent and anti-sectarian politics that drove forward the PD and contributed to the development of the new left in Ireland.

Having presented the period between the birth of the PD in October 1968 to early 1969 in detail, it seems clear that civil rights activists were consistently met with systemic opposition, which involved hard-line loyalists, both the RUC and USC and members of the Unionist government, to an extent that is often overlooked among historians who tend to focus upon the moments of 'provocation' from civil rights activists.<sup>393</sup> It should not be assumed that the Unionist state acted as some form of mediator between the movement for civil rights and the opposing loyalist countermovement. Rather, the state was central to obstructing the civil rights movement and emboldening the loyalist backlash.

To conclude, this thesis does not suggest that the PD should be approached uncritically. It is clear that the group sparked events that they had little ability to control, and it is more than obvious that there is a relationship between these developments and the violence that came later. This will be further drawn out in the following chapters. However, the PD was by definition a conscious attempt to challenge sectarian division through the power of Catholic and Protestant self-activity. It was the inability of the civil rights movement to

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<sup>393</sup> See, Prince, *Northern Ireland's '68*.

overcome sectarianism that resulted in the re-emergence of political traditions that the PD sincerely set out to transcend. The PD was indeed among the most anti-sectarian political forces of the time in the 1968-1969 period. The way in which historiography has attributed blame to the PD for bringing about violence has served to distort the history of the civil rights movement and misdirects attention away from the real forces of conflict.

## Chapter 4: From civil rights to civil strife

### 4.1. Introduction: 1969 the fateful year

‘Neglecting, or worse still, despising, so-called ‘spontaneous’ movements, i.e. failing to give them a conscious leadership or to raise them to a higher plane by inserting them into politics, may often have extremely serious consequences.’ – Antonio Gramsci.<sup>394</sup>

The next period of PD activity showed how precarious its role would be as a more serious situation confronted the civil rights movement. 1969 was the fateful year of the Northern Ireland troubles, when the civil rights campaign was overcome by violence and repression. Among historians it is often presented as the moment when genuine civil rights mobilisation ended and opposition to the Unionist state took on more regressive atavistic forms. Thus Henry Patterson argues that the post-Burntollet period ‘marks the pivotal point at which the civil rights phase of the ‘Troubles’ ended and the conflict began to focus on more ancient disputes over national and religious identities.’<sup>395</sup> Another survey history of the troubles presents an almost identical assessment of what followed Burntollet: ‘It could be argued that the march marks the pivotal point at which the Troubles changed from being primarily about civil rights to being about the more ancient disputes concerning national and religious identities.’<sup>396</sup> By treating the violence of 1969 as being driven by ‘ancient’ and atavistic disputes scholars have denoted the idea that sectarian conflict lay in fixed notions of identity and ethnicity, which presents a sense of inevitability to the emergence of conflict.

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<sup>394</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York, International Publishers, 2014), p. 199.

<sup>395</sup> Patterson, *Ireland Since 1939*, p. 207.

<sup>396</sup> Bew and Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles*, p. 12.

This chapter will argue that the crisis of 1969 cannot be explained in terms of the harking back to old or ‘ancient disputes’, but was a product of existing political structures and social relations at the centre of Northern Irish society that reacted aggressively against reform, reinforcing sectarian divisions and precipitating large-scale communal conflict in Belfast and Derry. The intensification of conflict saw the national question reemerge as the central feature in Northern politics, and it proved most problematic obstacle for those who had considered the border irrelevant in the struggle for civil rights. Events in 1969 would show that, far from irrelevant; the existence of the Unionist state—which continually showed an inability to concede reform—was the central obstacle facing those who set out to change the balance of social and economic power in Northern Ireland. As the PD mobilised the initial grievances that activists had set out to challenge were surpassed by greater grievances that far outweighed the original mobilising issues of civil rights.<sup>397</sup> Amidst the intense crisis that engulfed the state in 1969, the civil rights movement proved wholly incapable of directing and giving leadership to the forces unleashed by its activity, and thus offering an alternative to the sectarian impasse.

Throughout this fateful year PD activists were continually active, marching and picketing in their campaign of ‘civil rights for all’. In February the PD contested in the historic ‘crossroads election’ polling a sizeable vote that signalled a high level of support for the radical wing of the civil rights movement. Yet the rise in support for the civil rights campaign was ruptured by division over the strategy, tactics and the very *raison d’être* of the civil rights movement. When support increased, so too did the movements internal

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<sup>397</sup> O’Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites*, p. 309-312.

contradictions and as NICRA faced into 1969 splits emerged in almost all civil rights groups across the country. After the February election PD activists waged a battle inside NICRA to remobilise the civil rights movement along class lines, and were present in many of the major instances of protest.

The parliamentary highpoint for the radical left came when Bernadette Devlin was elected to Westminster in the Mid Ulster by-election of April 1969. It also encapsulated the obvious weakness in the entire PD project. Devlin was the most recognisable face of the civil rights movement and an able articulator of socialist politics. Distance between Devlin and the PD would soon grow, an evident result of the way that a loose and unorganised movement like the PD was unable to utilise such a prominent position.

The PD existed throughout most of 1969 as a militant ginger group inside the broader civil rights movement; they were active throughout the violence of August and subsequent introduction of British troops, and present behind the barricades of 'Free Belfast'. Central to the PD was an attempt to insert socialist politics into the movement, based upon Catholic and Protestant mobilisation. The rationale behind the PD argument ought to be highlighted, as there exists a tendency within historiography to distort the politics of the PD at this time. Thus it is argued that the PD was 'prepared to settle for a solely Catholic insurrection'<sup>398</sup>. This thesis will show how, in later years, the PD did indeed base their socialism predominantly in the Catholic community, however, the above statement bears little resemblance to their involvement in the movement for civil

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<sup>398</sup> Patterson, *Ireland Since 1939*, p. 205.

rights between 1968-1970.<sup>399</sup> Indeed, it was the failure of the civil rights movement, and the entire '68 experiment in Ireland, that led to the later degeneration of the PD into what has been somewhat pejoratively termed 'Green Marxism'<sup>400</sup>.

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<sup>399</sup> For my own analysis of this see Chapter 5, Unfree Citizens.

<sup>400</sup> See, Morgan, 'Socialism in Ireland— Red, Green and Orange'.

## 4.2. The February election

Captain O'Neill is desperately trying to don a liberal and progressive mask, which is wide enough to cover the bones of the grisly skeletons from the Unionist past which clank behind him. He is facing in all directions at once, but is determined to stand still.<sup>401</sup> - Michael Farrell.

The 'crossroads election' presented a different situation to previous electoral contests in the Northern Ireland state, with a Unionist Party fractured and divided over its approach to the civil rights movement, and an opposition awakened by new forms of mobilisation illustrating the depth of change that had taken place in the nationalist community. In this context the PD met to discuss putting candidates forward for election to the Stormont parliament.

Instinctively, some were against the very idea of electioneering; participation in elections forewarned bourgeois careerism and threatened compromising with the very system they had marched against, some warned of becoming a standard 'parliamentary party'.<sup>402</sup> The idea was first rejected at a meeting, but a few nights later another meeting was organised and the decision was overturned. Not for the first time the left around Michael Farrell pressed ahead with the intention to further politicise the movement, and provided the political edge to the campaign. The PD would enter the election not as a parliamentary party, but as a militant strand of the civil rights movement.

They approached the election with sole intention of using it as a platform to spread the civil rights movement. Declaring that this election, like all others was a 'sham', a 'non event', its major purpose would be to increase the grip of

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<sup>401</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 24 February 1969.

<sup>402</sup> 'Discussion on the strategy of People's Democracy', *New Left Review*, Also see, *Belfast Telegraph*, 24 February 1969.



the Unionist government and return a one party state. The election itself was a vindication of the existence of the civil rights movement; after all, it would be conducted among the gerrymandered constituencies that the civil rights movement had set out to reform.<sup>403</sup> Instead of being about issues that affected the social and material lives of working class people the election was a dispute over two forms of sectarian rule, ‘It is about whether sectarianism is to be polite and covert—the O’Neill approach—or paraded as something to be proud of, the approach of his so-called right wing colleagues.’<sup>404</sup> The PD strategy throughout the campaign was thus to expose the ‘confidence trick’ of O’Neill, who had continually talked of the need for reform, but whose very political survival rendered him incapable of challenging the obstacles to reform within the state itself.<sup>405</sup>

The election allowed the PD a greater outreach to working class areas across the North and students from outside Belfast would return to their hometowns to campaign. Fergus Woods, PD candidate in South Down, recalled: ‘My memories about that were, again, there was a great sense of comradeship, and people would come down into the constituency and speak on your behalf and help out and whatever.’<sup>406</sup> Initially the PD announced 12 candidates, but in the end 8 registered. The candidates and their constituencies were as follows; Eddie Wiegleb, (Belfast Cromac); Cyril Toman, (Mid-Armagh); Michael Farrell,

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<sup>403</sup> PD press release, February 1969, *People’s Democracy file*, NIPC.

<sup>404</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 February 1969.

<sup>405</sup> As Farrell put it: ‘On the one hand it involved convincing the Protestant population that the Border and their privileged position were not at stake. On the other hand it involved convincing the Catholic that inviting a few nuns and bishops to the Governor’s garden party meant an end to poverty and discrimination’. Michael Farrell, *Struggle in the North* (Pluto Press, 1969), p. 10.

<sup>406</sup> Interview with Fergus Woods, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

(Bannside); Bowes Egan, (Enniskillen); Malachy Carey, (Lisnaskea); Peter Cosgrove, (South Fermanagh); Bernadette Devlin, (South Derry); Fergus Woods, (South Down). The constituencies that the PD selected were ones that were traditionally defined as ‘Unionist’ or ‘Nationalist’ safe seats, which returned comfortable majorities. The strategy was more of a political statement than it did offer chance of electoral success.<sup>407</sup>

The PD manifesto conveyed solid social democratic demands.<sup>408</sup> For example, to solve the housing crisis it called for an end to discrimination and the establishment of ‘freely elected democratic councils’ to control estates. On the unemployment issue they demanded an emergency programme of state investment and ‘the extension of workers control to all branches of industry’. It also called for an end to segregation within the education system and the introduction of a democratically integrated schooling system. The extent to which the PD represented a rejection of sectarian politics was aptly illustrated in their statement on the national question:

Since we are making our demands for Civil Rights within Northern Ireland and recognising that the people of Northern Ireland have the right to determine their own political future, we regard the border as irrelevant in our struggle for civil rights.<sup>409</sup>

The election was an audacious effort for a group of activists whose average age ranged somewhere in the mid-twenties. Even funding the campaign proved

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<sup>407</sup> The PD ran in six ‘unionist’ seats and two ‘nationalist’ seats. In three of these wards they were the sole opposition candidates against the current members of parliament.

<sup>408</sup> Manifesto of the People’s Democracy, 1969, *People’s Democracy file*, NIPC.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*

problematic and the PD generally relied on supporters to do so through donations, candidates also conducted fundraising drives amongst their supporters and collections in their constituencies. They also received financial solidarity from the British student movement. The students' union at Manchester University put a penny on the price of drinks to finance the PD raising £400, and at Norwich University the students' union donated £100.<sup>410</sup>

One activist, Peter Cosgrove, was fortunate to be on leave from a relatively well-paid job and thus able to self fund his campaign, spending roughly £400. He also remembered that Bowes Egan 'had plenty of money and he greatly enjoyed spending it', reckoning that Egan spent £1,000 on his campaign.<sup>411</sup> This image of the eccentric Bowes Egan is confirmed by John Gray, who was also active in Fermanagh. The three Fermanagh campaigns worked out of the same base, Mahons Hotel in Irvinestown, 'Egan was the mastermind of the Fermanagh campaign, he financed it, or didn't finance it as the case may be'. Gray recalled that up to twenty people stayed at the hotel on a regular basis throughout the campaign, 'Egan never paid the bill, and almost ruined the hotel because the Protestant community subsequently boycotted the hotel.'<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> Evidence submitted by Michael Farrell to the Cameron inquiry, PRONI, GOV/2/1/218.

<sup>411</sup> Peter Cosgrove, *People's Democracy member 1969, part 1*, available online, <https://irishrepublicanmarxisthistoryproject.wordpress.com/2014/10/06/peoples-democracy-member-1969/>, accessed on 29/07/2016.

<sup>412</sup> Interview with John Gray, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

It perhaps comes as little surprise that media pundits talked down the possibility of the PD gaining support at the polls.<sup>413</sup> But the collapse of the old Nationalist Party vote against the rising tide of support for the civil rights movement dictated otherwise. Over the next few weeks PD members canvassed door to door, handed out thousands of leaflets, held open-air meetings that often attracted large crowds,<sup>414</sup> and took part in debates across their constituencies. Equipped with a programme and manifesto the activists broke off into groups across the country and embarked on ambitious vote winning drives. The loose organisation that had defined the movement's activity had immediate problems; anyone who agreed with the manifesto and was willing to organise a campaign was allowed to stand. The Cromac PD candidate, Eddie Weigleb, ran a haphazard campaign in a constituency that included an NILP candidate and the PD received public criticism from Labour members. The Cromac campaign was poorly organised and Weigleb received only 752 votes, losing his deposit. But the intervention in Cromac was not typical; every other campaign had a significant impact in registering support for the civil rights movement.

The campaign across Fermanagh was typical of the wider intervention and conveys both the inexperience of the activists, but also the way that they were received as a new and refreshing political force. Peter Cosgrove stood as a candidate in South Fermanagh; he recalled the instant problems of facing their

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<sup>413</sup> As one journalist put it, 'None of the People's Democracy candidates stand any chance of getting elected, and most will lose their deposits,' miscellaneous newspaper clippings, *Kevin Boyle papers*, PRONI, D3297/5.

<sup>414</sup> A typical example was when Peter Cosgrove organized and spoke to a crowd of 400 people at a PD meeting in Enniskillen, see, *Belfast Telegraph*, 17 February 1969. Also in Fermanagh, they found support from the beginning of the election campaign, where they were well received in meetings of large crowds of youths, see, *The Fermanagh Herald*, 22 February 1969.

campaign from the offset, where they struggled to get enough people to sign his election papers, but he also documented an inrush of activism and a solid level of support for the student's efforts,

We flooded the county with rented cars full of students and others. Some of the cars had expensive loudspeakers mounted on their roofs. We held public meetings. We gave out leaflets... We spoke at Church gates after Mass. We were very, very active.<sup>415</sup>

Rural nationalist constituencies had a long tradition of 'Chapel Gate' meetings, where candidates spoke to the Catholic community after Sunday mass, but the PD broke tradition and spoke outside Protestant as well as Catholic churches, and activists remember receiving support in both endeavours.<sup>416</sup> Peter Cosgrove himself received 33.8% of the vote in his constituency. John Gray confirms the influx of support that met the PD in Fermanagh, and offers telling memories of how their political intervention challenged some of the most traditional political positions:

I remember the first night we were down there we went to try and hold a meeting in one of the main Catholic estates outside Enniskillen, Kilmicormick. And all the local hoods attacked us, threw snowballs at us and rocks, whatever. And we thought we're not going to get too far with this. Within a week the entire estate was for it...similarly there was an occasion... when we were driven up into the hills above Brookeborough somewhere. Miles and miles in

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<sup>415</sup> Peter Cosgrove, *Peoples Democracy member 1969, part 1*.

<sup>416</sup> Interview with John Gray, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

the dark along these icy little rotted roads, until we reached a Nissen hut, right, in the middle of a frozen bog, no electric light, tele lamps, and the Nissen hut was full of men in trench coats as I remember it... These were the local republicans, and so we duly delivered our little tirades about how actually these are new times. You had the '56 campaign, it was an absolute failure. What were going to do now is demand civil rights, within the jurisdiction we've got, and that is going to be far more disabling to the state than any 56 style campaign, a most interesting discussion... I think some of them were well on for it, some weren't, and that was to be the picture with republicanism as it went along in the future.<sup>417</sup>

The national focal point of the election was Terence O'Neill's constituency of Bannside, where he had previously been elected unopposed for over 20 years. O'Neill squared off with Ian Paisley, and Michael Farrell flew the PD flag amidst what was the most contentious electoral contest in the history of Ulster Unionism. Farrell had little chance of being elected in such a strong Unionist constituency, but the media hype around the campaign allowed him to amplify the politics of the PD. The notoriety of the PD meant there was some opposition to their canvassing efforts, at one point Farrell was heckled,<sup>418</sup> and when he visited the leafy village of Ahoghill, home of O'Neill, he was met with an angry crowd of local women who screamed 'out out!' and 'go home you bum'.<sup>419</sup> Considering the level of opposition and violence that had met civil rights

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

<sup>418</sup> *Irish Independent*, 21 February 1969.

<sup>419</sup> Miscellaneous newspaper clippings, 16 February, *Kevin Boyle papers*, D3297/5.

activism previously, the February election passed off fairly amicably; perhaps the fact that students were now taking part in a socially acceptable form of political campaigning temporarily quelled opposition.

When the ballots were counted the PD won a highly respectable vote. With 23,645 votes polled in the 8 constituencies, it amounted to 4.23% of the vote spread across all 52 constituencies.<sup>420</sup> Broken down into their constituencies it is evident that PD candidates took significant portions of the turnout, taking roughly 30% of the vote and indicating strong support for the PD wherever their candidates were on offer. For example, Cyril Toman achieved 27.7% of the vote in mid-Armagh, while Bowes Egan 27.6% in Enniskillen. Likewise Bernadette Devlin polled 38.7% with 5,812 votes, and even in Bannside, Michael Farrell managed to poll 2,310 votes amounting to 14%. In South Down 4610 voters cast in favour of Fergus Woods. Woods came within 220 votes of being elected into the Stormont parliament and claimed 48.8% of the vote. The PD had no expectation to be elected—and thus no plan in the advent of such a high vote—and Woods recounts that it became a running joke amongst PD members that he himself had argued for a recount of his vote to avoid potentially taking a seat in the Stormont parliament.<sup>421</sup> The PD vote registered alongside a much more general radicalisation of the Catholic community. As journalist Mary Holland noted in the aftermath of the election,

The election shows that the Catholic minority is on the move, not perhaps toward Captain O'Neill and his policies of moderate reform,

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<sup>420</sup> If this is added to Eamonn McCann's vote, who stood on a similar manifesto in the Foyle constituency in Derry, it becomes 25,638 votes.

<sup>421</sup> Interview with Fergus Woods, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

but towards a more militant demand of equality of opportunity within Ulster.<sup>422</sup>

It was best illustrated in the electoral breakthroughs of three candidates associated with the civil rights movement— John Hume, Ivan Cooper and Paddy Devlin. Hume's election in particular took on a symbolic significance as he defeated the sitting Nationalist Party leader, Eddie McAteer, representing a definitive shift in oppositional politics. On a wider level the election revealed how much the middle ground had receded across the north, with O'Neill failing to achieve a substantial majority and to register a significant degree of Catholic support. The election had not delivered a strong mandate for the government; immediately afterward the PD announced that they would 'return to the streets' indefinitely and it was facilitated by wider support networks.<sup>423</sup> During and after the election the PD tried to capitalise on its gains by establishing local branches, including Armagh, Fermanagh, Toomebridge, Dunloy, South Derry, Newry and Cromac.<sup>424</sup> Their success varied and some made little headway. The Cromac branch managed to organise two marches into the city centre to protest over 'chronic housing conditions' in the area before seemingly collapsing into inexistence.<sup>425</sup> Other branches played a role in leading civil rights agitation in parts of the country, beginning a process where PD could potentially cultivate a more permanent base. The most active was in Armagh where a number of activists had helped out during Cyril Toman's campaign, including brothers Niall

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<sup>422</sup> *Observer*, 2 March 1969.

<sup>423</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 February 1969.

<sup>424</sup> Arthur, *The People's Democracy*, p. 48.

<sup>425</sup> *Irish News*, 12 March 1969.



and Brian Vallely.<sup>426</sup> Again the main mobilisation issue in Armagh throughout the summer of 69 was housing, and the branch organised actions aimed at re-housing tenants in deprived estates to get a fair points system that ensured the equal distribution of homes. In May PD activists disrupted the council chamber several times, only to be eventually banned from entering the public gallery. When they attempted to force their way into the chamber they were refused entry by the RUC; the Vallely brothers led the charge, followed by some 30 supporters, but the police prevented the activists from entering the room and scuffles ensued.<sup>427</sup> Both Vallely brothers were arrested alongside two other activists.<sup>428</sup>

Another notable area of PD activism was Fermanagh, where their three election candidates had together polled well over 6,000 votes.<sup>429</sup> Fermanagh was an evident illustration of sectarian imbalance, as despite having a majority Catholic electorate non-Unionists only held one third of the seats on the 52-seat council. The PD viewed this level of disenfranchisement as by-product both of Unionist discrimination and the complicity of the Nationalist Party, whom were guilty of a ‘silent agreement’ that left them secure in South Fermanagh and allowed the Unionists to dominate Enniskillen and Lisnaskea. Fermanagh PD amounted to about 15-20 members and they spearheaded similar activity to their comrades in Armagh, instigating local action around housing and

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<sup>426</sup> The Vallely brothers, who were known locally for their background in traditional Irish folk music, would play an important role in the PD into the future.

<sup>427</sup> *The Ulster Gazette and Armagh Standard*, 29 May 1969.

<sup>428</sup> Evidence submitted to the Cameron Commission by the People’s Democracy in Armagh, PRONI, GOV/2/1/190.

<sup>429</sup> The three candidates were Malachy Carey, Bowes Egan and Peter. Together they polled 6610 votes.

unemployment.<sup>430</sup> These efforts played out alongside a much deeper crisis across the civil rights movement, the focus of which will be the next section.

The February election saw the PD register a high level of support, giving the movement a national profile and enabling the activists to establish better networks across the country. It also solidified a more permanent turn toward the working class and away from the university campus. This was the natural course of the movement, but also worth noting was the way that much of the liberal support that existed among the student population was beginning to wane as protests ended in violent scenes. By April 1969 the students' union at Queen's had passed a motion stating that 'the PD does not represent the opinions of all students in this University and we, as the Students' Union, wish to disassociate ourselves from their recent activity.'<sup>431</sup> The university management also took a tougher line toward some students: in March Bernadette Devlin was denied the opportunity to complete her final exams on the grounds that she had 'brought the university into disrepute'.<sup>432</sup>

After the election then the PD held an amorphous existence, between its former base in the university campus, and its newfound role as a leading current of the civil rights movement. Cyril Toman relayed the problem facing the PD to a journalist:

The Stormont Election completely dispersed us. Which may prove to have been beneficial, in that it forced us to break clear of our student

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<sup>430</sup> Peter Cosgrove, *Peoples Democracy member 1969*, part 1.

<sup>431</sup> QUBSU conference motions, 22/4/1969, *People's Democracy file*, NIPC.

<sup>432</sup> Devlin, 'Recollections on the role of students: a personal-political account', *Spirit of 68, Beyond the Barricades*, p. 71.

base whilst at the same time we established ourselves as a national force. But it did mean that we lost the physical proximity necessary to strengthen ourselves politically and organizationally. Now in fact we face the problem of organizing PD from scratch.<sup>433</sup>

This problem would be compounded by a much wider division surrounding the strategy and tactics of the civil rights movement.

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<sup>433</sup> ‘Discussion on the strategy of People’s Democracy’, *New Left Review*.

### 4.3. The politics of civil rights

The PD radicalised the civil rights movement from the beginning of 1969 onward, however, its role also sharpened the existing divisions over the nature of the campaign and soon these divisions were so acute that the movement fractured. From the advent of street mobilisation tension had existed between the older established left and young radicals and as a broad social movement developed— encompassing contradictory strands of politics, ranging from conservative nationalism to radical socialism— division over strategy and politics wracked the movement. Indeed, immediate division existed across the radical left over the very question of protest action. In the terminology of the time it was described as a rift between the ‘radicals’ and the ‘moderates’ of the movement— the former represented by the PD and its likeminded supporters, who were committed to action since October 1968, and the latter represented by a broader assortment of established left forces, ranging from trade unionists, the NILP and the CPNI, who held an influential position in NICRA.

These organisations tended to be led by older political operatives, often quite cautious in their political approach, and wedded to an ideological outlook that had been formed over many decades. The dominant strategy among the established left was to develop the civil rights movement along the route of reform, championing civil rights as a ‘non-political’ cause and hoping to strengthen the position of the Catholic community inside the Northern state, thus democratising the state through parliamentary mechanisms. Much of this stood in contradistinction to tactics applied by the PD, who tried to push the campaign ahead in a more radical fashion, based upon working class mobilisation and

Protestant and Catholic unity in action. The PD did not necessarily have fixed positions or an agreed agenda of any depth, but it was defined by a commitment to street protest, anti-sectarianism, and a willingness to challenge the forces of law and order through non-violent civil disobedience. This meant an orientation toward working class self-activity as both the agency for radical transformation and in combating sectarianism.<sup>434</sup>

The tension between the PD and the established left is easy to source across the historical record and is well illustrated in the relationship that developed between the PD and Betty Sinclair, the leading member of the CPNI in the early days of NICRA. Sinclair had been the principle opponent of marching since the beginning of the civil rights movement, disagreeing initially with the first march in Dungannon, and as street agitation increased she became more openly opposed to the tactics of the radical left.<sup>435</sup> In time, Sinclair would develop much acrimony toward Bernadette Devlin and the PD more generally. Her diaries reveal attacks on the ‘stupid young students’ of the PD who were ‘playing with politics’ and had no idea of the realities of Northern Ireland.<sup>436</sup> Michael Farrell drew particular attention; for Sinclair, he was the ‘spider who weaves the webs’.<sup>437</sup>

The hostility that existed from the beginning was generally submerged throughout the early period of mobilisation due to the seemingly forward march

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<sup>434</sup> These themes were consistent with the European new left, see Paul Blackledge, ‘The New Left’s renewal of Marxism’, *International Socialism Journal* (issue 112, 2006), available online, <http://isj.org.uk/the-new-lefts-renewal-of-marxism/>, accessed on 14/09/2016.

<sup>435</sup> Purdie, *Politics in the Streets*, p. 135.

<sup>436</sup> Matt Treacy, *The Communist Party of Ireland, 1921-2011* (Brocaire Books 2012), pp. 356-357.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.* p. 364.

of the movement. Events came to a head, however, in the aftermath of Burntollet. When the PD announced their intention to march to Derry, Sinclair privately hoped that bad weather and snowfall would prevent the march from taking place.<sup>438</sup> Alas, her hope was in vain and what followed saw these disagreements enter the public arena. By the time that the Cameron enquiry spoke to Betty Sinclair she expressed strong differences with leftist attempts to politicise the civil rights movement, and when asked directly about the role of Michael Farrell she reacted as such:

Q: Now as far as Mr. Michael Farrell is concerned could you tell the Commission anything that you know about him [...]? A: I do not want certain things to be printed. I do not want to see things with my name appended to them. Anything I do say I will stand over. Would it be possible to go off the record here?<sup>439</sup>

The Commission interview then broke off before resuming. The prospect of Belfast's leading Communist going 'off record' to converse with a British judge concerning the activities of the radical left illustrates the level of animosity toward those who had taken on the role of building socialist politics outside of the realms of the Communist Party.

From the outset much of the criticism levelled at the PD by the Communist Party and other voices of moderation fell on deaf ears among a generation who felt they had experienced the 'reality of Northern Ireland' in full fashion and who could also claim, with some degree of truth, that their efforts

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<sup>438</sup> Ibid, p. 357.

<sup>439</sup> Evidence submitted to the Cameron enquiry by Miss Betty Sinclair, PRONI, GOV/2/1/130.

had done more to expose the true nature of the Unionist state in a few months than years of patient campaigning from the established left. Yet if the communists in the civil rights movement can be charged with hostility to the new left, then it should be qualified by recognising that the impatient, and at times ultra-left, nature of the PD often prevented the movement having any serious influence on the forces of the wider left.

Much PD activity existed upon the belief that their actions alone could spark the struggle capable of transforming the political situation, and a more general rejection of official politics, including the established left and social democratic organisations. There is little evidence to suggest that the PD had a rapport with other sections of the left and labour organisations on a substantive basis, instead they remained disconnected from the big battalions of working class organisation. Indeed, the PD at times seemed as charged against 'reformist' currents inside the civil rights movement as they did their class enemies in the government. Thus, with more than a touch of humour Bernadette Devlin would describe the communists 'as reactionary as the Unionists.'<sup>440</sup>

As the civil rights movement was met with increased opposition, division over future action began to split the movement. This was precipitated by PD's increase in support. After January 1969 two leading members of the PD, Michael Farrell and Kevin Boyle, were voted on to the NICRA executive. Their presence quickly brought objection from those on the leadership who wanted the campaign to stay within safe grounds. In March a split was triggered after Bernadette Devlin announced a joint NICRA/PD march that was planned to go

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<sup>440</sup> Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, p. 147.

from Belfast's city centre to the Stormont parliament, and thus through the heavily loyalist area of East Belfast. It soon became apparent that the NICRA executive had no knowledge of the demonstration and an executive meeting was held to discuss the matter. Three different proposals to resolve the issue were put forward by Farrell and Boyle, but the committee could not reach agreement and was split down the middle. Crucially the new chairperson, Frank Gogarty, who was known for more radical views than the previous chair, Betty Sinclair, voted in support of the PD proposals. After a heated debate on 14 March four leading members of the NICRA executive, Sinclair, Fred Heatley, John McAnerney and Dr Raymond Shearer, resigned in protest against the PD. The four released a joint statement that called for a secession of protests and strongly condemned the student radicals:

All we needed was time...a lull in which to see if Captain O'Neill is going to carry out the reforms he had promised. But the PD would not give us time and their political views are infringing on the non-political aims of NICRA...We have been taken over by people preaching the most extreme form of revolutionary socialism, the sort of politics that have been causing trouble in France, Germany, Japan and many other parts of the world.<sup>441</sup>

The statement illustrated the extent of the political gulf across the left. Ironically, Belfast's most prominent communist was to rally against the 'extreme socialism' of the PD, instead counter posing faith in the reforming capacity of the Unionist government to bring 'non political' change to the minority community. The

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<sup>441</sup> Arthur, *The People's Democracy*, p. 61.



decree to 'keep politics out' of the civil rights movement was seen simply as an attempt to silence the voice of the radical left. One activist responded in kind:

Of all the arguments used against the left, this is the most spurious.

All the demands of the civil rights movement are political. If the demand for the abolition of the Special Powers Act, for example, is not political then just what kind of demand is it?<sup>442</sup>

The PD reacted confidently to the walkout. Michael Farrell countered that talk of the PD infiltrating NICRA was 'arrant nonsense', claiming that the four who withdrew did so 'in a fit of temper' after they had unsuccessfully challenged the PD proposal. In Farrell's view no mention of infiltration had been made until after the walk out had taken place and the former executive members proposed no alternative motion or mode of action. Furthermore, the very idea of a 'take over' by the PD was in itself problematic, considering that there were only two PD members on the eighteen-person strong NICRA executive. Thus, what really happened at the meeting was that others on the NICRA had agreed with the PD around the question of returning to the streets, to the dissatisfaction of the Sinclair *et al.*<sup>443</sup>

The division in NICRA was reflecting one of the patterns of the global left, as predominately young militants clashed with passive and reformist currents of the established left. This process had indeed taken place in France,

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<sup>442</sup> Eamonn McCann, *Whose wrecking civil rights?* (1969) Available online, <https://cedarlounge.files.wordpress.com/2008/04/emc.pdf>, accessed on 12/03/2016.

<sup>443</sup> *Irish News*, 17 March 1969.

Germany, Britain and other parts of the world.<sup>444</sup> It would then play out across various civil rights groups. After the Belfast walkout eight out of thirteen members of the Omagh NICRA committee resigned in protest against what they perceived to be leftwing subversion: ‘We feel that C.R. is being undermined by extremist movements for whose actions we cannot hold ourselves responsible.’<sup>445</sup> Then, in Fermanagh, five members of the NICRA committee resigned citing similar grievances.<sup>446</sup>

It was against this backdrop of internal crisis that the PD and NICRA embarked on joint protests against the Public Order Bill, which further curtailed the right to protest and further called into question the liberal image of O’Neill.<sup>447</sup> On 22 March demonstrations were called in towns and cities across the North including Belfast, Derry, Newry, Toomebridge and Enniskillen, where turnouts varied. Incidentally, the day passed fairly peacefully, apart from in Armagh where four people were arrested. The PD claimed to have had a successful outing, having handed out over 30,000 leaflets explaining their opposition to the Bill.<sup>448</sup>

The rifts between activists were largely absent from the day, but the way in which the state reacted to the protests suggests that the politicisation of the civil rights movement was not something that could not be avoided. A consistent

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<sup>444</sup> See, Fraser, 1968.

<sup>445</sup> *Irish News*, 17 March 1969.

<sup>446</sup> Manilo, *Social Movements, Networks and National Cleavages in Northern Ireland: A case study of the civil rights movement and environmental protest*, Unpublished PhD thesis (Queen’s University Belfast 2002), p. 95.

<sup>447</sup> The Public Order Bill was an extension of the 1951 Public Order Act, which sought to further restrict the right to protest by, for example, making it more difficult to organize demonstrations and making it an offence to knowingly take part in an illegal march.

<sup>448</sup> *Irish News*, 22 March 1969.

theme throughout internal police reports on the 22 March protests was the effort to draw out republican involvement in civil rights protests. In Enniskillen, where the PD mobilised hundreds of supporters behind strictly civil rights banners, senior RUC Inspector Bill Meharg labelled the demonstrations republican orientated, stating, ‘most support from those who have in the past been identified as supporters of the Irish Republican movement in Fermanagh.’<sup>449</sup> In Newry, Meharg concluded that, ‘The Republican element is clearly the prime mover in the local agitation and the Newry committee is unable to control this element.’<sup>450</sup> In Belfast, where the PD held a student led city centre rally, Meharg was again keen to draw out republican involvement in the protest, by warning of a number of redacted names who were ‘prominent members of the Republican movement in Belfast.’<sup>451</sup> Certainly, republicans were involved in civil rights protests, but the RUC reports seem to overstate their role in a contrived way. The RUC viewed the hidden hand of republicanism as a major source of provocation; it was a reflection of a dominant consensus across the Unionist state, which served to mutually reinforce sectarian opposition to the movement from both inside and outside the government. Therefore, the state responded with an overtly political response to civil rights protests and the movement was unequipped to react politically, with many in NICRA favouring an avoidance of politics altogether—a calculated amnesia toward the sectarian obstacles that faced the movement.

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<sup>449</sup> People’s Democracy march: Enniskillen 22 March 1969, Letter from Bill Meharg to G. E. Greeves, 28 March 1969, PRONI, CAB/9/B/312/5.

<sup>450</sup> Civil rights protest meeting in Newry, 22 March 1969, Letter from Bill Meharg to G. E. Greeves. PRONI, CAB/9/B/312/5.

<sup>451</sup> Protest meeting by the People’s Democracy movement at Belfast City Hall on Saturday 22 March 1969, PRONI, CAB/9/B/312/5.

The PD led protests in Belfast against the Public Order Bill provided a telling example of the ideologically incoherent nature of PD activity. A crowd of students had gathered in the centre of Belfast but they were met with a two hundred strong crowd of loyalists who shouted down their demonstration. After some thirty minutes the students were forced to wind up when they broke into discussions surrounding themes as diverse and topical as 'Paisleyism, Civil Rights, Maoism and Chinese Communism'<sup>452</sup>.

The size of the loyalist counter protest at this particular protest illustrated the extent of opposition that was now to be expected toward student civil rights protest. For the more politically astute members of the PD the only hope for the survival of the civil rights movement was in its ability to reach across the sectarian divide and herein lay its problem. By early 1969 it was evident that, despite the continual efforts to articulate an anti-sectarian message, the overwhelming perception of the civil rights movement among the Protestant community was that of an all-Catholic movement concerned with advancing only solely Catholic interests. This was arguably reinforced by the role of the 'moderates' inside the movement. The effort to 'keep politics out' of the civil rights movement was intended to ensure maximum unity of the 'anti Unionist' community, thus uniting the forces of nationalist Ireland around the cause of equal treatment for Catholics. The PD adopted a distinctly different approach prioritising cross-communal mobilisation and struggle from below, to counter the

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<sup>452</sup> Ibid.

image that the civil rights campaign was a pan-Catholic movement intent on subverting the North into the Southern Irish state.<sup>453</sup>

The next PD initiative was an attempt to challenge the pan-Catholic image of the movement and show that the causes of civil rights were both universal and applicable to both Irish states. The march from Belfast to Dublin on 4 April was an effort to spread the civil rights movement across the border and into the southern state. It drew a further line between the radical left and the moderates of the civil rights movement. Calling the march under the slogan 'civil rights north and south', the PD made contact with groups on the southern left, student organisations and the Gluaiseacht Cearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta, the Gaeltacht civil rights movement in Galway, which organised a march from their city. The march provided an opportunity to connect movements against oppression in the Irish state with the struggle for rights in the North, and the Gaeltacht community saw the civil rights framework as a means of protesting their own perceived neglect within the Irish state.<sup>454</sup> The Minister for Home Affairs banned the march walking from Belfast to Newry and the PD instead organised public meetings that precipitated the activists setting off from Dundalk. In Lurgan one meeting was marred by police violence, with twenty-one people arrested including a group of activists who had travelled over from Britain. Anne Devlin, already a victim of violence during the Burntollet ambush,

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<sup>453</sup> Farrell, M, 'Long March to Freedom', *Twenty Years on*, p. 72.

<sup>454</sup> 'Communities in the West empathized with Northern Nationalists in their grievances against Stormont, and saw the civil rights framework embraced by Northern Nationalists as a means of protesting the perceived neglect by the Irish State of their communities.' Gerard Madden, *Reactions in the West of Ireland to political change in Northern Ireland, 1968-1982*, unpublished MA thesis, (2013 NUIG), p. 9.

was beaten unconscious by a District Inspector of the RUC wielding a blackthorn stick.<sup>455</sup>

From Galway, the newly founded Western Civil Rights Movement marched alongside PD to highlight issues as broad as housing, unemployment, the decline of the Gaeltacht and discrimination against the travelling community.<sup>456</sup> Naturally, it was not wracked by the violence now commonplace at demonstrations North of the border, but controversy did emerge after PD activists made policies of the Irish state a central theme of their demonstration. When the PD challenged the power of the Catholic Church by highlighting the illegality of divorce and contraception, it caused consternation among civil rights supporters and conflicted with some of the new base that the PD had garnered across the North. Before the march had set off activists in Fermanagh PD disagreed with attacking the Catholic Church.<sup>457</sup> After the march left Newry, Cyril Toman held a press conference where he criticised the church's record and challenged the state's censorship laws by producing two books *The Ginger Man* (1955) and *The Girl With Green Eyes* (1962); the latter was banned at the time. It was a small stunt, but it managed to arouse the anger of the southern media. It also brought criticism from other activists on the Irish left who were reticent about such tactics and refused to complete the march.<sup>458</sup>

The march was met by some 5,000 people in Dublin representing a notable level of support and the organisers had trouble keeping control of events,

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<sup>455</sup> *Irish News*, 5 April 1969. Interview with Anne Devlin, Belfast, 26/06/2015.

<sup>456</sup> Madden, op cit, p. 20.

<sup>457</sup> Cosgrove, *People's Democracy member 1969, part 1*.

<sup>458</sup> Madden op cit, p. 20.

with around 800 breakaway activists protesting at the British embassy.<sup>459</sup>

Marchers attacked Jack Lynch for using the issue of civil rights to divert attention from the appalling housing and unemployment conditions that existed in the Irish state, and afterward the PD released a statement contending the march:

Did not expect to precipitate a revolution in the south. It did hope to arouse the anger of the working people against the exploitation of Green Tories as well as Orange ones, and against the fact that the 40,000 unemployed in the north were matched by 60,000 in the south; the 4,000 homeless in Derry by the 10,000 in Dublin; the 6,000 annual emigrants in the north by the 17,000 in the south.<sup>460</sup>

Although the PD was positive in its press statements there is evidence to suggest that the march precipitated some division and demoralisation privately in its ranks.<sup>461</sup> Years later, Michael Farrell would reflect on the aspirations behind the march; the PD activists expected the civil rights movement to explode in the south in similar fashion to that previously in the north.<sup>462</sup> The belief that the southern working class would be easily mobilised in order to come to the aid of Catholics in the north was a common one in this period, but the hope that the Northern rebellion would produce a wave of radicalisation among southern

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<sup>459</sup> Arthur, *The People's Democracy*, p. 54.

<sup>460</sup> *Irish News*, 10 April.

<sup>461</sup> Paul Arthur's study, which benefitted from a number of 'fresh' interviews with PD members in the period following 1969 notes that some activists harbored private criticism over the march, see Arthur, *The People's Democracy*, p. 55.

