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## BURNTOLLET MARCH

The People's Democracy March, 1-4 January 1969

### Summary of Main Events

The People's Democracy decided to go ahead with a four-day march from Belfast to Derry, starting on 1 January. The march would be the acid test of the government's intentions. Either the government would face up to the extreme right of its own Unionist Party and protect the march from the 'harassing and hindering' immediately threatened by Major Bunting, or it would be exposed as impotent in the face of sectarian thuggery, and Westminster would be forced to intervene, re-opening the whole Irish question for the first time in 50 years. The march was modelled on the Selma-Montgomery march in Alabama in 1966, which had exposed the racist thuggery of America's deep South and forced the US government into major reforms. **Michael Farrell (1976) *Northern Ireland The Orange State* London: Pluto Press. (p.249)**

Available police forces did not provide adequate protection to People's Democracy marchers at Burntollet Bridge and in or near Irish Street, Londonderry on 4th January 1969. There were instances of police indiscipline and violence towards persons unassociated with rioting or disorder on 4th/ 5th January in Londonderry and these provoked serious hostility to the police, particularly among the Catholic population of Londonderry, and an increasing disbelief in their impartiality towards non-Unionists (paragraphs 97-101 and 177).

**Cameron Report. *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*. September 1969. (Cmd 532) (Summary of Conclusions; paragraph 15)**

The People's Democracy March left Belfast on 1 January and arrived in Derry on 4 January 1969. The march had been organised by a group called **People's Democracy** which had been formed on 9 October 1968 and mainly consisted of students from the Queen's University of Belfast. The march was intended to increase the pressure for social justice and to draw attention to events in Northern Ireland since the Derry March on 5 October 1968.

Loyalists viewed the People's Democracy and the march as another attempt to undermine the Unionist government of Northern Ireland. A number of leading Loyalists, including Ronald Bunting and Ian Paisley, had indicated in advance of the march that they would be calling on 'the Loyal citizens of Ulster' to 'harrass and harry' the four-day march.

On each day of the march groups of Loyalists confronted, jostled, and physically attacked those taking part in the march. At no time did the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), who were accompanying the march, make any effort to prevent these attacks. The most serious incidents occurred on the last day between Claudy and Derry. The march was ambushed at Burntollet Bridge by approximately 200 Loyalists, including off-duty members of the 'B-Specials', and 13 marchers required hospital treatment. The march was again attacked as it passed through the Waterside area of Derry. Later



in the evening members of the RUC attacked people and property in the Bogside area of Derry sparking several days of serious rioting.

The way in which the police mishandled the People's Democracy march confirmed the opinion of many Catholics that the RUC could not be trusted to provide impartial policing in Northern Ireland. The events also further alienated many in the Catholic population from the Northern Ireland state. The march also marked the point where concerns about civil rights were beginning to give way to questions related to national identity and the constitutional position of Northern Ireland.



## **Chronology of main events surrounding the People's Democracy March from Belfast to Derry**

### **Saturday 5 October 1968**

#### **Start date of the current 'Troubles'**

A civil rights [march in Derry](#), which 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. Estimates of the number of people taking part in the march differ. 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 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.

### **Wednesday 9 October 1968**

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.

### **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.

### **Thursday 24 October 1968**

The People's Democracy (PD) organised a protest demonstration at Stormont Parliament buildings, Belfast. (?)

### **Sunday 17 November 1968**

A policy of civil disobedience was adopted by the Nationalist Party at its annual conference.

### **Friday 22 November 1968**

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 it was safe to do so; and
- some reform of the local government franchise (the end of the company votes).

### **Friday 20 December 1968**

The People's Democracy (PD) announced that its members would undertake a protest march from Belfast to Derry beginning on 1 January 1969.

## **1969**

### **January 1969**

#### **Wednesday 1 January 1969**

Approximately 40 members of People's Democracy (PD) began a four-day march from Belfast across Northern Ireland to Derry. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) and some nationalists in Derry had advised against the march. The march was modelled on Martin Luther King's Selma to Montgomery march. The first day involved a walk from Belfast to Antrim. [Over the next four days the number of people on the march grew to a few hundred. The march was confronted and attacked by Loyalist crowds on a number of occasions the most serious attack occurring on 4 January 1969.]

#### **Thursday 2 January 1969**

The People's Democracy (PD) march continued, on day two, from Antrim to Maghera.

#### **Friday 3 January 1969**

The third day of the People's Democracy (PD) march took it from Maghera to Claudy.



### Saturday 4 January 1969

The fourth, and final, day of the People's Democracy (PD) march took the marchers from Claudy to Derry. Seven miles from its destination, the People's Democracy (PD) march was ambushed and attacked



by a loyalist mob at Burntollet Bridge. The ambush had been planned in



advance and around 200 loyalists, including off-duty members of the 'B-Specials', used sticks, iron bars, bottles and stones to attack the marchers, 13 of whom received hospital treatment. The marchers believed that the 80

Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officers, who accompanied the march, did little to protect them from the Loyalist crowd. As the march entered Derry it was again attacked at Irish Street, a mainly Protestant area of the city. Finally the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) broke up the rally that was held in the centre of the city as the march arrived. This action, and the subsequent entry of the RUC into the Bogside area of the city, led to serious rioting.

### Sunday 5 January 1969

Terence O'Neill, then Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, issued a [statement](#) on the events since 1 January 1969.

### Saturday 11 January 1969

There was rioting in a number of areas of Northern Ireland particularly in Derry and Newry.

### Wednesday 15 January 1969

Terence O'Neill, then Northern Ireland Prime Minister, announced the setting up of an official inquiry into the disturbances in Derry and elsewhere. The inquiry, under the chairmanship of Lord [Cameron](#), a Scottish judge, was to look into the causes of the civil unrest.



## Key Texts

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[This 64 page booklet deals in some detail with the events of the People's Democracy March]

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[This 64 page booklet deals in some detail with the events of the People's Democracy March]

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[Cameron Report, Cmd.532]

## Other Publications

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