



Language

The 1920 Government of Ireland Act created a Northern Ireland state within the UK with its own devolved parliament and government in the six North East counties of Ireland, which had constituted part of the nine counties of the province of Ulster. This constitutional arrangement was strengthened by the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty which created the Irish Free State, and also provided for Northern Ireland to choose to remain separate. The Treaty split the nationalist movement in the South and led to a bitter civil war between those for and against the Treaty.

Since Catholics/Nationalists formed a majority in two of the six counties of Northern Ireland and in the city of Derry/Londonderry, and since Irish republicans had fought for a united independent Ireland, the settlement created continuing sources of conflict. The demography of the new state and the political divide on Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist lines ensured permanent Unionist control of the Provincial government at Stormont and the exclusion and political alienation of the Catholic minority. Unionist governments, fearful of this minority which mainly looked to the south and cherished the hope of a united Ireland, enshrined Protestant dominance through restricting voting rights in local elections, altering local electoral boundaries and controlling most aspects of government and society, including law and order. Thus judges and magistrates were almost all Protestants, many members of the Unionists Party. The police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) was 90 per cent Protestant and the Ulster Special Constabulary – the ‘B-Specials’ – entirely so. Many in the political, and religious establishment, and the security forces were also members of the Orange Order, founded in 1795 to defend the Protestant Ascendancy. Discrimination in jobs and housing, which pre-dated the creation of the new state, continued. This was the background to intermittent unrest, and to bombings and other military attacks by the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Following the end of the IRA bombing campaign of 1956-62, a more effective challenge to the political status quo arose in the form of the Civil Rights movement which had its origins in various community initiatives dating back to the early 1960s. Thus in 1963 women in Dungannon, Co Tyrone, formed the Homeless Citizens League and supported homeless families who squatted in empty pre-fabs due for demolition. This was followed soon afterwards by the formation in the town of the Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland which publicized the discrimination in housing operated by Dungannon and other councils. In 1968 the Nationalist MP in Stormont (the Northern Ireland Parliament) for East Tyrone, Austin Currie, squatted in a house which Dungannon Rural District Council had allocated to an unmarried Protestant woman ahead of a young Catholic family. His action proved a catalyst for the countrywide campaign for civil rights and an end to discriminatory practices.

In Derry/Londonderry, a city with high unemployment, acute housing shortage and a majority Catholic population ruled by a Protestant/Unionist City Council, a campaign in 1965 to have the second university for Northern Ireland sited there brought together a cross section of people, including Catholic, and some Protestant, business people. The suspicion was that the Council was reluctant to have a university in the city as that would alter the demographic and threaten Protestant/Unionist control. Although the group failed in its objective its experience enabled some of its members to provide useful organizational support for a more far-reaching campaign on discrimination in housing and employment launched by a small group of socialists, republicans and other radicals in 1968, the Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC).

In January 1967 the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was launched in Belfast with support from trade unions, community and campaigning groups, republican bodies and representatives of all the Northern Ireland political parties. (The Unionist Party delegate walked out of the initial meeting but the Executive Committee subsequently co-opted two young Unionists.) NICRA called, not for the abolition of the border, but for an end to collective discrimination against Catholics on voting, housing and employment, the repeal of the Special Powers Act (which gave police sweeping powers of search and arrest and the right to ban meetings or publications), the disbandment of the B-Specials and the disarming of the RUC.

In August 1968 NICRA organized the first civil rights march from Coalisland to Dungannon in support of the campaign already under way there. Though prevented by police from entering the town centre, and facing provocation from a loyalist counter-demonstration led by Rev Ian Paisley, the majority of the march remained nonviolent.



However, the event which catapulted the campaign into the headlines, and can be seen in retrospect as marking the beginning of the mass movement for civil rights, took place in Derry on 5 October 1968 when police baton-charged a banned but relatively small march of around 400 people organized by the DHAC, with the backing of NICRA. Two weeks later 4,000 to 5,000 took part in a peaceful sitdown in Guildhall Square, this time organized by the newly-formed, and generally more middle-class and 'respectable', Derry Citizens Action Committee (DCAC), drawn mainly from people who had been active in the campaign over the siting of the university. The demonstration concluded with people singing 'We Shall Overcome'. On 16 November the DCAC engaged in civil disobedience for the first time, defying a ban to march to the city centre. Around 15,000 people took part and the police had no option but to allow them through and leave the maintenance of order in the hands of a well-trained body of marshals.

