

*Heritage, History & Memory Project*  
*(Workshop 2)*

**Civil Rights Internationally and the Crisis of the 1960s**

*A presentation by*

**Dr Brian Hanley**

*followed by a general discussion*

*compiled by*

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Published February 2019 by  
Island Publications  
132 Serpentine Road, Newtownabbey BT36 7JQ

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<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications>

***The Fellowship of Messines Association***

gratefully acknowledge the support they have received

from the **Heritage Lottery Fund** for their

**Heritage, History & Memory Project**

*and the associated publications*



Printed by Regency Press, Belfast

# Introduction

**The Fellowship of Messines Association** was formed in May 2002 by a diverse group of individuals from Loyalist, Republican and other backgrounds, united in their realisation of the need to confront sectarianism in our society as a necessary means of realistic peace-building. The project also engages young people and new citizens on themes of citizenship and cultural and political identity.

In 2018 the Association initiated its **Heritage, History & Memory Project**. For the inaugural launch of this project it was decided to focus on the period of the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement, and the early stages of the ‘Troubles’. To accomplish this, it was agreed to host a series of six workshops, looking at different aspects of that period, with each workshop developing on from the previous one.

The format for each workshop would comprise a presentation by a respected commentator/historian, which would then be followed by a general discussion involving people from diverse political backgrounds, who would be encouraged to share not only their thoughts on the presentation, but their own experiences and memories of the period under discussion.

This pamphlet details the *second* of those workshops. The guest speaker was historian **Dr. Brian Hanley**. He is the author of *The IRA 1926–36* and co-author of *The Lost Revolution: the Story of the Official IRA and the Workers’ Party*. He is currently Research Fellow at the School of Classics, History and Archaeology, University of Edinburgh. The theme of Dr Hanley’s presentation was ***Civil Rights Internationally and the Crisis of the 1960s***.

The event was co-chaired by **Martin Connolly** and **Deirdre Mac Bride**.

The event was hosted in the offices of the **Greater Shankill ACT Initiative**, courtesy of the Project Director **William Mitchell**.

Immediately after Dr Hanley’s presentation a wide-ranging discussion ensued, the participants in this discussion themselves reflecting a wide variety of backgrounds. However, while Dr Hanley’s presentation is recorded here in full, of necessity this general discussion had to be edited to fit into the available space.

**Harry Donaghy** *Co-ordinator*, The Fellowship of Messines Association

# *Civil Rights Internationally and the Crisis of the 1960s*

**Dr. Brian Hanley**

Firstly I would like to thank the Fellowship of Messines Project for the opportunity to speak here this morning. I want to look firstly at the late 1960s and particularly 1968, the year in which what had been a relatively small campaign for legal and social change in Northern Ireland became a civil rights movement; but also how that year events seemed to suggest that the world was about to change dramatically. So I'll begin with the global scene and then move back to the local. But firstly I'll warn that I am only really going to skim the surface of what is a vast and also a very contentious subject, particularly as it applies to this society. It is understandable that feelings about the civil rights period are so strong, given what followed, and the differing interpretations of what might have been. I think it is fair to say that within Nationalism the justness of the demand for civil rights is taken for granted and much of the more recent arguments tend to be about who was there and who wasn't and whose strategies were correct and whose are judged to have been disastrous. In contrast, within Unionism and Loyalism there is obviously far more scepticism about the demands of the civil rights movement themselves as well as a completely different attitude towards the society in which these demands were raised.

***Within Nationalism the justness of the demand for civil rights is taken for granted. ... Within Unionism and Loyalism there is obviously far more scepticism.***

One reason that these debates can become exceptionally heated and personal is because they concern events just 50 years ago; and 50 years is not that long in historical terms. It means that a lot of the participants, observers and those who were perhaps interested youngsters at the time are still around. So it is worth noting then that in 1968 there were still thousands of people alive who could remember the foundation of Northern Ireland, Partition, the violence of 1920-22, the upheavals of the 1930s and all the events after that; so their reaction to civil rights and the tumult that seemed to accompany them were also framed by their own life experiences, whether unionist or nationalist. And of course some of the key participants such as Betty Sinclair, a Belfast communist from a Protestant working-class background, had actually first become politically active in the 1930s. What I try to do as a historian is firstly look at what was being said at the time and how people reacted then and try not to immediately apply

our retrospective knowledge; which admittedly is difficult. We also need to keep in mind that in life the best-laid plans can have unintended consequences and to see what happened as proceeding naturally from a blueprint is probably mistaken. There is a significant amount of literature, including some published at the time, accessible on the internet, which will explain some of these themes better than I can.

There's a lot of mythology about 1968 but there is no doubt that it seemed as if the world was on the brink of some transformative change. I'll start with the United States. Since the mid-1950s the crisis over black civil rights had affected every aspect of American life. Despite huge legislative changes that had outlawed segregation in most areas the issue of race had ignited America's cities in every summer since 1964. In April 1968 the most prominent civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, was shot dead in Memphis. Riots followed in over 100 American cities and not for the first time in that decade regular American troops were dispatched to police urban ghettos alongside the National Guard.

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King is now quite clearly a national hero in the United States – but it is important to remember that he was a hugely controversial figure in his lifetime; many millions of ordinary Americans regarded him as a dangerous radical and not a few celebrated his death. King was in Memphis to support a strike by binmen; he was trying to organize a 'poor peoples' march on Washington and he was a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War, which alongside race was the most divisive issue in the contemporary United States. The 'American War' as it is called in Vietnam, where perhaps two million people died, caused huge trauma for America. The US was split down the middle, though in real terms its losses in human lives (about 58,000 men – it lost similar numbers in Korea with far less controversy) were much less than Vietnamese society, which was carpet-bombed, napalmed and so on. Indeed, a key event in early 1968 was the Tet offensive by the communist forces which had shocked American opinion which had been led to believe that the war was being won. But unlike previous wars, American intervention in Vietnam had come at a time when large sections of society were questioning the logic of the Cold War, the arms race and the nature of America itself. As a result of civil rights and anti-war protests there was the growth of both a New Left and a counter-culture and militancy of various shades. The stereotype would of course be dope-smoking hippies and so on, and music, youth culture and rebelliousness are part of the story of the late 1960s,

but they are only part of the story. For many Americans the events in Chicago in August 1968 when police and National Guardsmen had been deployed in huge numbers against anti-war protests at the Democratic party convention were deeply shocking. Like the war in Vietnam, this was televised and images of policemen beating protesters beamed into every American home (of course there are two sides to that reaction which I will get to in a minute). One of the observers at the Chicago convention was a British Labour MP Anne Kerr; she was also present in Derry on 5th October and afterwards compared the RUC unfavourably to the Chicago police.

These upheavals and the angst they produced were in no way limited to America. Anti-war protest was international. America's racial conflict was illustrated at the Mexico Olympics when two of its athletes gave 'black power' salutes from the winners' podium. Outside, and reflecting how political protest could be rather deadlier than in Chicago, several hundred students were gunned down by Mexican police and soldiers. In France what had begun as a student protest movement about university reform had led to street fighting and by May a general strike involving 10 million French workers. Italy saw waves of strikes and violent conflict between left and right; anti-American protests in Germany led to a new protest movement that demanded answers about the country's Nazi past. It was not only the western capitalist world that experienced upheaval. An experiment in what was called 'socialism with a human face' in Czechoslovakia was ended by Soviet intervention during August. The two great communist powers, the USSR and China, were not allies at this stage but rivals, and this rivalry not only threatened military conflict but was replicated in splits in the communist movement across the world. While they might seem difficult to comprehend for most people outside the left, these divisions were present even in the relatively small socialist movements in Ireland. The Irish Communists condemned the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia (as did Sinn Féin) though the Communists retrospectively endorsed the invasion some years later. Some of the disputes about tactics to be deployed in protests here during civil rights were framed in language that belonged to these ideological debates: 'Stalinists', 'Trotskyists' and so on. Many on the left had also been enthused by what seemed to be the romantic vision of socialism brought about by guerilla struggle in Cuba; Che Guevara, the iconic leader most associated with this strategy had been killed fighting in Bolivia the previous October.