<sup>462</sup> As Farrell put it "we thought the Southern political set-up would begin to crumble almost as quickly as the Northern one. We had a lot to learn about the dynamics of Southern society." 'Long March to Freedom', p. 72.

workers and witness them challenge their own 'Green Tory government' on mass did not to materialise.<sup>463</sup> The PD had seen the Unionist state rocked by the advent of people power and thought they could act as a detonator for similar struggle in the south. The future would show that it was an unsustainable strategy.

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<sup>463</sup> The British based Internationalist Socialist grouping, who had important links with the PD at this time, would later document similar mistakes. See, Chris Harman, *Ireland after the Hunger Strikes*, Socialist Review, January 1981. Available online, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1981/01/ireland.htm>, accessed on 22/05/2016.



#### 4.4. The election of Bernadette Devlin MP

By the time the PD was marching from Belfast to Dublin, Bernadette Devlin was heavily involved in the election campaign for the Mid Ulster seat in the Westminster Parliament. Devlin's electoral breakthrough was one of the most pivotal moments of the Northern Ireland civil rights campaign; it propelled her on to the world stage as the de facto leader of the rebellion in Northern Ireland and created a media frenzy. It also etched the name of the PD into the history of the European left as the only new left grouping during the rebellious 1968-1969 period to have a student member elected into parliament. The fact that a 21-year-old radical socialist with only 8 months political experience was elected into the British parliament with over 33,000 votes, beating the Unionist candidate, Anna Forrest, by a majority of over 4,000 testifies to the radicalisation around the civil rights campaign. Devlin's own personal journey— from unknown student activist to champion of a socialist Ireland— embodied the leaps and strides of the student movement since October 1968.<sup>464</sup>

The election victory became possible after the death of Unionist MP George Forrest in December 1968. There had been long speculation about the potential for a civil rights candidate to take the seat in the subsequent by-election. Republican Tom Mitchell had previously held the seat from his jail cell on an abstentionist ticket.<sup>465</sup> Both Kevin Agnew and Austin Currie had put themselves forward as candidates, but a yearning for a united candidate dominated the build up to the election throughout a number of 'unity

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<sup>464</sup> For Devlin's own story, see *The Price of My Soul*.

<sup>465</sup> Tom Mitchell was an Irish Republican who was twice elected while imprisoned.

conventions' organised by Patricia McCluskey, where various candidates put themselves forward. With the main political pillars of republicanism and moderate nationalism split over proposed candidates, Devlin emerged as a mediator between both currents, radical enough for the republicans but also acceptable to moderates.<sup>466</sup>

Initially, Devlin was reluctant to put herself forward, hoping that Michael Farrell would instead contest the seat, but Farrell opted out of the whole 'unity' project expressing uneasiness as it involved working alongside sections of the Catholic middle class and besides, he was unacceptable to some of the other factions in the convention, undoubtedly due to his role in driving forward the most militant aspects of civil rights action.<sup>467</sup> It was somewhat ironic that Devlin was seen as the tolerable choice, as she would prove to be far from moderate. Following the withdrawal of Austin Currie and Kevin Agnew, 225 delegates selected Devlin at a unity convention.<sup>468</sup>

Amidst the groundswell of momentum that developed around Devlin's campaign PD activists were overshadowed by larger political forces. Peter Cosgrove recalled that when he and other activists went to help out with the campaign they were almost irrelevant, because the combined effort of both republican and nationalist election machines 'needed little help from even the

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<sup>466</sup> Conn McCluskey recalled how, 'At that time she was everyone's darling. We were delighted with her dynamism and her absence of posturing. We hoped that from then on she would consolidate her position, fusing together the disparate elements of minority life. Unfortunately this did not happen.' Conn McCloskey, *Up off their Knees, a commentary on the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland* (Published by Conn McCluskey and Associates, 1989), pp. 142-143.

<sup>467</sup> Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, p. 166.

<sup>468</sup> *Irish News*, 3 April 1969.

most enthusiastic amateurs'<sup>469</sup>. Nevertheless, PD members did play a role in the election campaign, regularly sharing platforms at meetings; Bowes Egan, Michael Farrell, Peter Cosgrove and Fergus Woods spoke in support of Devlin at different events.<sup>470</sup>

The climate had heated since the February election and Devlin's campaign was met with more sizeable opposition. Public meetings were regularly confronted with hostile crowds waving union jacks and flinging missiles at Devlin's supporters. In such an instance in Bellaghy, Devlin pleaded to her followers that anyone ready to fight their Protestant neighbour had nothing in common with the civil rights movement.<sup>471</sup> In the village of Moneymore the campaign faced more serious opposition when a mob of loyalists pelted campaigners with stones, bottles and eggs. It was so fierce that the planned meeting was cancelled. However, Devlin responded by stating publicly that she would return the next day, which she did.<sup>472</sup>

Devlin entered Westminster as the youngest-ever female MP. For the next five years she would march, picket and protest in support of a variety of working class causes in Ireland, Britain and in the US; becoming Ireland's internationally renowned rebel MP. The victory encapsulated both the militancy and the internationalism of the movement, but it was also the apex of a contradiction, in that the loose fringe of socialists now had an MP who seriously broke with the grain of conventional politics. When elected, Devlin apparently declared, 'There may not be 30,000 socialists in this constituency but it has a

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<sup>469</sup> Cosgrove, *People's Democracy member 1969, part 1*.

<sup>470</sup> Arthur, *The People's Democracy*, p. 56.

<sup>471</sup> *Irish News*, 15 April 1969.

<sup>472</sup> *Irish News*, 16 April 1969.

socialist MP anyway<sup>473</sup>. The statement perfectly summed up the contradiction of the PD, which had made sizeable gains but was incapable of retaining the inrush of support and developing socialist organisation against the tide of sectarian conflict.<sup>474</sup>

Devlin's election focused the eyes of the world onto the Irish civil rights movement. Her parliamentary career defied both the republican tradition of abstentionism toward the British parliament, and the normal practices inside the House of Commons. Standing on the slogan of 'I will take my seat and fight for your rights', Devlin entered Westminster and her maiden speech set the tone for her future as an MP, breaking the parliamentary tradition of making uncontroversial speeches during inauguration to parliament, she delivered a fiery oration that hit out at the Unionist government and Britain's record in Ireland.<sup>475</sup> Her commitment to politics in the streets over politics in parliament was substantiated in August '69 when she led the resistance to police repression during the 'Battle of the Bogside' in Derry. The image of Devlin breaking up paving stones to arm the Catholic youths with ammunition to drive back the RUC is one of the most iconic images of the civil rights period. Equally infamous were Devlin's exploits in America, where she drummed up support for the Irish struggle and offered solidarity to blacks fighting against racial inequality, setting her further against the trend of nationalist Ireland and the conservative reception of Irish American support.

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<sup>473</sup> McCann, 'The roots of revolt'.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

<sup>475</sup> Parliamentary contributions of Bernadette Devlin, MP, Westminster Hansard 22 April 1969, Vol 782, available online, [http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1969/apr/22/northern-ireland#S5CV0782P0\\_19690422\\_HOC\\_271](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1969/apr/22/northern-ireland#S5CV0782P0_19690422_HOC_271), accessed on 12/01/2016.

A cursory glance at Devlin's record as an MP would contradict the conventional view that her support was based upon traditional Catholic nationalist fervour.<sup>476</sup> Indeed, if Devlin's socialist politics were obscure in April 1969— perhaps due to relative anonymity— they were in full view during the June 1970 general election when she again topped the poll with 37,739 votes. Devlin's election put the PD in a favourable position, but the reality of having an MP immediately confronted the group with problems. Michael Farrell recalled that after the election the PD was 'confounded'; an ultra left rejection of parliament combined with the PD's own loose structure 'meant we did not know what to do with an MP'. The result was confusion and some resentment between Devlin and others in PD.<sup>477</sup> Divisions surfaced after the election and it was clear that there was no common perspective between activists.

In a now iconic interview with *New Left Review* (NLR), on 20 April 1969, some of the leaders of the PD met to discuss strategy and tactics. The interview allowed the PD activists to present their account of the civil rights movement, and they came across united both in their desire for working class action to thwart the rise of sectarian tension and in their criticism of the moderates of the civil rights movement. Yet while what transpired on the pages of NLR testified to the feeling of possibility that encapsulated the late 1960s, it also showed how disorganised and divided the PD was. Cyril Toman reckoned that the coming together of the activists was probably the first time they had

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<sup>476</sup> As Jonathon Bardon has argued, 'Despite her firm socialist stand, the massive vote was a traditional Catholic anti-Unionist one.' Bardon, *A History of Ulster*, p. 663.

<sup>477</sup> Farrell, 'Long March to Freedom', p. 59.

discussed their strategy in any depth for a couple of months.<sup>478</sup> But events had moved quickly since student protests at Queen's and the movement had come up against immeasurable obstacles. Hitherto, the radicals had been united on one substantial point; the necessity to drive forward civil rights mobilisations in a socialist direction. However, the central problem facing the movement was the increase in sectarian division and the failure of the campaign to win significant support from the Protestant community. Disagreement over how this could be achieved was evident, as the newly elected MP put it, 'The fact of the matter is that everybody knows where they don't want us to go, but nobody really knows what they do want and nobody is prepared to organize'.<sup>479</sup> A clear line of disagreement emerged between Eamonn McCann and Michael Farrell, two individuals who can be said to have done the most to develop the ideas of the left. Recognising that the civil rights movement was leading to an upsurge of activism predominately within the Catholic community, the activists clashed over the balance of sectarianism among supporters of civil rights. Farrell's self-described 'humorous' use of the term 'Catholic Power' to portray the situation in which the left could advance the struggle in Catholic areas was also strongly challenged by McCann. For the time being it was a theoretical debate, but it did illustrate the likely road down which Farrell would steer the PD in the future, as sectarian division intensified the organisation would shift toward basing itself on the militancy of the Catholic community.

Overall, the NLR interview exposed how much of a mess the PD had found itself in, with various disagreements emerging. The Mid Ulster election

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<sup>478</sup> 'Discussion on the strategy of People's Democracy', *New Left Review*.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*

campaign itself emerged as a topic of division; Farrell disapproved of the type of unity that had developed between nationalist politicians during the campaign, who had addressed election meetings and emphasised sectarian issues over class issues. He also expressed concern that Devlin did not stand on an openly socialist ticket. While different opinions were aired during the interview, the clear overriding weakness was that the lack of political agreement was exacerbated by the absence of a functioning organisation, and this was evident in the political assessment of those who had done most to champion the development of the PD. Farrell began the interview by explaining that the PD was not just part of the civil rights movement, but was a 'revolutionary association'. He went on to argue that the loose nature of the PD was becoming a fetter on the development of socialist organisation and the furtherance of class politics, hinting that the left had sacrificed its identity to the broader civil rights movement:

I think it will be necessary, within the overall framework, to find a way of introducing a little more co-ordination. I had hoped that the PD would realise the necessity of taking a stand on class issues, and would therefore transform itself into a broadly socialist body, though a non-sectarian one in which socialists of several different tendencies could co-operate. I no longer think this will happen of its own accord.<sup>480</sup>

Farrell's comment identified another problem that had dogged the PD from its inception; a hope in the spontaneous nature of class struggle as a substitute for the building of socialist organisation, it was a common trait of new left

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<sup>480</sup> 'Discussion on the strategy of People's Democracy', *New Left Review*.

organisations. As the North teetered from civil rights to civil strife, the PD existed more as an idea than an organisation; it had not developed as a concrete pole of attraction capable of retaining support and strategically intervening in Northern politics. PD members thus increasingly found themselves reacting to events as opposed to influencing them.



#### 4.5. Drift to disaster

The extent to which the civil rights movement was losing control over the forces unleashed by demonstrations was shown in events over the weekend of 18-21 April. On 17 April members of the Derry Civil Rights Association attempted to re-trace the final leg of the Burntollet march outside of the city. It was met with loyalist opposition and sparked three days of widespread and intense rioting. During the trouble the RUC pursued rioters into a home and proceeded to assault residents, resulting in the death of Samuel Devenney.<sup>481</sup> It provided the context in which Devlin thundered against the ‘stark human misery’ perpetuated against the people of Derry by the Unionist Party during her first sitting in parliament.<sup>482</sup>

NICRA and the PD responded to the violence by calling for demonstrations across the country in order to take police pressure off Derry. In Belfast an extraordinary general meeting of NICRA was held at the Wellington Park Hotel to discuss events in Derry. After an emotional tape recording from the Devenney family was played, Michael Farrell made an urgent appeal that activists organise to ‘take pressure off Derry’. Then, ‘the country delegates were told to go back to their own areas and to arrange peaceful demonstrations’ although crucially ‘no arrangement was made for a demonstration in Belfast’.<sup>483</sup> NICRA’s reluctance to organise action that would likely be met with sectarian opposition stemmed from a genuine desire to retain peaceful protest, but it also amounted to an abdication of responsibility. As news of Derry’s troubles reached

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<sup>481</sup> O’Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites*, p. 51.

<sup>482</sup> Parliamentary contributions of Bernadette Devlin, MP, Westminster Hansard 22 April 1969, Vol 782.

<sup>483</sup> Liam Kelly, *Belfast, August 1969*, unpublished PhD thesis (Queen’s University Belfast, 2012), p. 36.

west Belfast the initiative was taken by local republicans who had a proven track record of agitation in the area. Among their ranks was a young Gerry Adams.<sup>484</sup> The protests that played out in Belfast illustrated the political vacuum that emerged in the city. Indeed, by April 1969 there was no functioning NICRA branch in Belfast and up until now the main strand of agitation had been the PD, which had been based in the university area.

On 19 April 300 people gathered at Casement Park and established the Andersonstown Civil Rights Committee. The crowd was joined by the Belfast Housing Action Committee and marched to Hastings Street police station to hand in a petition against police brutality. This form of protest would be repeated in Belfast over the next few days, again on 22 April a similar pattern played out.<sup>485</sup> On this occasion the crowd split into two groups with a breakaway faction going to hold a separate rally some fifty yards away. The splinter group was led by PD activist Fergus Woods who reasoned; ‘we believe in action but it must be planned action’. Woods urged the 300 people who had gathered not to protest, ‘but instead invited them to a meeting the following week-end where they could discuss civil rights.’<sup>486</sup> The calls for planned action were not enough to calm the crowd and that evening many of the youths that gathered set off on sporadic attacks on the police.<sup>487</sup> Belfast was beginning a slow descent into violence and PD members found themselves ever more on the sidelines with little option but to observe. Tony Cliff, who was in contact with the PD through his International Socialist group, based in Britain, recalled, ‘They had started an avalanche but

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<sup>484</sup> Gerry Adams gives his own version of his activism in 1969 in *Before The Dawn, an autobiography* (Brandon Books, 2001).

<sup>485</sup> Kelly, *Belfast, August 1969*, p. 37.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid*.

they did not know what to do, or how even to organise themselves.<sup>488</sup> As the summer approached this would become tragically apparent.

The disturbances in April coincided with a heightening of tension when loyalist bombs destroyed key institutions on 20, 24 and 26 April.<sup>489</sup> The explosions were the final straw in Terence O'Neill's long and unsuccessful balancing act. On 28 April O'Neill resigned, citing regret for the failure to surmount the religious divide. Yet some of his preceding comments also revealed the more sectarian persuasions that imbued unionism's most able reformer.<sup>490</sup> In the end it was not the civil rights movement that ended O'Neill, but its antithesis, the loyalist backlash. The PD saw O'Neill's demise as proof that he was a victim of his own myth; he had merely tried to meddle with the exterior of the Unionist state through superficial gestures that could not address the root causes of division and inequality, 'His ultimate dismissal reveals the stuff of which unionism is made.'<sup>491</sup> O'Neill was replaced by Chichester Clark who, on 1 May,

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<sup>488</sup> Tony Cliff, *A World to Win, Life of a Revolutionary* (London, Bookmarks, 2000), p. 97.

<sup>489</sup> Thomas Hennessey, *A History of Northern Ireland 1920-1996* (Gill and Macmillan, 1997), p.161.

<sup>490</sup> To one journalist O'Neill commented, 'It is frightfully hard to explain to Protestants that if you give Roman Catholics a good job and a good house, they will live like Protestants because they will see neighbours with cars and television sets; they will refuse to have eighteen children. But if a Roman Catholic is jobless, and lives in the most ghastly hovel, he will rear eighteen children on National Assistance. If you treat Roman Catholics with due consideration and kindness, they will live like Protestants in spite of the authoritarian nature of their Church . . .' Ibid, p. 162.

<sup>491</sup> *Irish News*, 29 April 1969. Or as Eamonn McCann later put it in a typically scathing epitaph on O'Neill's legacy: 'O'Neill became Prime Minister at a time when the Orange machine in Northern Ireland was becoming redundant to the needs of monopoly capitalism. What Toryism needed was a hard-headed 'professional politician' who could wean the Catholic middle class with a conservative consensus while not alienating the Protestant masses to the point of rebellion. Instead, what they got was an effete Etonian snob who sucked up to the Orange Order and sucked down to the Catholic clerics and thought that to do

attempted to make a break with the past and announced an amnesty on all those involved in disturbances since 5 October. It was received by some as a welcome gesture that alleviated the crackdown against civil rights activists, but others viewed it as a deliberate ploy that allowed the government to sweep aside the many abuses that had been carried out against civil rights activists. The attackers at Burntollet and the various examples of police violence would be ignored.<sup>492</sup>

The new political context saw the civil rights movement take a step back from activity and offer the new administration breathing space to introduce reforms. After a four hour meeting NICRA announced a retreat from demonstrations in favour of a campaign of civil disobedience, which included pickets and squatting actions across the country.<sup>493</sup> The decision did not take place without division in NICRA; one activist described its regional council meetings as ‘dog fights’ over whether or not activity should be suspended, with some representatives favouring a return to the streets.<sup>494</sup> However, differences were sunk for the sake of unity.<sup>495</sup> Crucially, PD members publicly agreed with the decision to suspend activity, but internally tension continued. At a meeting of the newly established civil rights association in Belfast, several members of the PD walked out after a debate with members of the Communist Party over the democratic functions of the group. In the end the dispute was resolved and PD

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both simultaneously was to be ‘non-sectarian’.’ Eamonn McCann, ‘The autobiography of Terence O’Neill’, *International Socialism Journal*, No 54, 1973. Available online, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/mccann/1973/01/oneill.htm>, accessed on 04/08/2015.

<sup>492</sup> Corrigan, A, *Eyewitness in Northern Ireland* (Voice of Ulster Publications, 1969), p. 23.

<sup>493</sup> *Irish News*, 5 May 1969.

<sup>494</sup> *Irish News*, 30 June 1969.

<sup>495</sup> *Irish News*, 19 May 1969.

members returned; at this meeting Fergus Woods was elected as chairman of the Belfast Civil Rights Association.<sup>496</sup>

It was against this backdrop of internal rancour and stalemate that the civil rights movement announced a return to the streets. Time had elapsed since the suspension of activity and it was clear that Chichester Clark would not indicate publicly the dates for the implementation of all reforms outlined by the civil rights movement four weeks previously. The remobilisation began with a NICRA rally in Strabane on 28 June, where the platform erupted in open debate over the very *raison d'être* of the movement. The stage encompassed 15 speakers representing the various strands of the campaign. Eamonn McCann led the charge from the left stating that the civil rights movement was proving unable to overcome sectarian division. McCann argued that the movement had not defined what type of unity it had hoped to see and attacked Austin Currie MP, who was also on the platform, for having accepted the government's timetable of reform. Bernadette Devlin followed by making it clear that as the newly elected MP she was firmly in the camp of the radical socialists,

I was elected as MP to Westminster as a Unity candidate; but if you picked me for the same kind of unity that Austin Currie stands for then I can't serve you and the sooner you get rid of me the better. I stand for Eamonn McCann's unity, and let there be no mistake about it.<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> *Irish News*, 24 May 1969.

<sup>497</sup> *Irish News*, 30 June 1969.

Farrell spoke on behalf of both PD and the NICRA executive; 'Our struggle is not just against unemployment, discrimination and gerrymandering but against the whole rotten corrupt system which the Unionist clique of proprietors, landlords and company directors use to keep themselves in power.'<sup>498</sup> The demonstration coincided with an important initiative in Dungiven, where PD members helped prevent a potential outbreak of violence in the face of a large Orange march. Just two weeks previously confrontations between nationalist youths and the police developed after stones had been thrown at an Orange parade through Dungiven.<sup>499</sup> More violence looked inevitable but for the intervention of the PD who, alongside the local Dungiven Action Committee prevented physical resistance to the march. Led by Kevin Boyle, the activists produced a leaflet arguing against obstructing the march and canvassed the local area for support. As an alternative, they proposed stunts of civil disobedience by shutting the shops and plastering the town in posters reading, 'you can march, can others?'<sup>500</sup>. They also argued with young people that the best way they could support the civil rights cause was to travel to the Strabane demonstration. Two busloads of youths travelled to the rally.<sup>501</sup>

The intervention served to diffuse sectarian tension and no significant trouble occurred on the day. It was a small microcosm of the potential for preventing sectarian violence in the run up to the most sustained period of Orange marches. The PD hoped that the experience could be replicated, but their

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<sup>498</sup> Ibid.

<sup>499</sup> *Irish News*, 9 June 1969.

<sup>500</sup> Van Voris, *Violence in Ulster, an oral documentary* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1975), p. 122.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid. Also see, *Irish News*, 23 June 1969.

hopes did not materialise.<sup>502</sup> The anger that was building up in working class areas was far surpassing the efforts to prevent confrontation, and it had been displayed on several occasions. Serious rioting had broken out in May in Ardoyne, an indicator of what was to come. Throughout July reports of Catholic families being intimidated from their homes in Belfast filtered through and sectarian assaults increased, particularly in Derry.<sup>503</sup>

As Northern Ireland entered its most destructive summer the PD continued to function as a militant ginger group inside the civil rights movement, with its activists present in various local bodies. However, the movement itself was beginning a rapid decline amidst division and confusion. In Armagh Civil Rights Association a number of activists resigned after a dispute with the PD over further action.<sup>504</sup> Moreover, as civil rights crowds were shrinking they were also being met with parallel numbers of counterdemonstrators.<sup>505</sup> In Newry on 5 July around 2,500 people marched over the route that had been previously banned on 11 January in the face of a mob of Paisleyites.<sup>506</sup> When the Orange marching season reached its crescendo on 12 July; sustained riots broke out with the most serious instances in Belfast, Derry and Dungiven. In response to the violence civil rights activists were reluctant to demonstrate. Fermanagh PD pressed ahead with a march on 26 July that focused on unemployment and 53 of their supporters were arrested by the RUC, with 37 of them being held overnight

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<sup>502</sup> *Irish News*, 30 June 1969.

<sup>503</sup> *Scarman Report, Violence and Disturbances in Northern Ireland 1969*, p. 25, p. 31, p. 248.

<sup>504</sup> *Irish News*, 22 July 1969.

<sup>505</sup> Farrell, *The Orange State*, p. 258.

<sup>506</sup> *Irish News*, 7 July 1969.

in jail.<sup>507</sup> The clampdown on civil rights had begun and it would intensify over the next month.

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<sup>507</sup> *Irish News*, 28 July 1969.



#### 4.6. 'Falls Road burns, Malone Road fiddles' - Behind the barricades

##### in Free Belfast

There is only one solution. It is not a new one. It is to fight Toryism, North and South and build Connolly's Workers' Republic. We serve neither Lynch nor Clark, but an Irish socialist Republic – *Citizen Press*.<sup>508</sup>

Considering the past year's events the flashpoints for conflict in the summer of 1969 were predictable, but faced with the level of violence in previous months the general policy of NICRA was to avoid taking action.<sup>509</sup> It reflected the situation the civil rights movement was now in; its role reduced to defensive reaction against the explosion of sectarian attacks in Belfast in August, which were overwhelmingly directed against the Catholic community. In turn, this saw PD members take part in their first serious activity inside the Catholic ghettos of Belfast.

At the height of the marching season in Derry on 12 August serious clashes ensued between the RUC and Catholic youths. The next day saw similar scenes spread across the North.<sup>510</sup> In Belfast, the NICRA executive met on 13 August where they were inundated with calls to alleviate pressure on Derry through protest action. The belligerence toward demonstrating in Belfast—because of fear of sectarian reprisal—left NICRA pacified, the strategy of not acting meant no strategy at all. Again, the groundswell of anger saw local

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<sup>508</sup> *Citizen Press*, Bulletin No 4, 22 August 1969.

<sup>509</sup> NICRA, 'We shall overcome...'

<sup>510</sup> *Scarman Report*, p. 86.

republican activists in Belfast organise support for those fighting the RUC in Derry.<sup>511</sup>

In the final hour NICRA was compelled to support demonstrations. Both Michael Farrell and Kevin Boyle were central to NICRA activity in these days, and Boyle urged those who were organising to ‘make sure it’s a non-violent demonstration and that it’s designed to block roads, to draw off police, to involve the use of police in other parts of the province.’<sup>512</sup> John Gray recalls how the PD attempted to send activists to each area where action was likely; he would go to Lurgan, Peter Cosgrove to Enniskillen and Cyril Toman to Armagh. In all places that demonstrations were called, riots happened ‘it wasn’t too difficult to start them’. Gray recalls watching the Specials ‘wrecking the area’ in Lurgan. He then joined other PD members in Belfast where the most vicious fighting had taken place.<sup>513</sup>

Belfast experienced unprecedented repression after Catholic crowds marched on police stations during 13 and 14 August. A violent backlash ensued against the Catholic community where members of the RUC and the B Specials were at the forefront of attacking residents alongside loyalists, during scenes that included the deployment of armoured vehicles, which traversed west Belfast unleashing heavy machine gun fire.<sup>514</sup>

By 15 August hundreds of Catholic homes had been burnt to the ground. The worst disturbances were in the west of the city, where Bombay Street was

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<sup>511</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, p. 126.

<sup>512</sup> Van Voris, *Violence in Ulster*, p. 138.

<sup>513</sup> Interview with John Gray, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

<sup>514</sup> *Scarman Report*, pp. 121-123.

set ablaze, as well as the Catholic enclave of Ardoyne in north Belfast. In Belfast alone the violence saw six people killed, including a nine-year-old Catholic boy, Patrick Rooney. The *Scarman Report*, set up to investigate the disturbances in the summer of 1969, estimated that 1,820 families fled their households between July, August and September; 1,505 of these households were Catholics, which made up 82.7 percent, or 5.3 percent of all Catholic families in the city.<sup>515</sup> The instability brought about the introduction of the British Army, in Derry on 14 and in Belfast on 15 August; it was a hugely significant turning point in the developing conflict. PD members were present as Belfast erupted, and Michael Farrell recalled that ‘the whole thing seemed unreal’<sup>516</sup>.

The violence saw the Catholic community mobilise to defend the most troubled areas, with residents erecting barricades at flashpoints across the city. The main method of organisation was through local defence committees, which had sprung up sporadically in response to previous violence, particularly in Ardoyne.<sup>517</sup> A number of committees were established and formed the ‘Belfast Central Citizens Defence Committee’ (CCDC). The CCDC had representatives from Ardoyne, East Belfast and Andersonstown among other areas. It claimed to represent the tens of thousands of people in the areas behind the barricades, now aptly named ‘Free Belfast’, an appellation that stuck after being painted on barricades throughout the city.<sup>518</sup> Like Free Derry, the liberated parts of Free Belfast became ‘no go’ areas that briefly opted out of the Northern state. Described as almost ‘revolutionary communes’ the no-go areas saw local people

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<sup>515</sup> Ibid, p. 248.

<sup>516</sup> Farrell, ‘Long March to Freedom’, p. 60.

<sup>517</sup> In North Belfast Defence committees were established after previous disturbances; see *Belfast Telegraph*, 7 August 1969.

<sup>518</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 September 1969.

appoint their own forces of law and order and administer forms of self-control.<sup>519</sup>

The CCDC organised defence of the barricades as well as patrols of the area, it also held social events such as ceilis and administered a curfew on residents and publicans.<sup>520</sup> PD activist Fergus O'Hare, who was a young man behind the barricades, recalled, 'It became very much a community activity or a community struggle'<sup>521</sup>.

PD members were active in Free Belfast, and although they had very little base in the liberated areas they possessed a formidable experience that allowed the small group to get a hearing.<sup>522</sup> Consequently, while the CCDC was directed mostly by older republicans and community figures — the overall chairman was republican Jim Sullivan—<sup>523</sup> PD members were active at rank and file level. The major function of the PD behind the barricades was to propagate socialist ideas and agitate for the maintenance of militant action to secure the civil rights demands, as the British Army moved in to work alongside the Unionist state to remove the barricades and restore order.

Their role is most memorably contained in the propaganda that was plastered across Free Belfast. After making contact with left-wing activists in London who introduced them to the techniques of silkscreen printing, first

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<sup>519</sup> Bardon, *A History of Ulster*, p. 673.

<sup>520</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 September 1969.

<sup>521</sup> Interview with Fergus O'Hare, Belfast, 08/06/2015.

<sup>522</sup> This can be contrasted with Derry, where radical socialists such as Eamonn McCann had a small but significant base in Derry's working class Bogside area. They had helped set up the DCDC one month before the Apprentice Boys march intended to 'defend the area from any further incursions by Protestants or police.' Hastings, *Ulster 69*, p. 132-133.

<sup>523</sup> Jim Sullivan was a central figure in the Belfast IRA during this period, he would remain active in the Official republican movement throughout most of the troubles, and he died in 1992.

popularised by radical leftists during the Paris uprising of May 1968, PD activists produced a stream of posters demanding that the ‘Barricades stay up until our demands are met’. The most famous stated ‘Falls Road burns, Malone Road fiddles’<sup>524</sup>. It seemed to encapsulate the class nature of the violence that had torn the city apart, drawing a contrast between the tranquillity of the upper class suburbs in the city centred on Belfast’s Malone Road, with the working class quarters that were ablaze. A PD leaflet distributed behind the barricades explained:

The people who suffer in these troubles live on both sides– though the last weeks events have been very one sided, and the people who live in the squalid backstreets of the Falls, Shankill and Crumlin Roads, they are working people earning low wages and many of them have lost all their possessions. The burning and wrecking never reach the Malone Road, the rattle of the machine gun fire never disturbs the tranquillity of the residents there. But that’s where most of the Unionist bosses live: the people who have been preaching hatred and violence but who are never around to see the effects of their oratory. It is always the working class who suffer.<sup>525</sup>

Class politics informed PD activity behind the barricades. The two main areas of activity were the barricades’ bulletin commissioned by the CCDC, *Citizen Press*, and the pirate radio station *Radio Free Belfast*. On both these outlets PD activists worked alongside republicans. The *Citizen Press* was printed on a daily basis, its

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<sup>524</sup> The Falls Burns, Malone Fiddles, *People’s Democracy poster*, NIPC, Linenhall Library, PPO0505.

<sup>525</sup> *The Troubles*, People’s Democracy leaflet 1969, PRONI, D2560/5/43.

fourth edition reaching a print-run of 5,000<sup>526</sup>, and activists recall that it immediately gained a large readership.<sup>527</sup>

The paper provided a daily communication and coordinated activity, for example, by advertising meetings to be held in Leeson Street where members of Defence Committees from across the city would come to participate.<sup>528</sup> The politics of the PD are visible throughout. *Citizen Press* hit out at the Unionist government's record and forwarded the civil rights demands; it also maintained a consistent anti-sectarian line arguing for defence of areas, but against sectarian attacks on Protestants:

For members of the Catholic community to attack Protestants is to sink to the same level as the B Specials and the Unionist extremists.

It is even worse because, while sectarian hatred is part and parcel of an unjust system, it dishonours and disgraces a just cause.<sup>529</sup>

An early edition presented the demands of those behind the barricades, contending that the barricades should stay up until these were met:<sup>530</sup>

1. Disband the B Specials.
2. Disband and reorganise the RUC.
3. Release political internees and a general amnesty for all those involved in recent disturbances that fought to defend their homes.

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<sup>526</sup> *Citizen Press*, Bulletin No 4, 22 August 1969, PRONI, D/2560/5/23.

<sup>527</sup> 'I was effectively the editor of *Citizen Press*... so much money came in that we had to organise a troop of wee lads to carry biscuit tins full of coins to the bank.' Interview with John Gray, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

<sup>528</sup> *Citizen Press*, Bulletin No 4, 22 August 1969, PRONI, D/2560/5/23.

<sup>529</sup> *Citizen Press*, Bulletin No 3, PRONI, D2560/5/22.

<sup>530</sup> *Citizen Press*, Bulletin No 9, D2560/5/25.

4. Westminster intervention to grant civil rights now, including the abolition of all repressive legislation (including SPA).<sup>531</sup>

The other major source of PD activity was *Radio Free Belfast*. Described by internal British intelligence reports as a ‘highly professional’<sup>532</sup> station that broadcast from ‘an anarchist or revolutionary socialist point of view’<sup>533</sup>. *Radio Free Belfast* delivered a mixture of serious political commentary and entertainment. PD members Michael Farrell, Cyril Toman and Peter Cosgrove were primarily responsible for the popular ‘Profiles in Carnage’ and ‘Profiles in Corruption’ sketches that mocked Unionist and nationalist politician alike.<sup>534</sup> The comedy at times received a mixed reception inside west Belfast. John Gray explains his own role on Radio Free Belfast and one startling reaction to it:

My main role on Radio Free Belfast was, believe it or not, to give sermons purporting to come from the reverend Ian Paisley and these required me to drink about 3 or 4 pints of Guinness in the Long Bar and think up some lunatic idea and then just go and do it straight to mic. And I had one on the dangers to British troops of drinking Catholic tea and the duty of Orangemen to paint every blade of grass in Ireland orange and so forth... There was a guy turned up with a gun saying ‘where’s the fucker’, he was drunk too, ‘I want to get the

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<sup>531</sup> *Citizen Press*, Bulletins No 2, D2560/5/21 and No 9, D2560/5/25.

<sup>532</sup> Jamming of illegal radio stations in Belfast and Londonderry, exchanges between UK ministers, Northern Ireland officials and HQ Northern command. *SECRET- Illegal broadcasting stations in Northern Ireland* (1969), NAUK, CJ/4/425.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid*, Illegal radio stations in Northern Ireland, 10 September 1969.

<sup>534</sup> Interview with John Gray, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

fucker’, ‘where’s the fucker’... and he had to be restrained. It had to be proved to him that actually this was an imitation.<sup>535</sup>

Less confusing, perhaps, was the political message that the radio broadcast. Communications called for Protestant and Catholic unity in the face of rising sectarian tension, echoing the words of the *Communist Manifesto*; ‘Workers of Belfast unite— you have nothing to lose but your Unionist government.’ Transmissions were addressed to the British troops in an attempt to explain the roots of the crisis and appeal to the soldiers on class grounds,

We call on you as workers to protect the ordinary people of this city, Catholics and Protestants, [...] We appeal to you not to do the Unionists’ dirty work for them, not to help them to oppress the people any longer.<sup>536</sup>

The radio even addressed the RUC, and while the message was unreserved in criticising the actions of the police, it directed its most vocal criticism at the Unionist elite and appealed to rank and file RUC officers to embrace reform. Reminding listeners of the events of the 1907 Dock strike in Belfast, when members of the police force sided with striking workers against employers, one broadcast humorously urged, ‘Today another Tory government is using you in its campaign to crush a section of the people by Orange terror. What about another strike? We’ll support you.’<sup>537</sup>

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<sup>535</sup> Ibid.

<sup>536</sup> Transcripts from Radio Free Belfast: Address to the British soldiers at present in Belfast and Derry, PRONI, D/3297/9.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid, A message to all members of the RUC, 6 September 1969.



It is unlikely that such a message received support from members of the RUC. However, it does contradict the claim that the ‘the socialist content of the radio was virtually non-existent’<sup>538</sup>. The evidence clearly suggests that the PDs’ role behind the barricades, through *Radio Free Belfast* and other outlets, gave a distinctly anti sectarian and socialist content to the politics of the ‘liberated’ area. *Radio Free Belfast* was not the only pirate station to air. At least five stations sprang up including *Radio Ulster* and *Radio Orange*, which were broadcast from Protestant estates and drew a stark contrast with both *Radio Free Belfast* and *Radio Peace*, a moderate station. Indeed, internal British files suggested that ‘extremist Protestant’ stations played a specific role in organising bouts of violence and helped force events to a head in September 1969. *Radio Orange* was involved in ‘issuing orders— telling sections to go to various places and do various things’.<sup>539</sup> Oliver Wright— a senior civil servant dispatched to Stormont Castle in the aftermath of the August violence— confirmed that ‘extreme Protestant’ stations were almost wholly responsible for an outbreak of violence on 7 September at Percy street,<sup>540</sup> and police reports testify that *Radio Orange* mobilised up to 3000 people that got involved in the riots, which saw the military use C.S. gas.<sup>541</sup> The next evening Chichester Clark appeared on television to announce that the barricades would be removed forcefully, if not voluntarily.<sup>542</sup>

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<sup>538</sup> Arthur, *The People’s Democracy*, p. 70.

<sup>539</sup> Northern Ireland- Pirate Radio Stations, *SECRET September 1969*. NAUK, CJ/4/425.

<sup>540</sup> Northern Ireland- the jamming of pirate radio stations, confidential report (no date). NAUK CJ/4/425.

<sup>541</sup> Northern Ireland: Report from Superintendent Hill, 11am Monday 8 September. NAUK, CJ/4/425.

<sup>542</sup> Hastings, *Ulster 69*, p. 169.

That same day the Army took steps to jam the radio stations as the British government worked hard to remove the barricades altogether.<sup>543</sup>

From the British establishment's perspective the situation in Belfast could not continue, and as the days and weeks passed the removal of the barricades became the priority of British Home Secretary James Callaghan. He was aided by moderate forces within the nationalist community who wanted to see a restoration of order. MP Gerry Fitt had gone to some length to bring complaints about both the PD and republicans to the British government, personally telling Prime Minister Harold Wilson 'he would condemn the IRA and the extremist People's Democracy'<sup>544</sup>. In another private meeting between Fitt and Callaghan he complained that 'the IRA and the People's Democracy had been allowed their heads too much behind the barricades.'<sup>545</sup> Michael Farrell argued that both these parties worked behind the scenes to ensure that this situation was short-lived, as protracted contact developed between the British government and representatives of the Catholic middle class, local politicians and the Catholic Church<sup>546</sup>.

The insistence to keep the barricades up until the demands were met soon shifted to being demands, 'that will have to be assured before the army can

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<sup>543</sup> Illegal Radio Stations in Northern Ireland (no date), NAUK, CJ/4/425.

<sup>544</sup> Note of a meeting between Gerry Fitt and Harold Wilson, 9 September 1969. Meetings with Gerry Fitt MP and other Roman Catholic representatives about the political and security systems in Northern Ireland, Sep 04- Sep 23, 1969. NAUK, CJ 3/53,

<sup>545</sup> Report from Brian Cubbon, 10 September 1969. PRONI, CJ/3/53.

<sup>546</sup> Farrell, *The Orange State*, p. 267.

leave.<sup>547</sup> On 11 September a meeting took place in London between a delegation of CCDC representatives. Significantly, the central figure of the Belfast CCDC, Jim Sullivan, a long-term member of the republican movement, was barred from attending as Callaghan refused to meet anyone associated with the IRA.<sup>548</sup> The delegation that met Callaghan included Gerry Fitt, Paddy Devlin, Tom Conaty and Catholic priest Patrick Murphy. Here it was agreed to remove the barricades and restore military control within a week. In reality, the British Army had already begun to remove the barricades on 10 September.<sup>549</sup>

There is evidence to suggest opposition to the decision; one journalist's account from the period noted that angry residents gathered to throw stones at the military in some cases.<sup>550</sup> The *Citizen Press* also reported that while the appointed CCDC representatives were negotiating the removal of the barricades in London, a straw poll was conducted across several streets in Belfast where 97 percent of those asked voiced their support for maintaining the barricades.<sup>551</sup> Although PD members agitated to keep the barricades up, they were ineffectual in determining the outcome of events as Free Belfast came to an end.

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<sup>547</sup> As the *Citizen Press* put it: 'They are not demands that had to be met before the barricades could come down. They are things that will have to be assured before the army can leave.' *Citizen Press*, Bulletin No 12, PRONI, D2560/5/27.

<sup>548</sup> *Report from Brian Cubbon*, 10 September 1969. PRONI, CJ/3/53.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>550</sup> Hastings, *Ulster 69*, p. 170.

<sup>551</sup> *Citizen Press*, Bulletin No 11, PRONI, D2560/5/27.

