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The civil rights struggle and its legacy

THE Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was a unique political organisation in the history of this country. It was established at a meeting in the International Hotel, Belfast, on 29 January 1967 and was disbanded in 1981. At its height, in 1972, NICRA had approximately five hundred members. Its archives are held in the Linen Hall Library, Belfast.



It had two constitutions. The original one was modelled on that of the British civil liberties body, the National Council for Civil Liberties. The second was adopted at an annual general meeting in 1970 and reflected the transformation of the organisation into a mass-based one.

Under both constitutions the elected ruling body was known as the Executive Council or Committee. The policy-making body was the annual conference.

NICRA was not a political party. It started as a pressure group but developed into a grass-roots organisation. The Cameron Commission described it as a "novel phenomenon."

It did not look south of the border for political direction. Instead it directed its demands at Westminster and Stormont and looked for support and allies in Britain, particularly in the British labour movement.

Its agenda was limited and was directed to redressing the grievances of a large section of the Northern population. It did not agitate over the issue

of Northern Ireland's status within the United Kingdom and accepted the constitutional framework as the basis for the redress of those grievances.

The prime focus of its campaign was always Westminster's responsibility for good government in Northern Ireland.

It sought to have Westminster exercise its responsibilities towards all its citizens as the sovereign authority under the Government of Ireland Act (1920), section 75 of which provided that, "notwithstanding the establishment of the Parliament of Northern Ireland, the supreme authority of the Parliament of the United Kingdom shall remain unaffected and undiminished over all persons, matters and things."

This article gave Westminster the power to intervene at any time in Northern Ireland to tackle the blatant abuses practised both by Stormont and by local government there. But if there was one thing that united Labour and Tories throughout the 1960s it was the fervent wish to leave section 75 to gather dust. A so-called convention

ruled out any parliamentary question in the London Parliament that sought to delve into the "internal affairs" of Northern Ireland.

NICRA sought to attract as wide a political and religious membership as possible and, as a corollary, advanced non-sectarianism as a fundamental principle.

How far NICRA was modelled on the American civil rights movement is open to question. The fundamental reality is that the struggle for civil rights would have occurred around that time even if the American civil rights movement had not existed.

The Cameron Report in 1969 set out the NICRA demands as:

- universal franchise in local government elections in line with the franchise in the rest of the United Kingdom,
- the re-drawing of electoral boundaries by an independent commission to ensure fair representation,
- legislation against discrimination in employment at local government and the provision of machinery to remedy local government grievances,
- a compulsory points system for housing which would ensure fair allocation,
- repeal of the Special Powers Act,
- disbanding of the B Specials, and later
- withdrawal of the Public Order (Amendment) Bill.

The substance of these demands had been conceded, legislated for and implemented by the mid-1970s. These demands were classic civil rights and democratic ones. Some were directed at catching up with general British standards; others, such as the abolition of the B Specials and Special Powers Act, were related to repressive institutions

peculiar to Unionist misrule in Northern Ireland.

The civil rights reforms sought by NICRA, and the analysis of what was wrong with Northern Ireland that they were based on, were little different from demands made by other groups and individuals over many years. What was unique was that NICRA was able to develop a politics that brought them to the attention of the world. The civil rights demands were widely understood and easily communicated. This helped to popularise



them.

The introduction of internment in August 1971 brought a period of intense confrontation with the Westminster and Stormont authorities, which culminated in Bloody Sunday.

NICRA was the focus of a campaign to end internment. The core of the campaign was a programme of civil disobedience, which involved the withdrawal of representatives from public bodies and the refusal to pay rent, rates or other financial dues to local councils or the Stormont authorities.

The lessons of the civil rights movement

ALTHOUGH there is no body of writing on the lessons of the civil rights struggle, there are clear lessons to be drawn from examining its history.

- **Clarity about where the responsibility for the injustice rests.** A lack of such clarity led elements of the civil rights movement down blind alleys. The most important confusion in this regard was the concentration on abolishing Stormont rather than forcing the British Government to intervene and redress the civil rights grievances over the heads of the Stormont administration.
- **The need for a competent political leadership capable of formulating and expressing progressive demands in a way that unites and moves people into struggle.** That leadership must

also be capable of carrying people further, once the initial victories are gained and popular morale and political consciousness have been raised through struggle.

- **The political potential of disciplined, well-organised mass action, where large bodies of people are moved to action by a widely shared sense of injustice that unites them.**
- **No matter how dedicated and brave the democratic forces, the objective circumstances must be right, so that it becomes possible to contemplate, develop and engage in struggle.**

Finally, the democratic forces can

never go it alone but must be able to win allies for the struggle.