On November 22 the Stormont government, announced its intention to introduce a package of reforms and on December 9 Prime Minister Terence O'Neil made a passionate appeal for people to give him their support and allow time for the promised reforms to succeed. NICRA and DCAC announced a temporary suspension of marches, but others argued that what the government promised fell far short of what was needed and that it was vital to keep up the momentum. In January 1969 a civil rights march from Belfast to Derry, the 'Long March', organized by the Peoples Democracy (PD) campaign, based at Queen's University Belfast, was attacked by Protestant loyalists at Burntollet Bridge a few miles from Derry.

A subsequent PD march in Newry, Co. Down, was followed by rioting and damage to property. In March, the Northern Ireland government set up a Commission of Enquiry under Lord Cameron to inquire into the causes of the disturbances which concluded there had indeed been partisan law enforcement, the gerrymandering of local government boundaries, and discrimination in the areas of housing allocation, and local government employment. The report also criticized the police for failing to protect the PD marchers at Burntollet.

The point of no return came in Derry on 12 August 1969 following clashes between the Protestant Apprentice Boys March and residents of the Catholic Bogside area of the city. The Bogside came under siege from loyalists, largely backed by the RUC and B-Specials, an event which came to be known as The Battle of the Bogside. The rioting escalated and spread to Belfast on 14 August, where 150 Catholic homes were burned, eight people killed and hundreds injured. The British government sent troops into the province, who were initially welcomed by Catholics. But increasingly the troops were seen as serving the interests of the Unionist government. In this period too, 1969-70, there was a split in the Republican movement between the 'Officials' who had been pursuing a political, Marxist, strategy, and the breakaway 'Provisionals' who favoured a continuation and stepping up of a military campaign to defend Catholic areas and ultimately to end partition.

In August 1971 in face of armed attacks and bombings by the Provisional IRA and loyalist paramilitaries, the British government introduced internment. Over 2,400 people were arrested in the first six months, the majority of them in the initial phase from the Catholic/Nationalist community. Although most were soon released, internment further antagonized the community, and the newly formed (mainly Catholic) Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) announced a campaign of civil disobedience, including a rent and rates strike. Many Catholics also withdrew from public bodies.

The last civil rights march took place in Derry in January 1972 when the British Army Parachute Regiment opened fire on unarmed demonstrators, killing 14 people and wounding many more. Bitterness in the Catholic/Nationalist community at the 'Bloody Sunday' massacre was intensified when later that year an official Commission of Inquiry, under Lord Widgery, largely exonerated the army – though commenting that its firing on the demonstrators 'bordered on the reckless' – and concluded that the organizers of the march bore the main responsibility for what happened by creating a situation where confrontation was inevitable. In March of that year the Northern Ireland government resigned, Stormont was suspended and direct rule from Westminster under a Secretary of State imposed. Thereafter violence escalated.

Despite the descent of Northern Ireland into violence, the Civil Rights movement did draw world attention to the injustices suffered by the minority community and forced the Northern Ireland and British governments to introduce reforms. These included one-person-one-vote in local council elections (1969), the creation of Parliamentary and local commissioners for complaints (1969), the replacement of the B-Specials with the Ulster Defence Regiment (1970), the establishment of a new housing executive (1971), proportional representation in local and European elections (1972), local government reorganization (1972), and the Fair Employment Act (1976). The movement also produced a new generation of political leaders and who continued to press for more far-reaching political and constitutional changes including, increasingly, the abolition of the border.



There were a number of initiatives at an official level to end the conflict in the course of the 1970s. In 1973 the British Government set up the Northern Ireland Assembly whose members were elected by proportional representation. The Sunningdale Agreement in December of that year provided for the establishment of a power-sharing Executive, a Council of Ireland (with representatives from both parts of Ireland) and, as a reassurance to the Protestant/Unionist community, reaffirmed that the constitutional status of Northern Ireland could only be changed with the consent of the majority in the Province. The Executive took office in January 1974 with ministers drawn from the Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP and the Alliance Party. But the Agreement proved divisive. Provisional Sinn Féin and IRA rejected it and the latter continued their attacks. The Unionist party split on the issue, its leader, Brian Faulkner, resigned, and all the Unionist MPs at Westminster opposed it. Anti-Sunningdale Unionist candidates won 11 out of 12 Westminster seats with 51 per cent of the votes in the UK February 1974 general election. Finally a strike by the Ulster Workers Council, in which gas and electricity workers played a critical role, brought the Province to a standstill, led to the downfall of the Executive and a decision by the British government to suspend the Assembly.

In a sense the UWC strike was an impressive demonstration of civil resistance, but it was far from nonviolent as there was widespread intimidation by Protestant paramilitary groups to enforce the strike. It also coincided with bombings of civilian targets in Dublin and Monaghan by the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in which 33 people were killed. However, the downfall of the power-sharing Executive was perhaps an indication that the time was not yet ripe for a cross party alliance of this kind to succeed and that the 'extremes' on all sides, including paramilitary groups, had somehow to be included in the peacemaking process.