#### 4.7. Conclusion

The PD set out at the beginning of 1969 with ‘Catholic and Protestant unity’ as their watchword, but the pursuit of these ideals proved an altogether difficult affair. By the summer of 1969 the brief moment when radical socialists played a leadership role in civil rights movement had passed. Although there is a clear line of development from the Burntollet march to the violence in August 1969, the drift to disaster should not be seen as inevitable. Central to the emergence of the crisis were various moments of state repression that provoked mass Catholic resistance in both Derry and Belfast.<sup>552</sup>

The state’s reaction to the campaign for reform changed the terms upon which oppositional politics was to be conducted, and it is evident that the tactics of non-violent civil disobedience had been strained to breaking point by the end of 1969. Defence of the Catholic community became a necessity and the republican movement moved from the background into the foreground of politics. Moreover, the experience of repression and violence that met the Catholic community in 1969 suggested that the strategy championed by the civil rights movement, based upon reforming the state, was not achievable. It had obvious repercussions for all forces within the civil rights movement. For example, by late 1969 the ‘stages theory’ approach looked very problematic, not least considering that the supposed first stage— a period of gradual democratisation— had been unattainable. In terms of the PD, its activists had set out on journey that began with them launching an optimistic movement, inseparable from the global rebellion of the 1960s, only to be engulfed in a

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<sup>552</sup> O’ Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites*, pp. 310-311. Finn, *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*, p. 58

communal conflict that was difficult to comprehend. More than one student of 68' would drop out of PD activity around this time.<sup>553</sup>

For the radical left who had driven the PD since its inception the crisis of 1969 demanded a more serious approach toward politics, organisation and strategy. Although the PD had carried out much activity it was clear that the organisation had failed to get its politics to large numbers of people. Eamonn McCann presented a critique of their record; the reason they had failed to get their position across, argued McCann, was that they had failed to wage any serious political fight within the civil rights movement, and this was a reflection of their inability to relate to the mass audience that emerged in 1968. Throughout the years the left in the north had been prone to talking to small groups of people:

Now suddenly, since October the 5th, we have found that we have an audience listening to us and applauding us, of tens of thousands of people. We got carried away by this, and submerged the Young Socialist Alliance in the PD; we submerged our politics into the Civil Rights movement. All that we managed to get across was that we were more extreme than the Civil Rights people. We have never made it clear that this difference in militancy stemmed from a political difference, we never made it clear why we were more militant; and the reason for that, I believe, is that we have been frightened of scaring off our mass audience.<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>553</sup> Interview with Anne Devlin, Belfast, 26/06/2015, and interview with Fergus Woods, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

<sup>554</sup> 'Discussion on the strategy of People's Democracy', *New Left Review*.

The socialist identity of the PD had been submerged into the broader civil rights movement and the left's pursuit of a different forms of struggle— class over communal — had been lost. The left lacked a coherent organisation that could direct the street movement and as the barricades in Belfast came down, only to be replaced with more permanent fences of division, the socialists of the PD set out to build just that.

## Chapter 5: Free Citizens

### 5.1. Introduction: making the left relevant

The conclusions drawn by the PD in the aftermath of the civil rights struggle were put into action in the period following August 1969, as activists formed a revolutionary socialist party and engaged in various forms of activism. This coincided with a long period of unrest that witnessed the breakdown of order in the North— when the Unionist state experienced a disintegration of relations between the Catholic community and British military, setting in train events that led to a more prolonged outbreak of violence from 1971 onwards.

The lack of research surrounding the PD leaves much to be unearthed and documented in order to assess the development of the revolutionary left. The PD played a considerable role in grassroots politics at this time, most notably in the mass civil resistance movement that erupted against internment in the post-August 1971 period.<sup>555</sup> Writing the history of the PD throughout the 1970s requires one to hone in on a small current of politics, whilst navigating through an intense period of conflict and change. The unfavourable terrain inhabited by those espousing a message of working class unity will be emphasised, but so too will the strategy of the wider left, including the NILP, the Communist Party and the broader labour and civil rights organisations, who advanced different strategies to the PD. As loyalist reaction deepened and sectarian division increased — both on the streets and in the political arena— the common

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<sup>555</sup> See Chapter 5, Unfree Citizens.

perspective across the left was one based on caution and support for the reforming capacity of British military intervention in Northern Ireland.

For the PD, the experience of August 1969, British intervention and the entrenching of Unionist reaction, necessitated an immediate move to build a relevant left based upon class politics and the day-to-day struggles of working people. That such a movement never developed should not lead us to conclude that history did not contain other possibilities, nor should we discard the potential that existed for a more substantial left-wing intervention. Indeed as has been argued elsewhere, it was the failure to fill the ‘vacuum of the left’, which emerged in 1968 that facilitated the resurgence of republicanism.<sup>556</sup> The clear lesson from the 1969-1972 period was that the Northern state had strongly reacted against any effort to enact reform, and that the left had proved incapable of confronting this reaction. Whereas the left were incapable of this task, other more experienced forces were able in challenging the state. This chapter looks at the aims and activity of the PD amidst this unfolding crisis.

The kind of political perspective developed by the PD was, arguably, a strategy that — through a commitment to class politics and opposition to both the Unionist state and British imperialism— contained within it the possibility to address the national question on socialist grounds, and potentially offer a different direction to militant oppositional politics amidst the outbreak of conflict. However, the PD never developed into a properly organised force capable of implementing its ideas.

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<sup>556</sup> As Eamonn McCann put it, the Provisional IRA were the ‘inrush that filled the vacuum left by the absence of a socialist option’, McCann, *War in an Irish Town*, p. 243.



The failure of the PD to grow was largely a result of the way that the organisation was formed and developed. Consistently ‘on the move’ and with little roots in society, the PD generally shifted with the tide, reacting to events as opposed to influencing them. This meant that there was often a disconnect between the politics and ideology of the PD and their ability to translate this into practical results. Further, the PD strategy failed to reach wider forces in society and the small membership of the organisation found it difficult to relate to others outside of their own ranks. In this regard, holding the politics of the PD against the strategy of the bigger battalions of the organised left will continue be a central theme of this thesis.

Instead, PD members were often forced to act alone and can be seen to have at times forwarded an overoptimistic perspective surrounding their own ability to construct a current of socialist politics, as the Unionist state fractured and fissured in the post-1969 period. The failures of such endeavours— in a context of far-right reaction, state repression and shrinking horizons for the radical left— helps explain the later demise of the PD and its retreat into the Catholic ghettos of the North.

This chapter begins by looking at the formation of the PD into a revolutionary socialist organisation at the end of 1969 and considers its political and ideological development. The PD argued that pursuit of a 32-County ‘Workers’ Republic’ necessitated working class agency and self-emancipation on both sides of the border, in a challenge to both states that was capable of approaching the national question in the interests of the Irish working class. Crucially, they contested that any such movement demanded unity of Catholic and Protestant workers in the North.

This perspective, which reflected the global trend of ‘socialism from below’— to borrow a term from Hal Draper<sup>557</sup>— stood in contradiction to the politics of the wider labour movement and the organised left. Therefore, when these ideas were put into action they were largely done so in an amateurish way with the PD acting alone throughout 1970-1971, organising a variety of social and economic struggles. The impact of this period of activism was thus minimal, and the PD failed to develop a real influence. Finally, this chapter looks at how the PD version of 32-county socialism viewed the republican movement as it experienced splits, reorganisation and resurgence in the post 1969 period. The way in which Marxists should relate to the republican movement has long wracked the many groups that populate the history of Irish socialism, and perhaps none more so in recent times than the PD. This will be a central theme throughout the final chapters of this thesis.

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<sup>557</sup> Draper’s emphasis on *socialism from below* was toward those forces that saw active workers struggle as the driving force for change; ‘How does a people or a class become fit to rule in their own name? *Only by fighting to do so*. Only by waging their struggle against oppression – oppression by those who tell them they are unfit to govern. Only by fighting for democratic power do they educate themselves and raise themselves up to the level of being able to wield that power. There has never been any other way for any class.’ Hal Draper, ‘The Two Souls of Socialism’, *New Politics* 5, no.1, winter 1966, pp.57-84. Available online, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/index.htm?PHPSESSID=35fb8e862c3404829cd69fc281a1c371>, accessed on 14/05/2016.

## 5.2. The launching of a socialist party

There is no liberal way out of this dilemma<sup>558</sup> - PD conference motion.

The PD was launched as a socialist party in a conference in Belfast on 12 October 1969. A motion proposed by Michael Farrell gave the organisation's intent; 'The People's Democracy, which has been active in the struggle for civil rights, for more jobs and houses, and against Toryism, North and South, believes that its objectives can only be obtained by the ousting of both Tory governments and the establishment of an Irish Socialist Republic.'<sup>559</sup> It outlined three areas where the PD needed to clarify its thinking:

1. The Protestant backlash and the threat of Orange Fascism.
2. The use of 7,000 British troops in Northern Ireland.
3. The necessity for support from the South.

The PD was hereafter formed into a centralised party, adopting individual membership and establishing a permanent leadership committee made up of nine activists elected every 6 months at an all member's conference, the membership worked through local branches. The official organ of the PD was the *Free Citizen* newspaper, which emerged from the shutting down of the *Citizen Press* after the dismantling of the barricades in Belfast. Over the next two years the *Free Citizen* was produced on a weekly basis.

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<sup>558</sup> People's Democracy conference motion, 1969, *People's Democracy file*, NIPC.

<sup>559</sup> *Ibid.*

The activity of the PD would feature in British government intelligence reports, which recognised that ‘the People’s Democracy leaders are skilful agitators’<sup>560</sup>, and that their ‘capacity for troublemaking must not be underrated’.<sup>561</sup> Internal PD documentation suggests that the group began to develop a notable structure and financial dependency, at least by the limited standards of the left in Northern Ireland. Its financial breakdown for the year 1970 reveals that the group could afford to employ a full time organiser, hire premises to run meetings and a bookshop, purchase a minibus and pay for a substantial output of printing and advertising.<sup>562</sup>

The PD also began to produce a respectable output of political literature. The *Free Citizen* became a regular outlet of anti establishment ideas with an early print run of up to 3500, similarly, the PD journal *The Northern Star*, with a print run of 1500, acted as a theoretical medium through which the group cohered its ideology over the next period.<sup>563</sup> The intellectual abilities of the PD were best illustrated in Michael Farrell, an able pamphleteer and perhaps the one individual who can be said to have exercised the most influence over the ideological development of the left in the North post-1968. In late 1969 Farrell

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<sup>560</sup> Memorandum by the secretary of state to the Home Department. Northern Ireland political situation: Home office appraisal and correspondence with UK representative. *Formation of the UDR, civil rights activity, 1969 Dec 01-1970 Nov 06*. NAUK, CJ 3/9.

<sup>561</sup> Director of operations- Intelligence committee Northern Ireland- 31 March 1970. *Northern Ireland internal situation, setting up of new defence force; possible amendment to police bill, part 8, 1970*. NAUK, PREM 13/3386.

<sup>562</sup> PD expenditure 1970, PRONI, D3297/7.

<sup>563</sup> PD Central Committee minutes, 25/1/1971, 11/1/1971, PRONI, D3297/7.

produced his first pamphlet titled *The Struggle in the North*, it was a novel socialist intervention into the situation since the civil rights movement.<sup>564</sup>

Farrell was primarily responsible for instigating a major ideological transformation in the PD by adopting an anti-partitionist position from 1970 onward. Having refused to raise the national question throughout 1968-1969, the PD now spoke against partition and in support of a '32-County Socialist Republic', using language that expressed the vision of James Connolly, Ireland's most renowned Marxist. This could be viewed as a natural enough trajectory for those radicals who were products of the nationalist community; after all, activists such as Farrell were already on record as being against partition and in support of an all Ireland socialist state before the upsurge of activism in 1968.<sup>565</sup> However, anti-partitionism had not featured heavily— if at all— in the activity of the PD throughout this period. The PD now challenged the Northern state on class grounds, arguing that Catholic and Protestant workers were the agency capable of carrying out a revolutionary transformation in Ireland.

This was not a perspective universally shared throughout the left in Ireland, among whom the re-emergence of the national question saw acute theoretical differences. The PD was beginning a journey that would see it develop into one of the most vocal and active anti-imperialist socialist organisations. Other currents defended the Northern state and supported partition, such was the case with the Irish Communist Organisation (ICO), later the British and Irish Communist Organisation (BICO). This grouping was a small Stalinist inspired

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<sup>564</sup> Farrell, *The Struggle in the North*.

<sup>565</sup> Others who came from a 'Catholic' or 'Nationalist' background and had expressed anti-partition views pre-1969 included Bernadette Devlin and Eamonn McCann.

organisation who were to the forefront in developing the ‘two nations theory’, which essentially contested that both the North’s Protestant Unionist and Catholic nationalist communities formed two separate nations, ‘each with distinct and equally legitimate traditions that had to be protected’<sup>566</sup>. BICO, therefore, viewed the idea of Irish reunification as a potential form of national oppression. The practical implications of this led BICO to ignore state led violence against the nationalist community, and support the loyalist backlash that was developing. As socialist writer Brian Trench has documented:

While state forces attacked the opponents of the Unionist regime, and the nationalist population in general, the advocates of ‘two nations’ theory were so concerned with distancing themselves from supposed Catholic nationalist desires to oppress the Protestants, that they were unable to oppose actual repression! Thus it was, that one month after the introduction of internment in August 1971, a leaflet was published by the ‘Worker’s Association for the Democratic Settlement of the National Conflict in Ireland,’ which omitted to mention internment or repression. Nor was there any mention of the British Army or of imperialism.<sup>567</sup>

Ultimately, BICO did not develop as an active political current in the way that the PD did. Nevertheless, the organisation produced a steady stream of

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<sup>566</sup> Brian Kelly, ‘Northern Ireland: The Left, Sectarian Resurgence and the National Question Today’, *Irish Marxist Review*, Vol. 2 No. 8 (Dublin, 2013) p. 52.

<sup>567</sup> Brian Trench, ‘The Two Nations Fallacy’, *International Socialism*, No. 51, April-June 1972, available online, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj/1972/no051/trench.htm>, accessed on 4/2/2016.

publications that exercised a significant ideological influence in the North.<sup>568</sup> The main individual responsible for the politics of BICO was Brendan Clifford, and PD meetings in 1970 were said to have often consisted of debates between Clifford and Farrell, both of who were developing their ideas at this time.<sup>569</sup> Farrell went on to produce a notable critique of the two nations theory, pointing out that by very definition it was problematic, not least because the Protestants of Ulster had never viewed themselves as an independent nation, nor had they ever presented their demands as such.<sup>570</sup> Instead, Protestant Unionism had emerged and developed as a component of British nationalism, and was closely related to the role of British imperialism in Ireland.

The political development of the PD from 1969-1970 signalled a more serious turn to Marxist ideas and this was expressed in how the organisation situated itself among the wider schisms of the global left. In one meeting, Farrell argued, somewhat simplistically, that there existed three mainstreams of socialist thought dominating the globe, 'the Communist Party, the social democratic parties and the revolutionaries'. Farrell placed the PD in the camp of the revolutionaries, stating that they rejected the totalitarian class-ridden society of the Eastern European states and the 'sham socialism' of the social democratic parties.<sup>571</sup> Identification with the global 'anti-Stalinist left' had been central to the PD from its inception, but while currents of socialism from below emerged

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<sup>568</sup> The publications of BICO have been particularly noted for their influence in academic circles. See, *The Economics of Partition*, British and Irish Communist Organisation (1972). *Connolly and Partition*, British and Irish Communist Organisation (1972).

<sup>569</sup> Trench, 'The Two Nations Fallacy', available online, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj/1972/no051/trench.htm>, accessed on 4/2/2016.

<sup>570</sup> Farrell, *The Orange State*, p. 30.

<sup>571</sup> *Irish Independent*, 7 August 1970.

outside of the official communist and social democratic organisation in this period, they were all tempered by different national contexts. In Northern Ireland the dark clouds of communalism were gathering as the PD attempted to assert class politics, and the problems that had met efforts to reform the state were glaring. The civil rights movement had radicalised the Catholic community, but— despite the efforts of those in the PD, was met with sustained opposition from the Protestant community. This demanded an assessment of the experience of the civil rights movement and an appraisal of how socialists could win a section of Protestant workers away from the ideology of the Northern state.

For the PD the loyalist backlash was rooted in the advantageous social position that Protestant workers held over their Catholic counterparts. ‘Civil rights’ for Catholics threatened the privileges that the Protestant working class enjoyed— for example, through access to skilled jobs and better housing— by demanding a levelling up process within the state.<sup>572</sup> As the second issue of the *Free Citizen* recognised, ‘Civil rights will mean a redistribution of power from the badly off (Protestant working people) to the worse off (Catholic working people) – there lies the whole strength of the Protestant backlash.’<sup>573</sup>

The call to end discrimination against the Catholic community, posed within the confines of the Unionist state, suggested that it was necessary to direct resources away from the Protestant working class— who were themselves living in conditions of poverty— toward the Catholic community. This balancing out

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<sup>572</sup> Farrell viewed this as an important driving force behind what he identified as ‘Orange Fascism’. A term that was somewhat ill defined at this point, but would become more central to the PD’s analysis as they tried to grapple against the intense loyalist. For my account of this, see Chapter 6.

<sup>573</sup> *Free Citizen*, No 2, 1969.



process created the real fear that Protestants would lose out to Catholics, and contributed to anger against reform. Indeed, if working class anger had fuelled the ranks of predominantly Catholic civil rights supporters, similar discontent formed the bedrock of— and was being directed by— the loyalist backlash against the civil rights movement. To challenge the perception among the Protestant community that dismantling the Northern state was against their interests, the PD argued that it was necessary to move beyond a campaign based upon undoing Catholic discrimination inside the structures of the Northern state and fight for the social and economic advancement of both communities, as part of a wider vision of working class empowerment.

However, the political terrain had become more problematic. The arrival of British troops temporarily relieved the Catholic ghettos, creating the ironic situation in which British troops were welcomed onto the Falls Road and met with hostility on the Shankill. The PD warned against those— including much of the left and the labour movement—who attached a progressive role to British military intervention in Ireland. Arguing that the primary role of the troops was to stabilise the Northern state, safeguarding British capital and restoring territorial order, they could not be relied on to implement adequate reform:

British troops are here to serve British interests and will only protect threatened people so long as that is what Britain wants...the presence of British troops is a sharp reminder of the reality of British imperialism in Northern Ireland.<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>574</sup> People's Democracy conference motion, 1969.

The PD's anti-imperialism was expressed in class terms that challenged the narrative perpetuated by Irish nationalists. It argued against the 'anti partitionist solution', which sought to unite all Catholics in the North to 'secure a Green Tory united Ireland', and warned that such a movement could 'spark a communal bloodbath in the Six Counties'.<sup>575</sup> In opposition the PD counterposed working class action and alliances with the southern left. Only the pursuit of a 32 county socialist movement across both states could create the force necessary to solve the national question in the interests of the working class. The combination of rejecting Irish nationalism while opposing the Unionist state on socialist grounds was seen to hold the potential to fuse the national and the social question.<sup>576</sup>

Liberal preaching of anti-sectarianism would not win Protestant workers: 'They will only be won away from Paisleyism by involving them in struggles—with their Catholic fellow workers— against redundancies, for higher wages, and for more houses.'<sup>577</sup> Class politics and an emphasis on workers' unity and self-emancipation were forwarded by the PD, in an effort to construct a current of socialist politics in a society that was becoming increasingly polarised. With the hindsight of history it is clear that these pursuits bore little fruit. Nevertheless, it is worth examining how the PD viewed the potential for socialist politics to develop, as the experience of this failure helps explain the development of the organisation.

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<sup>575</sup> Farrell, *The Struggle in the North*, p. 32.

<sup>576</sup> 'The struggle for a socialist republic links the economic class-consciousness of the Protestant workers with the anti-imperialist outlook of republicans.'  
People's Democracy Conference motion, 1969.

<sup>577</sup> Ibid.

The fracturing of the Unionist all-class alliance was viewed as a positive development that could present greater potential for socialist politics to emerge. The fissures within Unionism were evident in the way that loyalist forces were beginning to emerge among sections of the Protestant working and middle classes. A major problem, however, was that the forces of the left were rarely in competition with loyalism in any serious way. Considering this, it seems that the PD often forwarded an overoptimistic view about the immediate opportunities to win Protestant workers and offer a socialist solution to rising sectarian division. An edition of the *Free Citizen* in early 1970 commented:

The situation is full of promise. The break-up of the Unionist monolith is shattering traditional loyalties. Unionist supporters are confused and uncertain. They are open to new ideas. Class antagonisms are creeping in, small farmers against the big house, workers against their bosses, local small businessmen against the big monopolies. The leaders are irresolute and undecided, incapable of firm action. Never before has there been such an opportunity for winning large numbers of Protestant workers and farmers away from the Unionist Party.<sup>578</sup>

Although working class Protestants were breaking from 'big house' Unionism, there existed no sizeable left-wing pole of attraction capable of intervening in the situation, let alone win large numbers of people away from the ideology of the Unionist state. The PD, therefore, suffered from some confusion about the immediate nature of the Protestant backlash. For example, after the publication

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<sup>578</sup> *Free Citizen*, 1 May 1970.

of the *Hunt Report* (10 October, 1969), which recommended the replacement of the USC with a new force, the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), intense rioting erupted along the Shankill Road, resulting in scores of injuries and the death of two rioters, as well as one member of the RUC.<sup>579</sup>

The *Free Citizen* reacted by arguing that Protestant workers had been ‘betrayed and abandoned by their traditional leaders’ and that the ‘alliance of Protestant worker and big business had been broken’, heralding a new situation in which ‘the common interest of working people, Protestant and Catholic, will become clearer for all to see’.<sup>580</sup> The class dimension to the Shankill disturbances was not in doubt, but such a situation of ‘common interest’ was not emerging. Instead, sectarian forces were entrenching as loyalist groupings, which were the dynamic forces inside Protestant communities, were mobilising opposition to reform among those who felt they were losing out due to the dismantling of the B Specials— an important employer within Protestant communities and central arm of the ‘Orange State’.

Nevertheless, the PD continued to espouse enthusiasm toward transcending sectarian politics, and the new direction had implications for its relationship to NICRA. Both PD representatives in NICRA— Michael Farrell and Kevin Boyle— withdrew from the leadership, although they still formally supported the organisation.<sup>581</sup> At NICRA’s annual conference in February 1970

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<sup>579</sup> The murder of Constable Arbuckle marked the first police officer killed during the troubles. See, Bardon, *A History of Ulster*, p. 674.

<sup>580</sup> *Free Citizen*, No 3 1969.

<sup>581</sup> ‘While we will remain individual members of NICRA and support its actions, no member of the PD will be standing for the NICRA executive. We will be interested to see how our critics will fare without us.’ *Free Citizen*, No 19, 13 Feb 1970.

the main PD intervention consisted of a motion calling for the extension of NICRA's campaign into the south. The motion was narrowly defeated after a recount, with 90 to 88 delegates voting to 'refer back' the debate.

Afterward the PD stated that they expected the traditional nationalist strand of NICRA to vote against the motion, but expressed disappointment with radical republicans, represented by the Wolfe Tone societies, who joined them.<sup>582</sup> It was a formal indicator of the type of leadership that now dominated NICRA and signalled a gulf across the left. At the February conference the new NICRA leadership was largely made up by the Communist Party and Official Republicans, both of whom rallied around the proposal for a 'Bill of Rights' to be implemented at the behest of the British government as a mechanism for reforming the Northern state into a 'normal democracy'. In effect, this position meant that the Communist Party was now championing the reforming zeal of British imperialism in Ireland, an attitude that undoubtedly made them more irrelevant among the generation of working class Catholics who were becoming evermore experienced in street politics.<sup>583</sup> The departure from NICRA saw the PD concentrate on its own independent campaigns.

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<sup>582</sup> *Free Citizen*, No 20, 20 February 1970.

<sup>583</sup> Mike Milotte explains the rationale of this position as such, 'This attempt to focus all attention on Westminster rested on the belief that the British state had both the will and the ability to establish normal democracy in the Six Counties. This in turn was underpinned by the belief that 'monopoly capitalism' was diametrically opposed to the Unionists because big business required a degree of stability that the unionists could no longer provide.' Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland*, pp. 274-275.

### 5.3. Smash Toryism

This must be our task in the seventies- SMASH TORYISM - *Free*

*Citizen.*<sup>584</sup>

The socialist left looked to the labour movement as the main harbinger of working class unity in the North, and those versed in labour history could point to the historic moments of Catholic and Protestant struggle— including the 1907 dock strike, the 1919 engineers’ strike and the outdoor relief strike of 1932— all of which were major episodes that displayed both the potential for class politics, but also the inability to sustain such a movement in the context of sectarian reaction and fledgling socialist initiatives.<sup>585</sup> Workers struggle of such intensity had not emerged in the late 1960s, and while elements of the labour movement had been involved in pushing class politics to the forefront of civil rights agitation they had done so in a largely formal and tokenistic way during the early period of NICRA, when letter writing and lobbying was the order of the day, as opposed to active street mobilisation. The most celebrated moment of labour activism came amidst the violence of August 1969, when trade unionists stopped violence spreading toward Catholic workers in the East Belfast shipyards. Although undoubtedly a courageous moment, the politics of those fighting sectarianism in East Belfast’s key workplaces revealed the limitations with what could be called the ‘labourist solution’ to sectarianism.

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<sup>584</sup> *Free Citizen*, No 14, Friday 9 January 1970.

<sup>585</sup> See, Peter Beresford Ellis, *A History of the Irish Working Class* (London, Pluto Press 1996). John Gray, *City in Revolt, James Larkin and the Belfast Dock Strike of 1907* (Belfast, Blackstaff, 1985). Emmet O’Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824-2000* (University College Dublin Press, 2011). Bill Rolston and Ronnie Munck, *Belfast in the thirties: an oral history* (Belfast, Blackstaff 1987).

On 15 August, as tensions were quelled in the shipyards, anti-sectarian trades unionists organised a mass meeting where they forwarded a motion that gave some indication of their solution to the crisis. The motion demanded that, ‘the government and the forces of law and order take stronger measures to maintain the peace.’<sup>586</sup> The call for the Unionist government, through the RUC and B Specials, to maintain the peace raised obvious difficulties after the violence of that weekend. Arguably, the situation showed that even the most advanced militants of the trade union movement, although capable of preventing the further spread of sectarianism, were not able to offer any political solution to sectarianism.<sup>587</sup> It pointed to a deeper problem with the labour movement in the North, one that rendered it problematic in confronting sectarian discrimination and division in the past, and later throughout the troubles. The very composition of the trade union movement meant that it was wedded to the existence of the Northern state and strongly reflected the prevailing ideology of Unionism.<sup>588</sup>

By extension, this conservatism—which in Marxist terms stemmed from the *social position* of the trade union leadership and its bureaucracy, leading it to mediate between the Northern working class and the employing class<sup>589</sup>— would

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<sup>586</sup> Quoted in, Geoffrey Bell, *The British in Ireland A Suitable Case for Withdrawal* (London, Pluto Press, 1984), p. 80.

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>588</sup> For a leftist critique of the trade union movement in the North see, Andrew Boyd, *Have the Trade Unions Failed the North?* (Dublin, Mercier Press 1984).

<sup>589</sup> Cliff and Gluckstein describe the trade union bureaucracy as a ‘basically conservative, social formation. Like the God Janus it presents two faces: it balances between the employers and the workers. It holds back and controls workers’ struggles, but it has a vital interest not to push the collaboration with the employers to a point where it makes the unions completely impotent. For the official is not an independent arbitrator. If the union fails entirely to articulate members’ grievances, this will lead eventually either to effective internal challenges to the leadership, or to membership apathy and organisational

strongly influence those sections of the left that operated through the official structures of the labour movement and equated such structures with the working class, including the NILP and the Communist Party.<sup>590</sup> As the civil rights movement was increasingly repressed the labour movement's role in 'avoiding the issue' had become more acute and essentially more conservative, as it unequivocally supported the Northern state.<sup>591</sup> The process of uniting Catholic and Protestant workers in a political challenge to the Northern state did not, therefore, feature in the politics of the labour movement and it was something that the major forces of the left distinctly stood against. But this was central to what the small body of PD members set about to build in the period after August 1969.

Over the next eighteen months the PD embarked on campaigns and actions in support of struggles to win working class support. Considering the future trajectory of history it would be easy to dismiss these actions. Indeed, efforts to unite the working class in the post 1969 period were ineffective, but such activity was seriously pursued and a record of this is crucial to understanding how the PD developed. Further, the fact that an organisation of the

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disintegration, with members moving to a rival union. If the bureaucracy strays too far into the bourgeois camp it will lose its base. The bureaucracy has an interest in preserving the union organisation which is the source of their income and their social status.' Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein, *The Labour Party: A Marxist History* (London, Bookmarks, 1988), p. 27.

<sup>590</sup> As Andrew Boyd explains, once the Northern Ireland leadership of the ICTU had been officially recognised and 'brought in from the cold' by the unionist state '... the leaders of the ICTU in the six counties proved themselves more than willing to cooperate with the O'Neill government, and with every administration since then. Among the institutions of Northern Ireland the Northern Ireland committee of the ICTU is the most reliable and most loyal.' Boyd, *Have the Trade Unions Failed the North?* p. 38.

<sup>591</sup> For a well-rounded historical analysis of the labour movement as it dealt with the outbreak of conflict in the North, see, O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland*.



PD's size managed to organise any form of action during this period, however limited, deserves attention, and activists recalled that these efforts had some success in shaping the image of the PD as distinctly socialist, and away from that of a nationalist orientated organisation.<sup>592</sup>

The post-1969 phase of the PD was another period of hyper-activity; the organisation cultivated a reputation for constant activism and, for example, immediately took to the streets to continue protests against repression. PD activists were among the first to protest against the type of repression that would continue in the wake of British intervention. Against bans on demonstrations, they launched a series of pickets in late 1969 calling for the release of republicans who remained interned under the Special Powers Act, including Malachy McGurran and Proinsias MacAirt.<sup>593</sup> Such small-scale protests largely went ahead unhindered, but more crucially during the stage often termed as the 'honeymoon period', —in which relations between the Catholic community and the Army seemed amicable—was the extent that activity was violently opposed by loyalist forces, who by now, were capable of mobilising a substantial section of the Protestant community.

One notable incident occurred in Portadown, where the PD organised a public meeting in March 1970. It was met with up to 500 loyalists. Internal British government reports paid considerable attention the meeting and noted that although only a handful attended,

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<sup>592</sup> *Irish Press*, 16 March 1971.

<sup>593</sup> See *Irish Independent*, 22 November 1969, *Irish Press*, 29 November 1969, *Irish Press*, 5 December 1969.

local indignation mounted and a crowd of several hundred assembled and had to be cordoned off by the RUC, assisted by the military. The PD were pelted with stones and bottles and had to abandon the meeting. The subsequent rowdyism was barely contained by the RUC and the military.<sup>594</sup>

The report concluded that, 'The PD gathering of 10 persons was obviously provocative and its is noteworthy that it took 200 police and 150 soldiers to deal with the situation they had created.'<sup>595</sup> John Gray's recollections suggest that the provocation came from loyalists; he was threatened with a gun as they were forced to leave the town, and remembers feeling demoralised about their ability to create any non-sectarian momentum in the aftermath.<sup>596</sup> Nevertheless, the PD responded to what happened by reaffirming their commitment to winning Protestant support.

We will not abandon our conviction that if our movement is to be successful, it must recruit Protestant and Catholic workers. Socialism is as relevant to the Protestant workers of Ireland as to the Catholic workers. Both must play their full part in the struggle for the Workers' Republic...To abandon this programme, to fight for Catholic socialism would be to adopt the sectarian logic of

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<sup>594</sup> Northern Ireland internal situation; setting up of new defence force; possible amendment to police bill, 31 March 1970. NAUK, PREM 13/3386.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid.

<sup>596</sup> Interview with John Gray, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

Paisleyism, the Nationalist Party, [...] and to consign our own movement to the already over-cluttered dustbin of Irish History.<sup>597</sup>

After 1969 any form of activity in Protestant estates was extremely difficult, although the PD did continue to make links where possible. Fergus O'Hare recalls that even during the most intense bursts of sectarian violence that would come later in the 1970s the PD would always sell their paper in the city centre to ensure contact with Protestant workers.<sup>598</sup> However, for the most part circumstances dictated that the organisation was confined to working within Catholic areas in the North.

The potential to change these circumstances lay in wider action across the trade union movement and radical left. The PD argued that this was an immediate necessity against the tide of sectarian reaction, thus, in the aftermath of the historic election of Ian Paisley in 1970— a certain sign that the sectarian response to civil rights was finding resonance, the *Free Citizen* would argue that:

It is imperative that the working class struggle be pushed to the forefront instead of the sectarian dispute. To do so means a movement combining the socialist militancy of the People's Democracy with solid trade union backing. That movement must be built and quickly. In it there should be a place for the PD, left-wing labour party branches [...] militant trade unionists, and social

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<sup>597</sup> *Free Citizen* No 25, 27 March 1970.

<sup>598</sup> Interview with Fergus O'Hare, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

Republicans fed up with the leadership of both sections of their movement.<sup>599</sup>

The connections between the PD and the wider left and trade union movement were tentative and there appears to have been little appetite for such united front action. The timidity of the labour left toward launching any political challenge to sectarianism was indicated on May Day, 1970. Traditionally a day of trade union marching, where Protestant and Catholic workers gather in a show of anti-sectarian working class strength, it was perhaps more necessary than ever. The PD hoped that it could serve as a springboard to launch a broader political vehicle. However, the ICTU leadership —with support from the NILP and Communist Party— called off the march citing the threat of sectarian tension. As the PD pointed out sectarian tension had arisen because of the *lack of working class unity* and would only deepen in the absence of any effort to establish such unity. The PD called its own May Day march that year, but it was not supported by ICTU, the NILP or the Communist Party, although the Newtownabbey branch of the Labour Party did take part as well as other trade unionists. The *Free Citizen* reported that up to 400 people marched and hoped that a broader alliance of the left could be built from it in order to put class demands centre stage in the coming period, but such an alliance did not materialise.<sup>600</sup> In much similar fashion the PD campaigned throughout 1970 and 1971 engaged in various initiatives in what was a turn towards solidarity actions and workers' struggles.

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<sup>599</sup> *Free Citizen*, 1 May 1970.

<sup>600</sup> *Free Citizen*, No 31, 8 May 1970.

#### 5.4. The turn to social agitation: cement strike, bus fares campaign and the campaign for the Lough Neagh fisheries.

The PD turn toward workers' struggles was illustrated in their efforts to support 750 Irish cement workers who took strike action in 1970. Ongoing since February, striking workers had begun to regularly clash with those breaking picket lines and a central point of contention became the role of firms in Britain and Northern Ireland in importing cement into the south to break the strike. The PD took part in various acts of solidarity such as collecting money and challenging strike-breakers transporting cement over the border. Funds were collected in Armagh and Belfast and as the strike wore on solidarity actions were organised in the North.<sup>601</sup>

On 16 June a meeting was organised in the coastal village of Ardglass where cement was being unloaded to take over the border. After a clash with supporters of the strike, the RUC intervened resulting in the arrest of 15 PD members, totalling 57 months imprisonment and £140 in fines.<sup>602</sup> As police action increased so too did the militancy of the strikers. One account noted that in Armagh within two weeks some 21 lorries owned by 'cement scabs' were burnt.<sup>603</sup> Unsurprisingly, the PD got involved in the more militant aspects of the dispute and some PD members ended up in court. When the strike ended after 22 weeks, many activists were fortunate enough to receive suspended sentences,

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<sup>601</sup> *Anarchy, Ireland*, Issue No 6 (1971), p. 24, available online, <https://irishanarchisthistory.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/anarchyirl.pdf>, accessed on 23/4/2016.

<sup>602</sup> *Free Citizen* No 39, 3 July 1970.

<sup>603</sup> *Anarchy, Ireland*, Issue No 6, p.25.

while both Brian Vallely and Eugene Cassin were sent to prison.<sup>604</sup> Although the PD could claim a consistent record of activity during the cement strike, there is little evidence to suggest that the PD recruited any workers during the dispute.

Perhaps more successful in this area was the PD campaign to prevent a rise in bus fares in Belfast. The campaign was launched after Belfast Corporation threatened to raise the price of bus fares by 50%. Beginning with a protest outside Belfast City Hall on 11 August 1970, twenty PD members carrying placards and posters were joined by members of the public.<sup>605</sup> Regular protests around the issue would from then on be mounted on Corporation meetings.

The next action of the campaign was to launch a petition against the increase; the PD maintained city centre stalls each day for a fortnight amassing signatures, eventually collecting 50,000 names.<sup>606</sup> When the increase in fares was eventually voted through the council it was met by what the PD described as ‘the largest demonstration Belfast has witnessed for some time’, with support from sections of the NILP, the Communist Party and various trade unions.<sup>607</sup> Demonstrations were also launched outside six businesses belonging to Belfast Mayor, Joseph Cairns, in an effort to highlight how the business interest of the city benefitted from the changes by decreasing subsidies from ratepayers. This was a problematic action on the Shankill Road where activists were met by local youths who tore up placards and threatened tougher action if the protestors did

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<sup>604</sup> *Free Citizen*, Vol 2 No 7, 13 November 1970. Also see, *Anarchy, Ireland*, Issue No 6.

<sup>605</sup> *Free Citizen*, Vol 1, No 45, 14 August 1970.

<sup>606</sup> *Free Citizen*, Vol 1, No 48, 4 September 1970.

<sup>607</sup> *Free Citizen*, Vol 2, No 5, 6 November 1970.

not disperse.<sup>608</sup> Later, Michael Farrell would claim that in the aftermath of this protest he was informed by an RUC Special Branch officer that the UVF planned to shoot him if he returned to the Shankill.<sup>609</sup>

The last phase of the campaign was an attempt to organise a boycott of the buses. In November 1970 newspapers reported scenes of activists, said to be from the PD and the Republican Clubs who were wearing handkerchief masks in order to hide their identity, commandeering buses on the Falls Road and organising alternative transport to carry people along the road.<sup>610</sup> Other reports conveyed how even basic mobilisation over public transport had the potential to break out into violence, with one describing a ‘mob of 100 youths’ that stoned Hastings Street RUC station on their way home from a bus fares demonstration.”<sup>611</sup>

Eventually, the campaign petered out and failed to prevent the increase in fares. Importantly, however, Farrell claimed that this campaign recruited some working class Protestant trade unionists that worked in the aircraft and shipyard industries of East Belfast, but there is no evidence that this development turned into something more substantial.<sup>612</sup> Although Protestant workers were at times pulled into supporting economic struggles, this did not automatically translate into socialist consciousness and the PD found it difficult to win wider layers of activists. Even marginal campaigns around bus fares proved to be restricted and deterred by sectarian forces. John McAnulty remembered the ‘height’ of the bus

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<sup>608</sup> *Irish Press*, 9 November 1970.

<sup>609</sup> M. Farrell, ‘Long March to Freedom’, p 63.

<sup>610</sup> *Irish Press*, 9 November 1970.

<sup>611</sup> *Irish Press*, 3 November 1970.

<sup>612</sup> *Irish Press*, 16 March 1971.

fares campaign; when the PD mobilised what he described as a sizeable crowd in Belfast city centre, it led to confrontation with the police. After the rally— and subsequent melee with the RUC— McAnulty remembered proudly returning to the Falls Road with his peers, whereas Protestant activists were forced to hide their role in the protest when they arrived home, for fear of coming under physical attack for their association with the PD.<sup>613</sup>

One other campaign that is relevant in drawing out the social activism of the PD was their efforts to mobilise in rural areas around the campaign to defend the rights of local fishermen in Lough Neagh against the Toome Eel Fishery Company. For Farrell, this struggle represented a microcosm of the way in which power and privilege had passed from British ‘Robber Barons’ during the Ulster plantation to the Protestant aristocracy in Ulster, and was now being taken over by emerging multinational capital serving to rob the Irish people of their natural resources.<sup>614</sup> The ownership of Lough Neagh had historically been the privilege of Lord Shaftesbury, Marquis of Donegal, since the aftermath of the plantations. In more recent times fishing rights had been sold to the Dutch controlled Toome Eel Fisheries Company, who, through advanced methods and technologies made a lucrative business in the Lough, whilst being able to restrict the trade of local fishermen through granting limited licences.<sup>615</sup>

The dispute began in late 1969 when fishermen clashed with the company and were charged with illegally trespassing on the land and obstructing

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<sup>613</sup> Interview with John McAnulty, Belfast, 23/07/2015.

<sup>614</sup> Michael Farrell, *The Great Eel Robbery* (1970).