The legacy of NICRA

Although NICRA was formally wound up in 1981, its legacy remains for progressive people in this country and further afield. In particular, they should be aware of the continuing battle to apportion responsibility for Bloody Sunday where it should properly lie: with the British government.

The lessons of NICRA are part of the tradition and politics of everyone striving for justice

Timeline of the civil rights campaign

Late 1950s

The first talks and discussions begin for finding a way forward. C. Desmond Greaves is among the influential figures in this process.

1958-1962

The IRA launches a border campaign. Confined mainly to south Armagh and south Derry, it ends in failure and demoralisation.

1960

The Connolly Association in London publishes its pamphlet *Our Plan to End Partition*.

1962

The Communist Party programme, *Ireland's Path to Socialism*, identifies democracy as the Achilles heel of unionism and calls for a mass democratic struggle. The Republican Movement begins a rethink of its ideology and strategy.

1963

Wolfe Tone Societies are formed in Dublin, Belfast and Cork to com-

memorate the bicentenary of the birth of Theobald Wolfe Tone.

June: Demonstration by the Homeless Citizens' League in Dungannon to publicise discrimination in housing allocation.

27 August: Seventeen families move into a squat in Dungannon. Thirty-five houses are taken over. The council illegally cuts off electricity and water supplies.

1964

Campaign for Social Justice founded by Patricia and Conn McCluskey.

Connolly Association seeks pledge by candidates in the British general election that they will press for democratic reform in Northern Ireland.

1965

Campaign for Democracy in Ulster established in Britain, a loose alliance of Labour MPs headed by Fenner Brockway and Paul Rose.

May: Belfast Trades Council, through its secretary, Betty Sinclair, organises a conference on civil liberties in the

lecture room of the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union in Belfast. Several leading trade union members participate; also represented are Campaign for Social Justice, Communist Party, Republican Movement, and Northern Ireland Labour Party.

The Northern prime minister, Terence O'Neill, meets the Taoiseach, Seán Lemass.

1966

August: A conference of Wolfe Tone Societies in Maghera, Co. Derry, proposes the establishment of a civil rights organisation.

November: Public meeting in the War Memorial Building, Belfast, to publicise the issue of civil rights, chaired by John D. Stewart.

1967

29 January: Meeting in International Hotel, Belfast, at which all Northern political parties are represented. A thirteen-member committee is elected and mandated to draw up a draft constitution and campaign programme. The

following officers are elected: chairman: Noel Harris (DATA); vice-chairman: Conn McCluskey (Campaign for Social Justice); secretary: Derek O'Brien Peters (Communist Party); treasurer: Fred Heatley (Belfast Wolfe Tone Society); PRO: Jack Bennett (Belfast Wolfe Tone Society); other members are Betty Sinclair (Belfast Trades Council); Billy McMillen (Republican Clubs), John Quinn (Liberal Party), Michael Dolley (National Democratic Party), Joe Sherry (Republican Labour Party), Jim Andrews (Ardoyne Tenants' Association), Paddy Devlin (Northern Ireland Labour Party), Tony McGettigan (no affiliation). (Members do not represent their party political views on the committee.) The steering committee later co-opts Robin Cole, former chairperson of the Young Unionists at Queen's University.

A five-point outline of broad objectives is issued to the press:

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

7 March: The Minister of Home Affairs, William Craig, announces a ban on Republican Clubs (branches of Sinn Féin).

9 April: Meeting to ratify the constitution whereby NICRA officially comes into existence.

1968

April: Annual republican Easter parade in Armagh is banned. Ban on marches forces NICRA into holding street demonstrations.

June: Direct action in politics has begun. Members of Branrhy Republican Club and Austin Currie (Nationalist Party member of Northern parliament) squat in a house in Caledon, Co. Tyrone, that they feel has been unfairly allocated.

July: Members of Derry Housing Action Committee continue the campaign for impartial allocation of housing by blocking Craigavon Bridge; seventeen members are arrested.

14 August: The first civil rights march takes place, from Coalisland to Dungannon, Co. Tyrone, supported by more than two thousand people.

2 September: NICRA announces that a march will be held in Derry.

5 October: Derry witnesses the first bloodshed, when many of the two thousand marchers who defied Craig's ban are attacked. Among the injured is Gerry Fitt (Republican Labour member of the Northern parliament). Three members of the British parliament—

Russell Kerr, Ann Kerr, and John Ryan—witness the events.

"People's Democracy," an informal organisation of students, mainly in Queen's University, Belfast, is established.