***It was not only the western capitalist world that experienced upheaval. 'Socialism with a human face' in Czechoslovakia was ended by Soviet intervention.***

His image adorned countless posters and flags, along with those of the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh. But other anti-colonial wars were also raging, in the Portuguese colonies of western and south-eastern Africa, in Rhodesia (which had declared independence from the Commonwealth in order to maintain white minority rule) and protest over Apartheid in South Africa was growing. The left had also begun to identify with the Palestinians, especially after Israel's crushing victories in the 1967 war had left it controlling large territories in Gaza and the West Bank.

But for everyone inspired by all this, there were of course bigger numbers who paid little attention and whose lives revolved around making a living, raising their families and so on; though most agree that young people by the late 1960s were noticing that they were being regarded as a separate section of society in a way that they hadn't until the 1950s at least and their tastes in music, fashion and so on were expected to be different from those of their parents. But it would be wrong to assume that everyone was enthused by these events. When I was asked to speak about May 1968 at an event in Limerick earlier this year I deliberately started by saying that for a lot of people May '68 is when Manchester United won the European Cup. But tremors from these international events were still felt in Ireland, north and south.

***Tremors from these international events were felt in Ireland, north and south.***

Because they were not only about a left convinced that social change was in the offing. In the November 1968 US presidential elections Richard Nixon, the right-wing Republican candidate who promised to speak for the 'silent majority' of Americans won, sweeping the white vote in particular with appeals to patriotism and law and order. An even more right-wing candidate, George Wallace, had taken millions of votes from the Democrats in much of the American South and Nixon's strategy was based on building on this, exploiting the fears and unease of white Americans, particularly working-class former Democrats, about race and what seemed to be chaotic change. His influential advisor Kevin Philips asserted that knowing 'who hates who' and working on that was the key to electoral success; exploiting not only division between black and white, but also between young and old, urban and rural and so on. The chaos and anarchy of protest and the trauma of the assassination not just of King but also of Robert Kennedy in June 1968 terrified many. Nixon's success symbolized what became known in America as the 'backlash'; when conservatives rallied and resisted the left. In France, despite student protests and general strikes, the conservative Charles de Gaulle was

returned to power. In Britain the political sensation of the year was not the growth of the left, but an incendiary speech made by the Tory MP for Wolverhampton, Enoch Powell, who in April prophesied ‘rivers of blood’ if non-white immigration was allowed to continue. The support for Powell’s views expressed by many signalled that race would also be a fault-line in British politics. Some date the ultimate success of the new form of conservative politics led by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan as having been built on elements of this backlash.

After the assassination of Martin Luther King an American clergyman, Bob Spencer, had claimed that King had ‘loaded the gun of his own destruction by making himself the symbol of resistance to law and order’. That article was one of many by Spencer and other American opponents of King that were published in Ian Paisley’s *Protestant Telegraph*. Paisley himself had visited the United States during the spring of 1968 on his third American speaking tour, visiting 23 churches in 19 states. He had originally been awarded his doctorate by the Bob Jones University in South Carolina which was then a whites-only college. Indeed the success of Ian Paisley in mobilizing support among ordinary loyalists by denouncing moves towards reform by Prime Minister Terence O’Neill can also be seen in the context of this international ‘backlash’.

The most dramatic example of the influence of American civil rights in Ireland was the adoption of the term itself, of some of its slogans and particularly songs such as ‘We Shall Overcome’ and ‘We Shall Not Be Moved’. (There were, of course, many differences between Ireland and the United States.) While the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association had been founded in early 1967, the issue itself only really began to grip the public imagination during 1968. There has been a considerable amount of mythologizing of civil rights. More than one account for example has suggested that the slogan ‘British rights for British citizens’ ‘rang out’ on the early civil rights marches, but this simply does not seem to have been the case.

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There are various theories as to why civil rights happened when it did. One is that it was the logical outcome of the creation of a new Catholic middle class, created by the British welfare and educational reforms after 1945, that was no longer prepared to accept discrimination. There were a growing number of students from nationalist backgrounds and working-class nationalist backgrounds

at Queens, for example. There was also the growth of the state, the extension of the state into house-building in particular, but also into employment and investment that created greater competition for these resources between communities, particularly at local level. Or the conspiracy thesis: that republicans and communists organized the agitation in order to undermine the state. Now the fact is that republicans and communists, along with socialists and campaigners of various shades did organize most of the protests. But why they did, when they did, is important.

Firstly, by the 1960s mainstream Unionism was in some trouble, largely because of industrial decline. In 1958 the Northern Ireland Labour Party won four seats in Belfast, two in mainly Catholic areas, two in solidly Protestant constituencies, Victoria and Woodvale. This created alarm at ministerial level as a memorandum noted: ‘the maintenance of a Unionist government at Stormont depends to an increasing degree on the success or otherwise of its economic policy. Particularly in the city of Belfast voters are considering such matters as unemployment when deciding how to cast their vote and unless success is achieved in reducing the present total of unemployment ... the Unionist Party cannot hope to retain the allegiance of the working-class population.’ Communists, who had some contact through the trade unions with Protestant communities, and socialists and republicans of different varieties did think that change was coming among the Protestant working class. Some Unionist politicians, especially Premier Terence O’Neill, were also aware that elements of Northern Ireland’s local government franchise both discriminated against some of their own supporters but also provided opponents of Stormont in Britain with ammunition with which to pressurise London to deny funding to Northern Ireland. However the difficulties in doing something about this had been spelled out by Brian Faulkner in a meeting with a local Unionist Association in Woodvale in the late 1950s. Then, confronted by complaints that property qualifications meant some working-class Protestants did not have the vote, Faulkner admitted that this was wrong but warned that changing it meant losing Derry city, as well as parts of Fermanagh, Tyrone, Down and Armagh.

Because Northern Ireland had very different security legislation to the rest of the UK, activists had seen the potential for it being the focus for protest. The roots of the idea for campaigns against the Special Powers Act dated back to the 1930s. The Connolly Association in Britain had argued for similar strategies since then. In 1965 a group of British Labour MPs established the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster; and the Campaign for Social Justice, based mainly in Dungannon and

headed by Dr. Conn McCluskey and his wife Patricia had in fact used American comparisons in their early agitation. Belfast Trades Council had also agreed to demand 'one man, one vote' and an end to the Special Powers Act in 1965. In August 1966 the republican think-tank, the Wolfe Tone Societies, met in Maghera and heard a paper (written by Anthony Coughlan, based in Dublin) on a new strategy against discrimination. Among the audience were several IRA officers, including the organization's leader, Cathal Goulding. The Coughlan document (which was published in the journal *Tuairisc* at the time) argued, among other things, that it was important to 'Force O'Neill to concede more than he wants to or than he thinks he can dare give without risking overthrow by the more reactionary elements among Unionists. Demand more than may be demanded by the compromising elements than exist among the Catholic leadership.' This was to be broad-based peaceful agitation, with care taken not to be provocative to unionist opinion. A central idea was that Protestants could be encouraged to join in the protests. The press reported the meeting's call for a civil rights convention.