<sup>615</sup> *Free Citizen*, Vol 1, No 12.



bailiffs.<sup>616</sup> The PD viewed it as a struggle ‘which must be fought on the farms, in the factories and on the housing estates. It is the struggle to win back the land and the natural resources of this country to its people.’<sup>617</sup> On 13 February 1970 the short-lived Ardboe Fishermen’s branch of the PD held a picket outside of the courthouse in solidarity with those charged. Activists from Belfast and Armagh joined the demonstration.<sup>618</sup> Later, the activists attempted to bring the culture of protest from the city to the countryside and set up the ‘famously ill-fated and totally unsuccessful Free Radio Lough Neagh, which was established in a pig sty and failed to get any signal out to anyone.’<sup>619</sup>

As the campaign intensified PD members were again typically to the forefront of more militant actions. On 18 May thirteen fishermen, alongside PD member Oliver Cosgrove were arrested after challenging company bailiffs.<sup>620</sup> The arrests sparked a mass meeting on 23 May and one week later PD members occupied the offices of the Toome Eel Fisheries Company; they stayed until they were escorted out by the RUC.<sup>621</sup> In June, PD involvement reached its height when they mobilised 500 people in Toome to demand the expropriation of the lough from the company.<sup>622</sup> The intensification of action was met with tougher police methods. In July two fishermen were sentenced to three months in jail and others received suspended sentences. Later, on 28 October eighteen PD activists were served eighteen-month prison sentences, suspended for three years, and

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<sup>616</sup> *Free Citizen*, Vol 1 No 10.

<sup>617</sup> *Free Citizen*, Vol 1 No 22, 6 March 1970.

<sup>618</sup> *Free Citizen*, 13 February Vol 1 No 19.

<sup>619</sup> Interview with John Gray, Belfast, 21/04/2015. Also see, *Free Citizen*, Vol 1, No 26, 3 April 1970.

<sup>620</sup> *Free Citizen*, Vol 1 No 33, 22 May 1970.

<sup>621</sup> *Free Citizen*, Vol 1 Issue No 35, 5 June 1970.

<sup>622</sup> *Free Citizen*, No 39, 3 July 1970.

fined £25 for taking part in the occupation of the company's offices. When the dispute petered out the PD attacked the unwillingness of the Fishermen's Association to champion their cause.<sup>623</sup> The PD may have been able to claim a role as militant supporters of the fishermen, but their role ended with such a claim.

Throughout the 1970-1971 period the PD engaged in a number of actions aimed at achieving working class support. These actions in themselves were not enough to construct any formidable current of socialist politics. Further, this activity was not part of any wider movement in society and quickly dissipated. This meant that the PD entered into a period of increased repression in violence restricted to reacting to events inside the Catholic ghettos.

On a wider level the experience since 1969 suggested that that campaigns aimed toward working class unity were limited in a context of state repression, and likely to come under serious opposition from militant loyalists, much in the same way that the campaign for civil rights had. The pursuit of working class unity inside the Northern state as attempted by the PD was proving ineffectual, and this happened as relations between the Catholic community and the British Army reached breaking point.

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<sup>623</sup> Farrell, *The Great Eel Robbery*, p 16.

### 5.5. The end of the honeymoon and resurgent republicanism

Between 1969 and 1971 Northern Ireland experienced a breakdown in relations between the Catholic community and the British military. The context of repression and Catholic alienation saw support for the republican movement surge and we now turn to these developments to assess how they shaped the politics of the PD. August 1969 spurred an historic split in the Republican movement, with the breakaway Provisional IRA espousing criticism of the left-wing political turn of the movement as resulting in the failure to adequately defend Catholic Belfast. In response, the PIRA re-established the traditional commitment to armed struggle.<sup>624</sup>

The PD had already set out its stall against the ‘anti-partitionist solution’, but its alternative had primarily been one of small-scale campaigns around ‘bread and butter’ issues that had limited impact and were increasingly disconnected from the growing conflict emerging between the Catholic community and the British Army. The Northern state was beginning to resemble a militarised conflict where anti-Unionist opposition was strongly repressed. Relevant to this study, then, is how these developments gave rise to a new phase of armed republicanism and how this related to the socialist left. To draw this out, a brief detour into the split in the republican movement is necessary.

The rupture in the IRA in 1969 was the culmination of tensions that had built up over some time and although the catalyst was the issue of defence, it represented a much wider schism between the established leadership of republicanism— which had dictated the movement’s trajectory since the failure

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<sup>624</sup> English, *Armed Struggle*, p. 81.

of the border campaign (1956-1962) in favour of a politicised movement, culminating in its participation in civil rights agitation—and traditional republicans committed to physical force. Among the many criticisms directed at the IRA leadership by the emerging ‘Provisionals’ was the dropping of the republican principle of abstentionism toward both Irish and British parliaments and the strategy of the ‘National Liberation Front’.<sup>625</sup> Therefore, on the surface the republican split looked a straightforward left-right divide, with the ‘Officials’ espousing a socialist orientated republicanism and the Provisionals the champion of the old method of physical force, intent on overthrowing the Northern state. Yet the division was never a simple left-right divide, as is always the case, formal political positions would be tested against the reality of events.

The central obstacle that faced the left from 1968 had been the persistent opposition to reform and the level of violence that was waged against the civil rights movement. Increased repression meant that the Provisional demand to fight for the abolition of Stormont and the overthrow of an irreformable state would find greater traction among the minority community. This position, later aptly summed up in the popular slogan ‘Smash Stormont’, stood in contradistinction to the Official movement, who drew heavily upon the ‘stages theory’ method of democratising the Northern state, which, as we have already seen was regarded with aversion by the PD.

In the aftermath of the split the PD laid out its differences with both factions. In the first edition of the *Northern Star* Farrell argued that the leftward

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<sup>625</sup> The ‘National Liberation Front’ strategy argued for an alliance between republicans, communists, militant trade unionists and other progressives in a political movement that included electoral interventions to gradually reform the Northern state. See, Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, p. 116 and p. 146.

turn of the movement had been driven by a rise of Stalinist influenced socialism that forwarded a reformist strategy, in favour of first democratising the Northern state and fighting for a united capitalist Ireland as a necessary precursor to a workers' republic. In line with various trends of the global new left, Farrell argued that this negated the revolutionary kernel of Marxism by advocating unity with a section of the Irish bourgeoisie in pursuit of a 'national revolution', to take place before a socialist revolution. It had the obvious complication in Ireland in that it offered little hope of appealing to any section of the Protestant working class. Farrell explained:

In colonial and semi colonial countries all over the world the Communist Parties cling rigidly to the theory that the struggle for 'national independence' must be completed before the struggle for socialism can be commenced. What that means in practice is that Ireland must become an independent 32 County Capitalist Republic before the Workers' Republic can be considered. Therefore socialists must ally themselves with progressive 'national capitalists'.<sup>626</sup>

Thus, although the PD had a working relationship with the Official republicans— throughout the civil rights period and later in some of the small-scale campaigns outlined above, such as the bus fares protests— theoretical differences existed. On 8 March 1970 a meeting took place in Armagh in which PD activists engaged in 'a wide-ranging discussion' with members of the Official republican movement. However, the central committee noted 'serious

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<sup>626</sup> *Northern Star*, Vol 1, 1970.

disagreements over the role of the stages theory. PD members emphasised that the only revolution will be a workers revolution.<sup>627</sup>

Although relations between the PD and the Officials had been strained from the beginning the PD initially reserved its strongest criticism for the Provisionals. Recognising that a major impetus behind the appeal of the Provisional IRA was the necessity to defend Catholic areas against further attack, and that the grouping did indeed contain some ‘genuine if confused radicals’<sup>628</sup>. The PD was heavily critical of the politics and philosophy of the Provisional wing and their dogmatic adherence to traditional republicanism, which mixed rightwing conservatism with popular anti imperialism. It was a strategy that rejected ‘politics’, instead advancing a sole commitment to armed struggle, based in the Catholic community. The orientation of the Provisionals was such that they would often say the Rosary at commemorations.<sup>629</sup> Ideologically they justified their struggle with traditional republican discourse, rejecting British sovereignty in Ireland and claiming an historic commitment to the democratic republic of the Dail, elected in 1918.

The PD regarded much of this political thinking with animosity. The first issue of the PD journal, *The Northern Star*, contested that, ‘The claim that elections held 52 years ago have any authority today when most of the participants are long dead is potent nonsense. It has nothing to do with socialism.’<sup>630</sup> The article pointed out how any mention of socialism within the

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<sup>627</sup> Meeting of the central committee of the People’s Democracy, 9 March 1970, PRONI, D3297/7.

<sup>628</sup> *Northern Star*, Vol 1, 1970.

<sup>629</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>630</sup> *Ibid.*

publications of the Provisional's was couched in distinctly nationalist rhetoric that advanced 'Irish and Christian' values.<sup>631</sup> The PD replied that these statements sounded 'dangerously of Hitler's 'National Socialism' declaring that, 'There are not separate varieties of socialism, foreign and Irish. Socialism is internationalist.'<sup>632</sup> Moreover, the PD strongly hit out at the tactics of the Provisionals, which they argued were based upon the illusion that an armed campaign waged within a minority community could deliver a successful victory over imperialism. By February 1971 the *Free Citizen* was critical of how, 'For months now the Provisionals have encouraged young Catholic workers to believe that imperialism could be defeated by military force alone— and force based only on the Catholic section of the population.'<sup>633</sup> Instead, the paper argued for the necessity of class struggle across both states,

We see imperialism as an entire system of social and economic injustice, not just military force. The way to fight imperialism is to build a workers movement North and South based on the everyday struggle against injustices which immediately effect all workers.<sup>634</sup>

The PD denunciation of the Provos illustrated the extent to which the re-emergence of traditional armed force was seen as a negation of the original struggle for civil rights. But the focus on unity with southern workers also pointed to how the PD was developing its own unique position on the northern question, based on class struggle against both the Unionist state in the north and the conservative clerical state in the south, as an alternative to armed actions

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<sup>631</sup> Ibid.

<sup>632</sup> Ibid.

<sup>633</sup> *Free Citizen*, Vol 2 No 19, 12 February 1971.

<sup>634</sup> *Free Citizen*, Vol 2 No 22, 5 March 1971.

waged by a small section of the population. However, the PD did not develop any substantial links with southern workers and remained as a small current in the north. Therefore, their 32-County perspective was often confined to statements and pronouncements, although the organisation did launch limited actions that reflected this strategy. For example, in May 1970 the PD launched another cross-border march, which traversed Leitrim, Donegal and Fermanagh, and attempted to highlight the ‘unemployment, low-wages, emigration and bad-housing’ synonymous with the southern state.<sup>635</sup> The central premise was to show that it was ‘no good replacing the Orange government at Stormont with a Green Tory one— or a Green Tory one in Dublin. The Free State has the highest emigration rate in W. Europe and the highest unemployment rate in all occupations other than agriculture. The Green Tories in the South are even more blatantly in favour of inviting in fly-by-night exploiters.’<sup>636</sup> Farrell had already laid out the perspective more succinctly when he offered a frank view of the border:

The border must go, but it must go in the direction of a socialist republic and not just into a republic which might at some future date become socialist. Firstly the border must go because it is a relic of imperialism, and in order to root out imperialism we have to root out the neo-imperialist set-up in the South and the neo-colonial one in the North. Secondly, Northern Ireland is completely unviable economically and only exists as a capitalist entity at the moment because of massive subventions from Britain. Similarly the South on its own is an area of small farms with very little industry. It too is

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<sup>635</sup> *Free Citizen*, No 29, 25 April 1970.

<sup>636</sup> *Free Citizen*, No, 26, 3 April 1970.



completely unviable on its own and as a result is also dependent on Britain. The unification of Ireland into a socialist republic is not only necessary for the creation of a viable economy, it must also be an immediate demand, because only the concept of a socialist republic can ever reconcile Protestant workers, who rightly have a very deep-seated fear of a Roman Catholic republic, to the ending of the border.<sup>637</sup>

Therefore it can be said that as the question of partition was reemerging in the north, the PD had attempted to shape it in a socialist direction in a way that was opposed to the politics and strategy of the Provisional movement, who essentially forwarded a form of crude physical-force republicanism. However, the formal ideology of the Provisional's leadership—who were at that time mainly based in Dublin— was not the most important factor in determining their potential to grow and gain support. The key-determining factor in the growth of the Provisional IRA was their ability to channel the anger and frustrations of the Catholic working class into action against the Stormont state. The crucial importance surrounding the rise of Irish republicanism in the post-1969 period was that it intersected with a mass uprising of the urban Catholic working class. Throughout 1968-1972 the lived experience of the Catholic community saw it question the viability of the Northern state and in this context the Provisional fight to smash the Stormont state was increasingly appealing; for the first time in history the Irish republican movement grew with a substantial working class base. This dynamic partially explains why the Provisional strand of

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<sup>637</sup> 'Discussion on the strategy of People's Democracy', *New Left Review*.

republicanism grew as the dominant faction; it also helps explain the way in which the PD position toward this movement changed.

The conflict that developed between the Army and the Catholic community from 1970 onward signified that the British state had shifted from 'peacekeeping' toward working through the Unionist state, in order to deal with an increasingly militant and resurgent Catholic population. The most significant moments of violence are well documented: in April 1970 the first large-scale confrontations between Catholics and the British Army took place in Ballymurphy. On 28 June a gun battle between PIRA volunteers and loyalists in north Belfast signalled the first major military outing from the Provisionals. As the marching season approached the military deployed a whole scale crackdown on the Lower Falls area. The battle that developed included a three-night curfew on residents during which four people were killed. Catholic alienation from the state happened *en masse*, alongside a growing support for those republicans wishing to launch both defensive and offensive actions.<sup>638</sup>

The PD operated throughout these bouts of conflict, and had formed a small but active branch in west Belfast where they churned out leaflets and propaganda against the actions of the military.<sup>639</sup> For the most part this meant reacting to disturbances in the aftermath by trying to give them a political direction. For example, after the riots in Ballymurphy the British Director of Operations Intelligence Committee report would note that, 'PD were marginally concerned with the Ballymurphy disorder. They were not in evidence at the

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<sup>638</sup> English, *Armed Struggle*, pp.134-137.

<sup>639</sup> *Free Citizen*, Emergency Bulletin, 7 July 1970 available online, [http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/ephemera/periodical/pd\\_freecitizen\\_070770r.pdf](http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/ephemera/periodical/pd_freecitizen_070770r.pdf), accessed on 12/01/2016.

beginning although two students arrested on the third night asked for Kevin Boyle, one of the PD leaders. After the disturbances were over PD held an open-air meeting in the area and elected a committee to represent the young people.<sup>640</sup>

Military repression throughout 1970-1971 reflected tougher British policy that sought to strengthen the civil power by dealing more decisively with anti-Unionist opposition. In its early phase this took the form of searches and raids in Catholic areas in an effort to uproot republican arms, in what was a clearly partisan approach toward the nationalist community that greatly contrasted to the approach in Protestant areas, where, as the PD often pointed out, many more licensed firearms existed.<sup>641</sup> Although this was not often admitted openly, in November 1970 a senior secretary in the British Foreign Office would relay the reality to the Ministry of Defence (MoD). Having studied the previous searches throughout the year he concluded:

The new figures indicate that arms searches in Catholic areas, even excluding the Falls Road operation, were twice as many relative to population as in Protestant areas: this is just the impression we would not wish to see given in public.<sup>642</sup>

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<sup>640</sup> Northern Ireland internal situation; setting up of new defence force; possible amendment to police bill, part 8. 1970, 13 April 1970. PREM 13/3386.

<sup>641</sup> In April 1971 after the Army had raided Ballymurphy the PD commented that: 'In the three days between April 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> they searched a total of 58 houses and 10,000 cars in nineteen areas- and found a total of twenty nine small arms. This is a ludicrous figure when put beside the 70,000 private gun licenses in the North- with many ex-B Specials holding four or five guns at once, including automatic licences.' *Free Citizen*, Vol 2, No 27, 9 April 1971.

<sup>642</sup> Arms searches in Northern Ireland, AC. Thorpe to MOD, 12 November 1970. NAUK, FCO 33/1077.

The perception of impartiality was greatly undermined and opposition to the military grew, as did the capacity for republican attacks against the Army, who now resembled an occupying military force. The indiscriminate nature of military violence was palpable when tougher ‘shoot to kill’ orders resulted in the death of Danny O’Hagan in north Belfast on 31 July 1970. Further, the legal dispensation that was implemented offered no avenue for grievance and largely reflected the balance of power inside the state. Therefore, while Bernadette Devlin was jailed for her part in the battle of the Bogside, on 26 June 1970, those B Specials and RUC members who had carried out serious acts of violence in 1969 were not punished.<sup>643</sup>

The violence throughout this period was far from one sided, however, the conclusions drawn by the PD surrounding the nature of British intervention were seemingly vindicated. Subsequently, the PD shifted its position surrounding non-violent tactics. In part, this meant facing up to the reality of events since August 1969. Fergus O’Hare— who by 1970 was active in the west Belfast PD— recalls that after the violence of 1969 the situation moved quickly away from the ‘peaceful, non-violent don’t react attitude of the early marches. To suddenly people having to organize to defend themselves in their own areas’. Enforcing the politics of non-violence was relatively easy in small numbers or in committed groupings of activists. However, as whole areas came under attack, ‘Suddenly that’s no longer relevant, its actually a situation where you say ‘we have to stop this, we have to defend against this’.’<sup>644</sup>

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<sup>643</sup> *Free Citizen*, No 39, 3 July 1970.

<sup>644</sup> Interview with Fergus O’Hare, Belfast, 08/06/2015.

Those challenging military repression inside nationalist communities were considered to be taking part in justifiable acts of defence. After the ‘battle of the Falls’ the *Free Citizen* stated that, ‘the people have a complete right to defend themselves from attack’.<sup>645</sup> As Catholic youths engaged in pitched battles with the Army— a common occurrence in nationalist areas by mid-1970— the PD supported those fighting:

When we see young Irish workers, regardless of religion, in conflict with imperialist troops, or a Unionist police force, we support those young workers. And we know too that when the struggle for the workers’ republic enters its final stage we will have to fight the same enemy.<sup>646</sup>

A major question of course was how such fighting should manifest itself, and the PD, now down to a hardcore of committed members, would play no role in influencing this. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that the organisation grew in membership. Evident, however, is the sizeable growth of republican organisation in this period, particularly the Provisionals, their ranks were filled with those who took part in clashes with the military and the police.

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<sup>645</sup> *Free Citizen*, Emergency Bulletin, 7 July 1970.

<sup>646</sup> *Free Citizen* Vol 2 No 16, Friday 22 January 1970.

## 5.6. Conclusion

The PD's effort to develop a current of class politics during the period after the civil rights upsurge in 1968-1969 should be of interest to historians of the radical left, as they constitute some of the most serious efforts at agitation in Northern Ireland as conflict mounted. This chapter has shown how the organisation began to develop its own unique perspective on how socialist politics could develop across Ireland. It was based upon challenging partition, but also on a firm belief that class struggle and working class unity were the key to the pursuit of a workers' republic. However the PD was never able to put down roots outside of small constituencies in the north. Its 32-county orientation toward southern workers was genuine, but largely based upon political propaganda. Indeed, a rival leftist writing in 1975 would reflect upon the problem:

Had PD really cared about establishing an independent working class presence in the Northern anti-Unionist, anti-repression camp, it would have made more than half-hearted, rhetorical attempts to involve itself in distinctly working class struggles in the South. In the main, its activity in the South, such as it has been, is an extension of its involvement in the anti-repression struggle in the North [...] PD has generally shown a haughty indifference (and ignorance) to the economic concerns of the Southern workers. They still have to refer to the activity in solidarity with striking cement workers in 1970 to demonstrate that they have ever shown any interest in them.<sup>647</sup>

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<sup>647</sup> Brian Trench, 'Misplaced hopes: People's Democracy in the six counties', *International Socialism Journal*, No 74, 1975, Available online,

The broader picture throughout this period was one in which relations deteriorated between the Catholic community and the British military, a result of heightened repression and the rise of republican organisations, which were beginning to launch a sustained offensive against the Northern Ireland state. The PD continued to hold a critical line against the emerging armed campaign and was, for example, scathing against attacks that resulted in civilian casualties.

The PD regards a physical force campaign against the British Army as futile and doomed to failure.... It can never win the support of the majority in the north.... But while we can sympathize with the motives of those who would launch such a campaign we have nothing but contempt for those who would try to build a Republic on the bodies of dead or maimed Protestant Irishmen.... For the only Republic that can be established today is the Workers' Republic—and it can only be built with the aid of those very Protestant workers whom these men seek to murder.<sup>648</sup>

By 1971 the potential for such aid had long receded and the PD, who had 'effectively been beaten back into the Catholic ghettos to await Faulkner's next move alongside the other anti-Unionist forces'<sup>649</sup>, recognised that the single most important issue facing the left in the North was the level of repression it faced, and the necessity to launch broad anti repression action.<sup>650</sup> This reflected the reality of life on the ground in the Catholic community, but it was also in

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<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj/1975/no074/trench.htm>, accessed on 28/01/2016.

<sup>648</sup> *Free Citizen*, Vol 2 No 34, 28 May 1971.

<sup>649</sup> Finn, *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*, p. 82.

<sup>650</sup> *The Northern Star*, Vol 4, 1971.

anticipation of the many calls that had been made by hard-line elements in the Unionist party surrounding a more drastic solution to put down the IRA.



## Chapter 6: Unfree Citizens

### 6.1. Introduction

Armoured cars and tanks and guns,  
came to take away our sons,  
but every man must stand behind,  
the men behind the wire.<sup>651</sup>

The 1971-1972 period ranks as the most tumultuous phase in the history of the troubles. In August 1971 the government introduced internment on a widespread scale. Now almost universally accepted as a disastrous policy that generated mass resistance to the Northern state, internment has been widely examined throughout historiography. It was followed by a surge in support for militant republicanism. However, the historiography surrounding the post-internment period lacks in its treatment of the much wider emergence of mass protest and civil disobedience during what has been termed the ‘civil resistance movement’.<sup>652</sup>

Internment resembled an assault on the nationalist community, which signified the culmination of a long period of disintegration of relations between northern nationalists and the British military, spurring mass resistance to Unionist rule. The armed campaign of the republican movement was the most crucial destabilising force that met the Unionist government after internment, yet it is far from the whole story. No treatment of the collapse of the Unionist state in 1972 would be complete without an assessment of the mass extra-parliamentary

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<sup>651</sup> *The men behind the wire*, anti internment song (1971).

<sup>652</sup> Finn, *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*, p. 6.

resistance movement that emerged at this time. Various forms of protest saw the civil rights movement reignited under more militant terms, and this phase of civil disobedience generally ended in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday.

This chapter charts the role of the PD in these events and shows how the post internment period allowed the small forces of the revolutionary left to again play a role in street protests. The remobilisation of the civil rights movement saw a closer relationship develop between the PD and the republican movement as mass struggle re-emerged throughout 1971-1972. PD activists were interned in August 1971, and the detention of socialists and civil rights activists who were not members of the IRA did much to expose the indiscriminate nature of the operation. But the Unionist government vastly miscalculated the extent of social unrest that internment would create. Various forms of political action met internment including mass protests, rallies, marches and strikes, all of which strengthened the terrain that the republican movement was operating in. Amidst this explosion of agitation, the PD attempted to offer some coordinated direction and remobilise the civil rights movement on the basis of civil disobedience and mass protest. In doing so the organisation argued that it was necessary to launch an outright challenge to the northern state.

In late 1971, the PD formed the Northern Resistance Movement (NRM) alongside republican activists who were willing to press ahead with street protests. This brought about a unity between the PD and the Provisional movement, which involved a deeper political alignment surrounding the necessity to overthrow the Northern state. Therefore, the PD played an important role in reigniting civil rights protests at the beginning of 1972 and the organisation had shifted its position toward supporting the republican struggle,

essentially arguing that both the military campaign and the mass struggle of the people could bring down the Stormont state and solve the national question in the interests of the working class. This chapter explains how these developments emerged and suggests that they continued to define the fate of the PD as the conflict persisted into the 1970s.

## 6.2. The Introduction of Internment

You are dragged from your sleep by the dual crash of front and back doors being kicked in by the fascist kidnap squad. You are dragged from your bed; wrists lashed together, cotton wool stuffed in your mouth with a sack thrown over your head into a waiting jeep. Behind you your wife and family are being terrorised and your home is being wrecked in an army search. You get to the interrogation camp and the treatment begins...<sup>653</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, 10 August 1971.

Throughout 1970-1971 division inside the Unionist Party continued, in what Michael Farrell described as a ‘steady drift to the right’— a similar process that had brought down O’Neill now wracked his successor, Chichester Clark, in a more intense way.<sup>654</sup> This had profound implications for the left, as the pre-internment period was one in which loyalist forces began to mobilise significant sections of Protestant workers. In March 1971— after three British soldiers were killed by the PIRA— thousands of shipyard workers marched on Stormont calling for the introduction of internment. It illustrated the extent to which a large section of the Protestant working class were now willing to back state repression and it was the culmination of a more serious shift in East Belfast’s centre of industrial strength, where some of the best labour militants that had prevented violence in 1969 were now calling for internment. The inability to challenge Unionist ideology inside the labour movement directly facilitated a resurgence of

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<sup>653</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, 10 August 1971.

<sup>654</sup> Farrell, *The Orange State*, p. 275

loyalism in the early 1970s.<sup>655</sup> The trade union movement was effective in curbing sectarianism on the shop floor, but not in eliminating it.

The call for internment was, however, one that emanated primarily from the higher echelons of the Unionist government. Brian Faulkner, who took leadership of the Unionist Party after the resignation of Chichester Clark on 23 March 1971, consistently raised it. Faulkner viewed internment as a tried and tested method of putting down the IRA and would apply persuading pressure on the British military to act.<sup>656</sup> Faulkner's new dispensation also attempted to shift its relationship to the Catholic middle class by appointing an NILP Minister to the cabinet and offering opposition parties the chance to act as chairperson in two of three new functional committees. Although the committees would exercise little power the SDLP welcomed the announcement, with MP Paddy Devlin describing the announcement as 'Faulkner's finest hour'.<sup>657</sup>

To the *Unfree Citizen* it all amounted to a 'sham attempt' to buy off the Catholic community, isolate the Provisionals and create the illusion that Catholic grievances could be reconciled with the Unionist state.<sup>658</sup> Incidentally, Faulkner's finest hour ended when the military killed two Derry men, Seamus Cusack and Desmond Beattie, in what were widely viewed as executions by Derry's Catholic community. The SDLP withdrew from Stormont in protest and, simultaneously, the Provisionals embarked on a heightened campaign of

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<sup>655</sup> Report of a delegation of trade unionists from Belfast Shipyard to Stormont Castle, 29 June 1970, *Civil Rights Campaign in Northern Ireland*, PRONI, CAB/9B/205/12.

<sup>656</sup> Faulkner himself had been responsible for introducing internment during the IRA's Border Campaign (1956-62).

<sup>657</sup> McCann, *Bloody Sunday in Derry, what really happened?* p. 46.

<sup>658</sup> *Free Citizen*, 2 July 1971.

bombing throughout April, May and June.<sup>659</sup> In this context Faulkner was able to persuade the British government, now headed by Edward Heath's Tory cabinet, to resort to methods of repression that the military was familiar with in other colonial expeditions.

As early as August 1970 PD members were warning about the possibility of internment.<sup>660</sup> Later, on 14 February 1971 at a conference organised by the civil rights association in Belfast, Michael Farrell proposed concrete actions in the event of internment being implemented, including mass protests and weekly marches. The conference could not reach agreement and instead was imbued by a typically divided atmosphere over whether the movement should seek to mobilise toward an outright challenge to the state, or whether it should seek reform.<sup>661</sup> The PD called for preparations to challenge internment, but nothing came of these calls and as the military descended into Catholic estates to enforce imprisonment it came on a scale that most had not expected. Therefore, the civil rights movement took a significant blow when internment was introduced at 4am on 9 August, as some of the most important activists were targeted.

In the first swoop 342 men were arrested and despite Faulkner's consistent contention that the operation had been a success in capturing known IRA volunteers who were engaged in violence, the immediate evidence suggested otherwise. While many republicans were targeted the majority of the Provisionals either evaded capture or were not on the military's intelligence radar. For the most part, those republicans detained were either retired veteran

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<sup>659</sup> Farrell, *The Orange State*, p. 279.

<sup>660</sup> *Ulster Herald*, 15 August 1970.

<sup>661</sup> *Irish Press*, 15 February 1971.

activists— the old guard of the movement— or from the Official wing.<sup>662</sup> Some of the internees were general political opponents of the Unionist state including civil rights activists, socialists and militant trade unionists. Others were simply innocent civilians.<sup>663</sup>

The fact that socialists and civil rights activists were arrested under the presumption of violence revealed the indiscriminate nature of the operation. Prior to the arrests operational instructions stated that, ‘Both factions of the IRA, NICRA and PD have contingency plans for a campaign of violence and civ[sic] disobedience if internment should take place.’<sup>664</sup> Afterward, despite much evidence to show that many internees were not involved in violence, Brian Faulkner, who personally oversaw each internment case, consistently defended each decision:

I have made no internment order without being satisfied on evidence placed before me that the person interned was and still is an active member of the Official or Provisional wing of the IRA.... It is because of such involvement that persons are being held and not because they oppose the government. Persons who may be members of the Civil Rights movement or the People’s Democracy, or of other

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<sup>662</sup> Martin J. McCleery, *A re-examination of the use of internment without trial in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s*, PhD thesis (Queen’s University Belfast, 2013), p. 37.

<sup>663</sup> Ibid.

<sup>664</sup> Ibid.

organisations, are being interned only if they are also members of the IRA or actively involved in it....<sup>665</sup>

It was on this basis that 9 members of the PD were arrested. Gerry Ruddy, who had been involved in the PD since October 1968, received a phone call in the early hours of the morning to tell him that internment was under way and he beat a hasty retreat to Newry.<sup>666</sup> In the end, the Army did not come for Ruddy but other PD members were not so fortunate. Those detained on 9 August were; Michael Farrell, Dermot Kelly, Eugene Cassin, John McGuffin, Liam Begley, Malachy McRoe, J. D. Murphy, Oliver Cosgrove and Liam Shannon.<sup>667</sup> PD members were important in documenting the abuses that went on during the early phase of internment, initially through writing letters to local newspapers. John McGuffin would write the first serious analysis of internment, which documented his own arrest and interrogation.<sup>668</sup> As accounts filtered out surrounding the treatment of internees it was evident that almost all had been mistreated in some form, with experiences varying from verbal and physical abuse to more extreme torture techniques.<sup>669</sup>

The reaction to internment was angry and palpable and both factions of the IRA battled it out with the British military, the violence far surpassing anything the state had ever experienced. As the *Free Citizen* put it on 15 August,

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<sup>665</sup> *Internal situation in Northern Ireland*, 3 September 1971-15 September 1971, Statement by Mr Faulkner. NAUK, PREM 15/480.

<sup>666</sup> Interview with Gerry Ruddy, Belfast, 07/07/2015.

<sup>667</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, 10 August 1971.

<sup>668</sup> McGuffin, *Internment* (Tralee, Anvil Books, 1973).

<sup>669</sup> The most notorious cases became known as the 'Hooden men'; fourteen men who claimed that they experienced various torture techniques while interned. Their cases continued to be a source of dispute today, see, *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 January 2016.



‘there has been more violence in the North of Ireland in the past week than at any time during the past three years’<sup>670</sup>. The observation was correct, one authoritative historical record noted that in the four days after the introduction of internment twenty-two people had been killed and up to seven thousand people (mainly Catholics) were left homeless, as their houses had been burnt to the ground. In terms of 1971 as a whole, 34 people had been killed before 9 August, while a further 140 were to die before the year ended.<sup>671</sup>

The violence that followed internment has been well documented in pushing Northern Ireland over the Rubicon into a period of intractable conflict.<sup>672</sup> However, there was a much wider dynamic of protest and popular resistance that gripped nationalist areas. As the first internees were arrested working class Catholic estates erupted in riots, and barricades were erected in order to keep the military out. They were among the first instances of a widespread community struggle. The main pillar of the ‘civil resistance campaign’ against internment was the mass withholding of rent and rates, which, alongside the increase in IRA action brought about a new level of instability to the Unionist state. Throughout this turbulent period the PD played a role in re-igniting street protest and civil rights mobilisation.

The PD had taken a notable blow to its small organisation, with some of its most prominent members being detained. Immediately, the remaining activists reacted to internment by renaming the *Free Citizen* the *Unfree Citizen* overnight— which initially appeared much deteriorated in layout, likely down to

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<sup>670</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, 15 August 1971.

<sup>671</sup> Bew and Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A chronology of the Troubles*, p. 37.

<sup>672</sup> For the best academic analysis of internment see, Martin McCleery, *Operation Demetrius and its aftermath*.

PD printer John D. Murphy being interned— and set out to propagate support for the internees. After August '71 political activism took on a higher level of risk, and with PD member's interned tension occurred more regularly with the security forces. The *Unfree Citizen* often complained of Special Branch harassment, and members were allegedly being picked up and interrogated for hours when selling the paper. One young man was said to have been detained for thirty six hours and beaten up whilst being questioned about the whereabouts of their printing equipment.<sup>673</sup>

Many of the more experienced leaders of civil rights and anti-repression activity had been detained, and this forced others to take a position of leadership. Fergus O'Hare recalls: 'I remember standing in Andersonstown and having been involved in organising a protest meeting about the whole situation, and somebody handing me a megaphone and suddenly you're the speaker, and that was the first time you suddenly had to get up and do all that.'<sup>674</sup> The way in which the pace of events took over and working class areas experienced an eruption of grassroots activity was conveyed by the *Unfree Citizen* in later years:

The internment swoop on August 9<sup>th</sup> created a mass movement even greater than the civil rights movement. The imperialist's last desperate weapon blew up in their own faces. Street by street, the people built barricades and defended them. Estate by estate they stopped paying rent and rates. Town by town they held one day

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<sup>673</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Emergency Bulletin, 19 August 1971.

<sup>674</sup> Interview with Fergus O'Hare, Belfast, 08/06/2015.

protest strikes. They ignored the timid bleatings of political leaders, trade union officials and church dignitaries.<sup>675</sup>

We now turn to this phase of civil resistance.

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<sup>675</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, January 1977.

### 6.3. The Northern Resistance

The mass civil resistance movement against internment has arguably been overlooked among historians who have focused primarily on the level of armed activity between republicans and the British military.<sup>676</sup> However, the republican military offensive that raged throughout 1971-1972 could never have been sustained for such a prolonged period was it not for the level of active support it enjoyed throughout the nationalist community. This encompassed various forms of extra-parliamentary civil disobedience including, marches, protests, sit-downs, strikes and riots. August 1971 saw the resurrection of 'no-go' areas, and in Derry mass opposition pushed the military out of the Bogside and Free Derry saw its most sustained period. Grassroots organisation engulfed many working class areas as civil disobedience committees sprang up throughout the nationalist community, and mass protest re-emerged.<sup>677</sup> For example, in Derry on 16 August workers downed tools and took strike action,<sup>678</sup> and on 21 August up to 8000 took part in a monster sit-in in Derry's Brandywell football stadium.<sup>679</sup> In west Belfast, some 15,000 people packed into an anti-internment rally in Casement Park on 12 September, uniting a broad spectrum of political opposition.<sup>680</sup> Opposition to internment spanned across the entire Catholic community with sections of the Catholic middle class becoming alienated from the state in a way that had been hitherto unseen. In a matter of weeks up to 130 opposition

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<sup>676</sup> Much historical commentary surrounding the internment period focuses on the reemergence of armed republicanism, see, English, *Armed Struggle*.

<sup>677</sup> For reports surrounding the emergence of civil resistance committees see the *Irish News*, 16 August 1971.

<sup>678</sup> *Irish News*, 17 August 1971.

<sup>679</sup> *Irish News*, 23 August 1971.

<sup>680</sup> *Irish News*, 13 September 1971.

councillors— mostly members of the SDLP— resigned their positions from local councils.<sup>681</sup>

The central pillar of opposition to internment was the rent and rates strike, when thousands withheld their rent and rates payments to local authorities. Although supported by various political organisations including the SDLP, Sinn Féin, both wings of the IRA, NICRA, PD and other organisations of the radical left— the strike erupted on such a broad level that it should not be seen as the initiative of any one current. Michael Farrell described SDLP politicians— who often claimed credit for initiating the strike— as ratifying a *fait accompli* at the behest of the mass of Catholic people.<sup>682</sup>

The tactic of withholding rent and rates spread like wildfire. One account of the strike estimated that some 40,000 households took part at its height, and they were organised through the newly emerging civil disobedience committees.<sup>683</sup> Naturally, the strike was strongest in the areas that had borne the brunt of internment. Kevin Boyle would claim that 95 percent of the 15,000 families in west Belfast were refusing to pay rents, with a similar picture existing outside Belfast. The cost of the strike after four months was said to be up to £500,000.<sup>684</sup>

One week after the introduction of internment the *Unfree Citizen* indicated the extent of protest: ‘Rent and rates strikes are underway in Derry, Coalisland, Newry, Belfast and in many other towns. Protest meetings are being

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<sup>681</sup> *Irish News*, 20 August and 23 August 1971. Also see Farrell, *The Orange State*, p. 283.

<sup>682</sup> Farrell, *The Orange State*, p. 283.

<sup>683</sup> McGuffin, *Internment*, p. 109.

<sup>684</sup> *Irish News*, 10 September 1971.

held in almost every town and village in the North of Ireland,<sup>685</sup>. PD members played an active role in these initiatives, such as in west Belfast, where they were heavily involved at rank and file level. In Armagh, one local civil resistance committee claimed to represent 800 people who were on rent and rates strike, and was chaired by PD activist and former internee Dermot Kelly.<sup>686</sup>

The Unionist Party moved swiftly to quell the campaign. Recognising that the strike had ‘serious implications for local government and the essential local services which councils and similar local bodies provide’<sup>687</sup>, the government acted in mid-October to introduce legislation that aimed to counter the civil disobedience campaign. It enabled the government to divert to public authorities state payments including the social security benefits of people who were taking part in the rent and rates strike. The state argued that those who were taking part in the campaign were doing so through fear of intimidation or reprisal inside Catholic areas, and the pro-Unionist press was adorned with advertisements on behalf of the government that stressed, ‘The rent and rates strike is a self-inflicted wound. By helping to end the present campaign, you will help yourself, your family and your fellow citizens.’<sup>688</sup> But the evidence suggested otherwise.

Yet if opposition to internment was widespread, there was little effort to coordinate the mass activity of the people, which was largely a result of the disorganised state of the anti-internment forces. However, as momentum gathered and civil disobedience action began to coalesce around the central

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<sup>685</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, 15 August 1971.

<sup>686</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 19, 19 November 1971.

<sup>687</sup> *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 October 1971.

<sup>688</sup> *Ibid.*

slogan of ‘release all internees’, more coordinated efforts to establish a campaign were attempted. The *Unfree Citizen* called for unity around a list of anti repression demands, including; the release of all internees, repeal of the SPA, ‘break the Orange Unionist link’, and the dismissal of judiciary and bigoted courts.<sup>689</sup> The PD argued that the escalation in activism necessitated a united front initiative that reached beyond the small forces of the left, and that political agreement was not a prerequisite in opposing state repression.<sup>690</sup>

If unity in action throughout the early phase of civil rights activity had been difficult to achieve, it was more problematic in the period after internment. Alongside internment, Faulkner had announced a six-month ban on all marches making demonstrations illegal. Therefore, while the post-internment period saw an explosion of grassroots action, coordinated marches had been non-existent. Faced with the prospect of illegal marches many of the moderates within NICRA and the SDLP were wary of remobilising the civil rights campaign.

Throughout the autumn of 1971 forums were convened to debate a strategy to advance the campaign. On 17 October in Tyrone one such meeting failed to reach agreement over the demands of the campaign. The PD argued for a broad based movement that could bring together the civil disobedience committees from across the country and coordinate a return to the streets.<sup>691</sup> Yet such an initiative was at odds with the broader NICRA leadership— and those

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<sup>689</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, 15 August 1971.

<sup>690</sup> ‘All political parties and organisations opposed to internment are not socialist and as we in the People’s Democracy believe in socialism we have in the past criticised many of these organisations, and in the future we will continue to do so. However, as most of these people are democrats it is possible on limited demands to oppose repression.’ *Unfree Citizen*, 15 August 1971.

<sup>691</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, 26 November 1971.

MPs who had moved away from civil rights organisations into the SDLP— who cautioned against remobilisation and were opposed to launching a challenge to the Northern state. Instead, they wanted to keep the campaign inside the framework of the Civil Rights Association and were undoubtedly suspicious of the overlap between the PIRA and the civil disobedience committees.

The PD hit out at what they identified as the political sectarianism of the NICRA leadership who wished to ‘control the whole campaign’<sup>692</sup> and failed to co-operate with other groups by making it ‘abundantly clear that they are prepared to cooperate with no one if they cannot have sole control over the campaign.’<sup>693</sup> If the moderate left in NICRA were wary of street mobilisation, the effort to find a constitutional solution to the Northern crisis was more vocally expressed by the SDLP. After welcoming Faulkner’s reforming capacity in previous months— only to then embrace what resembled the old tactic of abstentionism— SDLP representatives now found themselves in the precarious position of being outside the structures of parliament whilst a mass movement swept their constituencies, temporarily uniting the Catholic middle class with the most militant demand to opt out of the Northern state.

