

Politics in the Streets

The origins of the
civil rights movement
in Northern Ireland

by
Bob Purdie
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INTRODUCTION

'The Proper Place for Politics is in the Streets'

Slogan carried in Derry on 5 October 1968

Northern Ireland became world famous during the 1970s as a battle front. For most commentators, the events preceding the outbreak of the Provisional Irish Republican Army's military campaign in 1970 have been relevant mainly as an explanation for the violence of the last two decades. The civil rights movement, therefore, has been seen as a prelude to the violence. But during most of its history Northern Ireland was at peace; even now, for most of the time, the vast majority of Northern Ireland people live together in amity and with a warmth of neighbourliness not to be found in many other places. Northern Ireland is gripped by an unresolved conflict which has its origins further back in history than the creation of the state; but it is wrong to ignore everything in that history except the conflict. The civil rights movement marked the transition from a period of peace to a renewal of the conflict and it has to be seen in the light of the events of the 1970s and 1980s. But it also has to be seen as a consequence of the 1960s and as a product of events that took place during a time of rapid, but peaceful, change. To revisit Northern Ireland in the 1960s is to enter a lost world in which most of the political landmarks are different and different assumptions and aspirations underpin politics. In the 1990s we can see why the society was liable to be torn apart in the 1970s, but the 1960s lacked that foreknowledge and peace seemed secure enough for new departures and new experiments. The civil rights movement was one of these new departures.

The movement began as a new way of conceptualising an old problem. Complaints about discrimination against Catholics in Northern Ireland were older than the state itself; they deserve to be assessed in their own right, but it has to be noted that they were always closely linked to nationalist politics and arose in part from perceptions that were deeply rooted in nationalist ideology. Until

the 1960s nationalism supplied the grammar with which to discuss possible solutions. Before 1918 the favoured solution was Home Rule; after World War I a minority of northern nationalists went along with the majority of southerners in supporting an independent republic. After 1921 hopes were pinned on a revision of the border which would eventually make the northern state unviable and immediately deliver large numbers of nationalists from Belfast rule. During the 1930s and 1940s, and reaching a crescendo in the 1950s, the demand was for the British government to transfer the six counties of Northern Ireland to the jurisdiction of the Dublin government. Attempts to pursue this objective through diplomatic and political channels failed, giving rise to the 1956–62 Irish Republican Army's border campaign, and when this failed it opened the way for a fresh approach.

The new strategy was inspired by the Black civil rights movement in the United States. The term 'civil rights' had not been used to define the aspirations of the minority community in Northern Ireland before the 1960s and it had never before adopted a strategy that was both militant and constitutional. Either it had focused narrowly on electoral activity and parliamentary pressure or it had rejected constitutional politics altogether. Both approaches proved equally unproductive. The Black civil rights movement militantly expressed the passion of Southern Blacks and their demand for the rights their citizenship should have given them. At the same time their aspirations were moderate; they simply demanded that the United States apply the letter of its constitution. This idea of fighting for existing constitutional rights was a new one for Northern Ireland nationalists. They had often made the propaganda point that Catholics in Northern Ireland were denied equal rights as citizens of the United Kingdom, but this had never been more than a means of exposing the Unionists in front of British public opinion; the solution was still seen as a united Ireland. The civil rights movement was innovatory precisely because it *did* restrict itself to demanding legal and constitutional rights within the United Kingdom. Most, if not all, of the movement's supporters continued to aspire, ultimately, to Irish unity. Unionists pointed out the inconsistency in their position and questioned their sincerity; but the moral force of the movement came from its deliberate moderation.

But the civil rights strategy was not an easy one to pursue. The civil rights movements in the United States and in Northern Ireland both utilised the tensions produced by the threat that violence might rise from their activities, either because they had lost control of some of their supporters or because they had provoked their opponents. For such tactics to achieve success the state must respond by using inappropriate force while the movement exercises restraint, thus augmenting support for the movement and increasing pressure for the state to make concessions. If the state responds with further inappropriate force, the spiral will be given another twist. But if generalised violence breaks out, the tension is released. The key to success is for the movement to exercise effective control of its own supporters, but this is a very difficult strategy to pursue, especially for a largely spontaneous and amorphous movement. The best way to combine tactical freedom for the leadership with trust on the part of the followers is through charismatic leadership, such as that exercised by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr, but the Northern Ireland civil rights movement had no leaders with this degree of moral authority.