A public meeting on civil liberties followed in Belfast in November 1966, with two speakers, both from the south, one of them Trinity lecturer Kadar Asmal. In January 1967 another meeting was held in the city's International Hotel. About 100 were present and a 13-man committee was established. Unionist Senator Nelson Elder had attended but left after failing to win an argument for retaining the death penalty for the murder of policemen. The new committee included members of the NILP, the Republican Labour Party, the Communist Party, the Wolfe Tone Society, Belfast Trades Council, the National Democratic Party and the Republican Clubs. A former chairman of the Young Unionists, Robin Cole, was co-opted to it a few days later. Now it is only fair to say that the Trades Council representative was Betty Sinclair, who was also a communist, and the Republican Clubs member was Liam McMillen, who was also the IRA's commander in Belfast. McMillen was replaced at an early stage by another republican, the solicitor Kevin Agnew from Co. Derry.

Five points had been agreed:

- To defend the basic freedoms of all citizens
- To protect the rights of the individual
- To highlight all possible abuses of power
- To demand guarantees for freedom of speech, assembly and association
- To inform the public of their lawful rights.

The official history of NICRA later claimed that 'These five demands later became the rallying cry for thousands of marchers.' Now, they didn't really. The

original NICRA demands said nothing at all about housing, employment or ‘one man, one vote’, which were in fact what people mobilized around in 1968.

The republicans and left-wingers who established NICRA underestimated the other factor in unionist politics of the 1960s: the growing backlash against any reforms and the belief that Protestants were being sold down the river. It is also fair to recall that violence had already occurred before 1968 and the first marches. For working-class Belfast nationalists in particular, two events – the 1964 Divis riots (during the elections in which police raided republican offices and seized a tricolour) and the 1966 clashes in the Markets – have been underestimated in terms of attitudes towards the police and willingness to confront them. Both events involved Ian Paisley; in 1966 he had led a march against the alleged ‘Romanizing tendencies’ in the Presbyterian Church through Cromac Square. Similarly, loyalists had killed three people during the summer of 1966, in part because they feared a republican uprising around the 1916 anniversary. Now a lot of republican thinkers seem to have underestimated this and also how quickly things could happen once popular forces were mobilized.

One of the founders of NICRA, Fred Heatley, later characterised the first 18 months of the association’s existence as a ‘time of frustration’. It engaged mainly in lobbying and writing letters, protesting about the government’s ban on the Republican Clubs for instance. Another activist, Ann Hope, recalled that during early 1968 ‘there was much re-thinking within the CRA leadership; the tactics of Martin Luther King in America had been absorbed insomuch that it was felt by some that only public marches could draw wide attention to what we were trying to achieve by normal democratic means. But there were members on the executive who didn’t relish either the trouble this would create or were too constitutional in their thinking.’ By this stage the sole Unionist on the NICRA executive had resigned in protest at the description of Northern Ireland as a ‘fascist state’. There were various arguments about whether or not to begin protest marches and advice from the Belfast communists in particular was that the mood among protestant trade unionists was becoming hostile to any discussion of civil rights. The official view, as put forward by William Craig in Stormont, was that civil rights agitation was the result of a communist and republican conspiracy. Captured IRA documents were read out which seemed to suggest this.

To give you some context for these debates, in early 1968 the Northern Ireland

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Labour Party split over whether or not playgrounds should be open on Sundays. In the midst of this controversy the emerging ally of Ian Paisley, Major Ronald Bunting, claimed that ‘if anyone wanted a communistic, godless, Bolshevik, atheistic city then the opening of playgrounds on Sundays was the right way to start.’ At the same time there were debates on Belfast City Council about housing allocation, and Unionist Councillor William Kennedy MP talked about the need to preserve Glencairn for Protestants in order to ‘prevent its deterioration’, comparing it to Cromac which he described as ‘positively filthy’. So even before civil rights became a live issue, the level of rhetoric around anything that was perceived as a communal issue was intense.

What brought matters to a head in 1968 were several protests that summer. The Republican Club in Brantry, Co. Tyrone, helped organise an occupation of a vacant council house in Caledon near Dungannon. A Catholic family, the Goodfellows, squatted in a house beside one that had been allocated to a young, single Protestant woman, who worked for the local Unionist party; the Cameron Commission later described her as by ‘no stretch of the imagination ... a priority tenant’. Mrs. Mary Goodfellow’s family, the Gildernews, were leading members of the Republican Club, who were identified by Unionist MP John Taylor as the instigators of the protest. The squat drew headlines when local Nationalist Party MP Austin Currie became involved and the family were forcibly evicted in front of the TV cameras. A protest rally in Dungannon followed, addressed by republicans, Labour Party and NICRA speakers and pressure grew for another march in the area; eventually agreed to. The publicity garnered by the Dungannon events was a huge boost to a more militant civil rights strategy.

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In Derry housing-action protesters disrupted the opening of the new Craigavon Bridge; again those arrested illustrate a coalition of activists: Johnnie White of the Republican Club, Eamonn McCann of the local Labour Party and so on. Then on 24 August 1968 the first civil rights march took place from Coalisland to Dungannon. Ian Paisley threatened a counter-demonstration, as did the Ulster Protestant Volunteers. Several thousand took part, their entry to the town centre blocked by the RUC because 1,500 loyalist counter protesters had also mobilized. At a late stage the NICRA march had been formally banned from the town square. Supporting the event were the Nationalist Party, Republican Labour, the Northern Ireland Labour Party, the National Democratic

Party, the Campaign for Social Justice, the Hibernians, the Foresters, the Wolfe Tone Society, the GAA and twenty marching bands. Most of the stewards were members of the republican movement. Speakers were from across the spectrum of those supporting the march. Only one, from the small NDP, made any reference to American civil rights. Jack Hassard, an NILP member of the local council, condemned the police ban. Austin Currie denounced ‘Orange bigots’ and compared Stormont to the regimes in Eastern Europe (Russian tanks had gone into Prague that week). Gerry Fitt MP reportedly described RUC officers as ‘black bastards’ and defied them to lay a hand ‘on one man, woman or child in this crowd to-night’. Marchers sang ‘We Shall Overcome’ and ‘A Nation Once Again’. There was stone-throwing and a baton charge, though in the context of what followed it was minor. Following the event some of the Young Socialists who had travelled from Belfast condemned NICRA for not breaking the police lines. There were also debates about this within the republican movement afterwards. It is worth noting that the headline in editorial of the *Irish News* the Monday after the march was ‘We Shall Overcome’.

In the aftermath of the Coalisland march a number of the Derry activists discussed the possibility of a march in their city. NICRA agreed to the proposal (though there was no NICRA branch in Derry) and a date for the march was fixed for October 5. The march was to take a route from the Waterside to the city centre. The Apprentice Boys of Derry announced a march from the same venue, on the same route and at the same time. Both demonstrations were then banned and a number of Derry nationalists including John Hume withdrew support from the protest, though the Nationalist Party leader Eddie McAteer did ultimately take part. About 400 people marched, including republicans from Belfast, and were confronted by the RUC in Duke Street. TV viewers saw Gerry Fitt and others batoned and the marchers scattered. Water cannons were also brought in to disperse the crowd. News of the events spread to the Bogside where major rioting broke out that lasted well into the night. Across Ireland people in living rooms and pubs were transfixed by the television pictures from Derry. The significance of this coverage can’t be underestimated: there were over 300,000 television sets in southern Ireland by 1968.

What’s notable is how quickly things happened after this. In Belfast on October 8 2,000 students marched in protest at the Derry events. At Queens University a general meeting led to the setting up of the Peoples Democracy. A 21-year-old Tyrone student, Bernadette Devlin, emerged as one of the most

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forceful of PD's public speakers. The key activists in PD had been members of the Young Socialists, who were influenced by events in France and elsewhere. Protests continued in Derry with a demonstration of 2,000 in late October, a sit-down of 3,000 in early November and a march of 15,000 later that month, all of which entered the Guildhall Square area. The establishment of a new body in that city, the Derry Citizens Action Committee, which included people ranging from John Hume, Ivan Cooper, members of the Housing Action group including Johnnie White and liberals from the Unionist tradition such as Claude Wilton (which was probably as important as NICRA in terms of Derry).

