LOST IN THE ECHO:

The People’s Democracy, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement, and How Violence Emerges from Nonviolent Objectives

Andrew P. Ohl

Undergraduate, Kent State University

Individual Honors Work 30096

December 2015
LOST IN THE ECHO:
The People’s Democracy, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement, and How Violence Emerges from Nonviolent Objectives

Introduction

“There was new violence today in Northern Ireland after weekend riots left more than eighty persons injured,” was the report that came from Walter Cronkite and CBS News in the United States on 5th October 1968. Cronkite continued, “The violence stems from complaints by Roman Catholics of alleged discrimination by the area’s Protestant-run government,” (BBC, “The Day the Troubles Began,” 2008). As protests against governments erupted across the globe in 1968, the protest movement in Northern Ireland had also emerged. On this day in October, about four hundred Catholic demonstrators took to the streets in the city of Derry to advocate for civil rights they had long-believed were denied to them since Northern Ireland’s founding as a province of the United Kingdom in the 1920s (McCann, War and an Irish Town, 1993; BBC, 2008). While marching in Derry, demonstrators ran into members of Northern Ireland’s police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Both sides engaged one another in a massive melee that was caught on television; the RUC ensued to use batons and water cannons to break-up and end the demonstration. Activists across Northern Ireland including Bernadette Devlin and Eamonn McCann were involved as well as numerous MPs from both Westminster and Stormont, the parliament in Northern Ireland. Westminster MP Gerry Fitt himself was bludgeoned by police. Still drenched in blood following the brawl, his remarks to the media immediately afterward were as foreboding as they were determined: “These stitches will not deter me from carrying on the fight which I have undertaken on behalf of the ordinary people of this country,” (BBC, 2008). Shocked and galvanized by the events on 5th October, the Catholic population throughout Northern Ireland rallied around the demands being put forth by civil rights organizations. These demands included protection of free speech, the right to assembly for both Catholics and Protestants, equal administration of justice for both Catholics and Protestants, fair

Just four days after the Derry march, a new organization calling itself the People’s Democracy was created. Originally founded at Queen’s University Belfast (QUB) and consisting mostly of university students, graduates, and faculty, the People’s Democracy or PD mostly reiterated the civil rights goals of other organizations as its own founding objectives (Arthur, People’s Democracy 1968-1973, 1974). The PD began its existence by using such tactics as marches, sit-ins, and other public demonstrations to agitate for civil rights demands already being made by other groups. However, the PD soon became more aggressive in its actions and tactics, as the cycle between its ideology-and-strategy and the societal reaction to the PD accelerated. By the end of 1969, the PD had morphed into an overtly Marxist organization whose expressed goals included the creation of a united, Irish Socialist Republic and the overthrow of the governments of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. By the 1970s, the protests and demonstrations that made up the civil rights movement had shifted into armed conflict between Protestant and Catholic communities, a conflict known simply today as “The Troubles.” The Troubles would last until the end of the 1990s and became the longest sustained military campaign in the history of the British Army.

The bold social and political demands of the People’s Democracy during the critical years 1968-1969 created a cyclical relationship between the PD’s evolving ideology-and-strategy and the increased conflict between it and other actors in Northern Ireland during this period. Both the PD and those who acted against the PD, namely Protestant counter-demonstrators and Protestant politicians within the Northern Ireland government, allowed suspicion of “the other” to become an inherent element that informed their objectives and the methods by which to achieve them. The PD and Protestant reactionaries stoked one another’s fears at different junctions, leading to the original goals and idealism of the civil rights movement becoming lost in the shroud of indiscriminate and uncontrolled violence. In attempting
to understand how it was possible for a nonviolent, non-armed civil rights movement to transform into a three-decades-long armed insurgent conflict, this paper seeks to demonstrate the existence of this cyclical relationship between the PD and greater population of Northern Ireland and how this relationship impacted the trajectory of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement. This paper seeks to uncover the implications arising out of the transition between the Northern Ireland civil rights movement and the Troubles as well as the conclusions drawn and applications to be made to other civil rights and social movements elsewhere.

**Historiography**

The overall literature on Northern Ireland tends to be robust when it comes to specifically examining the Troubles, but the scholarship on the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland and the years preceding it tend not to be as voluminous. This trend in part has to do with issues of chronological clarity regarding the events of Northern Ireland. The end of the Troubles is generally regarded as the creation of the Good Friday Agreements in 1998; as for the beginning, no such reliable placeholder exists. Depending on the scholar one reads, the Troubles may begin in 1969 after riots in Derry known as the Battle of the Bogside. Others would contend that the Troubles begin with the 5th October 1968 demonstration in Derry—indeed, the title of at least one documentary, BBC’s “The Day the Troubles Began,” makes this claim. Still others might contend that the Troubles do not begin in earnest until the 1970s.

This chronological muddle can be explained in large part by the rapid increase in violence that immediately occurred as a result of the demonstrations and marches spawned by the civil rights movement. The civil rights movement, as well as the violence that would eventually become the Troubles, coexisted with one another. Thus it could be argued that it is a fruitless endeavor and beside the point to try and delineate between the civil rights movement and the Troubles. Be that as it may, one of the consequences of this intertwining between two nominally different sets of events is that the
scholarship on the Troubles appears to have in part subsumed the scholarship on the civil rights movement.

It should be stated here that another purpose of this paper, along with the purposes aforementioned, is to not only provide analysis on the emergence of the Troubles but also to shed new light on the civil rights movement preceding it and to give the civil rights movement greater emphasis in the interconnection that exists between the movement and the Troubles. In attempting to glean knowledge from Northern Ireland, is crucial to know that the Troubles emerged not out of a vacuum, but out of a series of demands made by Catholics in the country which in turn elicited visceral reactions from Protestants. The result of this tension ended up being the Troubles, but alternative paths existed. Somewhere in between keeping the status quo of Northern Ireland politics and indefinite conflict lay another outcome: A more ideal society forged not out of sustained violence but through nonviolent direct action.

Within the literature that currently exists on the People’s Democracy and the Northern Ireland civil rights movement as a whole, two definitive works stand out: People’s Democracy 1968-1973 by Paul Arthur and Politics in the Streets by the late Bob Purdie. The former focuses exclusively on the People’s Democracy within the titular time frame while the latter focuses on the evolution of the civil rights movement as a whole. Published in 1974 and written by a former member of the PD, People’s Democracy provides an intimate account of the organization from its founding in 1968 into the 1970s and tracks its transformation from a student-based civil rights group to a full-fledged Marxist-socialist body. Arthur also details the dynamics and personality clashes between the PD’s leaders and in part offers a critique on the intransigence of the group’s ideology. Written in 1990 by a radical activist and former member of the International Marxist Group (IMG) who later made the turn to scholar and earned is Ph. D. in History, Politics in the Streets by Bob Purdie currently stands as the definitive work on the Northern Ireland civil rights movement. Politics in the Streets explains the emergence of the civil rights movement through analyzing the roles played by different groups, including the government of Northern Ireland, the
Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), the conglomerate of activist groups from the city of Derry, and an entire chapter dedicated to the People’s Democracy. Both books pay much attention to the left-wing ideology of the PD and in particular its leaders. Although the radical orientation of the organization is a fundamental part of its history and will play a role in this paper, the PD’s ultimate arrival at Marxism-socialism will not serve as the main focus of this paper per se. Instead, the PD’s path to Marxism-socialism will be discussed with regards to the PD’s role within the civil rights movement and not necessarily apart from this context. A major role that Purdie’s and Arthur’s works will play in this analysis is, among other things, the chronology of events both authors provide in their respective books.