4 November: The British prime minister, Harold Wilson, summons the Northern prime minister, Terence O'Neill, to London. Political pressure, both national and international, grows. Unionism and the role of the British government increasingly exposed, and the Unionist edifice begins to crack.

16 November: Second civil rights march, in Derry; more than twenty thousand people participate. The march is banned and is halted at police barriers at the entrance to the Walls.

9 December: O'Neill makes his "Ulster at the Crossroads" television speech on 9 December. Two days later he removes William Craig from office. The cracks in unionism deepen.

NICRA responds to O'Neill reforms. After much discussion in the Executive Committee it is decided not to hold any marches for the time being. This course of action is agreed upon for two reasons:

- the promised reforms must be given a chance to work, both for their own sake and for the credibility of the whole principle of civil rights demands;
- the chances of sectarian violence are growing by the day, and anything that might defuse the situation would be welcome.

1969

1 January: People's Democracy organises a march from Belfast to Derry, to pass through some of the most loyalist and reactionary rural areas of the North. The marchers are attacked in Antrim and Toome, outside Maghera, in Dungiven, at Burntollet, Co. Derry, and on the way into Derry.

24 February: O'Neill puts his political career to the test by announcing a general election for the Northern parliament. Old Nationalist Party leaders—Eddie McAteer, Patrick Gormley, and E. G. Richardson—lose out to John Hume, Ivan Cooper, and Paddy O'Hanlon.

On the Catholic side the march, and particularly the Burntollet ambush, is seen as a Protestant attack on Catholic students. Civil rights are slowly becoming identified in the Catholic mind with opposition to the Unionist regime, and this means opposition to the state. A conscious attempt to organise a broad, non-sectarian civil rights movement is becoming identified with a sectarian ideology.

19 April: Civil rights supporters hold a sit-down demonstration in Derry, which is

attacked by a counter-demonstration led by Ian Paisley.

20 April: Loyalists plant bombs that damage water and electricity supplies.

28 April: O'Neill resigns and is replaced by James Chichester-Clarke.

1 June: NICRA announces a return to the streets, believing it has given the government enough time to announce a timetable for substantial civil rights reforms. Its demands are

- one man one vote in local government elections;
- votes at eighteen in local government and parliamentary elections;
- an independent boundary commission to draw up fair electoral boundaries;
- a compulsory points system for housing;
- administrative machinery to remedy local government grievances;
- legislation to outlaw discrimination, especially in employment;
- the abolition of the Special Powers Act and the disbanding of the B Specials.

28 June: The first of the "post-truce" civil rights marches takes place in Strabane.

12 July: Sectarian violence at Unity Flats in Belfast.

13 July: Similar violence in Derry and in Dungiven.

14 July: More violence in the Crumlin Road and Hooker Street area of Belfast.

21 July: Most of the Armagh NICRA committee resign because of the tendency of People's Democracy to use it as a political platform.

2 August: Violence breaks out in Belfast at Unity Flats and Hooker Street, continuing at regular intervals throughout the week.

11 August: In Dungannon a hundred members of NICRA picket a meeting of the local council in protest against its housing policy.

12 August: Violence breaks out in Derry, spreading to Belfast later in the week, changing the face of Northern politics.

October: A protest march by Derry Housing Action Committee is broken up by a police baton charge, which is filmed and shown on television around the world.

Serious civil disturbances begin, and British troops are deployed on the streets.

1969 ends as it began—violently. Throughout the late autumn and early winter a succession of riots marks an increase in sectarian violence.

1970

January: The Ulster Defence Regiment is established, and the RUC returns, unarmed, to the Falls Road and the Bogside.

“With all opposition forces at Parliamentary level and many organisations of the working class and Labour movement in opposition, in one form or another, to this denial of democracy, here is the fundamental ingredient for a united struggle against Unionist domination of political affairs in Northern Ireland . . . Abolition of all anti-democratic laws, an end to civil and religious discrimination, and an end to the rigging of electoral areas in the interests of the wealthy, can be accomplished by united action of the people. The organised Labour movement is the force to lead the struggle for democracy and the rights of the individual to participate with equality in public affairs. The Communist Party has this struggle as its foremost aim.—Communist Party (Northern Ireland), *Ireland's Path to Socialism* (1962).

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This civil disobedience campaign will cripple unionism more surely than any bombings of city warehouses and stores.—*Belfast Telegraph*, 19 January 1972

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February: People's Democracy announces that it will not be contesting elections to the Executive Committee of NICRA, so ending a period of ultra-left disruption.

7 February: NICRA organises nine demonstrations in Northern Ireland and fifteen in Britain in protest against the Public Order (Amendment) Act.

21 April: The Alliance Party is formed.

June: In the British general election the Conservative Party wins.