By now every civil rights event faced Loyalist counter-protests. In Derry Catholic shirt factory workers on their way to the third demonstration had been stoned and there were increasing clashes between Catholic teenagers and youths from the Fountain area. On 30 November 5,000 joined a NICRA march in Armagh. Despite it being legal hundreds of Ian Paisley's supporters, many armed with clubs and sticks, occupied the town centre. They then blocked the route of the NICRA march. Clashes were avoided but locals confronted police and loyalists in the aftermath of the demonstration. In early December Terence O'Neill, under huge pressure from both Unionist hardliners and the Civil Rights movement had outlined a reform package and asked for a chance to put it into practice. Within NICRA there were conflicting views on how to respond. It was agreed to suspend marches for a period but PD argued for stepping up the pressure with a march from Belfast to Derry modeled on Martin Luther King's 1965 Selma to Montgomery march. This was the march that was attacked at Burntollet in early January 1969; for critics of the PD that's the 'year zero' when all the prospects for peaceful reform ended (personally I think that it is more complicated than that). After Burntollet barricades went up in the Bogside; 'You are now entering Free Derry' was painted on a gable wall and rioting went on for several days. The following weekend 10,000 marched in Newry and there was serious rioting that saw seven RUC tenders burnt or pushed into the town's canal. By the spring of 1969 crisis seemed to follow crisis ....

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But this is not simply a story about the North. Civil rights had a major impact on southern politics as well. The policy of the Fianna Fail government from the early 1960s had been cooperation with the North. Hence the well-publicized meetings between Terence O'Neill and Sean Lemass (highly symbolic in terms of

Lemass's 1916 heritage), and later Jack Lynch. The use of the term 'Northern Ireland' became the norm by politicians. In 1964 the Unionist Minister for Agriculture Harry West was entertained by his southern counterpart Charles Haughey at Haughey's residence in Dublin and not an eyebrow was raised.

But then the North became a live issue again.

In the week after the October 5th march in Derry there were three demonstrations in Dublin, including one which ended in clashes at the British Embassy. The Labour Party organised the largest protest, at which Gerry Fitt gave an emotional account of the Derry events. Dublin Lord Mayor, Labour's Frank Cluskey, promised 'the people of the North' that their 'days of abandonment are very near an end'. Fine Gael sent its two Donegal TDs to Derry to gather first-hand accounts of the trouble. But during October 1968 the Republic was preoccupied with an attempt by the Fianna Fáil government to replace the proportional representation (PR) voting system. A referendum to endorse that change was due to take place on October 16<sup>th</sup>. Critics claimed that without PR, Fianna Fáil would be virtually guaranteed electoral dominance. And campaigners noted that the *introduction* of a PR system was one of the demands of civil rights protesters in the North. Tom O'Higgins of Fine Gael compared Fianna Fáil to the Ulster Unionist Party, both run by 'rough and ruthless men ... determined to maintain themselves in office for as long as possible'.

Fianna Fáil were humiliated in the PR referendum. Leading party figures such as Niall Blaney and Kevin Boland soon began to publicly take a more militantly anti-partitionist line, perhaps in part because of the danger of being outflanked on this issue. Both men had been notably hardline in their criticism of protesters over issues such as housing in the south. But for radicals, the referendum result and the growing civil rights crisis in the North produced hope. *Irish Times* political correspondent Michael McInerney suggested 'something deep was stirring in the whole of Ireland.' At Sinn Féin's Ard Fheis in December party president Tomas Mac Giolla claimed that the 'slumbering and despairing Irish nation has suddenly awakened.' Republicans were 'witnessing what we hope is the beginning of the disintegration of two old and corrupt parties in Belfast and Dublin.' Campaigners against the Dublin government would continue to liken it to Stormont. In early 1969 Labour's Noel Browne compared a proposed Criminal Justice Bill to the Specials Powers legislation of Northern Ireland. His colleague Conor Cruise O'Brien described the same bill as a 'betrayal of the civil rights movement' and an 'encouragement to the Unionist Party in its continuing denial of civil rights in the Six Counties.' During January 1969 as housing protesters took to the streets of Dublin, they heard

messages of solidarity from those occupying Derry's Guildhall: 'The struggle is the same: North and South.' Civil rights committees sprang up across the state, some of them devoted to the issue in the North, but others concerned with the Gaeltacht, local democracy and Travellers' rights. The attack on the Peoples Democracy march at Burntollet and the subsequent rioting in Derry saw another wave of indignation and protests in Dublin. Hundreds of housing marchers joined a demonstration at the British Embassy in support of civil rights marchers in Newry a week later.

I think to understand the civil rights movement you have to look at it in every part of the North, as it was different in every area, and try to remember how quickly things were developing. The recent spats about republican involvement don't really help very much in that regard because almost everyone is being partial in their recall. In February 1969 for instance Cathal Goulding publicly asserted that 'If the civil rights movement fails there will be no answer other than the answer we have always preached. Everyone will realize it and all constitutional methods will go out the window.' That statement is open to interpretation but in the context of the time it is unlikely to have reassured Unionists. By the spring of 1969 elections and by-elections were transforming the question into a major political crisis. During April 1969 PD leaders debated in the *New Left Review* what was likely to happen next. Eamonn McCann was extremely pessimistic arguing that recently 'in Derry, after Catholic workers became enraged by the Paisleyites waving a Union Jack at them, they made for what we call the Fountain area, which is a Protestant working-class ghetto [and] they left no doubt in anyone's mind that when they got there they intended to beat the daylights out of any Protestants they found.' McCann asserted that 'the consciousness of the people who are fighting in the streets at the moment is sectarian and bigoted ... it is perfectly obvious that people still see themselves as Catholics and Protestants, and the cry "get the Protestants" is still very much on the lips of the Catholic working class. Everyone applauds loudly when one says in a speech that we are not sectarian ... but really that's because they see this as the new way of getting at the Protestants.'

A lot of the debates about what happened in 1968 are actually (and naturally enough) about today's politics but before we fall out about them we should at least examine in detail what was being said and done during 1968-69 itself. The conflict which followed was not inevitable but neither was it unlikely that violence would occur. There was really no honeymoon period when the demands of the civil rights movement were broadly accepted. All of the other questions lingering from 50 years of the existence of Northern Ireland itself were always likely to emerge.

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[**Martin Connolly** *co-facilitator*] Thank you for that, Brian. Deirdre Mac Bride is helping to facilitate proceedings today, and I invite her to say a few words now.

[**Deirdre Mac Bride** *co-facilitator*] Brian, that was an excellent presentation. I was ten in 1968, and I grew up in west Tyrone, eight miles from the border. Now, I don't remember Man United winning the European Cup but I do remember Bobby Kennedy's assassination, and the Vietnam War. There was a sense of being connected internationally, but also a real sense that there was 'west of the Bann' and there was 'east of the Bann': there were no jobs coming west of the Bann, and if you were a Catholic there was no chance of getting a job – you had to get an education, or else emigrate. And I am saying this because sometimes when we talk about Civil Rights we forget that there *were* grievances, and there were factories closing and Belfast was being laid waste by redevelopment, and all the rest of it. And whatever else about the rights and wrongs of 'who did what', the idea that this society could continue to prevent working-class people from having a vote in local elections was not conscionable for anybody. It wasn't just some nationalists, or some unionists, it was *anybody* who didn't own their own house. Any man or woman who lived in rented accommodation, or grown-up children over the age of 21 who lived at home, had no vote – that was a serious number of people. Such a situation could not be maintained, the dam would eventually have to burst. And that was what Civil Rights meant to me.