More recent analyses on Northern Ireland and on the civil rights movement include Ireland: The Politics of Enmity by Paul Bew and Northern Ireland’s ‘68 by Simon Prince. Northern Ireland’s ‘68, like Politics in the Streets, takes a similar actor-by-actor approach to analyzing the country of Northern Ireland in the late 1960s. Paul Bew’s Ireland provides an over-arching history of the land dating back to the 18th Century and includes relevant chapters on Northern Ireland since the 1920s.

Other works on the topics at hand include those done by Landon Hancock, Gianluca De Fazio, and John Lynch. Hancock’s works, including but not limited to “Northern Ireland: Troubles Brewing” (1998), “We Shall Not Overcome, Divided Identity and the Failure of NICRA 1968” (2014), and “Narratives of Identity in the Northern Irish Troubles” (2014) look at the role identity politics has played in the conflicts of Northern Ireland. Gianluca De Fazio’s recent comparative study, “Legal Opportunity Structure and Social Movement Strategy in Northern Ireland and Southern United States” (2012), looks at how the judicial culture and legal precedents in both Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom limited the opportunities of civil rights and activist groups in Northern Ireland to affect change through legal means. Lastly, “Turbulent Times: Bloody Sunday and the Civil Rights Movement” (2007) by John Lynch looks at the discursive practices that characterized both civil rights demonstrators and law enforcement authorities at the time of Bloody Sunday, widely regarded as the de facto end of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland. Collectively, the works by Bew, Prince, Hancock and the rest will serve to provide
insight into the ways in which the broad trend of action-and-counter-action between Catholics and Protestants helped create the downward spiral of violence in Northern Ireland, a trend that is exemplified by the PD and a trend which the group played a significant role in.

A lack of emphasis on the People’s Democracy appears to exist within the Northern Ireland literature. This research in part seeks to remedy this gap and add to the scholarship on the PD, a group that deserves focus given the significant role it played in a number of Northern Ireland’s most important events during the civil rights movement. The emphasis that scholars have put on religion and identity politics in explaining Northern Ireland politics and conflict is vital but also paints an incomplete picture. It is important to study not just the different characteristics in identity between groups in Northern Ireland and how these traits created social barriers, but also to observe how these different identities became manifested and were applied by those who “wore” these identities. This research seeks to uncover in greater detail this application of identities as manifested by the PD through its ideology-and-strategy and by the Protestant backlash to the group’s actions.

A Note Regarding Terminology

Within the discourse of Northern Ireland, there are a number of terms which can too easily get mixed up. Therefore, the following is established regarding terminology in this paper. The Northern Ireland civil rights movement will be hereafter referred simply as the civil rights movement unless making explicit reference to civil rights movements elsewhere. As will be discussed later in this paper, the dominant political party of Northern Ireland circa 1968 was the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the political party of the Protestants that controlled all levels of Northern Ireland government. The UUP will be referred to either as the “Unionist Party,” “Unionist government,” or simply “Unionism” for shorthand. References to Parliament, as a rule, will be meant as reference to the Northern Ireland Parliament at Stormont (stationed in Belfast); references to Westminster Parliament will be explicitly noted as such. In addition, with a number of sources both originating from and relating to Northern Ireland there is an
interchanging between the terms “Northern Ireland” and “Ulster.” Unless using Ulster as part of a quotation or reference to other sources, Northern Ireland will be used as the term of choice. More broadly speaking, Northern Ireland will be interchangeably regarded as a “U.K. province” or simply a “country.” The city of Derry, while also referred to as “Londonderry,” will be referred to as Derry in this paper unless in reference to other sources. Lastly, any reference to “republicans” is a reference to those Catholics either in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland who assert that all of Ireland should exist as a unified state. Likewise, any reference to “loyalists” is a reference to those Protestants who believe that Northern Ireland ought to remain part of the British crown and must be actively defended against any (see: Catholic) threats to this allegiance.

**Prelude to the People’s Democracy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Area Authority</th>
<th>Population Census 1961</th>
<th>Council Representation by 1968</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Armagh U.D.C.</td>
<td>5,881 Catholic; 4,181 Total Others</td>
<td>8 Non-Unionists, 12 Unionists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dungannon U.D.C.</td>
<td>3,276 Catholic; 3,235 Total Others</td>
<td>7 Non-Unionists, 14 Unionists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Londonderry Co. Borough</td>
<td>36,073 Catholic; 17,689 Total Others</td>
<td>8 Non-Unionists, 12 Unionists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newry U.D.C.</td>
<td>10,414 Catholic; 2,015 Total Others</td>
<td>12 Non-Unionists, 6 Unionists</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from the Cameron Report, formally *Disturbances in Northern Ireland: Report of the Commission appointed by the Governor of Northern Ireland*, published September 1969)

Following riots and unrest throughout the country in the opening months of 1969, the Northern Ireland government set up a commission to explain both the causes of the unrests as well as attempt to establish who, if anyone, owned primary responsibility for the unrest. The Cameron Commission, or Cameron Report as it’s otherwise known as, provided in significant detail its own explanation for the
reasons and consequences of the conflicts that had rose to the surface of Northern Ireland society. Among many other things discovered by the Report, it named Catholic resentment against the Protestant-controlled government as one of the long-term causes of the riots.

Within the above statistics provided by the Cameron Report lay one of the longstanding grievances of Catholics against the Northern Ireland government: Gerrymandering and unfair representation in government. Taken from a more comprehensive list from the Report, the numbers supplied here illuminate the division between Catholics and Protestants and their representation within local government authorities. The “Population Census 1961” column describes the number of both Catholics and “total others” in each town; for the purposes of this paper, “total others” can be assumed to mean Protestants. The “Council Representation” column describes the division of representation in local government authorities between Catholics and Protestants. This division of representation is expressed in terms of “Non-Unionist” (i.e. Catholic) and “Unionist” (i.e. Protestant). What is revealed is that the Catholic populations of towns across Northern Ireland were given less representation than their numbers would have otherwise suggested. Despite owning an approximate 3:2 population majority over Protestants in the town of Armagh, it was Protestants that received a 3:2 majority in the local government council. Despite the population being evenly split between Catholics and Protestants in one area of Dungannon, Protestants received a 2:1 majority in local government representation. The city of Derry was the most infamous example: Despite being home to over thirty-six thousand Catholics based on the 1961 census and despite these Catholics outnumbering Protestants 2:1 in the city, it was Protestants that retained a 3:2 majority representation in the local government council. Even in Newry, where the Catholic/Protestant ratio stood at over 5:1, the Catholic representation there was whittled down to a 2:1 majority. These case studies are representative examples of how Catholic interests were undermined through government representation, or lack thereof.

