

ON COMPUTER

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THE DERRY MARCH 5TH OCTOBER 1968

Background Information

For much of the period between the establishment of the Northern Ireland state and the outbreak of 'the Troubles', Derry had been governed by a city Corporation which was dominated by Unionist councillors. This was despite the fact that Derry had a Catholic / Nationalist majority amongst its population. This outcome was only achieved by blatant gerrymandering of the electoral boundaries. In addition Derry had suffered particularly high rates of unemployment and there was a chronic housing shortage. Few people believed that the Northern Ireland parliament based at Stormont near Belfast, and under Unionist control for almost fifty years, would address any of the grievances felt by the people of Derry.

There were many in Derry who felt that the Stormont government was deliberately under-investing in the area 'west of the Bann' (the west of the region) because of the high proportion of Catholics living there. Indeed sections of the Protestant / Unionist population of Derry also questioned some aspects of government policy in relation to the city. There were a number of examples of this during the 1960s, for example, the closure of the Great Northern railway line; the failure of any government schemes to tackle unemployment particularly following the closure of British Sound Reproducers Ltd., a major employer in the area; the establishment of a new town at Craigavon with the subsequent investment in housing and industry in that area as opposed to Derry; and the decision, which caused the most controversy, to site the New University of Ulster at the town of Coleraine instead of building it in Derry.

Prior to the first of the civil rights marches in Northern Ireland there had been a number of left-wing radical activists campaigning in Derry for more investment in employment and housing. In the two years prior to the 5 October 1968 march these radicals, under the auspicious of the Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC), had staged a number of non-violent direct action protests to try to force the local Corporation to address some of these issues.

Following the Civil Rights march in Dungannon the DHAC contacted the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) with a proposal to hold a civil rights march in Derry. The NICRA agreed to the proposal without fully appreciating the special circumstances in Derry. The proposed route would take the march into the walled city centre which was considered by unionists as Protestant territory. This, coupled with the level of resentment felt by Catholics in the city, was the backdrop against which events were played out.

MAIN EVENTS OF THE DAY

The march in Derry on 5 October 1968 was notionally organised by an ad hoc committee comprising representatives of the Derry Labour Party, the Derry Labour Party Young Socialists, the Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC), the Derry City Republican Club, and the James Connolly Society. In reality the ad hoc committee never functioned as expected and the practical organisation of the event was undertaken by two people, Eamonn McCann and Eamon Melaugh. The night before the march there was a final meeting between representatives of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) and the organisers in Derry. The NICRA wanted to call off the march because of the banning order imposed by William Craig, then Home Affairs Minister at Stormont. After some discussion it was decided to go ahead with the march.

Estimates of the number of people who took part in the march vary widely. For many such events the organisers tend to inflate estimates of the numbers who took part while official figures tend to be a more conservative estimate. Surprisingly therefore one of the main organisers, Eamonn McCann, stated that "*about 400 hundred people formed up in ranks in Duke Street. About two hundred stood on the pavement and looked on.*" (McCann, 1993; p.97), while the official estimate was approximately 2,000 people (Cameron Report, 1969; p.27). Among those who were present at the march were: representatives of the five local groups who were part of the ad hoc committee and members of the NICRA; a number of Nationalist Members of the Northern Ireland Parliament (NIMPs) including Eddie McAteer and Gerry Fitt and three Westminster Labour MPs; individuals such as John Hume; and many ordinary citizens of Derry. The fact that the organisers had miscalculated and planned the march for a day when the Derry City Football Club was playing 'at home', the fact that the march was starting in the Waterside, or the expectation that there might be an outbreak of violence, all probably contributed to the low numbers. The march was however about to achieve a significance far beyond its size.

Those intending to take part in the march assembled at the train station in the Waterside close to Duke Street. The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) had brought extra reserves of police officers into Derry and about 130 officers were deployed in the streets around the train station. In addition two water canons were also deployed and this was the first occasion they had been seen on the streets of Derry. As the march formed up the notified route was blocked by members of the RUC and the demonstrators were informed by the County Inspector of the conditions of the banning order. More ominously he also warned that women and children should not remain. The demonstrators then appeared to have taken the police by surprise by beginning to move up Duke Street against the flow of traffic. RUC officers quickly regrouped to block the top of Duke Street. As the marchers moved towards the new front police line another line of officers blocked the road behind them, effectively sealing the demonstrators into a section of the street.