For discussion of the UWC strike see:

Fisk, Robert, [The Point of No Return: The Strike which Broke the British in Ulster](#) [1], London, Times Books: Deutsch, 1975, pp. 264

Detailed account by journalist of the strike and its political repercussions.

See also:

Eamonn McCann, [War and an Irish Town](#) [2], ([I.2.c.i. Civil Rights Movement 1967-73](#) [3]), McCann cites reports that Prime Minister Harold Wilson was set to order the army to confront the UWC but was informed that the army would refuse to obey such an order (p.144).

Tom Nairn, [The Break-up of Britain](#) [4], ([I.2.a. Historical Background and Political Perspectives](#) [5]), Chapter 5, 'Northern Ireland: Relic or Portent?' The author comments: 'It [the strike] was without doubt the most successful political action carried out by any European working class since the World War' (p. 242).

David McKittrick; David McVea, [Making Sense of The Troubles](#) [6], ([I.2.a. Historical Background and Political Perspectives](#) [5]), Chapter 5: 'Sunningdale, Strike and Stalemate', pp. 98-117.

After Sunningdale, there was slow and fitful progress at the official level. In 1975 a Constitutional Convention made recommendations as to how the government of Northern Ireland should be constituted. In 1983 representatives of the four main constitutionalist nationalist parties in Northern Ireland and the Republic set up the New Ireland Forum to discuss ways forward to ending the Troubles. Its report published in May 1984 indicated greater flexibility on the part of nationalists with respect to constitutional changes, and paved the way for the Anglo-Irish Agreement of the following year which gave the Republic an advisory role in the government of Northern Ireland. In 1993 the British and Irish governments signed the Downing Street Declaration which set out the broad principles of a settlement, and this was followed five years later by the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) – also known as the Belfast Agreement – which re-established a Northern Ireland Assembly and power sharing Executive. The Agreement was endorsed in referendums in both Northern Ireland and the Republic. There was also an additional referendum in the Republic, in accordance with the terms of GFA, to approve the amendment of Articles 2 and 3 of its constitution so that the claim that its jurisdiction extended to Northern Ireland was relinquished. This too received overwhelming endorsement.



Among significant events at the grassroots level post the civil rights years were the formation of the cross-community Peace People initiated by Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams in 1976, the hunger strikes in 1980-81 by republican prisoners demanding the reinstatement of their former Special Category Status, the election of the hunger strike leader, Bobby Sands, as MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone shortly before his death, and subsequently the death of nine other hunger strikers, and a gradual shift away from a military policy by Provisional Sinn Fein and IRA, which twice instituted cease-fires in the 1990s, and finally in 2005 declared an end to the military campaign. This shift was occasioned in part by the evidence that the campaign had reached a dead end, and perhaps also by the fact that civilian campaigns such as the Smash H-Block campaign in support of the hunger-strikers, and the Bloody Sunday Justice Campaign in Derry showed the potential of mobilizing mass civilian action. The election to the Westminster Parliament of Bobby Sands who had become such an iconic figure in the republican movement and the wider Catholic/nationalist community – his funeral in Belfast was attended by 100,000 people – strengthened the position of those within Provisional Sinn Fein and IRA who favoured some level of engagement in conventional politics.

On the loyalist side, the Ulster Defence Association and its armed wing, the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) called a ceasefire in 2004 and announced an end to its military operations in 2007. The other main loyalist paramilitary group, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), responsible for some of the worst sectarian killings, announced a ceasefire in 1994 and, in 2007, an end to its military campaign, but it has subsequently been deemed responsible for fomenting riots, and for attacks on the police and rival paramilitary groups.

The political breakthrough, which virtually no-one had anticipated, came when Provisional Sinn Fein on the Republican side and the Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party, (DUP) won the majority of seats in Assembly elections and agreed to form a power-sharing Executive in 2007, with Ian Paisley as First Minister and his former arch-opponent, Martin McGuinness, as his deputy.

Communal tensions have, however, persisted related particularly to marches, the flying of the Union Flag at City Hall, sporadic attacks by breakaway republican and loyalist paramilitaries and the legacy of unsolved killings during the Troubles. By the autumn of 2014, these issues, plus wrangles over the administration budget and the implementation of welfare changes, threatened the collapse of the Assembly and Executive and a return to direct rule from Westminster. However, after 11 weeks of talks involving the five main parties in Northern Ireland, and British and Irish governments, a deal was reached on 23 December which averted the collapse, secured a £2 billion grant from the British government to cushion the effects of cuts and welfare changes, and established commissions to consider the unresolved issues of marches and flags.

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