Discrimination in government representation was only the tip of the iceberg. It was the local governments that controlled the allocation of housing throughout Northern Ireland. Therefore the
Unionist-controlled local councils and housing authorities had the incentive to build fewer new houses for Catholic families than Protestant ones. The situation was often dire for Catholics: Either they were forced to live in cramped conditions with multiple families being forced to live under the same roof, or they would become homeless altogether. Catholics felt maltreated and marginalized by a myriad of other facets of Northern Ireland government and law. Business owners could give other people the right to vote on their behalf in what amounted to being able to vote multiple times in one election. This disproportionately affected Catholics, who compared to Protestants in Northern Ireland typically occupied the lower economic classes of society. Catholics were also culturally dominated, as seen with the Flags and Emblems Act of 1954, which outlawed the flying of “provocative” symbols such as the Irish tricolor. As the act states in reference to offenders: “[Any police officer] may require the person displaying or responsible for the display of such emblem[s] to discontinue such display or cause it to be discontinued,” (Government of Northern Ireland, Flags and Emblems (Display) Act (Northern Ireland), 1954, 6th April 1954). There was also the infamous Special Powers Act of 1922, which stated, “The civil authority shall have power … to take all such steps and issue all such orders as may be necessary for preserving the peace and maintaining order….” (Government of Northern Ireland, Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act (Northern Ireland), 1922). Through the years this was widely believed by Catholics to be a means by which the Unionist government justified its repression of Catholics and their right to free speech and assembly. It was underneath this over-arching structure of Unionist-Protestant control of Northern Ireland society that a civil rights movement began to emerge by the early 1960s and especially by 1968.

The year 1962 marked the end of the aborted Irish Republican Army (IRA) border campaign which began in 1956 and aimed to dissolve the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Ever since the partition of Ireland, republican groups had always been agitating to reunite the island; armed conflict was a fan-favorite method, so to speak, amongst republicans to accomplish this aim. In one sense, this campaign was merely the latest in a string of (failed) republican efforts to achieve a united Ireland. However, the extent to which the campaign failed is worthy of note. The border
campaign was a low-intensity affair to say the least, which by 1959 “had become little more than a series of isolated attacks on individual policemen” (Purdie, Politics in the Streets, 1990). This agitation against authorities with mostly fruitless results had the effect of displeasing Catholics since it only served to welcome blowback from Protestants and strengthen the Unionist government without achieving any gains (NICRA, 1978). Thus, the end result amongst republicans was the realization that popular support did not exist for an armed overthrow of the Northern Ireland government. Republicans would have to find other means to generate popular support to achieve their goals.

Soon after the end of the border campaign, a new Prime Minister, Captain Terence O’Neill, had emerged as the new Prime Minister for Northern Ireland. Taking the helm in March 1963, O’Neill’s visions for Northern Ireland included such objectives as a modernization of the country’s economy and taking an ecumenical approach to Catholic-Protestant relations, making attempts reconcile divisions between communities (Purdie, 14). While by no means a progressive—O’Neill was a Unionist just like every Prime Minister before him in the history of Northern Ireland—the introduction of O’Neill appeared to provide a new avenue, other than armed conflict, by which Catholics and republicans could work to improve their conditions within the province.

Meanwhile, republicans were drawing up new plans for their goals moving forward. Among the new strategies formulated was the need for a combination of armed struggle and political agitation through nonviolent means to achieve their objective of a reunited Ireland; republicans came to the conclusion that other Catholics needed to see a more explicit connection between armed struggle and improving the Catholic condition both north and south of the border (Purdie, 126). The creation of a social movement was one way for republicans to communicate that connection to others, although republicans’ articulation of this dual-strategy of armed struggle and nonviolent action did remain ambiguous (Purdie, 124). In 1964, republicans created the Wolfe Tone societies, founded to commemorate the 18th Century Irish revolutionary Wolfe Tone (Purdie, 123). By 1966 the Wolfe Tone societies had held meetings regarding the formation of a civil rights organization. 1967 marked the
culmination of these meetings and efforts made by the societies and others, as the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was created.

The NICRA was comprised of a thirteen-member executive; twelve of its original thirteen executives were Catholic. (Hancock, “We Shall Not Overcome”, 2014; NICRA, 1978). The motivation for republicans and the Wolfe Tone societies for helping to create the NICRA was to use the organization as an intermediate objective in which there would be a phase in Northern Ireland society where, because of the momentous changes brought about by a civil rights movement, the society of Northern Ireland would be much more conducive and ready for the ultimate overthrow of the Unionist government and reunification of Ireland (Purdie, 129-130). Despite it being created as a result of republican efforts, and despite the desires republicans had toward the NICRA to help achieve their own goals, the NICRA acted independently. The NICRA remained focused on “the maintenance of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, propaganda and assembly,” not the overthrow of the society which they were attempting to change for the better (NICRA, *Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association Constitution and Rules*, 1967). The NICRA was interested in universal civil rights for the people of Northern Ireland, though the fight for civil rights in practice would predominantly concern Catholics and their grievances of discrimination. The NICRA would become the preeminent civil rights group in Northern Ireland and its stated goals of free speech and assembly would come to define the objectives of the civil rights movement as a whole moving forward.

Elsewhere, other groups agitating for the betterment of Northern Ireland society began to coalesce. In 1967 the Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC), later to become the Derry Citizens Action Committee (DCAC), was formed out of a failed attempt to create an NICRA branch in Derry (Hancock, “We Shall Not Overcome”, 5; Purdie, 180). The Campaign for Social Justice (CSJ), founded by Conn and Patricia McCluskey in 1964, began to address cases of discrimination in employment and housing, two issues which disproportionately affected Catholics (De Fazio, *Legal Opportunity Structure*, 2012). In contrast to other civil rights and activist groups at this time in Northern Ireland, the CSJ took a
legal approach to addressing grievances and attempted to work through the Northern Ireland judiciary. However, due to the “intrinsically conservative” culture of both the Northern Ireland and United Kingdom judiciary, combined with the fact that individual rights were not explicitly enumerated within U.K. law, legal means to affect change were effectively sealed off in the short-term (De Fazio, 10-14). As a result, those seeking to secure civil rights without resorting to violence had one major option remaining on the table: Nonviolent direct action as a means to appeal to the legislature and executive of Northern Ireland.

The NICRA made full utilization of direct action tactics with the 5th October 1968 march in Derry; the NICRA was the primary organization in charge of the march. The outrage amongst Catholics in response to police action on 5th October spawned another demonstration, this time in Belfast, just four days later on 9th October. Approximately 3,000 demonstrator, mostly university students, showed up and planned to march to City Hall in Belfast to express their demands, only to be confronted not only by the police but also by “Paisleyites,” followers of the charismatic, controversial, and most well-known Protestant preacher in Northern Ireland, the Rev. Ian Paisley—Paisley himself was in attendance for the showdown (Arthur, 29-30; Purdie, 206). The Paisleyites had arrived before the student demonstrators to block their proposed route, and the police were forced to stand in between the two groups in order to avoid bloodshed. Ultimately, the march passed off peacefully but without being able to reach City Hall. Deeply embarrassed over being stopped short by the police and the Paisleyites, many students marched back to QUB for a meeting which lasted through the night. As Arthur points out, “It was clear to all of those who had been involved in the sit-down that they had to overcome the frustration of not reaching their destination,” (Arthur, 30). As a result of this meeting and of the students’ desire to push back against their own sense of submission to other authorities, a new student organization was created. The organization was formed spontaneously by the students at QUB that night, and was born as a “militant, democratic group working within the civil rights movement,” (Arthur, 30; Purdie, 207). It was the People’s Democracy.
Michael Farrell listened intently to reporter Barry Linnane on this day, 3rd January 1969, as Linnane questioned the wisdom of the march that the People’s Democracy was now undertaking. When asked about the route of the march, which had the PD passing through towns that so far had elicited confrontations with those who opposed the group, Farrell responded in due manner. “Well, A, we chose the most direct route to the city of Derry [the march’s final destination], and B, we didn’t think that the reaction was necessarily predictable because when we’re protesting just about injustices, not supporting any particular party, we feel that the only people who can be offended by such a protest are those who actually uphold the injustices,” (RTE News, “Student Civil Rights Organiser Interviewed, 1969). Farrell, one of the PD’s leaders and the group’s primary spokesperson, was now in the middle of a civil rights march that was designed to move from Belfast to Derry at a time when other civil rights organizations had agreed to temporarily stop their own demonstrations in the face of apparent reforms coming from the government. Farrell and the rest of the PD were not so easily convinced that change was coming. Now, they stood on their march between Belfast and Derry, waiting to see if the decision to demonstrate would pay off.