As Brian was talking, I was thinking: why did the Civil Rights Movement emerge? And I heard Emmet O'Connor talk recently, and he said that for him, as an historian, one of the things that was important was the election of the Harold Wilson government. With the election of a Labour government there was a sort of expectation across the UK that things could change. And because things *weren't* changing there was a kind of frustration. But as someone who grew up as a northern nationalist I had no concept that Unionism was in trouble.

***[Brian's] final comments were a sort of wake-up call as to how quickly the genie gets out of the bottle, in terms of sectarianism.***

You talked, Brian, about what was happening in the US, and in the South, but your final comments were a sort of wake-up call as to how quickly the genie gets out of the bottle, in terms of sectarianism. And that is useful in relation to today, in terms of how we go forward and what are the compromises all of us in this society

ultimately have to make with each other, if we are to move on.

[**Martin Connolly**] Thanks, Deirdre. Brian, I thought that was a fascinating talk. I teach this period in schools, GCSE, and the kids are fascinated about the whole international context in which this all kicked off. You referred to the US Civil Rights, the Prague Spring, the riots in London, and so on... and I suppose that with the whole tumult that was going on in the 1960s it was inevitable that it was going to land in this place, given the historical tensions which existed here. I think, generally, what was important as well in your presentation, you touched on the anti-imperialist struggles which were taking place around the world. Of course, you had a two super-power world back then: we had the USSR versus the USA, and that no longer pertains. You mentioned the uprisings in the Soviet bloc. And also that the decolonisation of the British Empire was proceeding at breakneck speed, as well as with France and other countries. There are some fascinating things which we can draw from that period. I am going to open up the floor now...

[**Joe Bowers**] I was a member of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, and I participated in the marches. I was one of three people who travelled from Monkstown to take part in the Newry march, and afterwards I was the only one who remained interested in the Civil Rights Association. Because when the other two saw the police tenders being pushed into the Newry Canal, they didn't want anything more to do with Civil Rights.

All the opposition political parties in Northern Ireland in the sixties had a recognition that there was a need for democratic reform in Northern Ireland. Eddie McAteer's Nationalist Party, the Northern Ireland Labour Party, the Northern Ireland Liberal Party: they were all saying that there was a need for democratic reform. The Belfast Trades Council was involved in

discussions on democratic reform in the early sixties and there were joint representations made to the Stormont government by the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Northern Ireland Labour Party. And the demands that they were making were fairly minimal demands: 'one man, one vote' and that kind of thing.

A demand for democracy in Northern Ireland was also manifested in the Young Unionists, such as with Bob Cooper and Ivan Cooper. So, the demand for democracy in Northern Ireland was a growing demand, and was reflected in *all* parties. And

*All the opposition parties in the sixties had a recognition that there was a need for democratic reform in Northern Ireland. ... [This] was also manifested in the Young Unionists.*

Unionism, in its most progressive representation, acknowledged that it had to be addressed. But they couldn't manage the internal tensions that were created.

The point I am making is that there was considerable activity on the question of reform *even before* the Civil Rights Association was formed in 1967. And when it *was* formed labour participation was there; there was a formal relationship between the labour and trade union movement and the Civil Rights Association.

Brian points out that the attitude of the government in the Republic of Ireland was one of co-operation, such as the GNR railway link north and south, or the Erne Development around the lakes. Now, that co-operation actually goes back a long time, even soon after Partition. There was a concern within Unionism that the UK government was more concerned with the interests of the UK as a whole than with the specific interests of Northern Ireland. So Unionist leaders, even Brookeborough, conceded the necessity for more cooperation with the Republic. But when this development became public with the O'Neill/Lemass exchanges we know what happened. There was deep concern within Unionist Party ranks, which eventually led to the 'O'Neill Must Go!' campaign.

I agree with what Brian was saying about the suspicions held by the unionist population about the different political forces operating within Civil Rights. And, of course, when people say that there were communists and republicans involved in the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association that is absolutely true. And communists and republicans would obviously have a communist or republican agenda – those are the ingredients of democracy!

With regard to the Burntollet march, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was fundamentally opposed to that march taking place. And to another demonstration proposed by the People's Democracy, which was a march across Belfast to Stormont, through East Belfast – the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was totally opposed to that. They were conscious all the time that the demand for democracy was in danger of being led into a sectarian conflict. And unfortunately that's what happened.

***[NICRA] were conscious that the demand for democracy was in danger of being led into a sectarian conflict. And unfortunately that's what happened.***

**[Michael Hall]** I was at Burntollet, I was one of the ones who agreed that the march should go ahead. However, many radical young people, such as myself, had little awareness of Northern Ireland realities. It was the *international* events

that Brian talked about which motivated us – the Vietnam war, the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, the ‘May events’ in France: that was our primary motivation. It was only when we arrived in Derry after the ambush that I suddenly thought: I really need to know what is happening within my own society. In the sixties Northern Ireland had been going through a less communally-divisive period and much of the latent sectarianism was dormant,

and, to someone with my background, not even apparent. For although I was born in Protestant working-class East Belfast, my household was atheist, and my uncle was a member of the Communist Party. I was largely oblivious of the Unionist/Orange/Protestant culture right on my own doorstep. I will give you a ludicrous example which highlights my general lack of awareness regarding this society. I was a founder member of the Belfast Anarchist Group. Now, the anarchist flag is black and red and I carried an anarchist flag on one of the marches in Derry, and was amazed when some people applauded as I walked past. I was totally confused, for I assumed they knew little or nothing about anarchism. And a friend laughed at me and said: “Sure, black and red are the colours of Down Gaelic! Did you not know that?” That’s how little I knew about my own society!

**[Martin Connolly]** When we reflect about the international context... People were being batoned off the streets here. But in the US civilians were being shot by their own army, such as in Kent State. In London people were being batoned in Grosvenor Square; in Paris it was the same. So, in a sense what you have is power coming down on top of the people.

**[Anne Devlin]** Brian, thank you very much for that very illuminating paper. A great many of the issues I have been looking at myself recently, both from the point of view of the fractured civil rights family and equally I am grateful to Joe for his reflections on the fractured unionist family. Like Michael, I was born into a ‘political’ family, so I am coming at this from a very political background, and my father [Paddy Devlin] had a long labour history before I was born. So while I was one of the school-aged members of the People’s Democracy I also had a foot in the civic society of the Labour Party. I was one of the youngest members of the Falls Labour Party when Paddy set it up.

I too was at Burntollet and voted that that march should go ahead. I regarded

***Many radical young people, such as myself, had little awareness of Northern Ireland realities. It was the international events that Brian talked about which... [were] our primary motivation.***

myself in the same way that Michael did – as an internationalist – and I never for one second thought that I was getting involved in anything sectarian. I certainly didn't think Civil Rights was only for Catholics.

I think it really comes down to the issue that we haven't really solved, which is the issue of sectarianism. Now, I lived in England for many years and English society seemed to me to be very secular; British parliamentary democracy is a very secular place. But to this day in Northern Ireland we are organised around religious identities; there is nowhere like this place that is organised around gospel halls, churches. And I never accepted that as a young person. I saw the modernism, the opportunity to be a student and to support student politics as a way out of this. It was my absolute denial of the importance of religion which always led me to class politics, and still leads me to those politics. But I also feel that I have underestimated, in a very big way, the importance in our identities of religion. And if I pick up anything from the southern states of America it makes total sense to me that Paisley did that tour and brought back that Bible-belt politics. To be a non-believer is still very difficult in this society, and the issue that I would want to address is the legacy of sectarianism. There has to be a way of organising our identities that is not so locked into religious groupings, and I genuinely believe that that is what I underestimated as a young person. And that can't go on.