The Northern Ireland civil rights movement was already on its way to failure at the moment of its greatest success. The baton charge by the Royal Ulster Constabulary in Derry on 5 October 1968 helped to create a mass movement, but it was united more by anger than by strategic and tactical agreement. At first everyone agreed on peaceful, non-violent protest, but for some it was a matter of principle, for others a temporary tactic. When the Northern Ireland government offered some concessions towards the end of 1968, the unanimity broke down. The movement, inexorably, became involved in communal tensions and more and more of its time was spent trying to damp down sectarian outbreaks as the old fracture lines between Catholics and Protestants began to reappear and as the mobilisation of one community evoked a hostile response from the other.

The resulting violence led to the intervention of British troops in August 1969. During the next year the emergent Provisional Irish Republican Army began to shift the focus, for many of the civil rights movement's supporters, from a campaign against discrimination by the Unionist government at Stormont to a war against

the British Army and the Westminster government. When members of the Parachute Regiment opened fire on demonstrators in Derry on 30 January 1972, they became the execution squad for the civil rights movement. The subsequent mass demonstration in Newry to commemorate the thirteen victims was both the last great civil rights march and the movement's funeral procession. The Derry march had been one of a number called by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in an attempt to reassert the place of peaceful protest in the fight against internment, as an alternative to the tactics of the Provisional Irish Republican Army. The deaths in Derry led the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association to abandon street protests once and for all.

What happened after 5 October 1968 was not a chapter of accidents – it is readily explained by the effects of protest activity on Northern Ireland's divided society. The mobilisation of large numbers of Catholics in street demonstrations opened up a fault line that had always been there. What has to be explained is not the consequences of the events in Derry on 5 October 1968, but how the demonstrators came to be there in the first place.

Accounts of the civil rights movement which begin with 5 October 1968 or later dates are inadequate. After that date we are dealing with a movement that was slithering rapidly to the crisis of August 1969, and by the time members of this non-violent movement were priming petrol bombs in Derry or slipping over the border for arms training, it had become far too late to understand what brought them to such a pass. In October 1968 and August 1969 they were responding not just to single events but to a series of experiences which had profoundly altered their attitude to society in Northern Ireland and to political activity. Those experiences have to be traced through in more detail than has yet been done in order to understand what brought them to Duke Street in Derry on 5 October 1968.

The history of a movement is more difficult to chronicle than that of a political party. A party is an institution with a continuous life and a bureaucratic structure; its history can be written from the documents preserved by its officials and from the public record of its actions. The history of a movement is never filed away so tidily; it has to be followed through a patchwork of events, most of which only become significant in the light of later developments. It

is recorded in the scattered evidence left behind by the groups and individuals who met it at some point and who helped to transform it and were transformed by it. This book draws on newspapers and documents of the time, as well as contemporary literature and reminiscences published later. It is not an oral history, but each chapter was submitted to at least one person who had been involved in the events described. Their comments helped to fill in gaps and to give the analysis greater depth. Responsibility for the finished work, however, is mine alone.

The structure of the book is not chronological. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of the civil rights movement and follows the time sequence which seemed most appropriate for explaining that aspect, but because of the way in which the main components of the civil rights movement emerged, there is a broad chronological sequence throughout the work.

The first two chapters set out the political background to the emergence of the civil rights movement. Chapter 1 discusses the O'Neill years, showing how the modernising face of Northern Ireland in the early and mid-1960s concealed a society still profoundly divided over sectarian issues. Chapter 2 looks at the various parties and groups offering an alternative to unionism and shows how significant it was that the 1965 Stormont general election closed the door on the option of a change of government through the ballot box. The remaining chapters examine different strands of the civil rights movement, tracing them back to their origins and analysing their contributions to political events. Chapter 3 looks at the Dungannon-based Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland and the London-based Campaign for Democracy in Ulster. Chapter 4 deals with the most important civil rights organisation, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association. Chapter 5 is concerned with the city of Derry and its various action committees, ranging from the moderate and respectable University for Derry Action Committee and the Derry Citizens' Action Committee, to the radical Derry Unemployed Action Committee and the Derry Housing Action Committee. Chapter 6 examines the Queen's University-based People's Democracy and its background in student protest and left-wing Marxism in the early and mid-1960s. The Conclusion ties the threads together and discusses the significance of

contemporary government initiatives to eliminate religious discrimination in Northern Ireland.

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BOB PURDIE

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