As a party wedded to a constitutional vision of reforming the Northern state, the SDLP would find it hard to relate to the militant movement that was developing on the streets. The party effectively presented its own elected representatives as the solution, launching a short-lived and ineffectual ‘Alternative Assembly’ in Dungiven in late October.<sup>694</sup> Lacking any real power

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<sup>692</sup> Ibid.

<sup>693</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 19, 19 November 1971.

<sup>694</sup> Farrell, *The Orange State*, p. 285.



and without any agency beyond the mandate of nationalist representatives previously ratified in local elections, the Assembly had a short existence— it only met on one other occasion.<sup>695</sup> On the other hand, those who were looking to instigate mass mobilisations as a method to challenge internment began to find wider resonance.

In response to the failure of the civil rights association to initiate any campaign of popular protest the PD helped organise a series of conferences with republican activists and militant sections of the civil disobedience committees, who were willing to re-launch street protests in support of the internees. The first serious initiative launched in this direction took place in Omagh on 21 November, when committee delegates from across the country met in a conference that was sponsored by the Tyrone and Fermanagh Civil Resistance Committees. After a motion from Michael Farrell the conference elected an interim committee, representative of the nine historic counties of Ulster, to lead the campaign and so the Northern Resistance Movement was established, although its name would not be announced until later.<sup>696</sup> The central unifying issue behind the NRM was the need to mobilise against internment; but it was also the first real exercise in building a united front between those on the left and the republican movement, based on the idea that the fight against repression necessitated a sustained struggle against the state. It was recognition of the need to overthrow the state that united the PD with the Provisional republican

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<sup>695</sup> Ian McCallister, *The Northern Ireland Social and Democratic Labour Party: political opposition in a divided society* (London, Macmillan, 1977), pp. 104-105.

<sup>696</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 20, 26 November 1971, also see, *Donegal News* 27 November 1971. Also see McGuffin, *Internment*.

movement. Politically, the NRM united around the slogan ‘Smash Stormont’, forwarding its demands as such:

1. All internees are released unconditionally and the Special Powers Act is abolished.
2. All political prisoners jailed since 1968 are released.
3. Stormont is smashed and the Unionist government is sacked.
4. British troops are withdrawn from Northern Ireland.

The Chairman of the NRM was republican MP Frank MacManus, while the Vice Chair was Michael Farrell. Bernadette Devlin was also heavily involved from the outset.<sup>697</sup> Significantly, the NRM had notable support and involvement from Provisional Sinn Féin, which, although a shell of an organisation in 1971, added weight to the campaign as they provided a connection to many of the prisoners and an obvious affinity with the PIRA. The NRM signalled the beginning of unity between the PD and the Provisional movement as the organisation shifted toward a more overtly anti-imperialist position on the Northern state. Indeed, the NRM demands could be said to be an example of the PD uniting with republicans on republican terms and some on the left felt that it strayed too far into the republican camp. Eamonn McCann did not get involved in the NRM, and looking back on the situation reflected that the sharp PD turn was partially a result of the lack of political direction to the organisation: ‘the PD, and a lot of people within it, would have thought that the way to react to a worsening

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<sup>697</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, January 1977.

situation was simply to become more militant...<sup>698</sup>. This development is worth considering in some detail.

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<sup>698</sup> Interview with Eamonn McCann, Derry, 04/06/2015.

#### 6.4. Smashing Stormont

As the British Army showed its ability to repress Catholic revolt more effectively than the RUC ever had, the PD now found its most consistent allies to be within the republican movement. The pattern of events since the introduction of British troops suggested that the military had now moved to strengthen the existence of Unionist rule. Recognition of the need to challenge the institutions of the Northern state saw the PD shift its position away from the crude denunciation of the Provisionals to one of critical support for their campaign of national liberation. By 1972 the PD would move sharply in support of the PIRA, viewing the armed campaign as inextricably linked to the pursuit of socialism in Ireland. The PIRA was thus seen as a justifiable reaction to British repression and an important component in developing a revolutionary process in the North.

To a large extent unity between the PD and republicans was a product of immediate political situations that developed, and is well illustrated, for example, in the relationship that developed between the PD and activists such as Máire Drumm, a leading figure of Cumann na mBan and Vice President of Provisional Sinn Féin (1972-1976). Drumm had come to prominence as a leader of the new wave of street protest that engulfed nationalist areas as military repression increased. For example, her and other women would famously lead the large crowd that broke the Falls Road curfew in 1970. Drumm first spoke at a PD meeting outside Armagh jail in the summer of 1970, and later worked closely with the PD in building the NRM until the end of 1972. The relationship continued into the mid 1970s when later prisoner's campaigns were launched. Indeed, when Drumm was killed in 1976 the then central committee of the PD

offered an obituary that expressed deep regret at the loss of a ‘dedicated anti-imperialist and comrade in the struggle...we in People’s Democracy salute the memory of Máire Drumm, we are proud to have worked and struggled alongside her.’<sup>699</sup> Fergus O’Hare, who played a central role in the NRM, recalls their political connection in the early days of the anti-internment movement:

I can remember attending meetings in the early days with Máire Drumm, who was a very much involved in political mobilisations. Máire was a renowned sort of street speaker, she could make very mobilising or inspirational speeches, I suppose if you wanted to call them that... We worked for a long time quite closely with her, and again the media have her, you know, painted her as a rabble rousing rightwing... whereas I worked quite a lot with her and she was very interested in the political analysis that we were putting forward and I remember her saying that... She certainly had time for the sort of messages that we were putting out.<sup>700</sup>

There is also evidence to suggest that some internees were won to the politics of the PD, which includes more controversial figures associated with the Provisional campaign. In August 1973 the *Unfree Citizen* noted a ‘growing number of internees joining People’s Democracy’ and carried a letter from Long Kesh written by one new recruit.<sup>701</sup> It was penned by Freddie Scappaticci; then a twenty seven year old internee who had served a two-year sentence in the camp. Scappaticci’s letter was a fairly run-of-the-mill piece, which documented his

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<sup>699</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, 16 October 1976.

<sup>700</sup> Interview Fergus O’Hare, Belfast, 08/06/2015.

<sup>701</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 2, No 47, 13 August 1973.

internment in August 1971 and experiences of prison life. The PD were enthusiastic about the input of internees:

Through political study, activity and discussion within the hell-hole that is Long Kesh, he and other internees have decided to join PD. We regard this as one of the greatest compliments ever paid to our politics and organisation.<sup>702</sup>

It is unlikely Scappaticci's membership of the PD lasted long, and the welcome of it in the PD newspaper is an ironic read considering his later history. After release from prison Scappaticci would go on play a central role in the Provisional IRA, where he acted as head of the movement's 'internal security unit', a position that saw him oversee a large number of brutal executions, which are to this day shrouded in controversy. In 2003 he was exposed as the double agent known as 'Stakeknife', purported to be working for British intelligence for a long period throughout this time, and has been in hiding ever since.<sup>703</sup>

The extent to which the PD recruited new members inside the Long Kesh in the early 1970s was probably overstated by the organisation, as there is little evidence to suggest any notable base of membership ever existed inside the prison. Nevertheless, it does help highlight the type of unity that was developing in a context of escalating conflict between republicans and the British army. Underlying this was a more fundamental embrace of anti-imperialist politics and an appreciation of how the PD viewed the armed struggle is necessary to draw

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<sup>702</sup> Ibid.

<sup>703</sup> For the inside account of Scappaticci's role as a British double agent in the PIRA see, Greg Harkin and Martin Ingram, *Stakeknife: Britain's double agents in Ireland* (O'Brien Press, 2004).

this out. This shift toward the Provisionals was primarily driven by Michael Farrell, whose own experience of internment gave him, ‘a new insight into the weight of repression the nationalist community had suffered over the years and the endurance and resilience of the republican tradition even if its political thinking had often been limited’.<sup>704</sup> At the end of 1971 Farrell wrote a series of articles for the *Unfree Citizen* that argued a clear line of support for the republican movement. Farrell contended that socialists should not equate the violence of an oppressed national minority with the violence of an imperial oppressor, and that the left should not join the chorus of condemnation against the Provisional IRA that was being put forward by both the Unionist state and the mainstream media. Although the PD had fundamental differences with republican political philosophy and the strategy of the PIRA, Farrell argued that the resurgence of the Provisionals was not primarily rooted in such ideology; rather, it was a consequent reaction to the level of repression that met the nationalist community since 1968. In this context the Provisionals had moved away from playing a defensive role toward, ‘fighting one half of an anti-imperialist war— the other half is the mass civil resistance movement which is equally important’. The PD now viewed the military struggle and the political campaign as mutually reinforcing. Farrell concluded, ‘Socialists must of course support the struggle against imperialism ... and co-operate with the Provisionals who are doing most of the fighting. But that support and co-operation must be critical.’<sup>705</sup>

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<sup>704</sup> Farrell, ‘Long march to freedom’, p. 64.

<sup>705</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, 10 December 1971.

The PD criticised the Provisionals for a number of reasons, particularly when their actions led to the deaths of innocents, but also their alliances with sections of the Irish political establishment and the conservative anti-socialism that was prominent in their political literature. However, the PD argued that when a conflict raged between an imperialist power and an oppressed minority, the socialist left could not take a noncommittal stance in which violence was condemned on both sides equally. Rather, they should support the IRA against the British state and simultaneously engage in a process of debate and discussion with the republican movement, in the hope to win them to a more progressive strategy and ultimately a socialist position. This began a long period of attempting to shift the Provisional movement to the left, arguing that the armed campaign should act as an appendage to the political movement. Farrell drew on the history of republican compromises with the capitalist system to argue for a socialist led strategy directing the movement:

Politics and the gun must go hand in hand and politics must direct the gun. ...What is needed today if the Workers' Republic is to become a reality is a new generation of guerrillas with a clear political outlook who will sweep the con-men out of the 'arena' and negotiate their own settlement with the imperialists. Revolutionary socialists in the North should be deeply involved in the struggle against Stormont and Westminster and should cooperate fully with the Provisionals while remaining free to criticise individual actions and overall aspects of the campaign such as the apparent disregard for the lives of innocent



Protestant— or indeed Catholic— civilians. Such criticism, however, will only be listened to by those who are involved in the struggle.<sup>706</sup>

The PD and the Provisional movement now shared the same goal— the overthrow of the Northern state— although this demand was based upon different political visions. In 1971 the strategy of the PIRA was dictated by the guiding principles of the *Éire Nua* document, which called for the establishment of ‘Dail Uladh’, a federal assembly envisaged for the nine counties of historic Ulster, one of four such assemblies intended to form a new all Ireland parliamentary structure. When a meeting was held in Monaghan to establish a ‘Council of Ulster’, PD members attended.<sup>707</sup> The Dail Uladh strategy had little relationship to the socialist tradition in Ireland. Despite rhetoric about taking control of the ‘means of production’, it was a call for an independent bourgeois Irish state and reflected an ideological challenge to the type of socialism that had categorised the republican movement since the early 1960s, by now aptly expressed in the politics of the Officials. However, the strategy chimed in with PD thinking in its call for the abolition of Stormont and the establishment of alternative centres of power in the North. Throughout the same period the PD campaigned for a ‘Parliament of the Streets’, in which the anti-Unionist community could take control of their areas through popular councils and organise independently from the Unionist state, effectively opting out of its governance.<sup>708</sup>

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<sup>706</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, 10 December 1971.

<sup>707</sup> *Irish News*, 23 August 1971.

<sup>708</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 14, 15 October 1971.

The armed struggle and the mass civil disobedience campaign were viewed as forming the dynamic of a revolutionary process in the north, one that had the potential to overthrow the state. The PD assumed the role of the political left in the emerging anti-imperialist movement. Fergus O'Hare recounts an experience that seems symbolic of how the PD tried to organise politically amidst a situation of near civil war:

I can remember setting up a poster workshop, and being involved in a poster workshop whenever there was a massive gun battle going on outside and we're producing propaganda, and then having to bring the posters up the road in a van... Trying to organise politically in a situation where there are actual gun battles going on in the street, when British soldiers are coming up. The time I'm thinking of is just after internment, when there was a massive gun battle in Ballymurphy and you could hear this going on and, you know, you're watching out to see if the troops are coming up and all this sort of stuff.<sup>709</sup>

It was in this context that NRM began to organise marches in support of the internees, but the attempt to remobilise a protest movement should not be seen simply as tailing the armed struggle. It reflected a different conception through which the campaign to bring down the Northern state should be conducted—through mass protest, mass action, and the involvement of the population alongside the guerrilla movement. Eamonn McCann, although not a PD member, would be central to the remobilisation of the civil rights movement and provides

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<sup>709</sup> Interview with Fergus O'Hare, Belfast, 08/06/2015.

a useful analysis of the kind of leftwing thinking that once again was responsible for a return to mass protest at this juncture:

The faction most in favour of marching, almost as a matter of principle, was the left within the broader civil rights movement. The argument was that none of the other forms of protest provided a way for the mass of working people to become actively involved in the fight. The rent and rates strike had its attractions, but it was a passive sort of activity. The armed struggle could, of its nature, only involve a few, while rioting was appropriate mainly to the energetic young. At the core of this argument there was a conviction that in politics the means can determine the ends; the question of whether change could be won by electoralism and parliamentary manoeuvre, or by trial of arms, or by mass action, would help determine the nature of that change.<sup>710</sup>

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<sup>710</sup> McCann, *Bloody Sunday in Derry, what really happened?* p. 62.

### 6.5. Return to the Streets

Four days after the conference that launched the NRM activists began a coordinated return to activity, first by organising anti-internment pickets throughout the North. In early December the NRM took part in ‘border fillings’ across the country.<sup>711</sup> After internment the military had set about on a policy of cratering border roads with explosives, in order to prevent suspected IRA movements— anti-internment activists in rural areas responded with campaigns to refill the roads and make them accessible.<sup>712</sup> A more substantial return to the streets was called by the NRM alongside trade unionists in a march from west Belfast to Long Kesh on Christmas day, 1971. The march was intended to coincide with a commercial ‘Christmas boycott’ called by the PD, during which supporters of the internees would be encouraged to buy only cards and gifts that contributed to internment funds.<sup>713</sup>

25 December 1971 would be no normal Christmas in Northern Ireland. Two days after the festive celebrations the army issued a stern warning to parents throughout Belfast’s Lower Falls, stating that children playing with toy guns would likely be mistaken as genuine targets: ‘Remember— if your child plays with toy weapons in the street he may be shot. Don’t let this happen.’<sup>714</sup> Nevertheless, the call from the PD to boycott Christmas most likely came across as an unrealistic demand among the wider community.<sup>715</sup> Whilst the boycott did

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<sup>711</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6 No 4, January 1977.

<sup>712</sup> *Irish News*, 14 October 1971.

<sup>713</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 1 No 23, 17 December 1971.

<sup>714</sup> *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 December 1971.

<sup>715</sup> One statement from internees inside Long Kesh who were going to fast as a protest on Christmas day, while offering full support to all those willing to sacrifice on behalf of their plight, cautioned against the idea of the boycott ‘We

not take off, the PD did begin to remobilise groups of activists willing to break the marching ban in support of those behind the wire in Long Kesh.

Anti-internment rallies had hitherto been confined to demonstrations and mass gatherings inside Catholic areas. The PD intended to break this by walking from the Beechmount estate in west Belfast, out of the densely populated Catholic slum to the prison camp. The route of the march traversed the M1 motorway to Long Kesh, some 10 miles outside Belfast, but was met by a large military presence roughly three miles ahead, which stopped the crowd and a sit-down protest on the motorway ensued. Bernadette Devlin, Michael Farrell and Frank McManus, MP, delivered speeches.<sup>716</sup> Although the marchers had broken the ban no arrests were made, and the *Irish News* reported that police and Army had not interfered with the march 'because it was the season of goodwill'<sup>717</sup>.

The PD would later point to the march as a breakthrough: 'Over 2,000 people turned out on Christmas day, defied the ban and automatic six-month jail sentence, outwitted the Army and got halfway to Long Kesh along the motorway.'<sup>718</sup> While the numbers on the march were probably exaggerated by the *Unfree Citizen*, it did pressurise NICRA into remobilisation and precipitated demonstrations in the New Year. Immediately after Christmas, NICRA called a demonstration for 2 January in the Falls Park in west Belfast. The march was a

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ask that children's lives be made as happy as possible, that they should be allowed to relax and enjoy themselves amongst their families and friends and that they should not be made to sacrifice more.' *Irish News*, 20 December 1971.

<sup>716</sup> *Irish News*, 28 December 1971.

<sup>717</sup> *Irish News*, 28 December 1971.

<sup>718</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6, No 4, January 1977.

safer bet as it stayed inside 'Catholic' areas, but it was to be the first in a series of NICRA actions and mobilised up to 7,000 people.<sup>719</sup>

On 15 January the NRM marched in Dublin and on 22 January, in Armagh, a reported 2,000 attended a demonstration where they met a huge military presence that was said to have turned Armagh into a 'fortress'.<sup>720</sup> Again, on 29 January the NRM marched, this time joined by the Tyrone Central Civil Resistance Committee, to retrace the original civil rights march from Coalisland to Dungannon. When activists remobilised they would come up against a much heavier level of security. Dungannon's Market Square was sealed off by a massive concentration of police and military, and UDR roadblocks stopped and searched marchers. Eventually the marchers crossed a field in order to break the ban.<sup>721</sup> NICRA did not support the NRM marches, but it would begin to organise its own actions and as broader forces mobilised crowd sizes increased.

While the PD was marching in Armagh on 22 January, John Hume led a large demonstration to the newly opened internment camp at Magilligan outside Derry. The march coincided with other demonstrations in Newry and Castlewellan. Faced with the remobilisation of civil rights protest the military acted with open repression in order to stabilise Faulkner's regime. It was most evident at Magilligan, where demonstrators were met with CS gas, rubber bullets and baton charges from the paratroopers. Ivan Cooper claimed that he was hit on

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<sup>719</sup> *Irish News*, 3 January 1972.

<sup>720</sup> *Sunday Independent*, 23 January 1972. Also see *Irish News*, 26 January 1972.

<sup>721</sup> *Irish News*, 31 January 1972.

the head with a rubber bullet and afterward opposition MPs castigated the ‘appalling savagery’ of the British army.<sup>722</sup>

Therefore, when NICRA called an anti internment march intending to break the ban in Derry on Sunday, 30 January, some confrontation with the military was seen to be inevitable, but none quite expected what would come. Opinion surrounding a ‘return to the streets’ varied, and some in NICRA were against marching. Bríd Ruddy was one of two PD members who had rejoined the NICRA executive after internment, alongside Kevin Boyle. Ruddy recalls that due to the impact of internment ‘more and more of the women were coming forward’ to lead activity in an increasingly dangerous context. In particular, Ruddy remembers the series of shootings of civilians by the British Army at Ballymurphy in Belfast after the introduction of internment between 9 and 11 August 1971, it resulted in 11 civilian deaths and involved the same Parachute Regiment which would be deployed in Derry, ‘there was a possibility of people getting killed. But NICRA still decided to go and it was all the people in NICRA who were very opposed to PD who were at the front of the march.’ In January the NICRA executive had met for a final debate on the march. The leadership was divided over whether to go ahead, and as it went to vote the two PD members pressed strongly for mobilisation: ‘In the end we just got it by a hairs whisper really [...] It was very, very close, but I think we did win the day and I think NICRA were forced into taking the stand that they did, and fair play to

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<sup>722</sup> *Irish News*, 24 January 1971.

them'.<sup>723</sup> As the day approached the march organisers stressed their commitment to peaceful non-violence.<sup>724</sup>

When the 10,000 strong march attempted to move outside of Derry's Catholic area it was prohibited by the army, resulting in a small-scale riot that was, by now, a regular occurrence in the Bogside. The military response was to open fire with live rounds, resulting in the death of 14 unarmed civil rights protestors, in what seemed a calculated attempt to put down anti-Unionist forces.<sup>725</sup> The events of Bloody Sunday have been well documented as sounding the death knell of the civil rights movement and pushing Northern Ireland into its most violent period in history. After the killings in Derry recruitment to the PIRA soared and a more intense phase of violence began, but often overlooked is the extent to which mass mobilisation engulfed Ireland in a way that broke beyond both the established currents of constitutional nationalism and the armed campaign launched by both sections of the IRA.

Despite much reference to a period of 'national mourning' after Bloody Sunday— a term that originated in calls from the Irish government, — what erupted is better described as an explosion of solidarity with civil rights protestors. In Ireland, tens of thousands of workers took strike action in Cork, Galway, Limerick, Dundalk and Dublin. As far away as the east coast of the US, dockers refused to handle British ships and in Dublin, after three days of rioting, the British embassy was burnt to the ground.<sup>726</sup> Across the North there were

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<sup>723</sup> Interview with Bríd Ruddy, Belfast, 10/12/2015.

<sup>724</sup> *Irish News*, 28 January 1972.

<sup>725</sup> O'Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites*, p. 285.

<sup>726</sup> *Irish News*, 3 February 1972. Also see, McCann, *Bloody Sunday in Derry, what really happened?* pp. 166-167.



walkouts, protests and riots in almost all areas that held nationalist majorities. The *Unfree Citizen* listed some of the solidarity actions— a three-day general strike in Derry, a general strike in Omagh and Armagh. In Belfast, serious rioting broke out across the city and thousands of students took part in protests at Queen's.<sup>727</sup> In almost every working class Catholic estate people rioted and blocked roads and huge crowds flocked to Derry for the funerals of the victims.<sup>728</sup> Famously, Bernadette Devlin, who was on the platform during the march, delivered her own form of 'proletarian protest' to the British government when she thumped Tory MP Reginald Maudling in the House of Commons, after he argued that the army had fired in self defence against the IRA— a claim that is now commonly recognised as false.<sup>729</sup>

In Britain, the AIL organised marches in eight cities, Edinburgh, Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol, Cambridge, Leeds, Glasgow and London.<sup>730</sup> John Gray recalls that the London demonstration reached a peak, 'a huge moment' in terms of Irish solidarity demonstrations. Gray helped lead the demonstration to Downing Street where it ran into serious clashes with the London police. Afterward Gray's London home was raided and some activists were arrested for their part in the demonstration.<sup>731</sup> The reaction of the broader working class and anti-Unionist constituency in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday stood in stark contrast to that of the British state, which defended the actions of

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<sup>727</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 27, 4 February 1972.

<sup>728</sup> The *Irish News* reported that over 27, 000 people attended the funerals of the Bloody Sunday dead, see, *Irish News* 3 February 1972.

<sup>729</sup> *Irish News*, 1 February 1972.

<sup>730</sup> *Irish News*, 5 February 1972.

<sup>731</sup> Interview with John Gray, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

the paratrooper regiment in Derry and attempted to draw a line under events by forcing through the now discredited Widgery tribunal.<sup>732</sup>

Immediately after Bloody Sunday the PD released a statement arguing that the task ahead of the civil resistance movement was inadvertently clear, there could be no reform of the Unionist state and they must smash the Stormont regime.<sup>733</sup> If opposition to Stormont reached a peak after Bloody Sunday, this was not translated into action by the mainstream left and labour movement. The outpouring of opposition to Bloody Sunday came primarily from working class forces, but the role of the official labour movement and established left stood in contradistinction to the conclusion that was being drawn by many Catholics throughout the north— that it was now necessary to fight the Unionist state through any means necessary. The inability of the left to make any meaningful contribution to the fight against the Stormont state further enshrined its irrelevancy to the struggle in the north.

For example, the NILP had joined Faulkner's cabinet in 1971 and thus found it difficult to distance itself from the repression that had been meted out by the military. Two days following Bloody Sunday, Vivian Simpson, the only remaining NILP MP at Stormont, took part in a Commons debate surrounding

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<sup>732</sup> The Widgery report exonerated the military and placed the blame for the massacre on civil rights marchers and the IRA. *Report of the Tribunal appointed to inquire into the events on Sunday, 30 January 1972, which led to loss of life in connection with the procession in Londonderry on that day*, by the Rt. Hon. Lord Widgery, O.B.E., T.D. H.L. 101, H.C. 220, April 1972.

<sup>733</sup> The anti-imperialist demands that were forwarded by the NRM were repeated; Smash Stormont, ending of internment, withdrawal of troops from the streets pending their full withdrawal, withdrawal of the Special Powers Act, investigation into interrogation methods used by Special branch, sacking of the judiciary and full implementation of civil rights. *Unfree Citizen*, emergency bulletin, February 1972.

the killings in Derry. After Faulkner had delivered a speech that defended the security forces, he was followed by a variety of Unionist MPs who blamed the IRA and the civil rights movement for the violence. The timidity of Simpson's intervention is most striking, endorsing some of Faulkner's speech he did not speak out against any of the claims surrounding the violence and was on this occasion uncritical of the both the government and the military, calling for, 'new political initiatives so that we may get to the point in time that violence will not be uppermost in our minds.'<sup>734</sup> The speech illustrated how disconnected the NILP were from the growing street movement. The NILP had long held a position that supported partition and the existence of the Unionist state, confining it to a 'labour Unionist' tradition and casting the party increasingly out of touch with the trajectory of nationalist politics.<sup>735</sup>

If those who strove to be political representatives of the working class had been detached from the opposition to state violence, so too was that of the broader labour movement. Since internment the ICTU had performed a function that could be described as avoiding and ignoring the most oppressive instances of violence against the minority community. It was a reflection of ICTU's more general relationship with the Northern state. The fact that internment saw many trade union members unlawfully imprisoned was rarely taken up, and when trade unionists at grassroots level did get behind the NRM march that broke the ban on Christmas 1971 the leadership of ICTU distanced itself from such actions.<sup>736</sup>

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<sup>734</sup> Stormont Hansard, 1 February 1972, Volume 84, pp. 37-38.

<sup>735</sup> For an account of the NILP see, Edwards, *A History of the Northern Ireland Labour Party*.

<sup>736</sup> Indeed, one ICTU official in Belfast was said to have called on union members not to take part in the march. Boyd, *Have the trade unions failed the north?* p. 80.

Subsequently, when 6 trade union members were gunned down during Bloody Sunday, the trade union movement did not officially take part in mobilisations, instead organising a 'peace conference' in Belfast two days after the killings.<sup>737</sup>

The mass revulsion after Bloody Sunday found little organised expression and the PD found more in common with the Provisionals in their fight to overthrow an 'irreformable' state.

On 31 January, a meeting took place in Dungannon encompassing representatives from all of the major anti-internment currents, where the PD called for immediate joint action. The *Unfree Citizen* reported that the feeling in the meeting was in favour of such action, were it not for the Communist Party and Official IRA representatives who wanted to channel all action through NICRA.<sup>738</sup> When NICRA called a demonstration, for 6 February in Newry, the turnout was on a scale never seen before and the march mobilised up to 50,000 people. Yet the march also encapsulated the contradictory impasse that the civil rights movement had reached. Now mobilising huge numbers— a product of the mass movement that was erupting against the Northern state— the civil rights leadership offered no political strategy. NICRA organiser Kevin McCorry reportedly went to great lengths in the run up to the march to plead with people from across Ireland not to come to Newry, urging that the march would be non-political.<sup>739</sup> The Newry demonstration took a different form than previous civil rights demonstrations, the leaflet distributed by the local Civil Rights Association called for calm:

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<sup>737</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>738</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 27, 4 February 1972.

<sup>739</sup> McCann, *Bloody Sunday in Derry, what really happened?* p. 178.

This march is to be in total silence in honour of the Derry dead. We are marching to show our contempt for the Stormont system by breaking the ban on parades [...] We are not searching for a confrontation with the British Army... Silence and discipline are our watchwords.<sup>740</sup>

The sentiments of the leaflet undoubtedly chimed in with the mood after the funerals of the Derry dead, but they likely stood in contrast to the feeling inside Catholic working class areas, where the violence had been most strongly felt. If the Newry rally was a powerfully effective demonstration that unwarranted aggression had been meted out to protestors, it also symbolised the end of the civil rights movement, as non-violent reform of the state was cast aside for many in a generation of Irish Catholics who had seen the civil rights campaign rise and fall against continued repression.

The PD attacked NICRA for not building on the potential of events. Michael Farrell described the Newry march as, ‘remarkably docile, never coming near to realising its revolutionary potential, 50,000 marchers demanding an end to Stormont could have struck terror into Heath and Faulkner; demanding an end to Lynch they could have gone a long way to toppling him. They done nothing of the kind.’<sup>741</sup> Farrell contended that the march should have been used to bind the Northern opposition MP’s— both SDLP and NILP— to a policy of ‘no talks until internment ends and Stormont is abolished’, and to assert the right of the extra-parliamentary resistance movement to do the talking when these conditions

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<sup>740</sup> Newry Civil Rights Association, instructions for marchers 6 February 1972, *Kevin Boyle Papers*, A44/1/2/13, James Hardiman Archive, National University of Ireland, Galway.

<sup>741</sup> *Unfree Citizen* No 29, February 18, 1972.

were met. He argued that NICRA had no intention of pushing through such a radical position, which was the culmination of a series of positions and decisions by NICRA that had the effect of emasculating the resistance movement, centred around their attitude to Stormont, to the SDLP and to the very conduct of the campaign.<sup>742</sup>

On 13 February NICRA held its annual conference. Up to 600 delegates gathered and Kevin Boyle forwarded an amendment that tried to merge NICRA with the NRM. Among other things, the amendment called for a stepping up of the campaign in order to secure 'the temporary suspension of Stormont as the only feasible means' on the road to challenging Unionist dominance in the short term, and securing a united Ireland as a longer-term goal. It was defeated by 175 votes to 144.<sup>743</sup> Nevertheless, the PD kept up activity. On the same day as the NICRA conference the NRM marched in Enniskillen, attracting up to 10,000 people out on to the streets and marking the ninth time that anti internment marchers had broken Faulkner's ban. Despite warnings of violence the march passed off relatively peacefully and Michael Farrell warned that the NRM would continue marching until 'they had marched over the ruins of Stormont.'<sup>744</sup> The march showed that the PD was still capable of pulling off substantial mobilisations, but the reality was that by 1972 the tide of resistance had greatly shifted toward republican militarism.

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<sup>742</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>743</sup> *Irish News*, 14 February 1972.

<sup>744</sup> *Irish News*, 14 February 1972.

## 6.6. Dual Power

By 1972 the claim that the Northern state was a democratic entity had been greatly undermined. The breakdown of democracy and the clampdown of security against the broader anti-Unionist movement were widespread. Many PD members found themselves faced with increased charges due to their role in breaking the marching ban. In February three PD members, Michael Farrell, Kevin Boyle and Dermot Kelly, were summonsed to court for their part in the NRM actions that began the remobilisation of the civil rights movement at the beginning of that year. The courtroom was packed with some 60 RUC officers in the public gallery, as well as British soldiers. Each of the PD activists were sentenced to six-month jail sentences and from the dock Farrell delivered a speech that strongly attacked the legal dispensation:

Some evidence is being offered that I have committed certain actions but I want to challenge the whole basis of the legal set-up here, which decides what is legal or illegal. I am not guilty of any offence, because it appears to me that the system of law and justice in this state has broken down and collapsed. On the 9th August 1971, the door of my house was broken in and armed soldiers burst in and took me away at gunpoint. Later that day I was assaulted, beaten up and maltreated at Girdwood Park military barracks and then lodged in Crumlin Road jail. I was held there for five weeks and then released. At no time was I given any explanation for this treatment. It was later shown that it was all quite illegal even under the terms of the Special Powers Act. Yet I have no redress and there are some 700 or 800

others like me, still being held . . . the law in any society is based on a contract between the State and the citizen. When the State oversteps this authority, when it tramples on the rights of citizens, when it shoots down people in cold blood, then that contract is dissolved.<sup>745</sup>

The process of repression highlighted by Farrell fuelled the ranks of the republican movement, and both the PIRA and the OIRA unleashed a wave of violence after Bloody Sunday. While republican actions were primarily aimed at security services and the military, the armed campaign increasingly took on a more brutal form with disregard for the lives of innocent civilians. One major instance was an Official IRA bomb in Aldershot military barracks on 22 February that killed 7 non-military members of staff.

Simultaneously, a wider level of communal struggle developed. As the rent and rates strike continued, entire Catholic areas threw up barricades, virtually seceding from the state and developing ‘no-go’ areas on a larger scale. The position of the Unionist government was now so unsecure that the British were forced to intervene— heralding the suspension of Stormont. Announced by Ted Heath on 24 March, it was solidified with the implementation of Direct Rule on 30 March. The suspension of Stormont fulfilled one of the central demands of the civil resistance movement, but it also presented a contradictory situation in that the British government was now in control of the Northern state while the no go areas existed— a balance of power that could not last forever. For the PD this situation compromised a context of ‘Dual Power’, with the Catholic community

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<sup>745</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, 28 February 1972.



controlling whole areas of the state on the one hand, and the British government on the other.

The PD viewed these areas as containing the potential to develop socialist forms of organisation. The ‘liberated’ Catholic areas were zones in which the British Army was unable to enter, where republicans moved with some level of freedom and grassroots civil resistance committees flourished. As the *Unfree Citizen* put it: ‘whole areas have seceded from the state and there is a situation of Dual Power where some areas are controlled by the state and some by the people.’<sup>746</sup> From this position of strength the return to a reformed version of Stormont was seen as a retreat. The PD saw the ‘autonomous’ centres of community organisation as being capable of posing a fundamental challenge to the state. After an NRM conference in March the movement announced,

a decision to revolutionise the resistance movement through the setting up of an alternative society within the seceded areas and to press for the creation of an embryonic state from within, where the people will administer their own services, set up their own cooperatives and courts and govern their lives accordingly to their own dictates.<sup>747</sup>

The ceded areas saw the British military pushed out of many Catholic working class estates, through a combination of republican armed action and mass civil disobedience that could claim to enjoy a significant level of support. Many estates had developed networks of rank and file community organisation and

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<sup>746</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 39, 28 April 1972.

<sup>747</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 33, 17 March 1972.

self-help. Ranging from anti-internment activity to welfare based initiatives such as cleaning up estates and fixing streetlights, and more generally taking over the role of local authorities in the absence of any government control. For example, in the Andersonstown estate various local committees existed, and in Ardoyne a 'People's Assembly' was in the process of being set up in order to extend grassroots community control. The PD saw these as potential harbingers for a future socialist society: 'Already areas like Andersonstown, Ardoyne and Armagh are embarked on this course... It will lay the base for the emergence of a new socialist society to replace the capitalist institutions North and South.'<sup>748</sup>

The New Lodge area in north Belfast provided an apt example, a working class estate that had been the scene of much conflict since the onset of the troubles. After the establishment of the 'New Lodge Road Resistance Council'—through which residents had elected representative committees, — the PD claimed that this body would represent 20,000 people and described the functions of the council as being akin to deciding 'issues of policy in relation to the complete self government of the area'. The emergence of these types of organisation meant that,

A stage has been reached where the anti-Unionists have completely broken from Unionist and British government institutions. Vast areas of the North respect no traditional forms of government and feel the need for organisation in each area. Democracy has been put into the

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<sup>748</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 33, 17 March 1972.

hands of the people [...] and the people are electing their own leaders and forcing their own democratic organisations.<sup>749</sup>

Therefore, 'It is the duty of revolutionary socialists to foster and develop these potential soviets, to give them political direction, and to complete their organisation. Each area must be coordinated on a national level and a democratic parliament of the streets built up.'<sup>750</sup> Fergus O'Hare recalls activity in west Belfast, where by 1972 the PD had an Andersonstown branch:

I can remember us organising what we called at the time a parliament of the streets and actually organising an election...It just got off the ground, but it didn't fly for very long... I can remember that being organised as an election campaign throughout certainly the Andersonstown... it was mostly that area that I was involved in, and you had polling booths in people's garages and in people's kitchens and people nominated who they wanted to stand and people voted for them... people participated in them... It didn't last for very long... but again it was that idea of self-organisation...bring revolutionary or progressive ideas, I mean it was almost the idea of Soviets or something to get people organised.<sup>751</sup>

The reference to 'Soviets' was not simple rhetoric. It reflected how the PD viewed the upsurge in community activism, civil disobedience and the no-go areas more generally as akin to revolutionary centres of power that could provide alternative societal structures; although it should be recognised that the situation

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<sup>749</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 38, 21 April 1972.

<sup>750</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 38, 21 April 1972.

<sup>751</sup> Interview with Fergus O'Hare, Belfast, 08/06/2015.

of 'Dual Power' that was arising in the North owed more to the wider European experience of struggle in the 1970s than it did to the traditional method of 'Soviets', or popular workers' councils. The term 'Soviet' originated in the development of workers' councils during the Russian Revolution, representing the self-organisation of workers at the point of production and distribution and forming the basis of revolutionary working class power in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Leon Trotsky, leader of the first Soviet in 1905, described the development of such organs:

Prior to the Soviet we find among the industrial workers a multitude of revolutionary organizations.... But these were organizations *within the proletariat*, and their immediate aim was to achieve influence over the masses. The Soviet was, from the start, the organization *of the proletariat*, and its aim was the struggle for revolutionary power.<sup>752</sup>

Thus a workers' council applied methods of struggle that were determined by the nature of the working class, 'its role in production, its vast numbers, its social homogeneity' representing 'the organized expression of the class will of the proletariat'<sup>753</sup>. Historically, the principal method of struggle was the general strike and this contained the potential to transform the economic struggle of workers into a political contest for state power. A global phenomenon when working class self-activity reached a highpoint, they emerged, for example, in Germany in 1918, Italy 1919-1920 and more recently in Iran, in 1978-1979.

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<sup>752</sup> Leon Trotsky, *1905* (New York, Vintage Books, 1972), p. 251.

<sup>753</sup> *Ibid.*

Ireland itself was not immune to workers' councils with Soviets emerging during the revolutionary period of 1920-1921.<sup>754</sup>

An examination of the struggle in the North in the early 1970s testifies that what was emerging throughout the liberated nationalist areas were not organisations 'of the proletariat' in the sense outlined above. The form of struggle that was taking place in the North in 1972 was not based entirely on working class strength, nor was it situated at the point of production and distribution, i.e. workplaces, where workers held economic and material power—and thus had the ability to disrupt capitalist social relations. Instead, the no-go areas were based upon militant community mobilisation and various forms of civil disobedience that contained cross class contradictions, uniting working class militants with other elements in the nationalist community. Indeed, the no-go areas can be seen to have reflected the struggles that were developing across Europe since the upsurge of 1968, with the development of 'red bases', 'vanguards' and 'autonomous zones' bearing some resemblance to what was happening in the North of Ireland.<sup>755</sup>

Therefore, it could be argued that the PD overestimated the potential of these forms of struggle as capable of overthrowing the existing social order. For example, although the *Unfree Citizen* described the New Lodge Civil Resistance Committee as one that would 'decide issues of policy in relation to the complete self governance of the area', in reality, the role of the committee would be carrying out such activity as tidying up estates, repairing damages to houses,

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<sup>754</sup> For a labour history of these developments, see, Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland: popular militancy 1917 to 1923*.

<sup>755</sup> See, Harman, 1968: *The Fire Last Time*.

curbing vandalism and fixing street lighting.<sup>756</sup> These centres of ‘Dual Power’ reflected how the initially defensive struggle to protect areas had been transformed into an offensive struggle against the British state, as whole areas of the Catholic community opted out of the state. Nevertheless, the situation threw up all sorts of contradictions and possibilities for alternative forms of struggle aside from the armed campaign of republicanism.

By late 1972 then, the PD displayed a clear orientation toward the militancy of the Catholic community, which was a shift away from their previous strategy of uniting Protestant and Catholic workers. However, this should not be understood as a straightforward regression into republican politics, it was first and foremost a reflection of how difficult it had been to build working class unity inside the Northern state. It also reflected a trend across the global new left, which orientated toward the most militant aspects of social movements and communal struggle.

In European terms the PD was politically close to the Italian socialist group Lotta Continua (‘Continuous Struggle’), who sprung from similar roots to the PD and were described by the *Unfree Citizen* as ‘akin to the PD in philosophy and action’<sup>757</sup>. The connections between the PD and Lotta Continua were tentative but important. They published joint literature and coordinated

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<sup>756</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 38, 21 April 1972.

<sup>757</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 37, 14 April 1972. Initially a mass student movement that emerged in universities in 1968 Lotta Continua radicalized into an autonomous socialist group that attempted to build within the Italian working class. In time, sections of the Italian movement would experiment with the politics of armed struggle as a strategy for overthrowing the Italian state. Lotta Continua also produced a pamphlet to coincide with Kelly’s visit, titled *Ireland the Vietnam of Europe*, and a record of Irish protest songs.

speaking tours across Ireland and Italy.<sup>758</sup> In April 1972 PD member and former internee Dermot Kelly reported on one such tour, which was pitched as an opportunity to strengthen the links between Irish and Italian revolutionaries.<sup>759</sup> Kelly spoke at large events, reportedly 2,000 people in Turin, 3,000 in Milan and a rally of 7,000 in Rome and he described a keen interest on the rent and rates strike and the armed struggle.<sup>760</sup> Some weeks later the PD reciprocated when a three-man delegation of Lotta Continua visited Ireland, touring the country and speaking at various venues.<sup>761</sup> The struggle in the North had some effect on the PD's Italian counterparts, indeed, 'At one stage, leaders of Lotta Continua talked about setting up 'red bases' in the cities, and were impressed with the 'Northern Irish' model.'<sup>762</sup> Other sources recall that the Italian Left group Autonomia Operaia became interested in the struggle of ghetto riots being waged by the nationalist community.<sup>763</sup>

Yet if the Italian revolutionary left was reaching a peak in 1972, proving capable of influencing what possibly compromised the most combative working class in Europe, the Northern Irish left had moved swiftly to the sidelines amidst

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<sup>758</sup> Italian activist and photographer Fulvio Grimaldi was present in Derry on Bloody Sunday where he captured the scenes for the world to see on his camera. PD and Lotta Continua first published his images in a joint pamphlet, *Blood in the Street* (1972).

