

Chapter 4: The End of O'Neill, 1967-1969

Introduction

Terence O'Neill's attempts at reform faced growing opposition from both **nationalists and unionists**. Nationalists were frustrated by the **lack of meaningful change**, while unionists saw O'Neill's engagement with the Catholic community as a **betrayal of Protestant dominance**. The rise of **Ian Paisley**, the emergence of the **civil rights movement**, and violent clashes **further destabilised O'Neill's leadership**. By **April 1969**, he was forced to resign, marking the end of his attempts to **reconcile divisions in Northern Ireland**.

1. Nationalist Opposition to O'Neill

Key Grievances of Nationalists

Nationalists opposed O'Neill's leadership because of continued **political, economic, and social discrimination**

- **Gerrymandering:**
 - Unionists manipulated voting districts to maintain control of local councils, particularly in **Derry, Tyrone, and Fermanagh**.
- **Voting Restrictions:**
 - The **property qualification** meant only homeowners (and their spouses) could vote in local elections.
 - Business owners could **cast multiple votes**, while renters and young adults were excluded.
 - This system was **abolished in Britain and the Republic**, but remained in Northern Ireland.
- **Housing Discrimination:**
 - Unionist councils **allocated social housing to Protestants** to secure electoral control.
 - Example: **Derry Corporation rejected a proposal to build 500 houses** in the nationalist **North Ward**, fearing an increase in Catholic voters.
- **Employment Discrimination:**
 - Most **new industries** were located in **Protestant areas east of the River Bann**.
 - In **1971**, **Catholic unemployment stood at 17.7%**, compared to **5% for Protestants**.
 - **Derry Borough Council:** 145 Protestants earned **£124,424** in wages, while 32 Catholics earned only **£20,420**.
- **Policing and Sectarian Violence:**

- The RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) and B-Specials were accused of sectarian policing.
- The Special Powers Act (1922) allowed internment without trial, mainly used against Catholics.

2. The Rise of the Civil Rights Movement

The Campaign for Social Justice (CSJ)

- Founded in 1964 by Conn and Patricia McCluskey.
- Published **The Plain Truth (1964)** exposing discrimination in housing, voting, and employment.
- Sought support from **British MPs and trade unions** under the slogan “**British rights for British citizens**”.

The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) (1967)

- A peaceful protest group inspired by the US civil rights movement.
- Demands included:
 - One man, one vote.
 - End to gerrymandering.
 - Fair housing and employment.
 - Abolition of the Special Powers Act.
 - Disbanding of the B-Specials.
- Supported by nationalists, trade unions, socialists, students, and moderate unionists.

NICRA's First March (August 1968)

- Protested housing discrimination in **Dungannon**.
- Ian Paisley organised a **loyalist counter-demonstration**.
- The RUC blocked NICRA from entering the town.
- Protesters were **baton-charged by the RUC**, increasing nationalist anger.

3. The Emergence of Ian Paisley and Unionist Opposition

Paisley's Opposition to O'Neill

- Ian Paisley accused O'Neill of **betraying Protestants**.
- Called O'Neill a “**traitor**” and led the “**O'Neill Must Go**” campaign.
- Encouraged violent resistance against **NICRA and Catholic protesters**.

Divis Street Riot (1964)

- Paisley demanded the removal of an Irish tricolour from a Sinn Féin office in Belfast.
- The RUC removed the flag, triggering a two-day riot.

Snowball Protest (1965)

- During Seán Lemass' visit to Belfast, Paisley supporters threw snowballs at the Taoiseach's car.

4. The October 5, 1968 Civil Rights March in Derry

- NICRA planned a march through the mainly Protestant Waterside area of Derry.
- Minister for Home Affairs William Craig banned the march.
- NICRA ignored the ban, supported by John Hume, Gerry Fitt, and trade unions.
- The RUC baton-charged marchers, injuring Gerry Fitt and dozens of others.
- The entire event was filmed, gaining global media attention.
- Riots broke out in Derry, escalating tensions.

5. O'Neill's Five-Point Reform Programme

After British PM Harold Wilson pressured O'Neill, he announced reforms

1. Creation of an Ombudsman to investigate complaints.
 2. New housing points system to prevent discrimination.
 3. Dissolution of Derry Corporation, replaced by a Development Commission.
 4. Abolition of the Special Powers Act.
 5. Consideration of one man, one vote.
- Nationalists welcomed the reforms but wanted immediate action.
 - Unionists viewed them as a betrayal.

O'Neill's Televised Appeal (December 1968)

- Urged Northern Ireland to "reject extremism" and "choose cooperation over division."
- Protestants ignored his plea, and loyalist opposition intensified.
- He sacked William Craig to show strength, but this backfired.

6. The Burntollet Bridge Attack and People's Democracy

- People's Democracy (PD) was a radical student movement led by Bernadette Devlin and Michael Farrell.
- Organised a march from Belfast to Derry (January 1969), inspired by Martin Luther King.
- Attacked at Burntollet Bridge by loyalists and off-duty B-Specials.
- The RUC did nothing to stop the attack.
- That night, the RUC raided Catholic homes in the Bogside, sparking more riots.
- The Cameron Report (September 1969) later found the RUC had used excessive force.

7. O'Neill's Fall from Power (April 1969)

- Faced resignations from Brian Faulkner and William Morgan.
- Called a general election (February 1969) to gain support:

- The **Unionist Party** gained **3 seats**, but hardline MPs were re-elected.
- **Ian Paisley** lost by only **1,414 votes** to O'Neill.
- **John Hume** and **Bernadette Devlin** won seats for nationalists.
- O'Neill introduced **one man, one vote** in **April 1969**, angering hardline unionists.
- Loyalists **bombed power stations**, blaming the IRA.
- O'Neill resigned on **28 April 1969**, replaced by **James Chichester-Clark**.

Conclusion

- O'Neill's attempts at reform failed due to **unionist resistance and nationalist frustration**.
- The **civil rights movement** grew, highlighting sectarian discrimination.
- The **RUC's violent response** and **loyalist attacks** escalated tensions.
- His resignation marked the **end of peaceful reform efforts**, leading to the **Troubles**.

Key Terms

- **NICRA (1967)**: Civil rights movement for Catholic equality.
- **O'Neill Must Go (1965)**: Paisley's campaign against O'Neill.
- **Burntollet Bridge (1969)**: Loyalist attack on civil rights marchers.
- **Special Powers Act (1922)**: Allowed internment without trial.
- **One Man, One Vote (1969)**: O'Neill's final reform before resignation.