***I regarded myself as an internationalist, and I never for one second thought that I was getting involved in anything sectarian.***

In America, with the bussing of black students into white schools, the question of education became the fundamental issue in American politics, so it seems to me that we need to examine that, to think about the role of education, given that in the sixties education gave a lot of people the means to approach the dismantling of the older society, and, indeed, so many people got into education – and yet we *still* have separate schools. These are things that we have to address now.

We are a terribly ghettoised society. I still find it hard to accept that if I go to a particular social event it will happen in a particular building, in a particular area. So I am grateful for buildings like the one we are in now which can be used for everyone, for opportunities like this. It seems to me that somehow we have to climb over the dead and try to integrate our different groups. And to do that we obviously have to integrate our schools, because I don't see any other way we can do this if we don't, because our ghettoisation seems worse than when this conflict started.

[Sean O’Hare] I think I can give a sense of the feeling in the nationalist community around the Falls and Ballymurphy, where I came from. Brian mentioned 1964, and I think ’64 was a turning point for the ordinary people in nationalist areas of West Belfast – when the flag was taken away in Divis Street, and the rioting that ensued from that. † The rioting up to then hadn’t really been riots as such; since the thirties people just threw a few stones at the peelers and then ran away up the entry. But Divis Street was entirely different. There has been mention made of O’Neill and the reformists. Most of the people where I lived accepted that O’Neill was going to walk over us with carpet-slippers instead of hob-nail boots, but it was welcomed at the same time. But with Divis Street and Paisley threatening to come up and remove the flag, and the state, in the shape of the police, reacting immediately and sending a large force out to more or less do Paisley’s bidding, that was a big turning point, especially for people my age, in saying: no matter what O’Neill or the Stormont government says about reform they just blow a whistle and Paisley takes over – that was the feeling at the time. That was why there was such a massive reaction to the removal of the flag.

And the other big point about it was that the rioters were in such large numbers, and so well organised, that they drove away the police and had complete control of the streets. That created a dramatic change in attitude: people realised that the state *could* be excluded from our lives. Older people would have panicked about a situation like that, saying: ‘You’re going to bring the state down on us and, like, they’re building us nice houses and all, you should be content with what you have.’ But attitudes now changed. And when the Civil Rights stuff erupted it kind of unified everybody, parents and children were speaking the same language. In the riots of ’69 and into 1970, you can see men in their fifties out rioting alongside young people of sixteen and seventeen.

Mike pointed out that the ‘children of the sixties’ – for want of a better term

***[In the wake of the Divis Street riots people] had complete control of the streets. That created a dramatic change in attitude: people realised that the state could be excluded from our lives.***

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† When, in September 1964, during the run-up to a British General Election, an Irish Tricolour was displayed in the Divis Street headquarters of the Republican Party in West Belfast, Rev. Ian Paisley, leader of the Free Presbyterian Church, threatened to remove it if the authorities did not. On the 28th, when the RUC, armed with sten-guns, revolvers, riot-batons and shields, went to seize the flag they were confronted by a crowd of more than 2,000 people. After the police had smashed down the doors of the headquarters with pickaxes and taken possession of the flag, violence erupted. Severe rioting continued for another three nights.

– didn't know anything much about Northern Ireland politics. I would have said that even those of us who did know a bit about local politics, like myself and some of those in PD, had nothing but contempt for Northern Ireland politics. We just said it was rotten to the core; the attitude wasn't that we'll try and reform it, it was that it would be swept away in the whole new world that was coming along in '68. Which was the wrong attitude to have, but then we have all been wrong at some time or other.

And it wasn't that it was a demand for Civil Rights in places like Ballymurphy, where I lived, it was a new way of attacking Stormont. And, anyway, most republicans believed that Stormont would have been incapable of granting Civil Rights. That was the sort of attitude. And then when the violence started everything became totally and utterly sectarian. I saw people, who would have been regarded as very progressive and non-nationalist, who would previously have said that we have to make accommodations between Catholics and Protestants, but in '69 and the weeks that followed were now saying: "There's only one answer – get the gear out and get into them!" That was the attitude, and it took maybe a year or two after that for people, republicans and left-wing people in our areas, to come back to their senses, but by then it was too late.

***It wasn't that it was a demand for Civil Rights in places like Ballymurphy, where I lived, it was a new way of attacking Stormont.***

[**Adam Murray**] The comparisons between then and contemporary politics are quite stark. What you had was a situation where you didn't have any avenue for a communally-agreed protest, a communally-agreed legitimate way to protest. In America you had people sitting at lunch counters, sitting on buses, having marches in the streets, and as Brian said Martin Luther King's approval rating in the year he died was 30%, it was low. And here as well you had the different kinds of protests, all of them rejected as legitimate forms of protest, mostly by the Unionist community or the state. And whenever you don't have a legitimate way to make change pressure starts to build and eventually something happens.

However, I think there is a *contemporary* civil rights movement that could be made around three issues: LGBT rights and same-sex marriage; women's right to chose; and minority language protection and encouragement. Three things which are totally accepted in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic, but are not accepted here. I think that what frustrated the Civil Rights Movement – the divide between the two main communities – also frustrates current

contemporary politics as well. Because you *could* have a joined-up civil rights movement except that every time you mention those three things it's the question of language rights which is cited as a blockage by Unionists. So it is quite frustrating to hear people's experience of the divisions of that period and realise that today's great opportunities are still being frustrated by that legacy.

[**Martin Connolly**] All the contributions we have heard so far confirm what Brian said at the very beginning of his presentation, of the very complicated nature of that movement, at that time – and still to this day we are going to get contested opinions about what it was all about. But Adam touched on a good point and I personally think that these new civil rights issues can be made cross-community, it's not a green or an orange thing, it's a cross-community thing. I guess the Irish language issue is the only stumbling block there, but I think even that too could be overcome – just look at the statement Peter Robinson made about it this week.† Abortion and women's right to choose. I certainly think that those things can be overcome in the fullness of time.

*All the contributions confirm ... the very complicated nature of [the Civil Rights] movement, at that time – and still to this day we are going to get contested opinions about what it was all about.*

[**Anne Devlin**] Well, if they can be overcome in the Republic of Ireland, they can be overcome anywhere. Someone said to me, I think it was the poet Theo Dorgan: "This is a post-Catholic Republic."

[**Sean O'Hare**] See all this talk about having a 'new' civil rights movement embracing gay rights issues and the Irish language and all that sort of thing? To me it's naive. If such an organisation was ever brought about – and I think it would be a waste of time – immediately the Unionist politicians would say: well, if it's got to do with the Irish language it's nothing to do with us or our followers. So it would be the same thing all over again. There would be no big change: both sides would fall in behind the ranks.

[**Martin Connolly**] The point I was making was that the clamour already exists on both sides for those rights to be granted.

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† Peter Robinson, as reported by Gareth Cross in the *Belfast Telegraph* (23 November 2018), said that Irish language issues should not stand in the way of devolution, and should be overcome. "I couldn't care less about the Irish language," Robinson said, "Let them speak it until they are green, white and orange in the face, as long as it doesn't encroach on me."

[**Sean O’Hare**] I don’t think it does. Tell me a Unionist politician who has clamoured for any of those rights, or even voiced progressive opinions on them?

[**Martin Connolly**] Well, Billy Hutchinson, for example.

[**Sean O’Hare**] Many of Billy Hutchinson’s more progressive views would not necessarily be accepted within the mainstream Unionist parties.

[**Martin Connolly**] There are some Ulster Unionists who said they support them.

[**Sean O’Hare**] On the Shankill would most people support an Irish Language Act?

[**Liz Hagan**] No, I don’t think most of them would.

[**William Mitchell**] And probably not the LGBT issues either, for many Protestants are heavily influenced by right-wing fundamentalists.