<sup>759</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 48, Friday 30 June 1972.

<sup>760</sup> Kelly stated: 'I concentrated on political developments, especially on the emergence of street committees, their functions and objectives' *Unfree Citizen*, No 37, 14 April 1972.

<sup>761</sup> *Unfree Citizen No 48*, Friday 30 June 1972. The tour included the showing of the film '12<sup>th</sup> December' directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini and the singing of both Italian and Irish revolutionary songs. Meetings were held in west and north Belfast, in Portadown and at Queen's University.

<sup>762</sup> *Sidney Tarrow, Democracy and Disorder: protest and politics in Italy 1965-1975* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1989), p. 303.

<sup>763</sup> Lorenzo Bosi, *Truly days of hope and anger*, p. 192.

a mounting conflict.<sup>764</sup> By 1972 the PD's social weight and influence was so minimal that its arguments surrounding the potential to form alternative structures of power against the Northern state were becoming increasingly irrelevant to the anti-imperialist struggle being waged by the republican movement. Whatever the validity of building a political movement outside of the republican armed campaign, the PD was not in a position to put its ideas into practice.

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<sup>764</sup> As Paul Ginsborg explains, 'The Italian revolutionary groups, taken together, were the largest new left in Europe. Throughout the period 1968-1976, they mobilised many thousands of militants in unceasing and exhausting activity, with the aim of creating a widespread anti-capitalist and revolutionary consciousness among the Italian working class.' *A History of Contemporary Italy, Society and Politics, 1943-1988* (London, Penguin Books 1990), p. 313.



## 6.7. Conclusion: Motorman and the fall of Stormont

The period of 'Dual Power' came to an end in mid 1972 after the British government moved to dismantle the 'no go' areas. The widespread opposition to the Unionist state was an intolerable situation for the British government, who, at first, took part in talks with the republican movement in an effort to reach a solution to the crisis. On 20 June a meeting took place between representatives of the PIRA and officials from William Whitelaw's office. It led to more considered talks with the British government on 7 July. Considering the nature of the republican struggle, such clandestine talks were inevitable, but for the PD the way in which the IRA had carried out the negotiations flew in the face of the democracy of the movement. The PD continually criticised the Provisional leadership for negotiating without consent or consultation with the civil disobedience movement.<sup>765</sup> Yet such criticism only served to illustrate the illusions that the PD had in the military struggle of the IRA, which never sought any form of democratic mandate for its actions.

The truce broke down two days after the talks, during a dispute over housing in west Belfast. It ushered in a new wave of violence with the most notorious incident occurring when up to twenty PIRA bombs exploded in Belfast on 21 July. Nine people were killed and over 130 were injured in the explosions. Such actions put those in the civil resistance movement who supported the Provisionals in a difficult position. John Gray recalls how 'Bloody Friday' was

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<sup>765</sup> The PD held the truce of 1972 as indicative of how the PIRA waged an elitist struggle, '...when the IRA called a truce in June 1972 they didn't consult the NRM or even inform it... we don't query the IRA's right to call a truce, but this episode showed a total lack of understanding by the Provos of what commitment to a united front involved...' *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6 No 4, January 1977.

detrimental to the civil resistance movement and the cause of socialism more generally. He remembers that support for the AIL in England considerably decreased, citing first the Aldershot bombings and then the Bloody Friday killings as key turning points. For Gray, Bloody Friday in particular meant that he could no longer remain in an organisation that supported the Provisional campaign.<sup>766</sup> Gray's break with the armed campaign was not typical of the Belfast base of the PD, who although responding critically to the Provisionals, refused to join in with the 'chorus of unconditional condemnation' being forwarded by the establishment. Instead, the *Unfree Citizen* cited its already established opposition to attacks that were certain to endanger civilian life, but it went on to argue that the armed campaign must continue because efforts at reaching a truce had been proven futile. What was needed was a more selective military campaign, supported by a political movement:

To the Provo volunteers we say... Redirect your campaign to places where civilians cannot be harmed... combine political and military activities... A strong political campaign backed up by selective military action will restore support for the resistance campaign's demands...<sup>767</sup>

Even if the PIRA were to heed such advice— something that was looking both unrealistic and unlikely as the armed campaign continued— the entire basis of the civil resistance movement being championed by the PD was to be dealt a serious blow by the end of that month, when the British military launched its biggest operation since the Suez crisis of 1956; 12,000 troops supported by tanks

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<sup>766</sup> Interview with John Gray, Belfast, 21/04/2015.

<sup>767</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 1 No 51, 31 July 1972.

and bulldozers descended onto the no-go areas across the north dismantling barricades and putting an end to the brief period of liberated areas. Operation Motorman ended the most heightened period of mass resistance to the Unionist state, and overnight anti-Unionist areas turned into heavily militarised zones. The PD continued to put forward a strategy based upon political protest and mobilisation at all cost, but conditions were no longer conducive to mass mobilisation. The *Unfree Citizen* reported a meeting against military occupation outside Casement Park on 2 August; attempts to storm the gates were met with rubber bullets.<sup>768</sup>

In this context the PD was reduced to essentially supporting the Provisionals on a propaganda basis and faced with such serious levels of repression many of the most militant activists saw the need to respond with arms and republican organisations, particularly the Provisionals, became a much more attractive option. The urge to hit back militarily through armed action was widespread across a generation of militant Catholics throughout the North. It was also evident among the small ranks of the PD, and activists recall that some members left the PD and entered the republican movement. For example, Gerry O'Hare, a PD member from a working class background who had been imprisoned in the Long Kesh, cited internment as a major moment in convincing him that it was necessary to launch an armed struggle against the state and left the PD to join the ranks of the Provisionals.<sup>769</sup>

The phase of resistance that met the Unionist government's policy of internment after August 1971 saw the PD play a significant role in reigniting

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<sup>768</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 2, No1, 14 August 1972.

<sup>769</sup> Interview with Gerry O'Hare, Belfast, 05/10/2015.

street protests and political radicalisation. This happened in a wider context of republican struggle against the military. Although the PD was a small organisation, it played a notable role in events while shifting to supporting the republican armed struggle. Considering the conclusions that the PD had drawn on the need to smash the Stormont state, and the level of violence that had engulfed Northern Ireland by 1972, it is perhaps unsurprising that the organisation was reduced to an auxiliary role in supporting the Provisional IRA. It was the maintenance of this type of position and the political, ideological and theoretical conclusions that were drawn in the aftermath of the phase of struggle outlined above that would largely define the PD into the future.

## Chapter 7: The long decline of the PD

### 7.1. Introduction

The years following 1972 were not favourable to the Irish left and the PD was reduced to a small current of the broader anti-imperialist movement. Although the organisation continued a serious level of activity for a decade or more, it was rarely able to influence events. Nevertheless the PD continued to make an important political and ideological contribution to the late 1970 and early 1980s. This chapter will draw out this process, charting the main tenets of PD activity while taking a longer look at the demise of the organisation.

By late 1972 the different phases of mass resistance to the Northern state, encompassing both the early phase of the civil rights movement and the civil disobedience campaign that erupted after internment, had waned and been superseded by armed struggle. The rise of the Provisionals saw an organised force come to the forefront of working class politics in Catholic areas and the PD's pursuit of a militant struggle against the state saw them align in support of the republican campaign. The PD had already articulated its own version of popular struggle for the Catholic masses when it championed a strategy based upon 'Dual Power', and their ideological outlook was a mix between the revolutionary enthusiasm that was symptomatic of the European-wide revolt since 1968, and Ireland's own revolutionary socialist tradition that claimed its lineage back to James Connolly.

This transition was directly informed by the experience of the civil rights campaign and it brought about a changing view on how socialist politics could develop. The PD had initially argued that Protestant workers were a crucial

component in the fight for socialism in Ireland, yet the organisation would change its perspective. This was chiefly a result of the circumstances that were developing at fast pace from 1972 onward— with the intense loyalist backlash and rise of loyalist paramilitarism. But it was also a product of the type of Marxism that informed the PD, most coherently expressed in the theoretical positions developed by Michael Farrell. The PD conviction that the centrality of working class struggle was the necessary driving force for socialist change had been fused amidst upsurges of activism since 1968, but the organisation had failed to build serious roots in working class areas capable of shaping the fight against the Northern state. As the struggle against repression intensified, the PD quickly shifted toward supporting the most consistent fighters of the northern state. Kieran Allen has explained the transition:

the revolutionaries in People's Democracy influenced by the spontaneist politics of 1968 believed that it was sufficient to be *the militants* of the movement. They pushed for *more* confrontation with the police, *more* marches, *more* sit-downs etc, but there was no real attempt to argue any particular strategy. At the start of the movement, therefore, PD was among those who argued most vehemently that partition was not the issue and that the struggle was to unite Catholic and Protestant workers against the Tories, North and South. However, when the movement itself turned into a fight against the British Army and the Northern state, PD became uncritical supporters of the Provos, writing off the Protestant working class as

semi fascist and seeing the Catholic ghettos of the North as the vanguard for the Irish revolution.<sup>770</sup>

This chapter attempts to explain these developments; it shows how the inability to win Protestant workers away from Unionist ideology was seen as a product of the economic and material relations of the 'Orange State', which viewed Protestant workers as a privileged caste wedded to the sectarian institutions of the state. Such a perspective was at its most convincing in the mid-1970s, when the loyalist movement was at its height and was capable of drawing significant levels of support from Protestant workers. In this context the PD drifted into support for militarism and temporarily characterising the loyalist backlash as representing a threat of 'Orange Fascism'. This chapter begins by analysing the Marxism of the PD and its approach toward loyalism and British imperialism in Ireland.

Once again changing the terms of the question, the PD now began to argue that working class unity was not possible until the structures of the state were dismantled and independence from Britain was achieved. Therefore, the PD prioritised the struggle to overthrow the state, and worked within the broader anti-imperialist movement. In this regard the PD was capable of playing a significant role — at a time when the republican movement was primarily focused on the military struggle as opposed to social and political mobilisation— and can be said to have punched above its weight in this sense. PD activists were among the first to stress the importance of building mass campaigns around the issue of the prison struggle in the North, and through organisations such as the

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<sup>770</sup> Kieran Allen, *Socialists, Republicanism and the Armed Struggle*, Socialist Workers Movement pamphlet (Dublin, Bookmarks, 1991), p. 6.

NRM and the Political Hostages Release Committee (PHRC), they launched the first serious initiatives in this direction. The Relatives Action Committees and the Smash H Block/Armagh campaign, the latter of which saw notable PD involvement from its inception, would spearhead the prison campaign during a period that saw the revitalisation of mass struggle in the North and the emergence of a new popular movement.

This chapter shows how the ideas and activity deployed at different times from the PD influenced sections of the republican movement, who were emerging from the Northern struggle. It navigates these developments and argues that although the PD played a marginal role in Irish politics, it was nonetheless important in developing the broader anti-imperialist political tradition. It was also a significant player in instigating moments of activism that influenced and resonated with the republican project in Ireland. However, the emergence of mass social and political agitation around the prison issue during the hunger strikes of 1980-1981 also served as a contradictory development for the organisation.

If the pre-hunger strike period was one in which the republican movement neglected political mobilisation, the period during and after the hunger strikes was one in which a new generation of activists emerged at the leadership of the Provisional movement, and began to reshape the outlook and activity of modern Irish republicanism in a political direction. These developments exposed the limitations of the politics espoused by the PD, as the republican movement occupied the space that the PD held throughout much of the 1970s, leading to a crisis of identity for the small organisation. This chapter shows how the decline of the PD was due to the political and theoretical



development of the organisation over a long period, which saw the new left that emerged in 1968 sacrifice the development of an independent Marxist tradition to what was essentially a republican position toward the struggle for national liberation and socialism in Ireland.

## 7.2. The Orange State

In the aftermath of the civil rights struggle the PD engaged in a process of analysis and attempted to explain the crisis that had erupted in the North. The ideological development of the PD is best expressed in the writings of Michael Farrell, particularly in his well-known book *Northern Ireland: The Orange State*, but while this work was not published until 1976, his analysis is found in PD publications throughout the mid-1970s.<sup>771</sup>

Farrell was perhaps the primary individual who applied a Marxist method to the experience and demise of the civil rights movement from 1968-1972. *The Orange State* provided the first in-depth history of Northern Ireland; with a fluid and erudite style of writing that was typical of its author, it became a widely read cornerstone text of Irish historiography, even among those who would disagree with its arguments.<sup>772</sup> A central thesis advanced by Farrell was that because the Unionist state functioned on the basis of Protestant supremacy— through handing out marginal privileges to the majority community, thus ensuring its allegiance to Unionism— working class unity inside the Northern state had been unable to develop. When moments of working class struggle did emerge, Farrell contended that the sectarian basis of the state was able to obstruct its development. Arguing that it was the relationship between the Protestant community and the Northern state that had prevented challenges to the Unionist monolith, Farrell cast the Protestant working class as a labour aristocracy, whose

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<sup>771</sup> Farrell, *The Orange State*.

<sup>772</sup> The best academic works that summarize literature surrounding the troubles have recognized the importance of this book, see, John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, pp. 179-181. Also see, McGarry and O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland*, p. 8.

main community of interest presumably lay not in its relationship with its Catholic counterparts, but with the employing classes.<sup>773</sup>

Efforts to reform the state had stoked a powerful sectarian backlash, unifying Protestant workers behind the most reactionary loyalist forces wanting a return to the old style Stormont rule. The development of this theoretical position meant the PD now contested that the pursuit of working class unity within the Northern state was not possible. Instead, socialists should prioritise the struggle to ‘Smash Stormont’; end partition and afterward a process of working class unity could develop.

This would see the PD align more closely with the republican movement, and the line of thinking is evident throughout the publications of the PD from 1972 onward. In October 1972 the *Unfree Citizen* forwarded a short-term solution to the crisis, which called for an end to internment, withdrawal of troops, and ‘the dissolution of the six county and twenty-six county states and the establishment of an all Ireland Republic’.<sup>774</sup> The PD now essentially argued that the national question needed resolving before class politics could actualize. While circumstances were against the development of working class unity in 1972, the theoretical outlook that underpinned such demands essentially tailed the republican call to first end partition as a precondition to launching a struggle

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<sup>773</sup> ‘Most confusion of all has arisen over the relations between Protestant and Catholic workers in Northern Ireland, and the utter failure of the Labour movement there—even in so heavily industrialised a city as Belfast. This failure can only be understood against the background of religious discrimination in employment, which divided the working class. Giving the Protestant a small but real advantage, and creating a Protestant ‘aristocracy of labour’.’ Farrell, *The Orange State*, ‘Preface’ (1976).

<sup>774</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 2 No 6, 2 October 1972.

for a social reorganisation of society. This strategy, in one form or another, essentially remained the position of the PD throughout the rest of its existence.

It was a marked shift. Indeed, it is notable that during the 1968-1970 period the PD were among the most avid champions of Protestant and Catholic unity as a means to challenge the Unionist state. Why then did the PD shift toward a political perspective that essentially dismissed Protestant working class agency in the pursuit of socialist politics? The answer to this question lies in understanding the connection between the *absence of any socialist challenge to sectarian politics* and the *extent of the loyalist backlash against reform of the Northern Ireland state*, both of which greatly informed the Marxism developed by the PD.

The wider context in the early 1970s was one of shrinking horizons for class politics. 1972 saw an intense shift to the right among the Protestant community as loyalist opposition escalated and attempted to reassert Protestant majority rule against any form of power sharing with nationalists. The formation of the Vanguard movement<sup>775</sup> signalled how the political right of Unionism was capable of mobilising significant sections of the Protestant working class around demands that sought a return to old style Stormont rule and repression. In response to this much of the left, and indeed the republican movement, viewed the rise of loyalist militancy as an expression of working class politics that held some progressive features. Against this trend, the PD saw the rise of loyalism as

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<sup>775</sup> 'Ulster Vanguard' was a militant loyalist movement led by William Craig that became a political party. It emerged from a split in the Unionist Party and was closely affiliated with loyalist paramilitaries.

an altogether reactionary political force, which illustrated how pro-imperialist the Protestant community had become.<sup>776</sup>

The re-emergence of loyalism took on a militarist tone, involving street protest with UDA members in paramilitary regalia, and recruitment to such organisations soared. By the mid-1970s the UDA may have had up to 30,000 members, and close connections existed between loyalist paramilitaries and Vanguard.<sup>777</sup> At one infamous rally William Craig told an 80,000 strong crowd,

We must build up a dossier of the men and women who are a menace to this country... because if and when the politicians fail us, it may be our job to liquidate the enemy.<sup>778</sup>

One journalist who covered the period summarised perceptions among the minority community; ‘they represented, with all their paramilitary trappings and the presence of the UDA, a menacing display reminiscent of Hitler’s Nuremburg rallies.’<sup>779</sup> The rise of Vanguard coincided with an escalation of sectarian murders and although these were widespread across both sides of the sectarian divide, the evidence suggests that loyalist killings—carried out by both the UDA

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<sup>776</sup> Farrell would later comment on the nature of loyalist paramilitaries: ‘It is sometimes argued that the UDA and UVF are a sort of Protestant working-class equivalent of the Provisional IRA and that they are potential allies against the ‘Establishment’. The parallel is based on the crudest superficialities e.g. their lower-class membership, usually lumpen proletarian or semi-criminal in the case of the Loyalists.... The UDA and UVF are consciously pro-imperialist and boast of their members’ ex-service records in other outposts in the Empire and both have had connections with the National Front. They represent the most reactionary and sectarian elements in the Protestant population and there is no basis whatsoever for co-operation between them and anti-imperialist organisations.’ Farrell, ‘Northern Ireland- an anti imperialist struggle’, *Socialist Register* Vol 14 (1977), p. 77.

<sup>777</sup> Peter Taylor, *Loyalists* (London, Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 115.

<sup>778</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>779</sup> *Ibid.*

and the UVF— were notable for being frequently indiscriminate. By the end of 1972 there had been 121 murders that were defined as assassinations, and two-thirds of these were carried out by what those in the anti-imperialist movement termed ‘loyalist death squads’.<sup>780</sup> From 1972-1976 the average number of killings in Northern Ireland ran at just over 300 per year, for example, in 1975 loyalists killed 121 people and the vast majority were innocent Catholic civilians.<sup>781</sup> Fergus O’Hare recalls the ‘horrendous, unspoken scenario’ of innocent Catholics being picked off and killed on purely sectarian grounds, which at the time, he argues, were insufficiently acknowledged in the media.<sup>782</sup>

The PD viewed the loyalist backlash as a brutal and reactionary phase that was rooted in the social and economic crisis of the Northern state. The loyalist project was based around uniting Protestant workers with middle and upper class elements of Unionism that sought a restoration of Orange power; it combined street mobilisation and violence with a regressive political programme. Using a perspective that borrowed from the writings of Trotsky, the PD described this as a threat of ‘Orange Fascism’.<sup>783</sup> They argued that the historic decline of Orange capital in the North— resulting in a decaying Ulster bourgeoisie— had created precarious and frightened sections of lower class Protestant workers, generating an emerging class alliance that had much to lose if changes occurred in the Northern state, hence the appeal of militant loyalism.<sup>784</sup>

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<sup>780</sup> Ibid, p. 113.

<sup>781</sup> Ibid, p. 143 and p. 157.

<sup>782</sup> Interview with Fergus O’Hare, Belfast, 08/06/2015.

<sup>783</sup> See, Leon Trotsky, *Fascism, what it is and how to fight it* (Pathfinder press, 1996).

<sup>784</sup> As the PD newspaper warned: ‘We are now seeing the irrational fears and hatreds spawned by Orangeism being given violent expression... The spectre of



substantial resistance within hard-line unionism, leading to the formation of the Ulster Workers Council (UWC) and mass Protestant stoppages in workplaces, spurred on by paramilitary violence and intimidation, which brought the British strategy to its knees. The UWC, which was in many ways a continuation of the LAW, relied on support from Vanguard, various Unionist leaders and loyalist paramilitaries. While the episode has been correctly described as a ‘lockout’, as opposed to a strike, because of the way that loyalists enforced the shut-down, the UWC did enjoy mass support and created a heightened climate of fear and intimidation in which doomsday scenarios were predicted by some in the nationalist community.<sup>785</sup>

When the power-sharing executive collapsed, the main lesson drawn by the PD was that the British were preparing to hand over power to an ascendant loyalist movement, and the wider economic context was seen to confirm this. Declining British interest in Ireland, the context of recession during 1973-1975, which saw the flight of multi-national capital including various factory closures in the North, alongside the extent to which the British military had colluded and acquiesced with loyalist opposition to reform, all contributed to a perspective that viewed the British state as preparing to withdraw from the North and handover power to the most sectarian components of Unionism, thereby allowing a much more openly repressive and potentially ‘Orange Fascist’ state to exist. By 1976 Farrell would conclude his influential history of the Northern State with a stark warning toward this end:

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<sup>785</sup> For an account of the UWC Strike see, Robert Fisk, *The point of no return: the strike which broke the British in Ulster* (London, Times Books, 1975).



Britain, once the master in the Northern State, is fast becoming the servant of the Ulster Loyalists. Orangeism, once the mere tool of the Unionist bourgeoisie, has become the dominant force in Northern politics. The loyalists are intent on restoring the Orange system and returning to the pre-1968 set-up. They want even greater powers than the old Stormont had.<sup>786</sup>

For Farrell the situation was devastatingly simple, ‘...between, on the one hand, a semi-fascist Orange statelet in the North matched by a pro-imperialist police state in the south, and, on the other hand, an anti-imperialist and socialist revolution.’<sup>787</sup>

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<sup>786</sup> Farrell, *The Orange State* p. 331.

<sup>787</sup> *Ibid*, p. 335.

### 7.3. Militarism

Any theory that warned of a semi-fascist loyalist takeover of the North would naturally dictate a different form of activism, which ought to be considered against the wider context of armed struggle in this period. From 1972 to 1976 the Provisional republican movement launched a sustained offensive during what Allen has described as a phase of ‘misplaced military optimism and near defeat’<sup>788</sup>. The Provisionals strongly banked on the military capacity of the IRA as being capable of overthrowing the Northern state and waged an aggressive campaign of bombing and shooting their way to the negotiating table. Among the republican leadership there existed a real belief that the heightened military campaign was proving to be successful, and that the British government was preparing for withdrawal— this line of thinking inside the Provisional movement contributed to a ceasefire in 1976, an engagement that would come back to haunt those who orchestrated it.

The PD initially supported this phase of armed struggle in a forthright manner. Yet while the *Unfree Citizen* parroted republican sloganeering, for example, by declaring that 1972 would be the ‘Year of Liberty’<sup>789</sup>, the organisation had clearly developed a different and unique analysis surrounding the threat of loyalism and the prospects for a British withdrawal. The PD challenged the optimism espoused by the Provisionals and instead warned that the loyalist movement was preparing for a takeover of power, one that would be aided and abetted by British imperialism. The conclusion they drew was that it was now necessary to prepare for a situation that would potentially wreak havoc

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<sup>788</sup> Allen, *1916*, p. 145.

<sup>789</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, No 24, 7 January 1972.

on the minority community. With the memory of August 1969 still vivid, the increase in state repression and the build up of paramilitary violence in the proceeding years, the PD now saw defence of Catholic areas as paramount.

In late 1973 PD members went about setting up their own armed-wing to be utilised in the event of a loyalist takeover. First discussed and established in 1973, the 'Revolutionary Citizens Army' (RCA) emerged primarily as a defensive mechanism in order to resist the possibility of a mass resurgence of attacks against the Catholic community. Its existence was made public by the *Unfree Citizen* in December 1974, which described it as 'clearly and unequivocally the military wing of the PD.'<sup>790</sup> The paper stated its *raison d'être*,

We have decided to make our existence known to the people at this time because of the rapidly deteriorating situation in the six counties where the daily collaboration between the British imperialist forces and loyalist private armies and murder gangs points to the imminent danger of a British backed loyalist takeover and the establishment of an Orange Fascist state.<sup>791</sup>

The RCA was a clandestine organisation whose volunteers did not reveal their identity or membership. It was led by an Army Council, but the military leadership was subordinate to the overall leadership of the Central Committee of the PD.<sup>792</sup> By prioritising the Party over the military wing the PD had attempted to distance its armed initiative from the republican tradition, although its clear

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<sup>790</sup> Letter to the CC from comrades Farrell, Brown and O'Hare, *People's Democracy file*, NIPC.

<sup>791</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 4 No 10, 9 December 1974.

<sup>792</sup> History of the People's Democracy (undated internal Party document), *People's Democracy file*, NIPC.

intention was to work alongside republicans for defensive purposes. As the *Unfree Citizen* explained:

We are prepared to co-operate with all other anti-imperialist forces in this task and we urge the Provisional and Official IRA particularly to join in making preparations for united defence and resistance in the extremely grave situation that now faces us.<sup>793</sup>

The reality, however, was that the PD, and therefore also the RCA, was such a small organisation by this point that it barely mattered in the wider scheme of things. One source claimed that the RCA involved around twenty to thirty volunteers at its height.<sup>794</sup> This was reflected in the activity that was carried out. In 1975 the *Unfree Citizen* would reveal that 'limited military actions'<sup>795</sup> were being waged by the RCA and the evidence suggests that these included arms training and some bank robberies that were executed in order to raise funds for PD activity.<sup>796</sup> PD members paid a price for this type of activity; in February 1975 the *Unfree Citizen* reported that activist Seamus Ruddy was sentenced to three years in prison for possession of a revolver.<sup>797</sup> Ruddy later left the PD joining the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP), and becoming the source of much controversy and anguish when he was killed and his body was disappeared

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<sup>793</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 4 No 11, 16 December 1974.

<sup>794</sup> Interview with anonymous PD member, and member of the RCA.

<sup>795</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 4 No 28, 12 May 1975.

<sup>796</sup> Interview with anonymous PD member, and member of the RCA.

<sup>797</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 4 No 16, 10 February 1975.

in Paris in 1985. Thirty-two years later Ruddy's remains were found in a forest in northern France.<sup>798</sup>

The fact that a small cortège of PD activists such as Ruddy would later decamp and join the IRSP further illustrates the pull of militarism. Formed in late 1974 and initially welcomed by the PD as a shift toward socialist republicanism, the IRSP eventually joined a long list of organisations on the Irish left that attempted to unite the traditions of republicanism and socialism, only to fall behind the logic of a brutal militarist strategy propagated by its armed wing, the INLA.<sup>799</sup>

The emergence of the IRSP indicated a shift within Irish republicanism that could potentially compliment the project the PD had embarked on over the preceding years. The IRSP/INLA was essentially born from frustration within the ranks of the Official movement, where a divide developed between those who supported the leadership's strategy— which ostensibly rejected armed actions, parked the national question, and embraced the stages theory of democratisation of the Northern state— and those who sought to wage an armed campaign against partition and British occupation. The latter were grouped around the capable figure of Seamus Costello, who subsequently led a split from the Official republican movement and brought the IRSP/INLA into existence. As McDonald and Holland note, Costello and his comrades essentially 'took the view that the

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<sup>798</sup> The murder and disappearance of Seamus Ruddy was one of many contentious murders of which the full facts have never been revealed, for a recent report see, *Belfast Telegraph*, 13 May 2017, available online, <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/life/features/our-32-years-of-torment-searching-for-seamus-35709331.html>, accessed on 20/05/2017.

<sup>799</sup> For the para-military history of this grouping see Henry McDonald and Jack Holland, *INLA: Deadly Divisions* (Dublin, 1994), and for a political analysis of the IRSP, see, Finn, *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*.

national question and the social question were not to be approached in schematic stages but had to be fought for at the same time.<sup>800</sup>

The political realignment indicated here is important, as the IRSP initially appealed to sections of the radical left, including the PD. The most prominent left figure associated with the organisation was Bernadette McAliskey, who joined the first IRSP leadership. McAliskey's time in the IRSP did not last long, however, as the direction of the organisation would from the offset be one of militarism devoid of any real political strategy, something clearly documented in its later history. The extent to which militarism dictated the terms of play for the IRSP was evident early in its existence, with a brutal feud breaking out between the INLA and the Officials in Belfast.<sup>801</sup> Consequently, the IRSP's form of socialism was one primarily based upon rhetoric and lacking a serious engagement with Marxist ideas. Responding to one journalist in the mid 1970s the organisation made clear that they were not out to adopt any 'alien and mechanical formulas', such as the theories of Lenin or Trotsky into the struggle against imperialism in Ireland.<sup>802</sup>

The PD had commented that the founding of the IRSP was a 'step forward', particularly in regard to its line on the national question.<sup>803</sup> It sent observers along to the first IRSP conference, and there was at least some internal discussion around the possibility of entering the organisation.<sup>804</sup> However, beyond this there is little evidence that the organisations worked closely together

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<sup>800</sup> McDonald and Holland, *Deadly Divisions*, p.9.

<sup>801</sup> McDonald and Holland, *Deadly Divisions*, p. 60.

<sup>802</sup> *Ibid*, p. 45.

<sup>803</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 4 No 10, 9 December 1974.

<sup>804</sup> Finn, *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*, p. 143.

in the immediate years following the formation of the IRSP. While the IRSP/INLA very quickly descended into what has been described as a ‘bloody baptism’, the PD, on the other hand, developed its armed wing specifically as a reaction to political circumstances that were mounting in the mid-1970s as members grappled with a heightened threat of loyalist reaction.<sup>805</sup>

The turn to militarism was therefore not an attempt at painting republicanism red, and can be seen as a fairly unique exercise in paramilitarism in Northern Irish terms. Indeed, it was in many ways more consistent with the PD’s ability to reflect trends of the global revolutionary left than it was a drift to republicanism. In various parts of Europe since the upsurges of 1968, such as Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal, leftist currents often found themselves supporting armed struggles against different regimes, some of which blurred the line between defensive and offensive struggle against state repression and dictatorship.<sup>806</sup>

Internationalism and the PD’s affinity with world revolutionary currents was a clear ideological point of reference and both recollections from former activists and publications from the period suggest that paramount to the militarist period of the PD was the sense of solidarity with global struggles for national liberation and leftist pursuits of armed insurrection. The Brazilian communist struggle against military dictatorship was carried under the heading ‘Brazil—

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<sup>805</sup> McDonald and Holland, *Deadly Divisions*, p. 36.

<sup>806</sup> As the Italian organisation Lotta Continua put it: ‘The present period is a decisive one for the international class struggle... The law of the guerrilla is translated to the international level... In every movement the masses must be prepared to confront each form of aggression of their enemies, opposing violence to violence’. Quoted in Harman, *The Fire Last Time*, p. 207.

same struggle as Ireland<sup>807</sup>, and the struggle of the Basque people in Spain was widely compared to the Irish case for independence; ‘like the Northern minority, the Basques have turned to guerrilla warfare to fight for and achieve their aims.’<sup>808</sup> Fascist murder gangs in Argentina, who often operated with impunity from the state, were compared to loyalist elements in Northern Ireland.<sup>809</sup> Although comparisons with Ireland were often overstated, these were real attempts to situate the Irish struggle into an international context. Fergus O’Hare explained the outlook:

I mean we were living in a period whereby, you had the situation in central south America, where you had, well obviously the Cuban revolution had happened previously to that and was still very much being held up as an iconic symbol for young people who were striving for a better society. You even had the Maoist tendencies who were talking about ‘all power comes from the barrel of a gun’. You had then throughout the 70s the situations in you know Central South America, El Salvador and Nicaragua and all those places where groups were fighting against imperialism on a left platform, you had also experiences, which we looked to in Algeria in the 50s and, you know, liberation struggles throughout Africa. Again which were seen as anti imperialist and progressive in historical terms. I can remember during this whole period spending some time in Algeria, and meeting a lot of the groups from the different revolutionary organisations throughout Africa and being amazed at the commonality of our

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<sup>807</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 4 No 13, 20 January 1975.

<sup>808</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 4 No 20, 10 March 1975.

<sup>809</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 4 No 29, 9 June 1975.



struggle, listening to them talking about the oppression in their areas or in their countries and what they were trying to do to change it and so on. So we seen ourselves very much in this context of a world progressive movement, a world leftwing movement, a socialist movement. Now obviously all those different organisations and groups had different political orientations, but they were seen very much historically as progressive.<sup>810</sup>

Internationalism informed the PD's drift to militarism, and the effort to implant socialist programmes upon armed liberation struggles was a common global pattern, with Maoist and Guevarist tendencies giving a distinct revolutionary colour to armed insurrectionary movements across the world. Such tendencies would of course not develop in any significant way in Ireland— not least because of the strength and dominance of the republican tradition— although they were at times reflected in some small way through the PD.<sup>811</sup>

Against the broader picture of militarism in the North during the 1970s the RCA was insignificant, unsurprising then that this is one armed-wing that has not featured in the history books. However, it does represent an important juncture in the history of the PD. The drift to militarism was the culmination of a form of Marxism that the PD had developed since the demise of mass popular struggle during the civil rights and civil disobedience movements. It was a Marxism that in effect denied any progressive role for Protestant workers as a

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<sup>810</sup> Interview with Fergus O'Hare, Belfast, 08/06/2015.

<sup>811</sup> When Mao died in September 1976 the PD newspaper would point out that although they had real disagreements with many of Mao's actions, they nevertheless viewed him as a 'great revolutionary', whose life 'has many lessons for revolutionary socialists and republicans in Ireland'. *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6 No 1, 16 October 1976.

social force in the pursuit of a socialist Ireland, and went as far as equating the most sectarian elements of loyalism with the historic rise of fascism.

The PD strategy had now become confined to the militancy of the minority community, thus tailing the broader anti-imperialist movement in an effort to shift the Provisionals to the left. This was largely a result of circumstances during the intense loyalist backlash from 1973-1974, but the fear and paranoia associated with the prospects of a loyalist takeover of the North, in the aftermath of a potential British withdrawal, were also the product of a flawed analysis of the Northern state, which reduced the loyalist movement and the role of British imperialism in Ireland to a crude class analysis of the Protestant block.

Incidentally, events in the aftermath of the UWC Strike in 1974 would show how flawed the PD perspective was. The perspective of imminent victory resulted in near defeat, and far from driving the British military out of Ireland, the PIRA were drawn into a lengthy if sporadic truce that formally lasted from February 1975 to January 1976, although it involved various acts of violence in between. The republican leadership entered the truce with the view that it was laying the basis for a British withdrawal. Instead, the British used the ceasefire as an opportunity to solidify its position inside the Catholic ghettos, conducting important intelligence operations and preparing for a long and protracted fight against the PIRA, using methods that aimed to confine the conflict to the North through the strategy of 'Ulsterisation'.<sup>812</sup> For example, the reduction of British

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<sup>812</sup> As Lee explains: 'The size of the Army was gradually reduced from 21,000 in 1973 to 12,000 by 1980, while the total of the various police forces rose from 14,500 to 19,500. When the conciliatory policy failed to pay the desired dividends, Rees reversed his approach by ending 'special category' status in prisons, under which prisoners claiming political motivation for their offences

troops and their replacement with larger numbers of locally recruited units of UDR and RUC did not signify that the British Army was gearing up to withdraw. Rather, it showed a longer-term commitment from the British to reduce the 'Northern Ireland problem' to an acceptable level of violence, and take British soldiers away from the front line of conflict.

The PD had, therefore, wrongly calculated the strategy of British imperialism, yet they continued to warn of a loyalist takeover throughout 1975. The political implications for the organisation were dire and the PD shrank into a small group that often espoused a politically sectarian position. Years later, Michael Farrell would look back on the period:

People's Democracy dwindled to a tiny ginger group. Infected with the hysteria that prevailed in the ghettos after the collapse of Sunningdale, we thought a loyalist takeover was imminent and were in an ultra leftist phase of boycotting elections and scorning 'reformist' campaigns.<sup>813</sup>

In such a context the PD were disconnected from any wider audience and recognition of this would force a rethinking of strategy. The post 1972 period were therefore difficult years for PD activists, nevertheless, the organisation had kept up activity and arguably would go on to help pioneer what would become the next phase of mass mobilisation inside the nationalist community, beginning

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were permitted to live in largely civilian fashion, wearing their own clothes, and residing in compounds rather than in cells. Henceforth, those convicted of terrorist offences after March 1976 would be treated as ordinary criminals, having been tried in the courts. The partiality of those same courts would provide a regular bone of contention for years to come.' Lee, *Ireland, 1912-1985*, pp. 450-451.

<sup>813</sup> Farrell, 'Long march to freedom', p. 65.

in the late 1970s, which would provide a powerful inrush of support for the anti-imperialist movement—the campaign for rights for republican prisoners. We now turn to these campaigns, which would precede some of the largest mobilisations that the anti-imperialist movement had seen in the Northern state.

#### 7.4. Mass Action

Despite the isolation outlined above the PD still made notable efforts at instigating political mobilisation in this period. The context of internment and resistance meant that by the mid 1970s the North's jails were filled with predominately young working class men, and it was here that many disputes were played out which provided focal points for street mobilisation. The aftermath of internment saw new battle lines emerging between prisoners and the prison authorities. In May 1972 Provisional republican prisoners in Crumlin Road Prison, led by Billy McKee, embarked on a hunger strike to demand that those prisoners who had been convicted of charges were granted political status in a similar fashion to those facing internment. The political climate outside of the prisons 'was not particularly conducive to the building of popular support for the prisoner's demands', nevertheless, vigils, fasts and pickets were held in Catholic areas and these were primarily spearheaded by the NRM with PD members driving them forward.<sup>814</sup> The most authoritative account of the prison movement documented how these broad based protests contrasted to the kind of militant displays that the republican movement deployed in support of their comrades.<sup>815</sup>

Even at this early stage it seems that such actions influenced the thinking of some in the leadership of the republican movement. In his memoir, *Before the Dawn*, Gerry Adams recalled his approval of PD action around this time, and how their ideas struck a chord with young activists like himself: 'On the political front, the Northern Resistance Movement (NRM) had been formed in October

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<sup>814</sup> Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p 10.

<sup>815</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 10-11.

1971 ... I spoke at a number of NRM meetings at which PD argued quite correctly for wider popular mobilisations, and it struck me that all the potential for popular mobilisation was ours, while PD had all the theory.<sup>816</sup>

The mobilisations around the hunger strike had the aura of success when McKee and his comrades were granted special category status, but the reality was that this decision was made as part of a wider effort to facilitate talks between republicans and the British government.<sup>817</sup> Everything that followed this engagement— including the breakdown of talks and the introduction of Operation Motorman— greatly impacted upon the ability of the anti-imperialist movement to mobilise. The ending of the no-go areas meant that few opportunities for open political mobilisation that challenged the security forces existed. But when activity did re-emerge, once again the PD was central to it.

In June 1973 PD activists Michael Farrell and Tony Canavan were arrested for taking part in an illegal demonstration against state repression and loyalist killings. The charges related to a demonstration on 10 February, against what the PD described as the ‘anti-Catholic murder campaign’ raging in Belfast. It was the sixth such PD protest that had been banned in the space of nine months, and the organisation would often point out that this greatly contrasted with the British Army’s treatment of both the UDA and the Orange Order, who held some thirty demonstrations between them in the same period, which were tolerated by the military.<sup>818</sup> Because Farrell and Canavan were handed sentences that were under nine months, they were denied special category status and forced

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<sup>816</sup> Gerry Adams, *Before The Dawn*, p. 215.

<sup>817</sup> Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p 11.

<sup>818</sup> Michael Farrell and Phil McCullough, *Behind the Wire*, People’s Democracy pamphlet (1974), p. 13.

to serve their time in Crumlin Road prison, away from other internees jailed in Long Kesh. Faced with the prosecution they claimed their case to be straightforward and simple; they had taken part in a political demonstration and had received mandatory six-month sentences for political offences. Their trial was presided over by Judge W. W. B. Topping, former Unionist MP and one time Minister of Home Affairs.<sup>819</sup> Their view of the political validity of their actions, however, was not shared by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, William Whitelaw, who was adamant in the HOC that ‘Mr. Farrell is not activated by political motives’.<sup>820</sup>

On 6 July Farrell and Canavan began a hunger strike alongside three official republicans in the pursuit of political status. The ordeal was captured in a pamphlet produced by the PD, where Farrell gave his account of the hunger strike that lasted some 35 days, and in the end saw the two PD activists released alongside other prisoners serving similar sentences.<sup>821</sup> Gerry Adams later reckoned that the episode amounted to the ‘principal anti-unionist political success in 1973’<sup>822</sup>. The PD too declared a victory, and the hunger strike also offered an impetus for the beginning of solidarity action. In August the *Unfree Citizen* reported that up to 5,000 people had marched in support of Farrell, Canavan and the other prisoners.<sup>823</sup> This context saw the PD launch a united front initiative that pulled together different factions of the anti-imperialist

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<sup>819</sup> *Unfree Citizen* Vol, 2, No 43, 16 July 1973.