The People’s Democracy had come a long way from their creation as an organization just several months prior. What began as a spontaneous student movement had now morphed into an organization that was motivated by transformative goals for the people of Northern Ireland. By February 1969, the PD was declaring its demands for workers’ control in state-owned factories and crash housebuilding programs (PD, *Manifesto of the People’s Democracy February 1969*, 1969). Later in the year, the PD would formally articulate its end goal of an Irish Socialist Republic that would dissolve the Irish border (Farrell, *The Struggle in the North*, 1969). The existence of the PD and its eventual turn to socialism, however, would not have been possible without the existence of a supportive, radical student population at the PD’s original “home,” Queen’s University Belfast (QUB).
Student activism at QUB going into the 1960s was lackluster at best. One of the founding members of the PD, Bernadette Devlin, openly admitted to the situation. Writing in her memoir, *The Price of My Soul*, published by the end of 1969, Devlin wrote, “Politics for me meant debate, not action, when I joined Queen’s University Belfast,” (Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 1969). It was clear to Devlin that the university was not fit for serious political action upon her arrival; debates on campus were marred by a lack of seriousness and QUB “was basically a nine-to-six university. None of us was the kind of independent, twenty-four-hours-a-day student that you get at colleges in England … You were a student during the day, but your mother asked you where you were going at eight o’clock at night,” (Devlin, 77-80).

Despite this lack of political vigor at QUB, the groundwork for a radical student population was inadvertently laid by Northern Ireland’s Minister of Home Affairs, William Craig. On 8th March 1967, one day after Craig had announced a ban on Fenian Rising commemorations, a Republican Club was set up at QUB. Craig responded in May 1967, declaring that “’it would not only be unwise, but illegal, for clubs, even though constitutional in character, to adopt the title Republican Clubs…”’ (Purdie, 202-03). This is a strange statement since it implied that the organization title, not the organization itself, was the problem. Given the nature of the situation, this logic seems disingenuous. Craig’s peculiar logic notwithstanding, he actually held a meeting at Stormont with representatives from the Club and QUB in November 1967 which Craig stated, in bizarre fashion, that the Club need only change its name to “Republican Society” or “Republican Association” in order for it to retain its legality (Purdie, 204). Probably seeing through Craig’s insincerity, the Club rejected this advice. Meanwhile, a group called the Joint Action Committee Against Suppression of Civil Liberties organized a march to protest Craig’s antagonism of the Club, as well as QUB’s Academic Council refusing to formally approve the Club earlier in the month (Arthur, 26). On 15th November the march took place with about 1,500 to 2,000 marchers arriving at Craig’s house and handed in a protest against the Republican Clubs ban (Arthur, 26). A major consequence of the fight between Craig and the QUB students was increased awareness amongst
the broader student population the university about civil liberties; the ban by Craig “had the effect of stirring up student opposition to the Unionist administration,” (Purdie, 205; Wallace, Drums and Guns: Revolution in Ulster, 1970). The march on Craig’s house in particular demonstrated the point that the university’s students were ready to act “once their sense of justice was injured,” (Arthur, 27).

This newly-awoken student population would form the People’s Democracy nearly a year later. During the meeting at QUB following the 9th October 1968 march in Belfast, students at the meeting created what was known as the Faceless Committee; the original members of the Faceless Committee included Bernadette Devlin, Patricia Drinan, Ann McBurney, Ian Goodall, Michael O’Kane, Eddie McCameley, Joe Martin, Fergus Woods, Kevin Boyle, and Malcolm Myle (Purdie, 207; Arthur, 31). This body served as the executive of the PD whose sole purpose was to carry out and not interfere with the preferences of the membership (Purdie, 207). The most notable members of the original Faceless Committee included Devlin and Kevin Boyle. The other major leaders that would emerge in the months ahead for the PD included Michael Farrell, Cyril Toman, and Eamonn McCann. Together, these leaders would define the course of the organization and its place in the civil rights movement.

Bernadette Devlin was an undergraduate at QUB in October 1968 and held a particular disdain for the role that sectarianism played in the everyday lives of people throughout Ireland, north and south. What separated her from others with a Catholic background Northern Ireland was her contempt for the Catholic Church. As she writes in her memoir:

“‘Good Catholic and ‘practicing Catholic’ are terms I hate: as far as I am concerned they are labels suggesting how good a hypocrite you are, how well you go through the ritual. You are an exemplary Catholic if you go to Mass every day and tear your neighbors asunder on the way home from church, but the really charitable people who don’t go to Mass on Sundays are heathen, and you are quite entitled to look down your pious nose and at them and say, ‘Disgrace to their country!’”’ (Devlin, 74).

Kevin Boyle was a lecturer of law at the university when he joined the PD (Arthur, 31). Unlike many of the members and students in the PD, “he had not shared [other members’] interest in left-wing politics … a little against his better judgment, [he got] himself elected on to the Faceless Committee,” (Purdie, 233-
34). Devlin and Boyle served as moderating influences on the PD’s more radical leaders such as Michael Farrell and Cyril Toman. It was Farrell and Toman who pushed hard for the creation and implementation of the Belfast-to-Derry march, mentioned above, at the beginning of the New Year 1969. Farrell in particular emerged to become the organization’s ideological leader and propagandist. Perhaps more than any other person, Farrell was responsible for driving the PD to its final Marxist-socialist destination by the end of 1969.

As for Eamonn McCann, he held an interesting place in the PD leadership. McCann was never a full-fledged member of the PD; his energies were concentrated on the organizations specifically stationed in Derry such as DHAC/DCAC and served as a leader in the Derry branch of the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP). However, McCann was instrumental in getting other organizations such as the PD to conduct events in Derry. As Arthur puts it, “it would be more correct to speak of the ‘PD-McCann axis’” than to assume that McCann was primarily a part of the PD first, an activist in Derry second (Arthur, 49). If there was anyone in the PD sphere of influence more radical than Farrell, it was McCann. McCann’s attitude during this time can be neatly summed up in a remark given during one interview: “I make no bones about it, I don’t want just to embarrass Unionism, I want to destroy it,” (BBC, 2008).