[**Harry Donaghy**] We do have this unique problem here. Americans were out on the streets protesting *as Americans*, claiming the rights that the Constitution and Bill of Rights guaranteed citizens. Same with the changes in the Republic; people were agitating and voting for changes *as citizens of the Irish Republic*. But *we* have still got this monumental fracture between ‘British’ and ‘Irish’, which tends to trump everything. Okay, there are different voices within Unionism now, there is no stereotypical ‘Prod’ any more. For example, Billy Hutchinson said he voted to remain in the EU whereas the DUP voted to leave, and he agrees with women’s right to chose, and same-sex marriage. But there is still a deep fault-line in our society, between those who see themselves as Irish and those who see themselves as British, which impacts on everything we might try to do.

***There is still a deep fault-line in our society, between those who see themselves as Irish and those who see themselves as British, which impacts on everything we might try to do.***

[**Davy Hagan**] I have listened closely to this discussion and I also went to various talks about the period: I was invited to Tim Attwood’s ‘50 years of the Civil Rights’. Listening to all these discussions, I will say the same thing. We’re 50 years on and we have modern technology now. We can look up anything on the Internet, we didn’t have that then. We can see – hopefully – where things went wrong. But back then many Protestants could only go by the myths they were being told. We were told that Civil Rights had been taken over by dangerous elements, in particular militant republicans. But looking back I can see that there *was* need for reform, but for *everyone* in a working-class situation. It was ‘Big

House Unionism’ which was actually turning over working-class people, whether they were Protestant, Catholic or Dissenter. My own father would have been part of the Northern Ireland Labour Party and I *think* Gusty Spence’s background would have been Northern Ireland Labour Party in the beginning.

[**Deirdre Mac Bride**] I worry that many young people don’t really know about the Troubles, and that they are they are going to make similar mistakes going forward.

[**Anne Devlin**] The problem is we can’t anticipate where the new generation will go.

[**Michael Hall**] I think there is also a major problem in that some people assume that there is a kind of continuity between the Civil Rights demands of 1968 and today’s issues – such as the three issues Alan raised. They somehow imagine that this was all part of a continuum, as if the last forty years had all been about unresolved civil liberties issues. But I think any genuine pursuit of Civil Rights issues actually *stopped* in 1970, and an entirely different struggle took over. I will give you a personal

***They somehow imagine [that] the last forty years had all been about unresolved civil liberties issues. But I think any genuine pursuit of Civil Rights issues actually stopped in 1970.***

experience of trying to exercise *my* ‘civil rights’. In 1973 I brought out a pamphlet† in which I criticised the Unionist legacy of discrimination and gerrymandering, but I also criticised the Provisionals’ indiscriminate bombing campaign. Now, a friend of mine had close links to the Provisionals, and they asked him if he knew who wrote the pamphlet. When he said he did, they said: “Well, tell yer mate this: if he writes *anything* like that again he’ll get his knees ventilated!” Two weeks later I was walking near where I lived and two UVF men blocked my path and said, “We’re watching you, you bastard, we’re going to get you one of these nights!” A concern with civil liberties, from *either* side, was non-existent. It was no longer anything to do with civil rights. So to me there never was any continuum, the way some republicans claim that they took up the ‘mantle’ of civil rights. I agree with Anne: we believed in what we were doing, we genuinely believed we weren’t being sectarian, we believed in uniting the Protestant and Catholic working classes, but as Sean said the Civil Rights agitation unleashed a nationalist antagonism which had been building up against the Unionist state, which then opened the door for the Provisionals – and the whole thing changed irrevocably.

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† *Ireland: Dead or Alive?*, Belfast Libertarian Group, Belfast, 1973.

[**William Mitchell**] Michael, the comments you are making lead into the comments I was going to make. My question is: what is it about that time, what is it about Civil Rights per se that did not get Unionist/Loyalist support? You could argue that everything that the Civil Rights campaign was rooted in was actually successful: changing employment legislation, changing voting rights, changing housing allocation, and so on. And yet by the early to mid-seventies we witnessed the beginning of over two decades of indiscriminate killing. What had that all got to do with Civil Rights? *Why* is it that we had over two decades of indiscriminate killing? Why did we go down that path? Especially given that the Civil Rights demands were quite quickly instrumental in changing legislation?

***My question is: why is it that we had over two decades of indiscriminate killing? Why did we go down that path? What had that all got to do with Civil Rights?***

[**Sean O’Hare**] And there was the disbandment of the ‘B-Specials’.

[**Harry Donaghy**] And for the first time in the history of the state the RUC was unarmed.

[**Michael Hall**] In November 1968 Terrence O’Neill announced a reform programme, which included reform of local government elections – although not at this stage the implementation of ‘one man, one vote’. However, the momentum was obviously sufficient for PD leader Michael Farrell to say at a meeting in November 1969: “Now that all the civil right demands have been met.”† The IRA split did not take place until December 1969 – so the Provisionals arose a full year *after* a reform programme had been initiated.

[**Sean O’Hare**] The civil rights thing didn’t appeal to ordinary Protestants because quite simply to them it was basically a Nationalist thing.

[**William Mitchell**] The last thing I was going to say was about the comment you made, Brian, about ‘other’ anti-colonial wars. If what was happening here is propagated as nothing short of opposing British imperialism, then that makes it easy for Unionists to oppose it. The importance of Civil Rights was lost, as I think Paisley admitted close to his death. In an interview he said that one of his biggest regrets was not digging deeper into this notion of Civil

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† *The People’s Democracy 1968–73*, Paul Arthur, Blackstaff Press, 1974, p 73.

Rights at the time. And if not to support it, at least be a bit more objective about it.

[**Sean O’Hare**] We all come together here, from different parts of this society, and we all have these in-depth discussions – and then we walk away. And that’s it. Once we walk out the door, it’s gone. I really believe that there should be some sort of a forum where all this debate can be centred. Where things like, for instance, Irish language or LGBT rights could be discussed, in a neutral setting, without it being seen to compromise anyone’s basic Unionism or Nationalism. But *without* that neutral setting, you can be seen as a traitor within your own community if you say certain things. We need a stepping stone where people can exchange ideas without being seen to deny their own community’s aspirations.

[**William Mitchell**] It does get frustrating when you are trying to examine the Civil Rights period. It’s almost as if the narrative has been infiltrated by people using it for their own means. The most recent one that comes to mind is Declan Kearney. He claimed that the IRA’s campaign was rooted in the civil rights struggle, and a person no less than Bernadette McAlisky responded that he was disillusioned. And what we are doing is passing these new narratives on to a new generation, who, in a way, are being cloned to see the past through the new, revised rhetoric about that past. I think that instead of bringing us together, it is actually in danger of driving us further apart.

*And what we are doing is passing these new narratives on to a new generation, who, in a way, are being cloned to see the past through the new, revised, rhetoric about that past.*

[**Anne Devlin**] This last year I have gone to a whole lot of events, including making contributions myself, and in every exchange I have come away having found something I didn’t know before. And each time I have a more complex picture. It is not that I am re-writing the past, it is just that I have more and more information, and I begin to question many things.

[**William Mitchell**] We learn new facts all the time. Brian, I did not know the statement you say was made by Eamonn McCann back then. It is interesting to know that Eamonn McCann, one of the most prominent of the civil rights activists, actually admitted *at the time* that the rise in sectarianism was partly a product of the Civil Rights agitation.

[**Michael Hall**] With regard to Declan Kearney’s comments and Bernadette’s rubbishing of them, the truth is probably somewhere in between. I think it was Fionnuala O’Connor who said that when Kearney claimed that the IRA was behind Civil Rights, she agreed that of course there were republicans involved in it, but just not *his* republicans.