As the march approached the front line a number of RUC officers drew their batons and, without provocation, clubbed those at the head of the march, including two Nationalist MPs.

It appears to us established on the evidence that at this stage batons were used by certain police officers without explicit order, although this is denied by the police. We regret to state that we have no doubt that both Mr. Fitt and Mr. McAtteer were batoned by the police, at a time when no order to draw batons had been given and in circumstances in which the use of batons on these gentlemen was wholly without justification or excuse. (Cameron Report, 1969; p.28)

While the injured were being taken away to hospital an impromptu meeting was held in front of the police line and the crowd was addressed by a number of speakers. A short time later the County Inspector of the RUC gave an order to his officers to disperse the march. The two police lines drew their batons and moved towards the marchers. Even the official report concluded that the police broke ranks at this point and "*used their batons indiscriminately on people in Duke Street*" (Cameron Report, 1969; p.29). The crowd scattered and made their way across Craigavon Bridge having first run the gauntlet of the police lines. On the bridge the water canons were used on the dispersing marchers and Saturday afternoon shoppers making their way home.



The official report put the number of casualties as 4 RUC officers and 77 civilians. The organisers of the march estimated that the total number of people who went to hospital for treatment was approximately 100, although many others would have received first aid on the street and not attended the casualty department of the hospital.

As a result of what happened at the march there were further disturbances in the centre of the city and on the edges of the Bogside. Riots developed and the fighting lasted until the early hours of the 6 October. During the riots a barricade was erected in Rossville Street and a few petrol bombs thrown (McCann, 1993).



The events of 5 October 1968 were recorded by press and television reporters. These reports appeared in newspapers and on television the following day and were seen not only in Ireland and Britain but around the world. The scenes were to prove shocking to many people across the United Kingdom but they had a profound impact on the Catholic / Nationalist population of Northern Ireland.

One of the consequences of the break up of the demonstration in Duke Street was that press and television reports ensured that some very damaging pictures of police violence were seen throughout the United Kingdom and abroad. This produced a violent reaction of feeling in many places ... (Cameron Report, 1969; p.31).

Until this point in time consecutive British governments had been content to ignore how Unionists in Northern Ireland had governed the region. The events in Derry on 5 October 1968, and those which followed as a direct consequence, were to mean that the British government would be forced to take a more active involvement in the running of the state.

Summary of Main Events

Derry was the crucible of the civil rights movement. It was of enormous symbolic importance as the second city of Northern Ireland,... the town in which a Nationalist majority was denied control of local government by a particularly flagrant gerrymander of the electoral boundaries. It was in Derry on 5 October 1968 that Northern Ireland crossed its Rubicon,... The events of August 1969 in Derry brought Northern Ireland close to civil war and the killing of thirteen anti-internment demonstrators in the city on 30 January 1972 precipitated the imposition of direct rule and the end of the Stormont parliament.

Bob Purdie (1990) Politics in the Streets. Belfast: The Blackstaff Press. (p.159)

The police handling of the demonstration in Londonderry on 5 October 1968 was in certain material respects ill co-ordinated and inept. There was use of unnecessary and ill controlled force in the dispersal of the demonstrators, only a minority of whom acted in a disorderly and violent manner. The wide publicity given by press, radio and television to particular episodes inflamed and exacerbated feelings of resentment against the police which had been already aroused by their enforcement of the ministerial ban (paragraphs 168 - 171).

Cameron Report. Disturbances in Northern Ireland. September 1969. (Cmd 532) (Summary of Conclusions; paragraph 14)

We had no doubt that 5 October was going to be a very significant day. (After the meeting at which the CRA [Civil Rights Association] had accepted our route Melaugh had remarked: 'Well, that's it. Stormont is finished.') For six months we had been making steady and seemingly inexorable progress. We began as a small, disparate group and by simple direct action tactics we had month by month accumulated support. ... Now we were in control of an event which was seriously perturbing the government and exciting concerned editorials in the Belfast papers.

Eamonn McCann (1993) War and an Irish Town. London: Pluto Press. (p.95)

The Civil Rights march in Derry on 5 October 1968 was organised to draw attention to a series of grievances over issues related to housing, employment and electoral practices in the city. The driving force behind the idea for the march was a group of left-wing radicals who, through the Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC) and other organisations, had been taking non-violent direct action to try and improve conditions in the area. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was contacted and following a meeting the NICRA decided to support the proposed march. When the march was publicised Loyalists announced that they were holding an 'annual' parade on the same day, at the same time, and over the same route. The Stormont government then issued a banning order on all marches and parades. When the demonstration went ahead the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) blocked the route of the march and then baton charged the crowd. The scenes were recorded by television cameras and the subsequent news coverage sparked rioting in Derry. Most commentators consider the 5 October 1968 to be the start date of 'the Troubles'.