When discussing the ideology of the People’s Democracy at the time of its founding, it can be summed up as the following. A number of PD leaders, such as Farrell, had the personal desire of wanting to eventually achieve an Irish Socialist Republic, a goal that would entail the reunification of Ireland and the overthrow of not just the Unionist government in the north but the overthrow of the Republic of Ireland’s government in the south (Farrell, Struggle in the North, 3). The society of this Irish Socialist Republic would be a society defined by the achievement of civil rights across both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It would be defined by economic goals such as the right to housing, workers’ control of state-owned factories, and the break-up of large estates and the redistribution of land. Lastly, this new society would be defined by a transformation in education policy and making education the responsibility of a central government (PD, Manifesto, 1969). Although these were the desires and
ultimate wishes of many PD leaders, they were not formally expressed as goals of the PD as an organization until later declarations such as the PD Manifesto of February 1969 and the writings and interviews from Farrell, McCann, and others. During October 1968 and the founding days of the PD, its original policy can be traced back to a leaflet that was written immediately following the 9th October meeting. It included the following six demands…

1. One man, one vote
2. Fair boundaries [for electoral districts]
3. Housed on Need
4. Jobs on Merit
5. Free Speech

What can be seen from these six objectives is a combination of the economic goals desired by the PD and the civil rights groups in Derry that McCann was involved with, along with the civil rights goals of universal suffrage and free speech emphasized by the NICRA. What is not mentioned in those six demands are any reference to a government overthrow or revolution. This is in line with the overall strategy of the PD from October 1968 to at least February 1969 to not explicitly iterate the goal of an Irish Socialist Republic in its official policy. The PD at this time was operating within the civil rights movement but had other objectives in mind beyond civil rights. However, the PD would not have wanted to overtly express these “post-civil rights” ideas that would have greatly hindered the movement due to such ideas being too extreme for moderates to come around to and accept. For the sake of achieving civil rights if nothing else, it was not in the PD’s interest to disclose its grander designs at this stage in the civil rights movement and its formation as a group. The following statement from Eamonn McCann’s personal accounts of Northern Ireland, originally written in 1974, captures the dynamic of the civil rights movement by October 1968 well:

“Revolutionaries and reformers can unite only when the revolutionary agrees, temporarily at least, to suspend those items in his programme with which the reformer disagrees. There is no reciprocation. The revolutionary will agree with the reformer’s demands; his basic objection will be that they do not go far enough,” (McCann, War and an Irish Town, 103-04).
Whatever objections the PD, and in particular the likes of McCann and Farrell, may have had about other groups and their “mere” reformism, they were united for the time being with the NICRA, DCAC, CSJ, and others in the struggle for civil rights for all in Northern Ireland. But while the other groups were perhaps willing to be more patient in their struggle, given that their goal was reform and not revolution, the People’s Democracy would begin pushing the envelope of how much pressure the civil rights movement could put on the rest of Northern Ireland before the movement itself fell apart. As it turned out, the PD would end up testing not just the limits of the civil rights movement, but the limits of Northern Ireland’s very existence as a country.

People’s Democracy: Activities and Events 1968-1969

In his own work, Paul Arthur provides a reliable series of time frames by which to analyze the PD: October 1968 to February 1969, March 1969 to September 1969, and October 1969 to October 1970 (and beyond). This section of the research will use a similar chronological approach to analyzing the PD’s actions.

October 1968

The first official decision taken by the PD and its Faceless Committee was the declaration of another demonstration shortly after the one that had taken place on 9th October. The PD settled on the date 16th October as its next demonstration. That day, approximately 2,000 students marched to City Hall in Belfast. Unlike the 9th October march, the students made it to their destination. Like the 9th October march, the students were again confronted by Paisleyites, and once again, the march passed off peacefully despite being heckled by the Paisleyites (Arthur, 32; Purdie, 207). Thus, a trend was established: When the PD showed up to demonstrate or take any other likewise action, they could expect a counter-response.

Not everyone believed that the PD should even be conducting marches in the first place, given their potential to precipitate violence under the wrong circumstances. The president of the Students’ Union at QUB, Ian Brick, discouraged further use of marches by the PD; the vice-chancellor of QUB
wrote to Kevin Boyle stating more of the same (Purdie, 207-08). However, many members of the PD in the beginning seemed not to be too concerned. Simon Prince reports, “For the overwhelming majority of students who took part in the protests, the movement was not a way into radical politics but a way of enjoying themselves,” (Prince, Northern Ireland’s ’68, 2007). Kevin Boyle himself further recalled, “‘A lot of it was just fun,’” (Prince, 202). Unfortunately for the PD’s student members as well as the PD’s radical leaders, intentions mattered not to those who showed up to confront them. While individual PD members may have been motivated by either a sincere desire to end discrimination or were simply engaging in an exciting social activity, Protestant reactionaries were not quite as nuanced in interpreting the actions of the PD and the civil rights movement as a whole. The vast majority of backlash against the PD and the civil rights movement came from Ian Paisley and his “Paisleyite” followers, as well as extremist elements in the Unionist government such as Home Affairs Minister William Craig (Hancock, Narratives of Identity in the Northern Irish Troubles, 2014). Extremists such as the Paisleyites, Craig, and others identified the civil rights demonstrators, and by extension the many Catholics taking part in the movement, as inherently hostile to the interests of Protestants. The Unionist Brain Faulkner accused the civil rights movement as simply the most recent republican plot to destroy Northern Ireland (Hancock, Narratives of Identity, 452). These beliefs manifested themselves in the form of counter-demonstrations as a means to stop what they believed were existential threats. This would help begin the cycle of action-counteraction between Protestant reactionaries and the PD in particular. The initial excitement of the organization quickly turned more serious.

The next PD event after the 16th October march was a protest at Stormont on 24th October, which was Human Rights Day as declared by the United Nations. The PD protesters occupied the gallery first and then the central lobby for several hours. While sitting-in, they were even awarded a discussion with the Minister of Education, William Long (Arthur, 33; Purdie, 210). On 28th October, Prime Minister O’Neill was greeted by a modest picket during the opening of an exhibition at the Arts Council Gallery (Arthur, 34; Purdie, 210). Although these events went off well, they soon felt compelled to increase their
aggressiveness in the wake of increased resistance to their activities. The PD would not have to wait long for the opportunity to become more ambitious.

November-December 1968

On 4th November, yet another march to City Hall in Belfast was planned and yet again Paisleyites had showed up to block them. The police had insisted a re-route away from City Hall in order to avoid a confrontation. This time, however, the PD marchers had enough of it: While about 300 demonstrators had a stand-off with the police, some of them slipped in behind police lines. Scuffles broke out and several demonstrators were arrested (Arthur, 34; Prince, 203; Purdie, 210-11). Immediately after the incident, the student newspaper at QUB rushed out headlines and reports of demonstrators recalling brutality by the police; according to the reports, some people were grabbed by the throat, thrown against police cars, and spat on (Prince, 204). Going into the new month, this incident served as the latest round of increased disgust with the PD and their creating disorder on the Protestants’ end, and increased animosity against both counter-demonstrators and the government authorities from the PD’s end.

Meanwhile, away from the PD, one could feel the beginning of large tremors reverberating through Northern Ireland society. The DCAC held one of the largest civil rights demonstrations to date on 16th November with over 15,000 in attendance in Derry; a small contingent of about 120 PD members were also in attendance, (Arthur, 35). Less than a week later, a major breakthrough surfaced: Prime Minister O’Neill and the rest of the Unionist government approved a five-point reform package on 21st November. These points of reform included a new system for the allocation of housing and in particular housing reform in Derry, the appointment of an ombudsman to respond to complaints against the government, the abolition of the Special Powers Act when deemed appropriate, and the abolition of the “company vote” which up to then had permitted business owners to cast multiple votes in an election (Prince, 185). Another breakthrough just less than a week after that came to fruition. On 28th November, the Electoral Law Act of 1968 became law, thereby eliminating the company vote from the Northern
Ireland electoral process (Government of Northern Ireland, *Electoral Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1968*, 1968). Despite these leaps in accomplishment by the civil rights movement, manifested in these actions from the government, more ominous developments loomed.