[**Sean O’Hare**] She was right that it wasn’t Kearney’s republicans who were involved in it. As a matter of fact his republicans were hostile to it. When any of us talked about Civil Rights, or were seen going to Civil Rights meetings, those people who were to become the Provisionals – some older republicans and younger militants – were completely against us: “This is all reformist nonsense you’re coming off with. We’ll destroy it [Stormont].”

***Those who were to become the Provisionals were completely against us: “This is all reformist nonsense you’re coming off with. We’ll destroy Stormont.”***

I’ll give you a good example of this rewriting of the past. In the building of Bombay Street, Paddy Devlin was one of the main organisers of it and he asked me to get involved. There were seven of us, bricklayers and hod-carriers, involved at the start. All but one of those hod-carriers would have been either ex-IRA, Official IRA, or Communists – there was *one* hod-carrier who was a Provo supporter. And yet, in a TV programme about Bombay Street a few years ago, it was made to appear that it was all the work of Provisional Sinn Féin members. Not one of the original workers was interviewed for that programme, it was all Sinn Féiners. They have done the same with the Falls Curfew. Those in power just rewrite things.

[**Davy Hagan**] Let me read you this: I saved it on my phone. In *Republican News* in 1973 there was an article† about sectarianism, asking how it could be overcome. And one of the ways, so it claimed, was: “By treating with contempt the propaganda of the defeatist and deluded collaborators with fascism and imperialism – the Official Republicans, Republican Clubs, *Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association*, and The Communist Party.” A lot of people jumped on this to say: “Are you sure what you’re saying, Declan?”

[**Anne Devlin**] By by 1973 it’s over, that’s the point. The Civil Rights Movement is over, you’re talking about a different time.

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† *Republican News*, Vol. 2, No. 86, 19th May, 1973.

[**Brian Hanley**] I suppose given that they are not here to defend themselves, and while I am not going to give a defence of Declan Kearneys's comments, I will contextualise it in some way. What he ultimately said was that the Civil Rights Movement had many parents and many children. Kevin Agnew, a prominent republican, was a member of the NICRA Executive. If you look at the Civil Rights Movement in places like Tyrone, republicans such as the Gildernews were to the forefront. There is an absolutist view which is they were all against it and they weren't there, or maybe some of them were there. Now, they weren't 'Provos' because the Provos hadn't been founded yet.

And the rhetoric of what became the Officials, the Workers Party, also rewrote that period too. I didn't quote it but Tomás Mac Giolla in the eighties was saying that "we managed to rally people around equal citizenship within the United Kingdom." And *no-one* in the republican movement said that in 1968.

I think it is such a messy period. We know the outcome and the outcome is bad, and there is a tendency to say, "Well, if there hadn't been a Burntollet, or hadn't been this, or that" .... No-one says that about Martin Luther King, yet everything he did was provocative. Malcolm X said to him: "What kind of a leader sends schoolchildren out to be bitten by police dogs?" [as at Birmingham, Alabama], because King said that if the police hit schoolchildren it will be really powerful, it will look really bad. And Malcolm X said, "You're a coward; if you were a man you'd be out leading them, not letting kids get bitten by dogs." Selma to Montgomery: the police chief said if the marchers try and cross that bridge we are going to stop them. So there is within protest politics an element which says: of course we're going to get attacked. You would say that at least with the Burntollet marchers, they knew they would get attacked and suffered the consequences of that. Whether they were right or wrong... is it too simple to say that they changed the whole course of opinion? The other point of view is that the loyalists didn't have to attack them. If they had marched from Belfast to Derry and not been attacked what would have been the outcome?

***The other point of view is that the loyalists didn't have to attack them [at Burntollet]. If they had marched from Belfast to Derry and not been attacked what would have been the outcome?***

[**Sean O'Hare**] Nationalists in West Belfast were in support of the march that led to Burntollet. People around me were saying, "Yes, they're doing right. They should march, they should provoke them."

[**Brian Hanley**] The other point is that it is universal within Nationalism and in the South that the Civil Rights Movement was ‘just’; there might be a couple of academics in the South who are critical, but generally people felt it was right, and they kind of think it was the same as in America. Within Loyalism that’s *not* the view, it’s obviously much more complicated than that. And therefore how could there be an accepted view of it, if on the one hand some people were saying it was absolutely just, and the other side says we’re not sure if it was just or not.

[**Martin Connolly**] To return to today’s civil rights issues. There were some Young Unionists from Queens University took part in the original Civil Rights Movement, and today I really think there is overlap between both communities on those current issues. Maybe not the language issue, because that can be divisive. But the other issues there is significant support. I know friends of mine, who are Unionists, who support same-sex marriage: they have brothers, friends who are gay people.

[**Davy Hagan**] A recent newspaper article<sup>†</sup> revealed that those able to speak some Irish are *the same in number* as those who can speak some Ulster-Scots. Now, I love hearing Irish being fluently spoken. I listened to the Irish President speak at an event in Belfast City Hall. The Shinners go on about their love for the Irish language, yet many of them can’t even speak it properly, they stutter their way through their sentences. By contrast, it was a real joy to listen to Higgins – his Irish was so fluent. But why can we not build on the fact that *equal* numbers speak both languages – instead of everybody focusing on a stand-alone Irish language Act?

[**Brian Hanley**] There are historical reasons why the Irish language has become this emblematic thing for northern Nationalists, but Irish was the first language of the Southern state since independence and it is not successfully revived. Certainly in 1968 it wasn’t anywhere near a Civil Rights demand; nobody was thinking of Irish. The Irish language is deeply unpopular with a lot of people in the South, perhaps less so now that it has become less compulsory.

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<sup>†</sup> ‘Revealed: Almost half of Irish speakers only know basic terms’, Jonathan Bell, *Belfast Telegraph*, 29 November, 2018.

[**Michael Hall**] Regarding the quote from Eamonn McCann, warning about the rise of sectarianism. In his book McCann admits that before the 5 October march the CRA proposed to the Derry Housing Action Committee that an invite be sent to every political party in Derry, but his group “argued down the proposed invitation to the Unionists, but accepted that the Nationalists should be asked”.† So the seeds of sectarian division were being sown right at the beginning.

[**Anne Devlin**] Yes, we failed continually. I feel very strongly the reason we bought the American Civil Rights narrative so forcefully was that it allowed us to see ourselves in a non-sectarian way: this is not about Catholics, this is not about religion, this is about rights. And we actually sold that narrative to ourselves.

[**Deirdre Mac Bride**] What is wrong with Unionism that it couldn't hear Civil Rights, and what's wrong with Nationalism that it couldn't hear accommodation? The three issues mentioned earlier as current civil rights issues are obviously there, but I believe that if you try to advance those in the way civil rights issues were used in the sixties we would merely be using the wrong tactics, at the wrong time, and we couldn't predict where they were heading. But there are other things. According to the Northern Ireland Census 17% of the Northern Ireland population now refuse to declare a religious background, and that's a sizeable voting chunk which political parties could go after. But NISRA, the Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency, when they analyse the Census, divides us all back. They read the census forms and say, 'She's a Catholic, she's Protestant' and they put us back in our boxes!

*What is wrong with Unionism that it couldn't hear Civil Rights, and what's wrong with Nationalism that it couldn't hear accommodation?*

There are so many questions. Did the Civil Rights people make mistakes? Did the PD make mistakes? Did the police make mistakes? Did the state over-react? Indeed, what is the nature of this state that we are all operating in, one that continues to be organised along sectarian lines?

[**Martin Connolly**] Can I say thanks again to Brian for his presentation and to Deirdre for co-facilitating. And thanks to everyone for contributing to this debate.

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† *War and an Irish Town*, Eamonn McCann, Pluto Press, London, 1980, p 37.