6 June: In Derry the demand for a Bill of Rights is first made.

3 July: The commander of British forces in Northern Ireland, General Ian Freeland, imposes a curfew in the Lower Falls area of Belfast—later found to be completely illegal.

21 August: The Social Democratic and Labour Party is formally launched.

28 November: Back to the streets: a civil rights march takes place in Enniskillen.

December: 1970–71 sees the emergence of the Provisional IRA and the death of the first British soldier, with thirty others dying in the period before internment day, 9 August 1971.

1971

Mass civil disobedience begins. The RUC is rearmed.

20 March: Brian Faulkner replaces the politically ailing Chichester-Clarke as prime minister.

16 July: The first step in the direction of direct rule from London comes from the SDLP, which withdraws from Stormont.

9 August: Internment is introduced. Of the 342 people arrested, 105 are released within two days.

10 August: The day after internment, NICRA calls for a campaign of civil disobedience in protest against “military terrorism.” In the first week after internment an estimated fifty public meetings

are held by NICRA in one of the greatest upsurges of popular involvement in Northern Ireland against government policy. NICRA calls for a rent and rates strike.

15 August: SDLP and Nationalist MPs call for a similar protest after it has already begun in Belfast.

19 September: A new internment camp is opened at Long Kesh, near Lisburn.

9 December: Turf Lodge estate in Belfast reports 89 per cent of tenants not paying rent. Seán Morrissey, chairperson of Turf Lodge Residents' Association and a member of the Executive Committee of the Communist Party, is arrested.

1972

19 January: The *Belfast Telegraph* states: “This civil disobedience campaign will cripple unionism more surely than any bombings of city warehouses and stores.”

30 January: NICRA holds a march in Derry on a day that will become known as Bloody Sunday. Thirteen members of the crowd are murdered in cold blood by members of the British army's Parachute Regiment. (A fourteenth dies some weeks later from wounds received.)

6 February: Following the massacre in Derry an estimated 100,000 people take part in Newry in another march organised by NICRA. Increasing violence, however, means that the Newry march, though NICRA's biggest, is also its last significant one.

February: At its annual general meeting NICRA formulates its demands in the light of the new political situation.

March: Less than two months after Bloody Sunday, Faulkner is summoned to London to meet the prime minister,

Edward Heath. It is to be Faulkner's last meeting as prime minister: Heath tells him that London has decided to take direct control of Northern Ireland.

5 November: NICRA calls for a stepping up of civil disobedience, including non-payment of television and radio licences, ground rent, and water rates.

1973

The year of the “power-sharing” Executive.

28 December: The SDLP calls for an end to the strike. The SDLP minister in the Executive, Austin Currie, implements plans to increase the amount of arrears that can be seized each week and adds a penalty charge against the protesters. This provokes huge anger against the SDLP but also reduces the numbers involved in the protests.

During the following years NICRA takes on the role of investigating and producing reports regarding human rights violations, torture, and the use of plastic bullets. It addresses international conferences on the role of the British government and its army in the gross violation of human rights.

Armed violence and deepening sectarianism make it almost impossible for street marches to take place. NICRA's struggle has changed the political landscape of the North for ever. Many lessons can still be learnt from the role and activities of NICRA and the politics it attempted to develop and build on.

1981

Having organised hundreds of pickets, marches, demonstrations and conferences and presented numerous reports, NICRA finally closes its doors after more than a decade of intense political struggle.

Some pen-pictures

Betty Sinclair (1910–1981) was born into a working-class family in the Ardoyne area of Belfast and was from the Protestant tradition. She had many decades of experience of mobilising working people, bringing to bear her experience not alone from the 1934 Outdoor Relief struggle but also from decades of involvement in the trade union movement and an understanding of the crucial importance of the unity of Catholics and Protestants. In May 1965, under the auspices of Belfast Trades Council, she organised one of the first major meetings on civil rights. She was a founder-member of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in 1967 and its first chairperson. She resigned from her position in 1969 after NICRA had been compromised by ultra-leftists and pushed into provocations that would result in further sectarian divisions.



Madge Davison (1950–1991) was born and reared in east Belfast in a strong Protestant working-class family. In 1970 she took part in the breaking of the Falls curfew, when several hundred women marched in protest at being held within the area by the British army. By the 1970s she had begun work as full-time assistant organiser for NICRA. Many of her CPI comrades—including Betty Sinclair, Barry and Terry Bruton, Jimmy and Edwina Stewart, Joe Deighan, Andy Barr, Lynda Walker, Margaret Bruton, Noel Harris, Joe Bowers, and many others—also played a significant role in the organisation.