On 30th November, the NICRA conducted a demonstration in Armagh. Although this was primarily an NICRA event, the PD maintained a presence in the form of Michael Farrell being one of the event’s main speakers (Arthur, 35). As usual, Paisleyites showed up to try and block and harass the demonstrators. This time, though, the Paisleyites showed up armed with cudgels and sticks and prevented the march from taking its intended route (Purdie, 212). In an interview shortly after this latest episode, Ian Paisley stated, “Romanism, when she is in the majority, would deny the Protestants the liberties that they should have. Protestantism is prepared to give liberty to all,” (RTE News, interview with Ian Paisley, December 1968). Implied within this type of statement is a dual, zero-sum/positive-sum line of thinking. According to Paisley, Catholicism (or “Romanism” as he refers to it) must keep others down in order to maintain itself. Conveniently for Paisley’s own view, Protestantism on the other hand is ready to give freedom to all people “within, of course, the law,” (RTE News, interview with Ian Paisley, December 1968). What can be drawn from Paisley’s statements is a belief that religion is also inherently political. According to Paisley’s statements, Catholics are predisposed to view democracy and rule of law with less regard compared to Protestants. Therefore, Northern Ireland and its government must remain inherently Protestant in its activities in order to protect democracy. As for Catholics, they must assimilate to this reality or be met with force, as demonstrated by the Paisleyites arming themselves at the Armagh demonstration.

This new escalation in the tension between the civil rights movement and the Protestant counter-demonstrators prompted Prime Minister O’Neill to make a television address on 9th December. Known as the “Crossroads” speech, O’Neill pleaded to the people of Northern Ireland for a return to law and order at a time when he believed the country was on the brink of collapse, and he assured that change for the better was in fact coming. In his speech, he admonished “foolish people” who argued for an abandonment
of reforms, a move which O’Neill promised would leave all of Northern Ireland without a single friend in Westminster Parliament (O’Neill, the “Crossroads” speech, 1968). O’Neill also made a direct appeal to the civil rights demonstrators with the following statement: “I believe that most of you want change, not revolution. Your voice has been heard and clearly heard. Your duty now is to play your part in taking the heat out the situation before the blood is shed,” (O’Neill, 1968).

O’Neill was bolstered by an upsurge in moderate support immediately following the speech (Arthur, 37). Feeling bold, O’Neill then made a change in the employment status of William Craig: O’Neill sacked Craig as the Minister of Home Affairs just two days later on 11th December, thus satisfying one of the most long-standing desires of many civil rights marchers. In response to both the “Crossroads” speech and this sudden sacking of William Craig, many civil rights organizations made the decision to suspend their marches in order to decrease the tension prevailing throughout the country and give the Unionist government the opportunity to pass reforms under more normal and peaceful circumstances. O’Neill became further bolstered by an upsurge in moderate support (Arthur, 37).

The People’s Democracy was not so easily convinced by Prime Minister O’Neill and the Unionist government. On 20th December and in the face of increasing public support for O’Neill, the PD announced it would conduct a march to kick off the New Year 1969 (Purdie, 213). The march would travel the length of the country, moving from Belfast in the East to Derry in the West. Here a major split between the PD and the remainder of the civil rights movement began to take place. The PD believed that a stoppage in demonstrations would not only halt the momentum of the movement indefinitely, it would also amount to an approval of what they believed were O’Neill’s mediocre and weak policies in response to the demands being made (Arthur, 39-40). More fundamentally, the PD was motivated to continue marching by the belief and suspicion that O’Neill’s reforms simply had no power to change anything. For as long as hostile counter-demonstrators such as the Paisleyites showed up to events, the PD felt no reason to believe that O’Neill’s promises could guarantee their safety or ensure greater socio-economic reform.
Bernadette Devlin sums up the PD’s decision to march on New Year’s Day with the following declaration from her memoir: “Our function in marching from Belfast to Derry was to break the truce, to relaunch the civil-rights movement as a mass movement, and to show people that O’Neill was, in fact, offering them nothing.” (Devlin, 134). To put it another way: The PD was deliberately looking, this time, for a reaction from counter-demonstrators to show the rest of Northern Ireland society and the outside world that O’Neill’s promises alone could do nothing and more pressure on the Unionist government, not less, was needed at this critical juncture to fully secure the demands emanating from the movement. The logic went that the Unionist government, in the face of further demonstrations, would be forced to make a choice. Either it would stand up to the Protestant counter-demonstrators and actually protect civil rights marchers, or the insincerity of O’Neill’s reform promises would be exposed and Westminster would be given no choice but to intervene (Prince, 206).

By the end of 1968, the PD had become more serious-minded, more radical, and was increasingly dominated by its leaders. Devlin recalls that the “People’s Democracy, and I along with it, moved gradually and inexorably to the left … The move leftwards had begun by the end of October … We educated ourselves into socialism. Night after night we sat down to four-hour-long meetings to discuss every aspect of every Northern Ireland problem…” (Devlin, 130-31). In relation to the decision to undertake the Belfast-to-Derry march on New Year’s 1969, Michael Farrell and Cyril Toman were instrumental in the decision to have the march take place “at all costs,” (Arthur, 38). This was indicative of the way in which the PD’s leaders took advantage of the organization’s ultra-democratic structure, where anyone professing to be a PD member could call a meeting and make decisions without there being any quorum or other membership-related requirements. At this stage in its development, the PD had no accepted Constitution and as a result decision-making within the organization was very loose (Arthur, 31; Purdie, 207; Cameron Report, paragraph 195). Consequently, the group’s more impassioned and dedicated leaders, like Farrell, Toman, and the rest could simply outlast everyone else who attended a PD meeting and then make decisions once everyone else had either left or was too tired to protest. The PD
and its members had by this point become entrenched with Protestant reactionaries such as the Paisleyites and saw first-hand the level of ill-will such people had towards them. The fun from October was gone, and everyone now knew what the stakes were moving into the New Year. It was time to find out whether or not Prime Minister O’Neill and the Unionist government was actually serious in its promise for reform.

January 1969

A series of instructions were handed out by the PD to those participating in the Belfast-to-Derry march about several days to a week before the march began. Included in this document were the following instructions: “Every marcher will be his own steward. Each individual is therefore asked to act in a responsible manner and to carry out any functions which he deems to be necessary without waiting for someone else to do so,” (PD, instructions for Belfast-to-Derry march, 1968). Also of note were these instructions, included in the same document: “In the event of the march being attacked or faced with a hostile crowd or police cordon marchers are reminded that the P.D. is committed to a policy of non-violence and marchers are asked under these circumstances to conduct themselves with the maximum possible restraint and calmness,” (PD, instructions for Belfast-to-Derry march, 1968).