Chronology of events around the Civil Rights march in Derry on 5 October 1968

1 February 1967

The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was formed. The Civil Rights Movement campaigned for a number of reforms one of which was 'one man, one vote' that is a universal franchise for local government elections. At the time only owners or tenants of a dwelling, or their spouses, were entitled to votes, and there were other anomalies to do with additional votes for companies. The association also pressed for the end to gerrymandering of electoral boundaries. Other reforms sought included: the end to perceived discrimination in the allocation of public sector housing and appointments to, particularly, public sector employment; the repeal of the Special Powers Act; and the disbandment of the 'B-Specials' (Ulster Special Constabulary) which was a paramilitary style reserve police force which was entirely Protestant in its makeup.

Monday 25(?) March 1968

Members of the Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC) disrupted a meeting of Londonderry Corporation to protest at the lack of housing provision in the city.

Saturday 27 April 1968

The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) held a rally to protest at the banning of a Republican Easter parade.

Thursday 16 May 1968

In the Stormont (Northern Ireland parliament) by-election in the city of Londonderry (Derry) the Ulster Unionists retained the seat.

Saturday 25(?) May 1968

The Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC) held another protest at the Guildhall in Derry.

Thursday 20 June 1968

The Caledon Protest

Austin Currie, then Nationalist Member of Parliament (MP) at Stormont, and a number of other people, began a protest about discrimination in the allocation of housing by 'squating' (illegally occupying) in a house in Caledon, County Tyrone. The house had been allocated by Dungannon Rural District Council to a 19 year-old unmarried Protestant woman, Emily Beatty, who was the secretary of a local Unionist politician. Emily Beatty was given the house ahead of older married Catholic families with children. The protesters were evicted by officers of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). [One of the officers was Emily Beatty's brother.]

Saturday 22 June 1968

The Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC) staged a protest by blocking the Lecky Road in the Bogside area of Derry.

Wednesday 3 July 1968

As part of a series of protests against housing conditions in Derry, the Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC) held a sit-down protest on the newly opened second deck of the Craigavon Bridge in the city.

Saturday 24 August 1968**First Civil Rights March**

The Campaign for Social Justice (CSJ), the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), and a number of other groups, held the first '[civil rights](#) march' in Northern Ireland from Coalisland to Dungannon. Loyalists organised a counter demonstration in an effort to get the march banned and in fact the planned rally was officially banned. [This was a tactic that was to be used throughout the period of 'the Troubles']. Despite this the march took place and passed off without incident. The publicity surrounding the march acted as encouragement to other protesting groups to form branches of the NICRA.

Tuesday 27 August 1968

The Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC) organised another protest in the Guildhall's council chamber. Immediately after the protest Eamon Melaugh phoned the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) and invited them to organise a march in Derry.

Saturday 31 August 1968

A delegation from the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) met with members of the Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC) to discuss the proposed march. An ad-hoc Civil Rights Committee was established to organise the march on Saturday 5 October 1968. [The Committee did not operate as anticipated and effective control of the march fell to Eamonn McCann and Eamon Melaugh.]

Saturday 7 September 1968

A second meeting was held between the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) and members of the Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC) to discuss the proposed Derry March. [The first meeting was on 31 August 1968.]

Tuesday 1 October 1968

The Apprentice Boys of Derry announced its intention to hold an 'annual' march along the same proposed route of the Civil Rights demonstration, on the same day and at the same time. [This particular tactic had been used on several occasions before and many times after the Derry March. It provided the excuse needed to ban the march.]

Thursday 3 October 1968

The proposed civil rights march in Derry was banned from the area of the city centre and the Waterside area. The banning order was issued under the Public Order Act by William Craig, then Home Affairs Minister.

Friday 4 October 1968

A Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) delegation met with the Derry March organisers and tried to have the march cancelled. Eventually it was decided to go ahead with the march.