<sup>820</sup> House of Commons Hansard, Debate on 19 July 1973 vol. 860. Available online, [http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1973/jul/19/security#S5CV0860P0\\_19730719\\_HOC\\_41](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1973/jul/19/security#S5CV0860P0_19730719_HOC_41), accessed on 14/04/2016.

<sup>821</sup> Farrell and McCullough, *Behind the Wire* (1974).

<sup>822</sup> Adams, *Before the Dawn*, p. 216.

<sup>823</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 2 No 47, 13 August 1973.

movement, and others opposed to internment. The Political Hostages Release Committee (PHRC) was established on 22 July, although the initial hopes for unity proved premature.<sup>824</sup> On ‘internment day’ a punch up ensued at a rally in the Falls Park in west Belfast, over which factions should address the crowd.<sup>825</sup> PD activist Gerry Ruddy recalls being physically assaulted by Official republicans at this demonstration.<sup>826</sup> The split in the PHRC resulted in a war of words between different factions of the left with division between the PD and both the Communist Party and the Official republicans at the centre of it.<sup>827</sup>

Nevertheless, the PHRC carried out a range of activity throughout the winter of 1973 and spring of 1974, including demonstrations in Armagh, Enniskillen, Derry and Newry. On Christmas day 1973 it organised what was now an annual march for internees in Belfast.<sup>828</sup> This activity is notable as it ranks among the first organised efforts to prioritise the prison issue toward a strategy of street protest and popular mobilisation, and for some time the PD again worked closely with the Provisionals on this committee. One notable campaign was the case of the ‘Winchester Hostages’— eight republican volunteers convicted of bombings in England, four of whom became a focal point for a support campaign when they went on hunger strike to demand their repatriation to a prison in the North. All four prisoners eventually won their demands and the PHRC organised solidarity actions for the prisoners.<sup>829</sup> While

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<sup>824</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6 No 8, May/June 1977.

<sup>825</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 2 No 47, 13 August 1973. Also see, *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 3 No 27, April 1974.

<sup>826</sup> Interview with Gerry Ruddy, Belfast, 07/07/2015.

<sup>827</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6 No 8, May/June 1977.

<sup>828</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>829</sup> Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 13. For a PD report see *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 3 No 8, 28 November 1973.



there was some limited joint activity between the PD and the Provisionals at this time, it soon came to an end. The alliance between the revolutionary socialism of the PD and militant republicanism of the Provisionals was always an uneasy one, as whilst the PD placed a central emphasis on protest action, the Provisional movement viewed such campaigns as a straightforward appendage to the cutting edge of armed actions. Events came to a head before the Winchester prisoners had won their demands when Sinn Féin pulled out of the PHRC, launching an attack on the PD in their newspaper: ‘Sinn Féin will not allow itself to be used to support the meandering politics of PD nor will it allow pseudo-revolutionaries to bathe in the glory of Ireland’s recent dead.’<sup>830</sup> The PD would later argue that this reflected a swing to the right in the Belfast faction of Provisional Sinn Féin, pointing out that it came at a time when their paper also headlined an article that equated contraception with child murder.<sup>831</sup> By the time the Provisionals withdrew from the PHRC the committee could only claim to represent the PD and the even smaller Revolutionary Marxist Group (RMG). In October 1974 the PHRC was disbanded.<sup>832</sup>

The lifespan of the PHRC illustrates that the PD attempted to maintain popular mobilisation, but the mid-1970s were difficult times for those who presented a strategy based upon protest and people power. After the demise of the civil disobedience campaign in 1972 violence became frequent and sustained. Moreover, from 1972 onward the major basis of working class mobilisation was behind the powerful banner of loyalism. Faced with mass Protestant opposition

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<sup>830</sup> Kevin Kelley, *The Longest War, Northern Ireland and the IRA* (Kerry, Brandon Books, 1982), p. 205.

<sup>831</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6 No 8, May/June 1977.

<sup>832</sup> *Ibid.*

to reform and a republican armed campaign capable of causing serious disruption to the Northern state, the PD at times retreated into vulgar support for the Provisionals, which was developing a violent dynamic of its own. The republican struggle of the mid 1970s involved a sustained campaign of bombing and killings predicated on the idea that victory was on the cards and a belief that the might of the PIRA could win a lasting victory over the British Army.

PD support for republican violence would occasionally reach dogmatic levels, during instances that seriously contradicted the republican movement's claim that its violence did not wilfully target innocent civilians, or contain any sectarian precedent. One incident in particular is forever etched into the history books: when members of the PIRA, under the cover name of the South Armagh Republican Action Force, murdered ten Protestant workmen at Kingsmill in Armagh.<sup>833</sup> It was a blatantly sectarian act and the PD reaction illustrates the extent to which support for republican violence strained credulity among some in its ranks. In the edition of the *Unfree Citizen* that followed the killings at Kingsmill, the paper was primarily concerned with challenging the established narrative around sectarian murders— and pointing to the campaign of loyalist killings throughout Armagh that was said to have provoked Kingsmill— as opposed to condemning the act. It included an ominous statement that seemed to justify the killings, 'However crude the response to that was, nevertheless we must recognize that retaliation of some form was both inevitable and necessary.'<sup>834</sup> It was, to put it mildly, a controversial message from an organisation that was on record as being opposed to sectarian killings.

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<sup>833</sup> See, English, *Armed Struggle*, p.172.

<sup>834</sup> Quoted in, Finn, *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*, p. 148.

Incidentally, the statement did not reflect the position of the organisation surrounding Kingsmill. The next issue of the *Unfree Citizen* would reveal that the article had been printed without the support of the leadership and offered a different analysis.

The last issue of the *Unfree Citizen* carried an article on the Kingsmills killings in south Armagh. The last paragraph of the article appeared to condone these killings. This is not and was not the policy of the People's Democracy. We are opposed to acts of indiscriminate terror like the south Armagh killings and believe they represent a disastrous dead-end for the anti-imperialist movement and actively prevent the necessary rebuilding of the mass movement . . . Our Central Committee voted by a majority to black out the last paragraph of the article before the paper was sold—it was too late to replace it—and this was done. The article formed part of the internal division in our organization and the former editor has since resigned.<sup>835</sup>

The same edition carried an article revealing that there was 'serious division' in the PD. In the aftermath of the debate surrounding Kingsmill the organisation had experienced a split. The article recognised the overall demoralisation that affected the anti-imperialist movement and stated that a group of members saw the solution to the impasse in supporting a militarist strategy that was increasingly based on small numbers of republican fighters, and increasingly

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<sup>835</sup> *Unfree Citizen* Vol 5, No 10 March 1976.

disconnected from the vast majority of ordinary people.<sup>836</sup> Those who broke away from the PD on this basis would go on to form the short lived 'Red Republican Party'. This group represented the section of the PD who clung on to the loyalist takeover theory outlined above, and therefore were most forthright in their support for armed struggle and the maintenance of a military wing.<sup>837</sup>

Against this trend the PD entered a period of soul searching. Analysing the struggle in the north, they argued that recent history showed how armed actions were largely irrelevant in the absence of a mass movement, and could also be counterproductive to the building of one.<sup>838</sup> The new perspective was to be crystallised in a document titled '*militarism versus mass action*', which drew upon the experience of years past. It argued that significant advances were only made through mass popular activity and the involvement of large numbers of people, as opposed to small numbers of armed fighters. The PD compared the context of the civil rights and civil disobedience movement with the situation in 1976. Between 1968-1969 and 1971-1972 real mass movements existed in the North:

There was little need to advertise and organize marches and demonstrations in those days, thousands came of their own accord often travelling long distances. The whole minority population was in ferment. Civil Rights committees and later Resistance committees sprang up in every area. The people were self-confident and determined, they mounted their own protests without prompting, they

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<sup>836</sup> Ibid.

<sup>837</sup> *Programme of the Red Republican Party*, Dublin (NIPC, 1977).

<sup>838</sup> *Unfree Citizen* Vol 5, No 10 March 1976.

stood up and often drove out the RUC and British Army. In Derry they controlled their own No-Go area for almost a year. The best example is the rent and rates strike; the people in the ghettos started it spontaneously before there were any calls from the politicians. The enthusiasm and determination of the people was so great that they forced even the parliamentary politicians into the streets and forced hostile political groups to cooperate around common demands. It was this spectacle of a whole people in revolt, not just the Provos military campaign, which brought down Stormont and wrung a whole series of concessions from the British [...] Compare that with the situation today. The anti-imperialist movement is deeply divided, the bulk of the minority population are apathetic if not hostile. Let any organisation, including Sinn Féin, call a demonstration now around some political demands, and how many will turn up? Hardly any except their own members and a handful of dedicated activists.<sup>839</sup>

The solution to this situation lay in rejecting the elitist tactics of republicanism, which saw the masses of ordinary people as ‘passive spectators in their own liberation’, and instead rebuild movements from below, through a process of education and discussion and ultimately strengthening the national struggle with mass involvement and mass mobilisation.<sup>840</sup> Applying Lenin, the PD criticised the individualist nature of republican violence, which was carried out by small groups of people without any democratic mandate or mass participation.<sup>841</sup> In a

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<sup>839</sup> *Unfree Citizen* Vol 5, No 10 March 1976.

<sup>840</sup> *Unfree Citizen* Vol 5, No 10 March 1976.

<sup>841</sup> *Ibid.*

significant appraisal of where the struggle in Ireland was at in 1977, Michael Farrell drew attention to the narrow and limited base of republicanism,

It has drawn its support almost solely from the Catholic minority in the North making little or no effort to involve the— initially at any rate— sympathetic masses in the South [...] It has thus cut itself off from the powerful weapon of working class action and is peculiarly vulnerable to war-weariness and demoralisation.<sup>842</sup>

Farrell argued that an orientation to the social and economic struggles of the southern working class was crucial and in the aftermath of the *militarism vs. mass action* document the *Unfree Citizen* would carry articles that looked at the history of the NRM and the PHRC. The central thrust of the articles was to articulate a strategy that rejected the militarist tactics of the republican movement and argue for broad based mobilisations as an alternative.<sup>843</sup>

A clear problem for the PD, however, was that it was an organisation with little social weight or ability to carry such a strategy to large numbers of people. One account of the republican movement noted that by the late 1970s the PD might have had up to 250 strong supporters. Although the author qualifies this by stating that, outside of Sinn Féin, PD members were among the most determined of political activists who enjoyed the respect of many across the republican movement.<sup>844</sup> Yet this respect also had its limitations. The PD had largely fallen behind the republican campaign, existing at times almost as a

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<sup>842</sup> Farrell, 'Northern Ireland: an anti-imperialist struggle?' p. 78.

<sup>843</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6 No 7, April 1977, and *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6 No 8, May/June 1977.

<sup>844</sup> Kelley, *The Longest War*, p. 286-287.

propaganda force inside the anti-imperialist movement, and speaking primarily to the republican community. Therefore, when the PD attempted to criticise the Provisionals and articulate a different direction toward the struggle, they challenged the Provisionals on their own terrain and from an obvious position of weakness. The very fact that the PD had not taken part in the armed struggle meant that they made little headway criticising the Provisionals and an earlier commentary from *Republican News* illustrates how the Provisionals dealt with criticism from the PD.

We do not deride the members of the People's Democracy for their failure to back up sterling words with equally sterling action. They have played their part in organizing the people against jackboot policies . . . but only one organization has met the English forces in consistent armed opposition. Only one group have laid their lives at risk to contain and defeat English aggression. When the People's Democracy decides to couple use of the typewriter with use of the gun, as Connolly did, then they can jettison the label of armchair revolutionaries. Until then they will remain categorized with the Official reformists, the Communist Party of Ireland, and the other groups who yearn for a 32 County Socialist Workers' Republic but are not prepared to jeopardize their lives to achieve that aim.<sup>845</sup>

Finn rightly outlines how this impacted upon the ability of the PD to either grow or to influence the Provisional movement:

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<sup>845</sup> From *Republican News*, 8 March 1975, quoted in Finn, *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*, p. 141.

People's Democracy had done everything short of joining the armed struggle: its members had been jailed and interned; they had organized illegal demonstrations and even made use of a traditional republican weapon, the hunger strike, at some risk to their own lives. But they had not planted any bombs or pulled any triggers, and that was all that really mattered. Too small to have much of an impact on its own, PD could only hope to make a difference as part of a broader alliance. But the Provos had no interest in helping a small far-left group without so much as an Armalite to its name to gain influence.<sup>846</sup>

Although a broader anti-imperialist alliance was some distance away in the mid-1970s, the PD enjoyed a modest influx of new members in 1978, when the Party fused with the *Movement for a Socialist Republic* (MSR), the Irish section of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International. Formerly named the Revolutionary Marxist Group (RMG), the MSR had emerged in the early 1970s and, like the PD, took its cue from a more traditional Trotskyist analysis of Ireland. The politics of the Fourth International had historically been the reserve of tiny numbers of people in Ireland, and while the post 1968 period did not see Trotskyist organisations attract a mass following, it did perhaps offer the possibility of Trotskyism securing a foothold in Irish politics in a way that had been hitherto unseen.<sup>847</sup> The chequered history of the MSR displayed similar political persuasions to the PD— a commitment to class politics and to the vision

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<sup>846</sup> Finn, *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*, p. 141.

<sup>847</sup> For the history of Irish Trotskyism, see, Ciaran Crossey and Jim Monaghan, 'The Origins of Trotskyism in Ireland', *Revolutionary History*, Volume 6, No 2/3 (London, Socialist Platform).



of a 32 county workers' republic, alongside support for the national liberation struggle. Supporters of the USFI had experimented with guerrilla politics in the mid 1970s, joining the controversial Saor Éire grouping, although the majority of MSR members later reacted strongly against this trend, finding their way to unity with the PD.<sup>848</sup> The fusion between the PD and MSR represented a certain level of awareness surrounding Trotskyist influenced section of the left toward future strategy. The extent to which Trotskyism had influenced the political journey of the PD is obvious; several of the early PD leaders had associations with the old IWG, and joining the USFI was a formal recognition of the strand of Marxism that had most dictated the PD's trajectory over its history.<sup>849</sup> The *Unfree Citizen* reflected that the PD 'began as an activist organisation which came to adopt the principles of Marxism through an extremely tough process of trial and error which cost us many setbacks and several splits.'<sup>850</sup> The newly launched PD, then, was born with a hope that the fusion of the two organisations would 'stimulate the process of Marxist re-groupment generally.'<sup>851</sup>

The ability of the PD to initiate a re-groupment of Marxist forces in Ireland, however, was limited, and the party did not develop a lasting working relationship with other Trotskyist organisations. For example, the Irish *Militant Labour*, which was essentially an offshoot of the British *Militant Tendency* and forwarded an entryist strategy inside the Irish Labour Party, held a fundamentally different view of the Northern struggle to the PD— one that did not support the republican armed struggle or any effort against partition, — were denounced for

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<sup>848</sup> Ibid, p .149.

<sup>849</sup> For a history of the Fourth International, see, Pierre Frank, *The Fourth International: The Long March of the Trotskyists* (London, Ink Links, 1979).

<sup>850</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6 No 1, December/January 1977-78.

<sup>851</sup> Ibid.

parroting ‘the propaganda of imperialism’ and helping to ‘perpetuate the problem by attempting to foist anti-nationalist prejudices among the working class’<sup>852</sup> The PD had a better relationship with the *Socialist Workers Movement* (SWM), the Irish component of the International Socialist Tendency, who were an anti-partitionist organisation, but one that put a serious emphasis on the necessity to build independent working class politics inside the Northern state as part of the struggle against partition.<sup>853</sup> The PD and the SWM would sporadically unite in campaigns, such as those around state repression or issues of prisoner’s rights, but these did not develop beyond immediate campaigning efforts.

The consolidation of the PD and the MSR to some extent signified a merger between two sections of the Irish left who were united in their increasing irrelevance to the bigger picture of anti-imperialist politics. One MSR activist recalled that his grouping probably brought only 20 new members into what was already a small core of PD activists.<sup>854</sup> The ‘new’ PD was officially launched in February 1978 and it involved a rebranding of the *Unfree Citizen*, which was renamed *Socialist Republic*. Although forged in isolation, central to the revamped PD was a strategy based upon broad mobilisation and as the period ahead saw changes take place within the republican movement, the ideas and strategy associated with the PD would begin to find a wider resonance.

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<sup>852</sup> *Socialist Republic*, Vol 4, No 6.

<sup>853</sup> See, Allen, *Socialists, Republicanism and Armed Struggle*, Socialist Workers Movement pamphlet (Dublin, Bookmarks, 1991).

<sup>854</sup> Interview with Jim Monaghan, Dublin, 15/03/2015.

### 7.5. The rebirth of civil resistance

The mid-1970s forced a major rethinking in strategy and tactics inside the republican movement, which the PD embraced. The turn was encapsulated in a famous speech in June 1977 at the annual Bodenstown march, a key date in the republican calendar that would often provide an opportune moment for the movement to introduce a new line of thinking. It was here that Jimmy Drumm delivered an oration that is widely recognised as the beginning a re-orientation of the Provisional movement. The speech drew on themes that bore resemblance to previous arguments made by the PD:

We find that a successful war of liberation cannot be fought exclusively on the backs of the oppressed in the Six Counties, nor around the physical presence of the British Army. Hatred and resentment of the Army cannot sustain the war, and the isolation of socialist republicans around the armed struggle is dangerous and has produced the reformist notion that 'Ulster' is the issue, without the mobilisation of the working class in the 26 counties. We need a positive tie-in with the mass of the Irish people who have little or no idea of the suffering in the North ... We need to make a stand on economic issues and on the everyday struggles of people. The forging of strong links between the Republican movement and the workers of Ireland and radical trade unionists will create an irrepressible mass movement and will ensure mass support for the continuing armed struggle in the North...The British government is NOT withdrawing from the Six Counties and the substantial pull-out

of business and the closing of factories in 1975 and 1976 was due to world economic recession, though mistakenly attributed at the time to symptoms of withdrawal. Indeed, the British government is committed to stabilising the Six Counties and is pouring vast sums of money to improve the area and assure loyalists, and secure from loyalists, support for a long haul against the Irish Republican Army...<sup>855</sup>

A rejection of pure militarism, an orientation toward mass struggle and class politics, and a recognition that the perspective of republican imminent military victory had been vastly wrong, were central to what the PD had been contending for some time. Drumm's speech clearly put forward a similar perspective to the PD in its strategic orientation, for example, in its call to get involved in workers struggles and develop links with the trade union movement. Indeed, many of these ideas were ones that had been put forward by small groups of PD members and were now being presented to a large audience from the main platform of radical republicanism in Ireland. The *Unfree Citizen* warmly welcomed Drumm's speech stating that he had slaughtered one of the 'sacred cows of republicanism'— the notion that the British intended withdrawal from Ireland. The paper pointed out the divide that had developed inside the republican movement— between traditionalists to the right and a new emerging generation that were engaging with politics and espoused left-wing ideas;

A section of the movement, particularly in Belfast, has gradually but definitively moved away from militarism and from exclusive

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<sup>855</sup> Jimmy Drumm, *speech at Bodenstown* (1977), NIPC.

concentration on the Northern question and towards involvement in social and economic struggles on both sides of the border.<sup>856</sup>

The observation was correct. Drumm's speech represented the opening salvo in a battle that was being waged by the new generation of republicans who had emerged from the Northern ghettos to fill the ranks of the Provisional movement since 1970; Gerry Adams and Danny Morrison had composed the speech. Adams had subtly introduced his new line of thinking in the movement's newspaper *Republican News* in 1976, under the pseudonym 'Brownie', where he argued for 'Active Republicanism' and raised the possibility of 'Active Abstentionism'. Drawing on the experiences of the mass activity during the civil rights movement, Adams suggested that republicans should be engaged in building the elements of an alternative administration, emphasising the need for social and political mobilisation alongside the war effort.<sup>857</sup> Adams had already been influenced by PD activity during internment and the consistency with the politics of the PD here is obvious. The critical shift in republicanism, however, represented a wider strategic orientation, in what Allen has described as a period of 'long war and leftist rhetoric'.<sup>858</sup>

To tackle the demoralised state of the PIRA a new strategy of 'long war' was adopted, which recognised that the military struggle was not on the cusp of victory. The PIRA was reorganised into a cell structure, which made it harder for the British military to penetrate and also meant that it was less dependant on

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<sup>856</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6 No 9, July/August, 1977.

<sup>857</sup> Adams, *Before the Dawn*, p. 248.

<sup>858</sup> Allen, *1916*, p. 148.

public support. Ideologically, this meant an assault on the traditionalist line of Éire Nua and instead a more socialist orientated republicanism was developed,

This (*Éire Nua*) was attacked by the younger northern leadership as a ‘sop to loyalism’ and, using language borrowed from the remnants of the PD, it was argued that the Protestant workers were a ‘labour aristocracy’, who would only play a progressive role after a united Ireland had been achieved. On the basis of posing as more hard-line and closer to the realities of Catholic working-class ghettos, the Adams leadership set out to modernise republicanism.<sup>859</sup>

In one internal document presented to the republican movement, known as the ‘gray document’, Adams drew upon Connolly and explicitly called for a socialist reorganisation of society: ‘We desire to see capitalism abolished and a democratic system of common or public ownership. This democratic system, which is called socialism, will, we believe, come as a result of the continuous increase of the power of the working class.’<sup>860</sup> Naturally then, the PD welcomed these developments as sections of the republican movement began to embrace long held leftist positions. The extent of the shift was always largely based upon rhetoric, as Allen suggests, nevertheless, the turn would provide a powerful impetus for allowing the republican movement to break beyond its limited base, which as the PD contended, was a minority inside a minority in the North.<sup>861</sup>

The context for a new phase in popular protest came in 1976 after the British government withdrew ‘special category status’ for republican and loyalist

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<sup>859</sup> Ibid, p. 148.

<sup>860</sup> Ibid, pp. 149-150.

<sup>861</sup> Ibid, p. 148.

prisoners. The policy was part of the wider strategy to 'ulsterise' the conflict and therefore treat prisoners as normal criminal elements. It precipitated a lengthy struggle when republican prisoners embarked on the 'blanket protest' in demand of political rights. The prison struggle of 1976-1981 would provide the effective basis for implementing Adams' new line of thinking, mobilising large swathes of the population in support of republican prisoners. However, it is important not to see this as a steady process of development for the movement. The prison issue was reemerging, but it took some time for those advancing a strategy based upon political action to put it at the centre of the republican movement's approach. In this context the PD were able to play an important role in prioritising the prison issue, and arguably influenced historic shifts in direction across Irish republicanism.

Initially, when the blanket protest first began the prison issue was taken up by relatives of those inside the Long Kesh. On Easter Monday, 1976, a 'Prisoners Action Committee' soon to be renamed 'Relatives Action Committee' (RAC) was established in Belfast. Sinn Féin were centrally involved in setting up and supporting the RAC's, however, there also existed an almost constant tension between relatives and those in the republican movement who prioritised the war effort over all else.<sup>862</sup> Therefore, it can be said that when the blanket protest began, neither Sinn Féin nor the IRA fully prioritised the issue. The *Unfree Citizen* would point out how it was the hard work of the RAC that at first championed activity throughout that summer, 'leafletting, holding meetings and pickets to build up support on the political status issue.'<sup>863</sup> Against the

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<sup>862</sup> Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 23.

<sup>863</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6 No 1, September 1976.

prevailing republican thinking, which focused on the heroic sacrifice of the few, the PD argued that history had shown that a victory in relation to political status would be won by the mass mobilisation of the people and that such a process was needed to turn the tide of the present struggle. The PD itself was a tiny organisation confined to Catholic ghettos, but it did put the prison issue at the centre of its activity through its publications and by, for example, launching a petition for political status.<sup>864</sup> The same cannot perhaps be said for the wider anti-imperialist movement in the early days of the dispute, and the *Unfree Citizen* would carry a telling letter from republican activist Jim Gibney, a young republican prisoner and a close ally of Gerry Adams. Gibney spoke directly to the issue of political status:

I feel that the issue is not being given enough support by all the groupings concerned. Whilst not singling out any group in particular, I believe that unity on this issue is essential. All groupings should recognize the importance of utilizing the opportunity this issue provides in rallying the people away from their inertia and apathy. I believe that if we are to get back to a situation where the struggle for a united Ireland is seen to be visibly supported by the Irish people then we must halt the series of victories that the British and their allies are having against the anti-imperialists and the anti-Unionist population. The struggle for the retention of political prisoner status must be won by involving the people.<sup>865</sup>

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<sup>864</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 5 No 10, March 1976.

<sup>865</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6 No 9, July/August 1977.



Gibney's comments—which were more than a veiled criticism of his own movement—are instructive, as he would emerge as a key player who helped shift the movement in a more political direction. Gibney kept close contact with leftwing organisations and read PD publications and, as Brian Feeney recounts, 'He (*Gibney*) was struck by a debate on the far left about militarism versus mass struggle, which argued that Sinn Féin was losing out and limiting its appeal because it supported only armed struggle.'<sup>866</sup> Gibney himself is on record in appreciating the role that the PD played in the period that predated the mass prison movement that was soon to emerge:

You know, People's Democracy were to the fore. They dominated the scene politically from about 1970 to the 1975 period. They were the recognised political leadership of what we loosely called the anti-imperialist movement in this city and elsewhere... And there was pressure coming from republicans for a republican leadership to emerge who would, in a sense, replace PD as the public expressions of how republicans are feeling at that particular time... What republicans wanted was a Sinn Féin person to speak on their behalf.<sup>867</sup>

Throughout the months following the establishment of the Relatives Action Committees Sinn Féin had not got heavily involved in the fight for the retention of political status. Gerry Adams remembered it as a period when 'Sinn Féin was in many ways a victim of the aversion to politics which marked Republicanism at

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<sup>866</sup> Brian Feeney, *Sinn Fein, A Hundred Turbulent Years* (Dublin, O'Brien Press, 2002), p. 285.

<sup>867</sup> *Ibid*, p. 273-274.

this time.<sup>868</sup> Nevertheless, the small numbers of relatives who had established themselves around the RAC campaigned vigorously on behalf of the prisoners from 1976 onward, and although they were yet to break out of the limited support that they enjoyed in republican areas, their actions provided a focal point for wider numbers of anti-repression activists.

It was recognition of both the limited impact and the potentially wider appeal of the RAC that was behind a decision to call an anti-repression conference in Coalisland in January 1978, which was primarily initiated by Bernadette McAliskey and other local activists. The PD had already consistently set out its stall as to what it wanted to develop:

The final aim should be a united front drawing together Republican and Socialist groups, local united communities and the many individual militants who are willing to fight back but who will remain disorganised and ineffective without such a body to unify them. Such a front could rebuild the mass movement and mass struggle on which the defeat of imperialism must be based.<sup>869</sup>

The PD considered the conference a great success. It noted that up to 800 delegates attended, who were representative of a broad level of the Irish left and anti-imperialist movement, including, the RAC's, Sinn Féin, IRSP, RRP, IWG, SWM<sup>870</sup>, MSR, PD and various community groupings. Michael Farrell spoke on the platform at the conference where he argued for mass demonstrations in

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<sup>868</sup> Adams, *Before The Dawn*, p. 263.

<sup>869</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6 No 10, September/October 1977.

<sup>870</sup> The Socialist Workers' Movement was a Trotskyist organisation founded in 1971 by supporters of the British International Socialists.

support of political status, and the conference passed an important motion calling for the building of RACs throughout the six counties and agreed on tentative action for the weeks ahead.<sup>871</sup>

After the conference the *Unfree Citizen* reported on an early debate that arose highlighting the different approaches to the campaign. The issue centred upon the question of unity with forces outside of the ‘anti-imperialist movement’ and a debate emerged about the role of the SDLP, who had recently shifted their position toward one that more vocally challenged state repression. The Provisional movement held a long-standing hostility to working with the SDLP, but the PD argued that it was necessary to involve such wider forces. Their reasoning was that because large numbers of people would not view the SDLP in the same way that the radical left did, it was necessary to expose their limitations through the course of campaigning and win people away from the moderates in practice.<sup>872</sup> It was an early indication of the type of united front approach that was to be applied in order for the movement to reach a wider audience.

Some weeks after the Coalisland conference up to 100 delegates from across the North met in west Belfast, where the debate over the nature of the campaign continued. The PD proposed a motion calling for a broad campaign that argued, quite crucially, that demanding support for armed actions would hinder this process. It would become a central debate throughout the campaign, with, for example, the PD and others on the left arguing against the killing of prison officers during the course of the prison dispute, due to the alienating and negative impact that such attacks had. The *Socialist Republic* noted that the

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<sup>871</sup> *Socialist Republic*, Vol 1, No 1 February 1978.

<sup>872</sup> *Unfree Citizen*, Vol 6 No 11, December/ January, 1977/1978.

motion received a mixed reception among republicans, some of whom seemed to think that support for armed actions was the only way in which support for the prisoners could be built.<sup>873</sup>

The relationship between the armed struggle and the campaign in support of republican prisoners would be a contentious issue throughout the campaign. In the aftermath of the conference in west Belfast the republican press hit out at the PD, it challenged the idea that a new mass resistance comparable to the civil rights movement could emerge out of the Coalisland conference. Nor would it provide an alternative to armed struggle, argued the Provisional's newspaper:

The clock cannot simply be turned back like that much as People's Democracy and Bernadette McAliskey might wish it to be . . . any public campaign against torture and for political status needs to be pointed firmly in the direction of 'Brits out' and needs to recognize the necessary methods for this aim. For status and torture in reality cannot be isolated from the Brit presence; a presence which cannot be removed without armed struggle.<sup>874</sup>

After the debate between the PD and Sinn Féin came to a head the negative impact of militarism was felt when a botched PIRA bombing operation incinerated a restaurant in County Down, burning 12 innocent Protestants to death and injuring many more. The La Mon restaurant bombing brought the debate surrounding militarism to a new level and was the source of much criticism, even among republican ranks. Gerry Adams would recall 'two years of

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<sup>873</sup> *Socialist Republic*, Vol 1, No 2, March and April 1978.

<sup>874</sup> Finn, *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*, p. 157.

work going down the drain'<sup>875</sup>. The campaign petered on throughout 1978 and a hardcore of political militants worked to raise the profile of the prison issue, it was significantly aided by high profile visits to the prison by members of the Catholic Church. Throughout 1978 there was also a rapid expansion of the RAC's as more prisoners joined the blanket protest and awareness was garnered from media outlets.<sup>876</sup>

In this context the North approached the ten-year anniversary of the civil rights movement, and the first joint action of the RAC's that had sprung up throughout the year was a march that coincided with the anniversary of the first civil rights demonstration in Coalisland, in August 1968. Its numbers reflected the growing groundswell in support of the prisoners; the *Socialist Republic* claimed the demonstration involved up to 10,000 people and it was soon followed by a march in west Belfast.<sup>877</sup> Following this, the first major marches of the civil rights movement were marked with demonstrations in support of the blanketmen. In early October Sinn Féin organised a march to mark the anniversary of the first civil rights march in Derry, on 5 October.<sup>878</sup> To mark the anniversary of the Burntollet march ten years previously, the PD spearheaded a demonstration from Belfast to Derry. It was officially organised by the *United*

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<sup>875</sup> Adams, *Before the Dawn*, p. 266.

<sup>876</sup> In July Tomás Ó Fiaich, Archbishop of Armagh, visited the H Blocks and his statement following the visit was publicized widely throughout the world's press: 'Having spent the whole of Sunday in the prison, I was shocked at the inhuman conditions prevailing in H Blocks 3, 4 and 5, where over 300 prisoners are incarcerated. One would hardly allow an animal to remain in such conditions, let alone a human being. The nearest approach to it I have seen was the spectacle of the hundreds of homeless people living in sewer pipes in the slums of Calcutta.' Denis O' Hearn, *Nothing but an unfinished song, Bobby Sands and the Irish Hunger Striker who ignited a generation* (New York, Avalon Press, 2006), p. 201.

<sup>877</sup> *Socialist Republic*, Vol 1 No 6 October 1978.

<sup>878</sup> Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p 52.

*Burntollet Commemoration Committee*, which included PD, IRSP, RRP, ISP and the Socialist Labour Party (SLP).<sup>879</sup> The PD claimed that the march mobilised a couple of thousand people, but the series of demonstrations that marked the outbreak of civil rights agitation revealed the various splits and schisms that existed across the anti-imperialist movement. The PD had previously complained about Sinn Féin's unwillingness to involve other groups in their demonstrations, and after the Burntollet anniversary march they hit out at the republican movement for not supporting the initiative. The reason Sinn Féin gave for not backing the demonstration was that the PD had given the RUC notice that they intended to march, and therefore recognised their legitimacy.<sup>880</sup> It was another debate that illustrated the contention between the traditional and arguably dogmatic position of republicanism, and the practical necessity to build a political movement.

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<sup>879</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>880</sup> 'A sour note was struck by Sinn Féin who officially boycotted the march, tried to persuade some of the RAC's not to support it and attacked it in the Andersonstown News... The reason given for the Sinn Féin boycott was the Committee's decision to give notice of the march to the RUC.' *Socialist Republic*, special supplement on Burntollet 1979, Vol 2, No 1.

## 7.6. Smash the H Blocks

In May 1979 Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party ousted the Labour government, thus inaugurating a British administration that would become the most bitter of opponents to republican prisoners. The following month Northern Ireland would go to the polls in a European election. Refusal to recognise the institutions of the Northern state had been a central tenet of republicanism since partition, and this meant rejection of the electoral process. The Provisional movement had reiterated its longstanding refusal to participate in electoral politics at its Ard Fheis in 1978. Again, forces to the radical left would act as a counterweight to this position and Bernadette McAliskey came forward to make another mark in history. McAliskey contested the European election on a radical pro-prisoner platform, arguing for political status and an end to the H Block system.<sup>881</sup> The electoral intervention caused a great deal of division and bitterness, with the Provisionals condemning McAliskey for 'exploiting' the prison issue and running a negative campaign against her.<sup>882</sup> The PD got involved in McAliskey's campaign and documented how sections of Sinn Féin and the IRSP had 'used all the resources at their disposal' to ensure that a genuine anti-imperialist electoral campaign was scuppered.<sup>883</sup>

Nevertheless, the long-term result of the election campaign undoubtedly influenced those in the republican movement who wanted to see a wider political response in support of the prisoners. McAliskey polled an impressive 33,969

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<sup>881</sup> Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>882</sup> 'Leading Provos such as Derry's Martin McGuinness followed McAliskey and her supporters on the campaign trail, heckling them with the aid of megaphones.' *Ibid*, p. 158.

<sup>883</sup> *Socialist Republic*, Vol 2, No 3.

votes, and Gerry Adams recalls that by 1980 Jim Gibney was arguing internally that Sinn Féin should contest local elections.<sup>884</sup> The major shift that facilitated this end came in October 1979, when the republican movement called a ‘Smash H Block conference’ in west Belfast. The conference was a response to the dire conditions that were developing inside the prison, in which a hunger strike looked likely, and therefore more strenuous efforts were now being made by the republican leadership outside of the prison to develop a broad based movement of support, in order to prevent this end.<sup>885</sup>

The conference was formally sponsored by the RAC and up to 600 delegates packed the hall. It saw significant involvement from Sinn Féin but various other organisations were also represented including IRSP, PD, the Irish Civil Rights Action League, the Trade Union Campaign Against Repression<sup>886</sup>, Conradh na Gaeilge<sup>887</sup>, the Socialist Workers Group, the Socialist Labour Party and the Peace People.<sup>888</sup> The PD saw the conference as an opportunity to build the united front approach that it had long agitated for:

We see the primary task of the conference to begin the process of building active support for this struggle from outside those layers of

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<sup>884</sup> Adams, *Before the Dawn*, p. 279.

<sup>885</sup> As one former blanketman remarked: ‘Morale was at an all time low, and the more experienced men spoke for the rest of us when they said they were nearly at the end of their tether.’ Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 61.

<sup>886</sup> The Trade Union Campaign Against Repression was established by socialist and republican trade unionists in Dublin and campaigned on a range of issues in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

<sup>887</sup> Conradh na Gaeilge was the main social and cultural organisation that promoted the Irish language across Ireland.

<sup>888</sup> Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 62.



people we already have on our side; i.e. prisoners relatives plus republican and socialist organisations.<sup>889</sup>

The conference elected a 17-person steering committee whose role was to campaign around the prisoners' five central demands: no prison work, the right to wear civilian clothing, free association with other prisoners, the right to educational and recreational facilities and full remission. The initiative represented a significant shift, as it was open to all who agreed with these demands. The republican movement had finally embraced a campaign to support the prisoners, one that did not demand support for the armed struggle as a prerequisite. Although the steering committee was heavily weighted in favour of the Provisional movement, other groups were represented at leadership level, including the PD and the IRSP. Fergus O'Hare was elected to the steering committee on behalf of the PD, where he would play a central role in the mass movement that would rock the Northern state.<sup>890</sup>

The PD entered 1980 on an optimistic note surrounding the shifts that were taking place inside the republican movement. An article in the *Socialist Republic* provided an overview of the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis in 1979 and it welcomed recent policy shifts such as the new emphasis on prison mobilisation. The paper commented on the rise of a new generation of Sinn Féin leaders, centred on Gerry Adams, who spoke more openly from a leftist platform and were elected to the leadership of Sinn Féin, including Danny Morrison and Tom

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<sup>889</sup> Discussion document for H/Block open conference, by People's Democracy, 21 October 1979. NIPC.

<sup>890</sup> Interview with Fergus O' Hare, Belfast, 08/06/2015.

Hartley.<sup>891</sup> However, it also noted how this generation were keen to appease the traditional right in the republican movement, indicating a long-term strategy of the Adams leadership that was designed to shift the organisation to the left while avoiding any serious rupture with the traditionalists. There was much truth to this claim.<sup>892</sup>

1980 began with a large protest under the banner of the National H-Block/Armagh committee from west Belfast to the Long Kesh prison, but activists were stopped by security forces and the result was a large sit-down protest.<sup>893</sup> This happened against a backdrop of deteriorating conditions inside the prisons. The National H-Block campaign had been established in order to prevent what many could see was going to result in Hunger Strike, but the obvious contradiction was that public sympathy and support for the prisoners was dictated by the extent to which they were capable of battling against gruelling conditions. As Finn explains,

...there was a fundamental contradiction embedded in the campaign. Its activists—especially those who came from a left-wing background—wanted to end the phenomenon of ‘spectator politics’ for good. Yet they were ultimately dependent on the physical strength and determination of a tiny group of men in the H-Blocks: it was their willingness to risk death that made it possible to organize

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<sup>891</sup> Danny Morrison and Tom Hartley would go on to be two important figures in Gerry Adams’ ‘kitchen cabinet’, an internal think tank that had a powerful influence in directing the Provisional republican movement over the next number of decades.

<sup>892</sup> *Socialist Republic*, Vol 3, No 1.

<sup>893</sup> Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, pp. 74-75.

the largest demonstrations Northern Ireland had seen since the early 1970s.<sup>894</sup>

Throughout 1980 the blanket protest escalated and so too did the street campaign, bringing severe repercussions. By the end of that year two well-known anti-H Block activists, Miriam Daly of the IRSP and John Turnley of the Irish Independence Party<sup>895</sup>, had been assassinated by loyalist paramilitaries. Radical leftists at the leadership of the campaign had become prime targets for loyalists in actions that were often claimed by anti-H Block campaigners as having hallmarks of collusion. In January 1981 Bernadette McAliskey and her husband were shot several times by members of the UVF in their home in Coalisland. One account of the history of the UDA suggests that the 'next candidate for assassination was Michael Farrell'.<sup>896</sup> The threat likely influenced Farrell's decision to relocate to Dublin, a move that would see the most significant PD activist fade from socialist politics in the North.

The targeting of anti-H Block campaigners was a clear result of the impact of the campaign; indeed, much work had been carried out across Ireland, for example, in petitioning for support among the trade union movement and organising speaking tours. In mid September the National H Block/Armagh committee could at its second conference claim up to 30 action groups.<sup>897</sup> The seismic shift came, however, when republican prison leader Brendan Hughes announced the first hunger strike in October 1980. The immediate impact of the

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<sup>894</sup> Finn, *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*, p 160.

<sup>895</sup> The Irish Independence Party was an Irish Nationalist Party founded in the late 1970s by Frank McManus MP.