Based upon these instructions and the remarks by Devlin and others, the PD strategy within the civil rights movement by New Year’s 1969 could be summarized in the following points. The PD believed the best strategy moving forward was to force an ultimatum from government authorities (such as the police) to either protect civil rights demonstrators fully or allow Protestant counter-demonstrators to violently confront the civil rights marchers. In the eyes of the PD, either outcome was a positive one: If the government failed to protect, then the civil rights movement would in a sense be “liberated” and no longer have the need to care about the government’s opinion if they were proven to be impotent. In the event that government authorities actually did protect civil rights marchers, then a major objective would then be automatically achieved: The right to free procession. This can be put in contrast to other organizations such as the NICRA, DCAC, and others which suspended their demonstrations in December.
1968 precisely because they had enough faith in the government that they did not want to risk what goodwill they had with a provocative march.

The PD march began in earnest on New Year’s Day 1969 with approximately forty demonstrators at the start (Purdie, 213). Michael Farrell, McCann, Devlin, Boyle, and Toman were all in attendance for the march. Over the next three days from 1st January to 3rd January the march would travel from Belfast and move through such towns as Antrim and Randallstown. Over the course of the march the PD spent nearly equal time marching as they did being escorted by police and away from counter-demonstrators and trouble spots (Prince, 207). Although such a situation was by no means ideal, it was fitting in with the PD’s goal of wanting to show that O’Neill’s reforms could do nothing about counter-demonstrators and their threats to commit violence. By the same token, the police “unfortunately” were putting in just enough effort to not render the PD’s argument completely valid by consistently trying to steer them away from trouble. Nobody could have foreseen, however, what would happen on the fourth day.

On 4th January 1969, the PD was making its way to its final destination, the city of Derry. The size of the demonstration by this point had swelled from forty to several hundred (McCann, 107). As the PD made its way to Burntollet Bridge, en route to Derry, the RUC began to receive reports that a number of counter-demonstrators were organizing up the road at Burntollet Bridge (Prince, 208; Purdie, 214). Upon hearing this, Michael Farrell addressed the demonstrators. “There is a good possibility that some stones may be thrown, some people may be hurt somewhat. However, the police have said they are quite prepared to get us through this obstacle,” (RTE News, “Civil Rights March Attacked, 4th January 1969). As the marchers began to cross Burntollet Bridge, it became evident that neither the police nor the marchers were ready for what was about to unfold. About two hundred counter-demonstrators, which were well-organized, armed with cudgels, and wearing white armbands to help identify one another, descended upon the march and began attacking the procession (Prince, 208; Purdie, 214). The entire march descended into chaos. Several young girls were chased by some counter-demonstrators into the nearby river and endured a flurry of stones (Prince, 208). Many others were beaten and kicked and
prevented from escaping and seeking shelter (Purdie, 215). Devlin described the scene from her own view.

“As I stood there I could see a great big lump of flatwood, like a plank out of an orange-box, getting nearer and nearer my face, and there were two great nails sticking out of it. By a quick reflex action, my hand reached my face before the wood did, and immediately two nails went into the back of my hand…I rolled up into a ball on the road, tucked my knees in, tucked my elbows in, and covered my face with one hand … About six people were busily involved in trying to beat me into the ground … Finally these men muttered something incoherent about leaving that one, and tore off across the fields after somebody else,” (Devlin, 157-58).

Eamonn McCann had this to say about the attack:

“…a force of hundreds…attacked with nailed clubs, stones, and bicycle chains…Emotion swelled as bloodstained marchers mounted a platform [at Guildhall Square in Derry] and described their experiences. Rioting broke out and continued for some hours,” (McCann, 107).

To everyone who was involved, the events of the day were no less than shocking, and the consequences would be profound. Extremist elements in both Protestant and Catholic communities would become even further polarized by what had transpired (Arthur, 41). Whatever sympathy the civil rights movement had with the Unionist government was completely lost. Prime Minister O’Neill, instead of expressing outrage at the violence of the counter-demonstrators, actually condemned the marchers themselves. In a statement that was released the following day, O’Neill declared, “The march to Londonderry planned by the People’s Democracy was, from the outset, a foolhardy and irresponsible undertaking,” (O’Neill, statement on 5th January 1969, 1969). O’Neill then played the “minority” card as a way to undermine both the civil rights marchers and counter-demonstrators and as a means to win back support for his own policies, which by this point was waning. “We are all sick of marchers and counter-marchers. Unless these warring minorities rapidly return to their senses we will have to consider a further reinforcement of the regular police…” (O’Neill, 1969). Prime Minister O’Neill concluded his statement with these words, “We have heard sufficient for now about civil rights. Let us hear a little about civic responsibility,” (O’Neill, 1969).
As Purdie pointed out, what began to occur was a shift in the dynamic of politics and conflict in Northern Ireland: “...hostility between Protestants and Catholics was being superseded by hostility between the Catholic community and the forces of the state,” (Purdie, 215). The “battlefield” of civil rights which had pitted Catholic protesters against “the establishment” in the form of the Unionist government was beginning to be re-arranged. The objective of civil rights was beginning to become less apparent. A new battlefield on a different plane was beginning to emerge, that of Catholics and the State, with the objective becoming national/community security, depending on one’s viewpoint. This new paradigm shift was exemplified in the emergence of the Free Derry movement. Just two days after the attack at Burntollet, the RUC had to inform Stormont of their withdrawal “from an area of Londonderry, which was being controlled by an organized and armed force,” (Prince, 211). Catholics, now completely and openly distrustful of the police, were now taking matters of policing and law enforcement into their own hands inside their own communities. Simon Prince observes, “The civil rights movement in Derry was starting to assume the form of a Catholic insurrection,” (Prince, 210). Although the “Free Derry” movement would disappear and re-emerge multiple times over the course of the next year and beyond, a new precedent had been set.

*February 1969*

Prime Minister O’Neill called for elections to be held on 24th February. O’Neill was feeling heat all around him: Not only were his reforms derided as weak by the civil rights movement and especially the PD, a large portion of his own Unionist Party thought he had already gone too far in trying to appeal to Catholics and the civil rights demonstrators. O’Neill figured that an election would serve as a way to re-generate his moderate support and fend off the rebellion occurring within his own party.

The People’s Democracy responded to this election by sending out and endorsing its own candidates, as well as writing up its manifesto where it formally declared many of its socialist and economic reform goals for the first time. The PD contested eight seats at Stormont in the election with the
following candidates: E. Wiegleb, Cyril Toman, Michael Farrell, Bowes Egan, M. Carey, P. Cosgrove, Bernadette Devlin, and Fergus Woods (Arthur, 121). Farrell was particularly ambitious in the race he had entered: He stood against none other than Prime Minister O’Neill and Ian Paisley, where both Paisley and Farrell were contesting O’Neill’s district of Bannside (Arthur, 121). In all, none of the PD’s candidates won, but they did make their presence be known. The PD’s candidates received a not-totally-insignificant percentage of the overall vote at 4.23 percent. Prime Minister O’Neill survived his race and thus also held on as Prime Minister, although the numbers showed that his support was waning. While O’Neill received a total 7,745 votes, Paisley and Farrell received 6,331 and 2,310 votes respectively, meaning that O’Neill could only muster a plurality, not a majority, of the votes cast in his district. The closest any PD candidate came to winning a seat at Stormont was Fergus Woods, who came within 220 votes of Nationalist MP Michael Keogh (Arthur, 120-21).