Saturday 5 October 1968**Civil Rights March in Derry**

[Considered by many as the start date of the current 'Troubles']

A civil rights [march in Derry](#), that had been organised by members of the Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC) and supported by the Northern Ireland Civil

Rights Association (NICRA), was stopped by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) before it had properly begun. The marchers had proposed to walk from Duke Street in the Waterside area of Derry to the Diamond in the centre of the City. Present at the march were three British Labour Party Members of Parliament (MP), Gerry Fitt, then Republican Labour MP, several Stormont MPs, and members of the media including a television crew from RTE. There were different estimates of the number of people taking part in the march. Eamonn McCann (one of the organisers of the march) estimated that about 400 people lined up on the street with a further 200 watching from the pavements. The RUC broke-up the march by baton-charging the crowd and leaving many people injured including a number of MPs. [The incidents were filmed and later there was world-wide television coverage. The incidents in Derry had a profound effect on many people around the world but particularly on the Catholic population of Northern Ireland. Immediately after the march there were two days of serious rioting in Derry between the Catholic residents of the city and the RUC.]

Sunday 6 October 1968

Rioting flared up again in the afternoon in Derry.

Monday 7 October 1968

Rioting continued in Derry.

Tuesday 8 October 1968

Sporadic disturbances continued in Derry.

Wednesday 9 October 1968

People's Democracy Formed

2,000 students from the Queen's University of Belfast (QUB) tried to march to Belfast City Hall to protest against 'police brutality' on the 5 October 1968 in Derry. The march was blocked by a counter demonstration led by Ian Paisley. A three-hour sit-down demonstration followed the blocking of the march. [Following the events of the day the People's Democracy (PD) organisation was formed. PD became an important force in the civil rights movement and a number of those who were leading members in the organisation, for example Bernadette Devlin and Michael Farrell, became prominent political activists.]

The Derry Citizen's Action Committee (DCAC) was formed from five protest organisations which had been active in the city. Ivan Cooper was the first chairman and John Hume the first vice-chairman of the DCAC.

Tuesday 15 October 1968

Nationalist Party Withdrew as 'Official' Opposition

The Nationalist Party of Northern Ireland (NPNI) withdrew from its role as 'official' opposition within the Northern Ireland parliament at Stormont.

Wednesday 16 October 1968

The People's Democracy (PD) organised a march of 1,300 students from the Queen's University of Belfast to the City Hall in the centre of the city.

Saturday 19 October 1968

Derry Citizen's Action Committee (established on 9 October 1968) organised an

illegal sit-down at Guildhall Square as part of large civil disobedience campaign. The event passed off peacefully.

Saturday 2 November 1968

There was a march in Derry by the fifteen committee members of the Derry Citizen's Action Committee (DCAC). The march took place over the route of the banned 5 October 1968 march. Thousands of people walked in support behind the DCAC committee. [Due to the number of people taking part the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) were unable to prevent the march taking place.]

Friday 8 November 1968

Londonderry Corporation agreed to a Nationalist request to introduce a points system in the allocation of public sector housing.

Wednesday 13 November 1968

William Craig, then Home Affairs Minister, banned all marches, with the exception of 'customary' parades, in Derry from 14 November 1968 to 14 December 1968. [The exception of 'customary' parades meant that Loyalist institutions could parade but civil rights marches would be banned.]

Saturday 16 November 1968

The Derry Citizens Action Committee (DCAC) defied a ban on marches in Derry by marching to the Diamond area of the city. An estimated 15,000 people took part in the subsequent sit-down demonstration in the Diamond area of Derry.

Friday 22 November 1968

Reforms Package Announced

Terence O'Neill, then Northern Ireland Prime Minister, announced a package of reform measures which had resulted from meetings in London with Harold Wilson, then British Prime Minister, and James Callaghan, then British Home Secretary. The five point reform plan included:

- a nine member 'Development Commission' to take over the powers of the Londonderry Corporation;
- an ombudsman to investigate complaints against government departments;
- the allocation of houses by local authorities to be based on need;
- the Special Powers Act to be abolished as soon as it was safe to do so; and
- some reform of the local government franchise (the end of the company votes).

Monday 9 December 1968

Terence O'Neill, then Northern Ireland Prime Minister, made a television appeal for moderate opinion in what became known as the 'Ulster stands at the Crossroads' speech. The speech gained a lot of public support. The Derry Citizen's Action Committee (DCAC) called a halt to all marches and protests for a period of one month.

Wednesday 11 December 1968

Terence O'Neill, then Northern Ireland Prime Minister, sacked William Craig, then Home Affairs Minister, because of differing opinions on the legality of Westminster intervention on devolved matters.

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