<sup>896</sup> Henry McDonald and Jim Cusack, *UDA: Inside the Heart of Loyalist Terror* (Dublin, Penguin, 2004), p. 118.

<sup>897</sup> Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 85.

strike was to provide momentum for the biggest demonstrations since the civil rights and anti-internment movement. The first major march in October drew some 17,000 people and journalists drew comparisons between it and the civil rights movement. In the weeks that followed there would be pickets, fasts and rallies the length and breadth of the country, with major demonstrations taking place in Derry and Dublin.<sup>898</sup> A number of affiliated H-Block groups sprang up across the country and many took on a clearly humanitarian tone. By mid-November 1981 around 125 groups existed and at its height the campaign boasted some 437 affiliated groups.<sup>899</sup>

While the story of what happened behind lonely prison walls in 1981 is well known, the history of the individuals and activists who made up the campaign on the outside is less understood. The history of the hunger strike has been thoroughly documented; during the first protest the leadership was faced with one hunger striker that was nearing death and a deal was accepted under disputed circumstances. The result of the deal did not change the prisoners' circumstances and as the same regime remained inside the Long Kesh, it was perhaps inevitable that another hunger strike would be called. In the context of mass mobilisations in support of republican hunger strikers the death of long-standing MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Frank McManus provided the terrain in which the republican movement would take its first steps into electoral politics, with Bobby Sands running in the by-election. Later, in the southern Irish election in June 1981, the campaign stood 9 prisoner candidates returning two TDs and securing over 40,000 votes. Although the hunger strike of 1981 ended

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<sup>898</sup> Ibid, pp. 95-96.

<sup>899</sup> Ibid, p. 98 and p. 186.

without winning its demands, the entire period served to transform Irish politics. The movement that emerged outside of the prisons, which F. Stuart Ross contends arguably ‘dwarfed that of 1968 and 1969’<sup>900</sup> provided fertile ground for a new politicised republican movement to grow. Central to this was the way in which strategies from the left intersected with and influenced republican thinking, and in this regard the PD was involved in every level of the campaign.

The central argument pushed by the PD throughout the campaign surrounded the necessity to build a broad united front that did not demand support for armed actions as a precondition for supporting the plight of the prisoners. It was the broad humanitarian appeal in support of the prisoners that saw masses of people participate in the campaign, thereby vindicating the arguments made by PD and others. Gerry Adams recognised this years later when he looked back on the Coalisland conference. From the conference floor ‘one of our people insisted that anyone involved in campaigning for the prisoners should accept the legitimacy of the armed struggle... I knew it was a mistake the moment I heard about it.’<sup>901</sup>

This united front approach also influenced the shift in republicanism on a wider level surrounding electoral interventions. Thus, while the election of Bobby Sands resulted from an unpredictable accident of history, the local government elections in May 1981 were well anticipated in advance. The Provisional movement, which had reaffirmed its opposition to contesting elections during its recent Ard Fheis in 1980, in effect shunned this election. The PD, on the other hand, argued strongly against abstentionism and would emerge

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<sup>900</sup> Ibid, p. 177.

<sup>901</sup> Adams, *Before the Dawn*, p. 283.

alongside others to challenge politicians in the nationalist community who would not support the republican prisoners. By targeting two representatives in particular, Gerry Fitt and Paddy Devlin, the PD offered a scathing critique of the SDLP:

The anti-imperialist movement is paying a heavy price for continuing the policy of abstention in elections. It is quite clear that we cannot ignore quislings like [Gerry] Fitt nor can we render them irrelevant simply by mass mobilizations. They must be fought and defeated on their home ground and exposed as completely unrepresentative of the Irish people. That is why People's Democracy has stood candidates against Fitt and union bureaucrat Paddy Devlin in the local government elections. The immediate and central problem is to demonstrate the massive support that there is for the hunger strikers, but we also want to show that elections can be used by anti-imperialists.<sup>902</sup>

Both Devlin and Fitt had refused to support the campaign, with the latter denouncing the prisoners in severe terms.<sup>903</sup> The PD insistence that the anti-imperialist movement could use elections was successful, after standing Fergus O'Hare and John McAnulty, they unseated Gerry Fitt and beat Paddy Devlin significantly. Both men were political heavyweights of the nationalist community. O'Hare achieved 20 percent of the vote while McAnulty polled 17

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<sup>902</sup> *From Reform to Collaboration: the history of Gerry Fitt*, People's Democracy pamphlet (Belfast 1981), p. 7.

<sup>903</sup> In November 1980 Fitt would declare that he 'could not support a demand for privileged treatment for people who have committed the most despicable crimes in Ireland'. *Ibid*, p. 2.

percent, and their victories coincided with three IRSP members also being elected on a pro-prisoner platform.<sup>904</sup> The republican leadership noted the intervention of those to the left of the Provisionals, and Adams would later recall that the election had seen Sinn Féin ‘surrendering further ground’ to the PD and others.<sup>905</sup> But the Adams leadership, which was becoming increasingly solidified throughout the hunger strike period, had little intention of conceding further ground to the left in the aftermath of the death of Bobby Sands. Sands’ seat was won in a second by-election after his death by his own election agent, Owen Carron.

After nine other hunger strikers died, in what signalled one of the most intense battles of modern Irish history, the Provisional movement made an historic turn towards electoralism in the early 1980s. The prison dispute ended in terms that meant a defeat for the prisoners’ five demands. However, it also led to a major process of revitalisation across the republican movement, categorised by unprecedented levels of public support and swathes of new activists, spurring the growth of republicanism over the next two decades.<sup>906</sup>

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<sup>904</sup> Local government elections, 1981, available online, <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/flg81.htm>, accessed on 06/01/2017.

<sup>905</sup> Adams, *Before the Dawn*, p. 278.

<sup>906</sup> Journalist Ed Moloney comments on the formal demise of the H Block campaign, and the way that it led to an inrush of support and membership for Sinn Féin: ‘Quietly, meekly, and with almost no notice taken by the media, the National H Block Committee voted itself out of existence and scores of its supporters moved over to Sinn Féin. ‘The fact was that after the hunger strikes the republican movement was swamped by new young members’, explained one former Sinn Féin leader. ‘Some H Block committees just became Sinn Féin branches overnight’, The decision by Sinn Féin to contest elections and to embrace this strategy was a formality’. Moloney, *Secret History of the IRA*, p. 215.

The PD did not fare well throughout this process. Although the organisation had campaigned for a united front approach, at times as if such a development itself would ensure the conditions in which the party would gain support, the reality was that Sinn Féin was by far the largest and most important force inside the prison movement and would continually dictate the terms of play. In October 1982 the Smash H Block/ Armagh campaign was disbanded and the PD could do little but comment upon ‘the collapse of the H Block/Armagh campaign’<sup>907</sup>. This was largely a result of the strategy of the republican forces, which although willing to partake in united campaigning for the duration of the prison dispute, did not share this principle as part of their wider strategy in its aftermath. Instead the republican movement was embarking on its own form of combining militarism and political action, aptly summarised by Danny Morrison’s well-known phrase aimed at re-orientating the republican struggle to one with a ballot paper in one hand ‘and the Armalite in the other’.<sup>908</sup>

Therefore, in 1982 when Thatcher’s government announced an Assembly election, Sinn Féin would stand, taking five seats and ten percent of the vote, returning activists who represented the new shift in republican thinking including Adams, Morrison and Martin McGuinness. The PD— seemingly confused about what approach to take— had initially called for a boycott of the Assembly election and then changed its tune when the Provisionals announced

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<sup>907</sup> *Socialist Republic*, October 1982.

<sup>908</sup> ‘Who here really believes we can win the war through the ballot box? But will anyone here object if, with a ballot paper in one hand and the Armalite in the other, we take power in Ireland?’ The well-known quote was delivered by Morrison during a speech at the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis in 1981, and came to encapsulate the new strategy of the movement going into the 1980s. Feeney, *Sinn Féin*, p. 303.



candidates.<sup>909</sup> PD councillors Fergus O'Hare and John McAnulty stood, but were only able to muster 442 votes between them.<sup>910</sup> The small electoral gains that the PD previously made were dwarfed in a way that was symbolic of the organisation's fate. In 1983, after the resignation of IRSP Belfast City Councillor, Gerry Kelly, Sinn Féin activist Alex Maskey was elected and became the party's first member to take his seat in the council chamber. The motion to trigger the by-election was moved by PD councillor Fergus O'Hare, setting in train the process that would begin the rise of Sinn Féin in local councils in the North.<sup>911</sup> By the 1985 council election the PD totalled a measly 131 votes, or 0.1 percent of the vote.<sup>912</sup> The extent to which the marginal space that the PD had occupied had been swept from under them was illustrated in their collapsed vote.

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<sup>909</sup> Finn, *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*, p. 164.

<sup>910</sup> 1982 Northern Ireland Assembly election results, available online, <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/fa82.htm>, accessed on 06/01/2017.

<sup>911</sup> Maskey was the second Sinn Féin councilor elected to a local council in the North, the first was Seamus Kerr, who was elected to Omagh District Council three months previously. See, Barry McCaffrey, Alex Maskey, *Man and Mayor*, (Brehon Press, Belfast, 2003), pp. 54-55.

<sup>912</sup> Local government election results, 1985.

## 7.7. Conclusion

Despite the pioneering role that the PD had played in the prisoners' movement the organisation came out of the Smash H Block/Armagh campaign with little ground gained. It did not recruit significantly, and in the new situation it tended to swim with the tide toward political republicanism. Unsurprising then, that a debate would surface surrounding the PD's relationship to the politics of Sinn Féin. There existed an obvious tendency for those in the ranks of the PD to be influenced by the republican movement, with activists often joining the Provisionals and other republican organisations on an individual basis. But by the early 1980s the political ground had shifted to the extent that it posed a crisis of identity for the PD.

One internal PD document from 1984 proposed a new orientation to the republican movement, noting, 'Sinn Féin has grown significantly. It is more attractive to left-wing militants. This includes PD ranks and periphery. We must project a new strategic orientation'. The document went on to argue that 'anti-imperialist politics today are dominated by Sinn Féin's turn to the left', and pointed out that Sinn Féin now embraced a broader acceptance of the need for united action, greater involvement with the trade unions and more attention to social and economic issues— including issues of women's rights—, and a more constructive approach to elections.<sup>913</sup> The new orientation favoured an anti-imperialist united front that could unite the PD with republicanism.

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<sup>913</sup> James Gallagher, *Our orientation to the republican movement*, PD internal document, 10 November 1984. Available online, <http://www.clrirlshleftarchive.org/document/view/363/>, accessed on 23/01/2017.

Such a process of unity was not to emerge and the document itself arguably illustrated the continued illusions that the PD held in the republican movement. Namely, that with pressure from the radical left it would embrace a socialist agenda. Nevertheless, on this basis a significant section of the PD membership voted to join Provisional Sinn Féin. Of the two PD councillors elected in 1981 Fergus O'Hare left the organisation, while John McAnulty continued activity with the small rump of the PD that still existed for some years. Vincent Doherty was also one of those who would join Sinn Féin, although he did so some years later. Doherty's own recollections about his political transition testify to the sheer weight of the experience of the Smash H-Block period, offering an interesting anecdote of how those on the anti-imperialist left in the north viewed the situation in the 1980s.

The first thing was the incredible emotion of the period. As it happens I was born two weeks before Bobby Sands so the chronology would be pretty exact. Bombay Street and the pogrom of 69 at 15. Falls Road curfew 1970 at 16. Internment, widespread torture in 71, at 17. Bloody Sunday in 72, still 17. The Hunger Strikers were the single biggest political events in my life up to that point. The massive upsurge in the activities of the Loyalist death squads and the widespread British Army and RUC repression caused a feeling of suffocation and instinctual reaction to fight back, physically as well as politically. The other thing I wanted to say was that certainly in my case, we weren't exactly received with open arms into SF. That was to change later but initially they were quite suspicious, wondering if people especially would organise a

tendency in the party, which off course never happened and which in time allowed for people to be brought into line one by one.<sup>914</sup>

Doherty's recollection illustrate the extent to which such a tactic was not likely to bear fruit. Notwithstanding the perceived 'shift to the left' within Sinn Féin, the movement was not particularly open to democratic debate and development. Indeed, the party retained the same military ethos as the Provisional movement, and a small and tight knit leadership would enact significant control over the organisation throughout the next number of decades. The great irony was that the political changes taking place across the republican movement in the period following the late 1980s did not necessarily result in resurgent left radicalism. In fact the movement embarked on a long road of embracing constitutional establishment politics in the North. After years of political struggle the PD had failed to develop as a significant force in Irish politics, and instead sacrificed their socialism to the politics and indeed the organisations of the republican movement.

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<sup>914</sup> Correspondence with Vincent Doherty, 24/03/2016.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

### 8.1. Assessing years of struggle

‘We find after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us.’- John Steinbeck.

This thesis set out to chart the history of the PD, its role during the most intense period of the troubles, and its contribution to the socialist tradition in Ireland. It is clear that the organisation experienced an eventful but varied history. At the outset this thesis posed some general questions; what follows is an attempt to address these questions, summarise the findings that can be concluded from this study, and offer an appraisal of this topic. The central task that this research set was to ascertain how a relatively small organisation exercised a wide influence on events. It is the contention of this thesis that the PD at times played a crucial role in recent history because of its emphasis on mass protest and mass action, as opposed to other political strategies, ranging from armed actions to parliamentarianism. The PD’s role in the civil rights movement illustrates that the organisation was a decisive driving force to the social movement that mounted a challenge to Unionist majority rule in the late 1960s. Moreover, this thesis has contested that the PD’s contribution was not confined to the most known instances of protest action in 1968-69, but continued up until the very end of civil rights mobilisation, when, for example, PD members helped lead opposition to internment and pressed for a march in Derry in January 1972, which became Bloody Sunday.

An appreciation of both the continuity and change that encompassed the 1960s is necessary in defining the significance of the new left’s role in Ireland. It

is tempting to see the emergence of the PD as a something entirely peculiar to 1968, a moment of radicalism that would be forced to accommodate to the sectarian divisions that are enshrined into the social and political makeup of Northern Irish politics. Such an analysis has been warned against by some of those who engaged in the pursuit of socialism from 1968 onward. Looking back on 1968 with the benefit of two decades hindsight, Chris Harman challenged what he described as the conventional ‘media account’ of the period, which presented the radicalism of 1968 as an historical anomaly, one of militant student protestors who would inevitably be absorbed into the reality of life under capitalism. Harman argued that the origins of the revolts of the 1960s had deep roots and their impact would continue to define the period that followed; ‘1968 was the product of contradictions which had been developing in the years that came before and which continued to explode in the decade afterward.’<sup>915</sup> Perhaps nowhere illustrated this point more clearly than Northern Ireland.

There are times when a relatively small political movement can encapsulate a shift of profound importance, and this was the case with the PD. The students who marched for civil rights in October 1968 were among the most visible products of the changing social, economic and cultural tides that swept the post-WWII period. Politically, the PD reflected the process of liberalisation of the 1960s. The Unionist and nationalist traditions of yesteryear were seen as dead-weights that belonged to previous generations, they were viewed as irrelevant and indeed at times counterpoised to the struggle for equality and social justice. Therefore, while a radical tradition existed in Ireland, which included generational struggles against colonialism, these did not feature in the

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<sup>915</sup> Harman, ‘Prologue’, *The Fire Last Time*.

PD's early outlook. Validity was taken not from any well-honed analysis of Irish society, but from a gut reaction to the repressive and discriminatory practices of the Unionist government, and from the powerful impact of the movements that were emerging across the globe. The PD best expressed the internationalism of the civil rights movement and mirrored the protest movements emerging across the world at this time. This is most evident throughout 1968 and 1969, when they replicated forms of action that were being utilised by their global generational counterparts. Although the PD began as a broad, liberal and ill-defined protest movement, this thesis has shown that it was from the beginning driven forward by a small current of radical socialists who viewed the civil rights movement as an opportunity to advance class politics across the sectarian divide. The radical left are to be credited with launching civil rights protests in Belfast in the wake of the police violence of 5 October. The same activists would go on to shape the politics and activity of the civil rights movement into 1969.

The 'new left' currents of the 1960s shared a commonality of social roots and often reflected similar goals, but they were all tempered by specific national and political contexts. When a campaign against Unionist domination in Northern Ireland was launched a crisis of hegemony and authority engulfed the state. By 1969, the level of repression that met the civil rights movement confounded the PD. The initial strength of the PD was its fluidity and its ability to move fast, putting civil disobedience and 'people power' at the centre of the civil rights campaign. However, its strengths also contained its weakness, as the lack of organisation and strategy left the PD unable to coherently grow. As the struggle for civil rights precipitated a struggle against the state for a large section

of the minority community, the PD was unable to relate to this in any significant way. More traditional political forces did not have this problem.

Understanding the way in which working class communities were divided during the civil rights movement demands an investigation of a number of key themes, including the sectarian nature of the Northern Ireland state in the 1960s, and the weaknesses of socialist and anti-sectarian forces as the civil rights movement emerged in 1968. It is worth drawing some conclusions in regard to the latter point. As Colin Barker points out, social movements are, in essence, ‘mediated expressions of class struggle’.<sup>916</sup> The PD was the most militantly class-conscious element of the social movement that erupted in the late 1960s in Ireland. It was the main force on the left that attempted to build Catholic and Protestant unity through common struggle, but aside from limited protests among the student body, it was unsuccessful in this pursuit. Always a minority within the broader civil rights movement, this thesis has measured the PD against the role of the bigger and more established currents of the Irish left, who put forward distinctly different strategies to the PD.

The civil rights movement was a ‘social movement from below’; a movement of subaltern groups aimed at challenging a dominant and repressive

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<sup>916</sup> ‘Only at a level more immediate level than that explored in Marx’s *Capital* can we locate definite people, speaking in particular tongues and with their own histories and traditions, struggling to understand and achieve control of their material and social conditions. It is at this more immediate level, of more ‘concrete’ sociocultural formations, that ‘social movements’ emerge, as specific forms of social and political activity. Movements are mediated expressions of class struggle.’ Colin Barker, ‘Class Struggle and Social Movements’, *Marxism and Social Movements*, ed. Colin Barker, Laurence Cox, John Krinsky and Alf Gunvald Nilsen, (Boston, Brill Books 2013), p. 47.



societal structure.<sup>917</sup> In contrast, the loyalist backlash represented a form of ‘social movement from above’, emerging chiefly as a project of dominant groups that sought to both maintain and modify an existing structure of entrenched needs and capabilities.<sup>918</sup> These countervailing forces emerged simultaneously, and explaining the outbreak of conflict lies in understanding both the failure of the social movement from below *in challenging the Unionist hierarchy*, and the strength of the social movement from above *in asserting itself in order to maintain and modify the fractured hegemony of the Unionist state*. The PD was briefly at the centre of these events, and its role is notable in highlighting both the failures of the civil rights movement and the extent of the Unionist backlash against reform.

The civil rights movement emerged primarily concerning the grievances and advancement of one community; this posed obvious problems for those trying to fight for working class interest as a whole. From the outset the PD had maintained that the civil rights cause was a universal working class cause, not to be confined to one community. However, the effort to rectify the sectarian imbalance inside the arrangements of the Northern state gave the perception that any advancement for the Catholic minority meant a retreat for the Protestant majority. This was a perception that was fuelled by sectarian currents who wished to maintain one party Unionist rule, but there was also logic to this perception. The civil rights movement temporarily united a broad range of forces, including nationalists, socialists, republicans and various class currents in a programme aimed at reforming the state. Such reforms, enacted within the

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<sup>917</sup> Alf Gunvald Nilsen and Laurence Cox, ‘What would a Marxist theory of social movement look like?’ *Marxism and Social Movements*, p. 73.

<sup>918</sup> *Ibid*, p. 66.

confines of the Northern state offered little gain to Protestant workers. The necessity of the social movement from below to wage a struggle against the totality of the system, not solely one individual component of it, was crucial both to advance the gains made by the civil rights movement and to win Protestant support.<sup>919</sup> It was the radical left— most notably in the PD, but also sections of the Derry left— who identified a key problem with the civil rights movement, in that by 1969 it was developing as a broad pan-Catholic alliance, and therefore failing to appeal to Protestant workers on a class basis. The absence of any united class orientation meant that the civil rights movement was incapable of offering an alternative to the communal pressures that were mounting.

Although the PD presented a critique of the moderates in the civil rights movement, they had no real strategy to overcome this problem. PD activists did attempt to counter the imbalance by putting the emphasis on the social and economic grievances of both communities. The campaigning of the PD throughout 1969 and afterward, encapsulated in the slogans of ‘jobs and houses for all’ and the rejection of ‘Orange and Green Tories’, were genuine attempts to shift this emphasis. However, given the disorganised nature of the PD movement, its size, strength and lack of social weight, not to mention the extent of crisis and opposition that met the civil rights movement, these efforts were largely in vain. Could things have gone differently for the left during the civil rights movement? Such a question is impossible to answer, but nonetheless important to ask. Those who retain a note of optimism surrounding the growth of socialist politics in Ireland have argued that the problem with the civil rights upsurge was the lack of socialist organisation, rooted in working areas and

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<sup>919</sup> Ibid, pp. 77-80.

capable of advancing independent class politics, whilst also offering an alternative direction to the fight that erupted in the Catholic ghettos in the post-1969 period.<sup>920</sup> The PD had obviously recognised the need for this to some extent, but they were never able to put such a project into practice. It was a failure that helped seal the fate of the left during the civil rights movement.

From 1968 to 1972 a powerfully repressive state apparatus met the civil rights movement. Those seeking reform were forced to confront the reality that the Northern Ireland state was not redressing the problem of sectarian dominance, but was in fact intensifying division and conflict. For the PD, the struggle to ‘overcome’ sectarianism became a struggle to overthrow the state. This was informed by events throughout 1968-1969, when violence emerged against the civil rights campaign at a time when non-violent politics were central to oppositional politics. Its result would lay the basis for a sustained conflict. By examining the PD, this thesis has argued that sectarian violence and aggression toward civil rights action was not something that emerged at exceptional moments, nor was it driven from the fringes of Unionism, but was in fact widespread and systemic. An understanding of this is crucial to explaining August 1969 and what followed. It is also central to understanding the development of the PD.

The most widely commented upon instance of PD activity is the Burntollet march. This thesis has challenged the conventional narrative around Burntollet, which views the actions of the PD as intended at provoking violence, thereby preventing reform and contributing to the mounting of sectarian tension.

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<sup>920</sup> See, McCann, *War in an Irish Town*, and Allen, *1916*.

This narrative is often based upon a distortion of the PD's aims and its politics, and its wider impact has been to downplay the extent that sectarian repression was driven by the Unionist state in this period. It was the inability of the state to deliver meaningful reform— both through its own internal mechanisms, and later through the 'external' intervention of the British government, and the way that the response to demands for reform generated far bigger grievances among the nationalist population— that primarily created the conditions for conflict to emerge in the North.<sup>921</sup> The early history of the PD encompasses some of the most important moments of this process.

In this early phase the PD enjoyed a notable, if temporary, level of support as was shown in the election in February 1969. The events that followed illustrated the extent to which the left was unable to influence the forces unleashed by civil rights action. If the PD was central to oppositional politics in early 1969, its minimal role in August 69 indicated how the socialist current of the civil rights campaign was sidelined. Finally, PD activists were clearly victims of sectarian violence during 1968 and 1969, but they were not passive agitators. After the crisis of 1969 the most politicised PD activists concluded upon the primacy of socialist organisation. The history of the PD post-1969 is the history

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<sup>921</sup> As Niall O' Dochartaigh explains in regard to Derry in 1969: 'One person one vote, for example, was granted shortly after the April riots in Derry during which Samuel Devenney, who later died, was severely beaten by the RUC and large sections of the population of the Bogside had been evacuated to Creggan in response to the threat of an RUC 'invasion' of the area. To say that the grievance of one-person one vote had been superseded by other grievances by then, would be to understate the case. The sequence in which reform was granted taught the cynical lesson that 'reform', and the British government interventions which prompted it, were dependant on the conflict and that the progress of reform was inseparable from the pace and progress of the conflict. It was not something apart from the conflict which could help solve it.' O' Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites*, p. 311.

of one of the most determined efforts to construct socialist organisation and develop Marxist ideas in Northern Ireland during the troubles. In terms of both the activity of the PD and the ideological influences of the organisation, the 'class of 68' left their mark on Northern Ireland over the next decade and more.

## 8.2. Pursuing the Workers' Republic

The PD attempt to build a revolutionary socialist party from 1969 onward undoubtedly began with high hopes, but the organisation never reached a position where it could continually shape Irish politics in a significant way, and this was reflected in its consistently small size. The PD never grew far beyond a small membership, amounting to no more than perhaps 100 activists.<sup>922</sup> However, one should avoid citing the low membership of the organisation as the determining factor in labelling it as ineffectual, or as a small 'sect' of the radical left. The term sect is often used to describe small socialist groupings, implying an inward looking organisation concerned with its own prerogatives. The classic Marxist definition of political sectarianism is that of an organisation that puts its own interests before the interests of working class forces.<sup>923</sup> It is evident that throughout the history of the PD the organisation was largely concerned with influencing events outside of its ranks, to the point that it perhaps even neglected the process of consolidating and building upon whatever gains it had made during different periods of political agitation. Despite the almost constant array of activism, PD members never managed to develop their organisation into a serious national force.

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<sup>922</sup> Although membership figures for the PD are hard to find this estimation was gleaned from interviews with a number of PD activists. Interview with Brid Ruddy, Belfast, 10/12/2015, Fergus O'Hare, Belfast, 08/06/2015, Jim Monaghan, Dublin, 15/03/2015.

<sup>923</sup> As Marx put it, 'The sect sees the justification for its existence and its point of honour not in what it has in *common* with the class movement but in the *particular shibboleth* which *distinguishes* it from the movement.' Letter from Marx to Schweitzer, 13 October 1868, *Marx and Engels Correspondence*, (International Publishers, 1968), available online, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68\\_10\\_13-abs.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68_10_13-abs.htm), accessed on 13/01/2017.

This thesis has drawn out the strategies, perspectives and activism of the PD and shown how these developed against a backdrop of social crisis and intense political change. The PD embrace of anti-partitionism and 32-county socialism happened in a context of resurgent republican armed struggle, which, for the first time in history was concentrated in urban areas. As the mass upsurge of the Catholic working class during the civil rights struggle intersected with armed struggle against the state, the PD began a long and complicated relationship with Irish republicanism. The journey of the PD, from 1968 until the 1980s, to some extent reflected the precarious historical position that the organisation began to occupy within the broader anti imperialist movement.

The post-1969 period was one in which PD members tried hard to agitate for working class unity inside the Northern state, but their own activity was no substitute for a wider realignment of left-wing forces and although PD members embarked on a variety of campaigns, they had little success. Viewing the failures of the Irish left through the prism of one small current is insufficient. Instead, this thesis has measured the PD against the bigger battalions of the organised left in the North, including the NILP, the Communist Party and the trade unions. The established left tended to base its strategy on reform through the parliamentary arena and by extension through offering support to the institutions of the Northern state. The PD maintained quite a different strategy, which argued for the primacy of working class struggle from below in a challenge to the state. Unsurprising then that as violence and repression increased against the civil rights movement the horizons for such a project shrank. Catholic grievances against the state became increasingly articulated through republican armed

struggle and more militant forms of civil resistance, consequently the PD moved closer toward the republican position.

Distinguishing between the different strategies across the left is important, however, the crucial overarching point is that class struggle or workers' unity clearly did not develop during the late 1960s and early 1970s in any significant way. By 1969 sectarian division ran deep and although the left had a notable base in nationalist areas, it failed to make any real inroads among Protestant workers. The opportunities for the PD receded by the early 1970s, and the weight of communal division strongly impacted against any left-wing project. The ultimate lesson that the PD drew from the experience since 1968 was that the Northern state was incompatible with democracy and was the main motor of repression against those mobilising for radical change. The process has been documented above, and if August 1969 had alienated large parts of the nationalist community from the state in some of the most densely populated areas in Belfast and Derry, then internment should be recognised as having this effect across the North more generally. Building a socialist organisation at this time was an arduous task. Mass struggle reached its height, and combined with large-scale republican militarism during the civil disobedience campaign, the PD radicalised, contending that the fight against British imperialism was now crucial to deliver progress for the Irish working class. The turn signified a political alignment with the Provisional campaign and the post-internment period marks an important shift in the PD. It was during this time that the organisation dropped its ambition of building an independent working class force, instead falling behind the Provisional demand to first smash the Northern state before the social question could be properly addressed. This thesis has shown how the PD



developed an important political contribution in this regard— based on popular struggle from below and anti-imperialism— which gathered some traction at a time when the republican movement was concerned with waging a military campaign. This allowed the PD space to develop a political movement that influenced a range of areas, including popular campaigns of street protest, such as the NRM, but also the development of a theoretical critique of the Northern Ireland state.

Internment was a watershed moment that generated widespread Catholic alienation against the British military and led to sustained violence. It also had a great deal of impact on the PD and wider civil rights movement. Figures like Michael Farrell had been centrally involved in challenging the Unionist government since 1968, but their activity had been entirely based upon mass civil disobedience, and was dictated by the politics of non-violence. The treatment of internees, including PD members, was a microcosm of what was meted out to the nationalist community more generally in the autumn of 1971. Amidst the explosive circumstances that followed internment the PD played a key role alongside other forces in pressing ahead with marches during the civil resistance campaign. This was a crucial period in the history of the troubles as it sparked a new wave of mass protest.

Among historians, internment is primarily associated with the rise of republican armed struggle; this thesis has shown that there was a wider explosion of oppositional politics. The PD played a notable role in this regard, indeed, while republicanism grew significantly in this period it could not have enjoyed such wide support, nor was it likely to have had such a destabilising effect, were it not for various forms of civil disobedience and mass participatory action that

were waged throughout the Catholic community— including, the rent and rates strike, marches, workplace walkouts, demonstrations and frequent riots. Amidst all of this the PD tried to direct the civil disobedience campaign with a strategy that looked to coordinated mass action.

The anti-internment campaign formed part of an almost whole scale community struggle. The PD hoped that this could counter and challenge the authority of Britain in Ireland, forming the basis of a wider process of national and social liberation. This reached its height with the establishment of no-go areas, where a significant level of communal control was exercised through civil disobedience committees and other forums that resembled popular assemblies. Although the PD supported the republican campaign, it held a different conception of how advances could be made, viewing the emergence of no-go areas as offering an alternative to the tightly controlled militarist campaign that was being waged by the PIRA. Affinities with other sections of the European revolutionary left were again relevant, with the PD contesting that these areas of ‘Dual power’ could form alternative centres of governance in the way that workers’ councils had historically acted. There existed some degree of hopeful ‘movementism’ in the politics of the PD.<sup>924</sup> The organisation forwarded a vague

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<sup>924</sup> Chris Harman argued that the ‘movementism’ of the left in the 1970s and 1980s was a retreat from an independent working class position: ‘Often, instead of the revolutionary left winning new people from these movements the reverse has happened – these movements have won members of the revolutionary left to their non-working class approach. Revolutionaries have begun to make concessions to the idea that the movements’ goals can be achieved without working class action. The situation has been made worse by the inevitable pattern of such movements... Revolutionary socialists who put their faith in such movements receive an initial boost, only then to suffer all the demoralisation that comes with the decline.’ Harman, ‘Women’s liberation and Revolutionary Socialism’, *International Socialism Journal*, 2: 23, available online, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1984/xx/women.html>, accessed on

strategy based upon the militancy and self-governance of the ‘anti-imperialist’ population, but it could not explain how this situation could be maintained and developed against the balance of forces. The weakness of this strategy was shown when the British military dismantled the no go areas.

Motorman indicated Britain’s long-term strategy toward Ireland. Despite its declining interest in the North, and the level of destabilisation that engulfed the state, the British establishment was prepared for a strategy of containing and controlling the Northern conflict. The following years would see shrinking horizons for the PD as the phase of mass civil resistance ended and militant oppositional politics was articulated primarily by armed republicanism. In this context the PD drifted into more open and uncritical support for the Provisional movement. The anti-imperialist shift of the PD can be summarised as being rooted in a progressive view of the republican struggle in challenging imperialism, and ultimately the existence of the Northern state through armed action. It was also a reflection of how the PD had come to understand the nature of the Protestant backlash that had developed at a fast pace by 1972. The context created by rising sectarian tension and Protestant opposition to power sharing has been drawn upon. However, this thesis has also illustrated how the changing politics of the PD was a product of its version of Marxism, its approach to the ‘Protestants of Ulster’ and their relationship to the Unionist state. Initially, the PD had been the most committed voice of Protestant and Catholic unity, but as loyalist opposition mounted working class unity was seen to be impossible within the parameters of the ‘Orange state’.

The Marxism of the PD essentially contended that the whole Protestant community held a stake in maintaining the arrangements of the Northern state. The theory of the 'labour aristocracy' viewed Protestant workers as wedded to the institutions of the state through the granting of marginal privileges. This theoretical outlook, then, dictated that progressive class struggle would not involve a significant section of the Protestant community until the structures of the state had been dismantled. Consequently, the PD almost solely orientated toward Catholic workers, regressing into a defensive position against militant loyalism, which was on the offensive in this period. By the time the Protestant backlash reached its height with the UWC strike of 1974, the PD had theorised a potential loyalist takeover of the North, which facilitated a more general drift into supporting the republican position of armed struggle. The dismissal of Protestant working class agency in the struggle for socialism ensured a much longer problem as it confined the PD to working within the 'anti-imperialist-movement', and thus neglected the long and difficult task of building a socialist current independent of republicanism.

The contradictions contained in this position would take some time to develop, partially because of the state of the republican movement in the mid-1970s. Indeed, the PD operated during a period when republicanism in Ireland lacked any real political strength and was focused almost wholly on the military struggle. In these circumstances the PD was able to play an important role in instigating social and political mobilisation within the nationalist community at various junctures. A focus on mass movements and mass mobilisation was central to the politics and strategy of the PD since 1968, and such an outlook was clearly influential in reinvigorating republicanism in the North at the beginning

of the 1980s. This thesis has shown that there was an important level of continuity between the civil rights movement, the civil disobedience campaign and the movement against prison repression.<sup>925</sup> This continuity was best expressed by the PD and others on the radical left, such as Bernadette Devlin/McAliskey, who played a leading role in these periods of mass political action. Throughout these different periods of grassroots activism the PD emerged to the forefront of political agitation, where they would often utilise similar tactics from previous struggles. The central strategy espoused by the PD was one based upon the application of mass action and popular protest, as an alternative to a strategy based upon individual actions and the elitist tactics that characterised the republican armed struggle.

The PD had clear successes during both the civil rights campaign and the civil disobedience campaigns, in both cases managing to draw out large numbers of people, and put respective issues of civil rights and anti-repression to the forefront of Northern politics in a radical way. A similar process took place during the campaign for prisoners' rights in the late 1970s and early 1980s, although it is important not to overstate the role of the PD in the latter period. By the late 1970s Northern Ireland had long crossed the Rubicon into a period of conflict. Among the anti-imperialist constituency the terms of play were strongly dictated by the Provisional republican movement, and the period was less open to other political possibilities in comparison with the civil rights era. Nevertheless,

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<sup>925</sup> As Finn notes of these campaigns: 'We find the same individuals and organisations coming to the fore... The history of the troubles cannot be reduced to a straightforward choice between the revolutionary militarism of the Provos and the parliamentary nationalism of the SDLP'. Finn, *Challengers to Provisional Republicanism*, p. 181.

throughout modern Irish history there has always been an interesting relationship between the radical republican movement and the socialist left.

In the 1970s this relationship was most evident by the connections between the PD and the Provisionals. The ideas and actions of the PD would influence historic changes in republicanism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The PD were among the first groups to prioritise the prison issue alongside prisoners' relatives, arguing that it was a crucial area that should be focused on in terms of social and political mobilisation. When conditions inside the prison forced wider movement in this direction the PD had a consistent line, arguing for a broad based campaign that reached beyond the confines of the minority pro-republican constituency in Ireland. The campaign took some time to develop—not least due to the traditional strand of the Provisionals, who had to be won gradually to embrace such shifts—but as it did develop it was clearly influenced by the approach forwarded by the PD. For example, the united front strategy articulated by the PD meant dropping the assertion that support for prisoners necessitated support for armed republicanism, and the left's initiatives toward electoral contests on a pro-prisoner platform contributed to seismic shifts in republican strategy in the early 1980s.

Yet while the PD had a consistent line surrounding what type of campaigning it wished to see during the Smash H-Block movement, the consistency of the organisation itself was less certain. The PD was capable of playing an important role in politics during a time when the republican movement neglected the political field. However, in the post-1981 period the situation had remarkably changed and as a new politicised republicanism emerged, it quickly filled the space that the PD had previously occupied. The

changing politics of Sinn Féin— which reflected the contradictory position that the Provisionals found themselves in since the mid 1970s, as republicans grappled with a growing realisation that they could not defeat the British state using military power alone— reached a critical moment in the early 1980s after the hunger strikes, when a new generation of political activists emerged around the movement and proved capable of dwarfing the small forces to the left of the party.

The irony was that while the PD viewed the changing politics of Sinn Féin as a welcome shift to the left, the republican movement was on a much longer road to embracing constitutional politics.<sup>926</sup> Indeed, the future electoral trajectory of Sinn Féin was predominantly geared toward realignment with the forces of Irish nationalism of the SDLP, in what was fully realised with the ‘pan-nationalist’ strategy of the republican leadership.<sup>927</sup> The fact that in later years no organised left current would develop within Sinn Féin was another obvious illustration of the limitations surrounding an entryist strategy into a militarist movement. It would be some decades before an independent revolutionary left of any meaningful size or influence would again exist in the North of Ireland. Always a small organisation, when a section of the PD joined Sinn Féin in the mid 1980s it completed the group’s long demise. Joining Sinn Féin was not quite an ending fitting for the start. The changing politics of the PD— from the non-

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<sup>926</sup> As Kevin Bean writes: ‘The history of Provisionalism can be summarized as one of a long retreat from the highpoint of the early 1970s to the current pragmatic adaptation to the status quo. As the insurrectionary wave that had produced the Provisional’s began to recede after 1974, they were forced to manoeuvre for nearly twenty years to avoid obvious military and political defeat. However, by the 1990s Republicans were eventually compelled to yield and through the peace process arrive at their current position of accommodation with the British state in Northern Ireland.’ Bean, *The new politics of Sinn Féin*, p. 2.

<sup>927</sup> Moloney, *Secret History of the IRA*, p. 389-390.

violence of the student new left of 1968, through the civil rights and civil disobedience movements, and later to supporting the militant republican struggle against the state— is perhaps the most vivid example of the radical left's search for a revolutionary socialist tradition amidst the turbulent crisis that engulfed the North throughout the troubles.

Clearly, the PD's changing position on the national question is crucial to understanding the fate of the organisation. The PD began life with an aversion to the national question, but ignoring partition, and the state that it maintained, proved detrimental to the left during the civil rights movement. As events rapidly changed, the PD often just as rapidly changed the terms of the question, thus changing themselves in the process. This was of course forced by circumstances but it also reflected the inconsistency of the PD's Marxism. The writing off of the Protestant working class in the fight for socialism in the North was an inverted version of the PD's initial insistence that challenging partition was not necessary. Its later drift toward republicanism showed how far the organisation had shifted toward overthrowing the state through anti-imperialism.

The long demise of the PD was in one sense the story of the new left's failure to make itself relevant to the struggle that erupted against the Northern state. Ultimately, the retreat into Sinn Féin by a significant portion of its members best signified that the PD had adopted a left republican position toward national liberation and reunification. Today, the political tradition established by the PD has been largely forgotten. Yet the PD enjoyed a small but important role throughout the troubles representing one of the most eventful leftwing experiments of its time. An appraisal the role of the PD helps us in understanding the development of the Irish left, and also contributes to our knowledge to what



happened during the most tumultuous period of recent Irish history. This thesis is a modest contribution to those efforts.

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Vincent Doherty: PD member based out of Dublin and member of the National H Block/Armagh campaign, interviewed on 16/03/2016 in Dublin.

Jeff Dudgeon: QUB student in 1968 and a PD activist, interviewed on 10/06/2015 in Belfast.

John Gray: PD member from 1968 to 1972, interviewed on 21/04/2015 in Belfast.

John McAnulty: founding member of the PD and former People's Democracy councillor on Belfast City Council, interviewed on 23/07/2015 in Belfast.

Eamonn McCann: Derry based socialist, writer and trade unionist, member of the Derry Labour Party in 1968, interviewed on 04/06/2015 in Derry.

Eilish McDermott: QUB student and member of the People's Democracy, interviewed on 24/08/2015 in Belfast.

Jim Monaghan: Dublin based member of the PD (1978-mid 1980s), interviewed on 15/03/2015 in Dublin.

Fergus O'Hare: PD activist and former People's Democracy councillor, interviewed on 08/06/2015 in Belfast.

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