Both the PD Manifesto and other documents it printed at the time show that the group was beginning to move away from the mainstream of the civil rights movement and become more focused on its goals of economic justice. The PD was certainly still emphasizing such goals as free speech and assembly, but was now doing so in the broader context of its final end goal: an Irish Socialist Republic. In a pamphlet entitled “Why PD?” which was published before the 24th February elections, the PD reiterated many of the same goals it included in its manifesto such as “the declaration of housing emergency” for the purposes of a crash-housing program and state investment in industry (PD, “Why PD?,” 1969). This pamphlet also made highlighted the importance of having representation in government “on the basis of [peoples’] real needs,” an oblique reference to the PD’s disdain for sectarianism and religion as a major role in everyday politics (PD, “Why PD?,” 1969). For everyone else trying to win civil rights through reform and not revolution, the PD’s move to the Left and further into socialism could not have been met with any fanfare. Now that the PD’s more radical goals were out in the open, it could only serve to further discredit the rest of the movement and justify the ideology of the Paisleyites and others and their fears of a government overthrow.
In March 1969 and following the 24th February elections, the PD would continue to make more ambitious plans. The next event it had in store was a march across the border into the Republic of Ireland to show solidarity with civil rights organizations that were operating to the south of the Irish border. In part, the march into the Republic of Ireland was also designed as a means to demonstrate the group’s non-sectarianism and show that what mattered most was social and economic justice regardless of religious denomination or where efforts to achieve socio-economic justice were occurring (Arthur, 54). The march began on 4th April and would only get worse from there. In a symbolic gesture to critique the Catholic Church’s status in the Republic, Cyril Toman attempted to get two novels, *The Ginger Man* and *The Girl With Green Eyes*, confiscated at the border since they were both subject to censorship (Arthur, 54). The incident proved to be an embarrassment for the PD. Later, disagreements continued between the PD and groups operating in the Republic, and by the end of the whole affair the PD had alienated left-wing groups in the Republic and the march had received bad press (Arthur, 54). Another fundamental change was occurring within the organization by this time. The People’s Democracy was no longer solely or even primarily a student organization. By this time and beyond, the PD constituency was composed in large part of younger people from a Catholic area of Belfast known as Falls Road (Beach, “Social Movement Radicalization,” 1977). Since Falls Road consisted of Catholic youths who were typically lower-income and all-around less well-off than those attending QUB, they were more willing to engage in radical and militant activities (Beach, 312). This would serve as another step in radicalization for the PD.

The month of April 1969 bestowed numerous fates to several key individuals. On 17th April 1969, and despite losing to James Chichester-Clark in the 24th February Stormont elections, Bernadette Devlin became the youngest woman ever (at the time) at age 21 to be elected to Westminster by winning in a by-election. As for James Chichester-Clark, he became the new Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. On 28th April, and just days after the government voted to introduce universal suffrage in local governments in Northern Ireland, O’Neill resigned as Prime Minister, no longer possessing the support he once had and
no longer capable to handle both the right wing of the Unionist Party and the demands of civil rights protesters all at once (Hancock, “We Shall Not Overcome,” 10). The election of Devlin to Westminster had obvious implications for the PD, as her moderating influence on the organization would wane and the group’s arc towards the Left would continue unabated.

*August 1969—and beyond*

As the summer of 1969 emerged, the PD had faded into the background, as did other civil rights organizations that just a year prior had a massive influence on the country. The civil rights movement became backseat to more immediate concerns of physical safety and communal security. As the date 12th August approached, Protestants were getting ready for the annual “Apprentice Boys” march, a Protestant commemoration of the Siege of Derry dating all the way back to 1688-89. Despite there being evidence that serious danger would ensue if the march were allowed to move through the Catholic areas of Derry, Prime Minister Chichester-Clark allowed to march to proceed anyway (Hancock, “We Shall Not Overcome,” 10). Indeed, trouble did in fact ensue. “The Battle of the Bogside” as it became known lasted for three days between Catholics and Protestants. The two groups rioted against each other from the 12th of August to the 14th of August. On the third day, the British military was finally compelled to intervene and was sent to Derry to quell the violence. By the summer of 1969, violence had won out against nonviolence in Northern Ireland; the goals had shifted from civil rights to defense of community and country (Hancock, “We Shall Not Overcome,” 10; Prince and Warner, “Political Competition and the Turn to Violence,” 2012). It would not be until October of 1969, a full year after the founding of the PD, where the organization would finally be able to reorganize itself around Michael Farrell and a renewed interest in an Irish Socialist Republic (Arthur, 73). As for the rest of the civil rights movement, the NICRA and the other groups were no longer able to operate in any meaningful capacity lest the cycle of sectarian violence be accelerated at a rate faster than it was already going (Hancock, “We Shall Not Overcome,” 10; NICRA, 1978). Civil rights demonstrations had become damaged goods. If “Bloody
Sunday” is regarded as the de facto end of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, then the Battle of the Bogside can be regarded as the movement’s return to the backstage.

**Conclusion: Consequences of the People’s Democracy 1968-1969**

The People’s Democracy and its interaction with Protestant reactionaries, in particular the “Paiselyite” counter-demonstrators led by Ian Paisley, led to a process of “mirror-imaging” where both sides took on a similarly fearful and cynical attitude of the other. This process served to self-fulfill and justify each other’s actions. Both sides aimed to antagonize the other to the point of overwhelming them as a means to achieve their objectives. With these mentalities in place, compromise as a means to move society forward became highly improbable if not completely impossible. Ideally, the purpose of politics and political institutions is to have mechanisms in place that can help the different segments of a population bridge the gap between each other’s own preferences. In a political system where little to no room exists for one segment of the population to express their preferences and grievances, it can be expected that people will begin to look for solutions through politics “by other means,” such as the use of violence or the self-policing of communities.

There is the additional concern what alternatives existed for the civil rights movement and the PD’s involvement in it, considering that A.) It was in fact aiming for the ultimate overthrow of the Unionist government once civil rights were achieved, and B.) It had an utter lack of faith in the Unionist government and Prime Minister O’Neill to deliver on meaningful reform. While no one will ever know for sure what might have happened in the history of Northern Ireland if, say, the Belfast-to-Derry march never occurred, one can know for certain that the incident, precipitated by the PD and Protestant counter-demonstrators, did permanently damage the potential of the civil rights movement to affect change. While the PD did demonstrate its point that O’Neill did not have the capacity to force the RUC to properly protect civil rights demonstrators, the point demonstrated by the PD may have been less important than a larger lesson in play. Sometimes it pays to be prudent through patience. The irony of the PD’s actions in
1968-69 and in particular the Belfast-to-Derry march was that despite the fact that it was designed to keep the civil rights movement alive and strong, it actually ended up killing it in no small part. Perhaps more reforms would have emerged from O’Neill and the Unionist government, and perhaps it might have been painstakingly slow for many in the PD. But the patience, rather than the boldness, might have instead kept the civil rights movement alive longer than it ended up being. This in turn would have meant, if nothing else, a much-desired delay or mitigation of what became the Troubles.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Books


Pamphlets


Other written materials


People’s Democracy. Instructions given to marchers for Belfast-to-Derry march from 1st January to 4th January 1969. Date of creation unknown, most likely late December 1968. Northern Ireland Political Literature, fiche 65.


**Video material**


**Secondary Sources**

**Books**


**Articles**


**Theses and Dissertations**


**Video Material**