

Ch. 3 - THE *Outbreak* OF THE *Troubles*

# Learning Intentions

In this chapter you will learn about:

- The early years of the civil rights campaign
- The fall from power of Terence O'Neill
- Derry: The Apprentice Boys' march and the Battle of the Bogside
- The arrival of British troops on the streets of Northern Ireland

5.1 CASE STUDY THE EUCHARISTIC CONGRESS,  
*Northern Ireland After World War II*  
1932

# The Formation of the Civil Rights Association

In January 1967, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was founded in Belfast. Its programme included demands for one person, one vote in local elections, no gerrymandering of constituency boundaries, a fair distribution of local council houses and a proper complaints procedure against local authorities. The association also called for the disbandment of the part-time police force, the B-Specials, which it regarded as overwhelmingly Protestant and biased against the nationalist community. Finally, it called for the repeal of the Special Powers Act, which gave vast powers to the Northern Ireland Government, including internment without trial and the right to ban all demonstrations.

From the outset, the civil rights movement was highly controversial. Most nationalists strongly identified with its demands. Its leadership largely emerged from a group of young educated Catholics. One of these, Seamus Mallon, later observed:

“It can't have been a coincidence that the civil rights movement was led by the eleven-plus generation of young people who were starting to come out of the universities: John Hume, Austin Currie, Bernadette Devlin, Eamon McCann, Michael Farrell. Also television had become a household thing for the first time, and we were seeing those gripping pictures of Rosa Parks on the bus in Alabama, and hearing the speeches of Martin Luther King with black and white people singing 'we shall overcome' together. That began to focus people's minds and to make them ask, 'What the hell have we got here in the North of Ireland.’”

Seamus Mallon, *A Shared Home Place* (Dublin, 2019)

In contrast to nationalists, many unionists believed that the civil rights movement was a front for the IRA. In their view, following the defeat of the Border Campaign in 1962, the IRA was now using other means to undermine the security of Northern Ireland.

# The First Civil Rights March

In the summer of 1968, the Civil Rights Association and the Campaign for Social Justice joined forces to organise a protest march in Co. Tyrone. This arose out of a housing scandal in a small village called Caledon. Although many large Catholic families were on the waiting list, the local council allocated a house to a single nineteen-year-old Protestant woman who worked as a secretary to a unionist solicitor. The local MP, Austin Currie, a member of the Nationalist Party, raised the matter at Stormont on 19 June. When he got no satisfactory response, he squatted in the house in Caledon before being removed by police.

On 24 August 1968 there was a civil rights march, involving around 2,500 people, from Coalisland to Dungannon to protest against the Caledon affair and other forms of injustice. When the marchers reached the outskirts of Dungannon, they were blocked by a police barricade. Behind the RUC there was a crowd of around 1,500 loyalists taking part in a counter-demonstration. They regarded the centre of Dungannon as part of their territory and were determined to keep the civil rights marchers out of it.



# The First Civil Rights March

When the civil rights marchers reached the police cordons, they sat on the road and listened to speeches. Betty Sinclair, a veteran communist and Chairperson of the Civil Rights Association, declared, 'What we have done today will go down in history and in this way we will be more effective in showing the world that we are a peaceful people asking for our own civil rights in an orderly manner.'

Some other participants were less calm, however. Austin Currie compared the police cordon to the Berlin Wall. Gerry Fitt declared that his blood was boiling and that he would not stop until full civil rights were won.

Soon after this first march, the Civil Rights Association agreed to the request of a number of activists to hold the next protest march in Derry. The event was planned for 5 October 1968.

# REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. When was the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) founded?
2. List three of the organisation's main demands.
3. Why did the association call for the disbandment of the B-Specials?
4. How did many unionists view the civil rights movement?
5. What housing scandal took place in Caledon, Co. Tyrone?
6. How did Austin Currie react to it?
7. What happened at the end of the Civil Rights march from Coalisland to Dungannon in August 1968?
8. How did Austin Currie and Gerry Fitt react to this situation?

# The Derry Civil Rights March

As in Dungannon, the housing situation in Derry was appalling. The unionist-controlled corporation constantly refused to build houses for Catholics outside the overcrowded southern ward in case this threatened their control of the city. In September 1967, the Derry Housing Action Committee was formed to highlight the crisis by taking direct action such as marches and sit-ins. A young socialist journalist from Derry, Eamon McCann, was prominent in the movement. When the NICRA began to organise protests, the Derry Housing Action Committee joined in.

When the date for the proposed civil rights march in Derry was announced, a loyal order, the Apprentice Boys of Derry, immediately announced a march of their own over the same route at the same time. Using his powers under the Special Powers Act, the Unionist Minister of Home Affairs, William Craig, banned the civil rights march. Fearing violence, members of the Civil Rights Association wished to cancel the march, but they were persuaded to go ahead by the Derry Housing Action Committee.

When the civil rights march took place in Derry on Saturday 5 October the marchers were attacked with batons by the RUC. Gerry Fitt, who was accompanied by three MPs from the British Labour Party, was struck on the head by a baton, as were two Stormont nationalist MPs, Eddie McAteer and Austin Currie. In all, seventy-seven people, including marchers and bystanders, were injured by the police. In the aftermath of the march, there were violent clashes between the police and nationalist youths for the following two days.



# World Attention

The events in Derry on 5 October 1968 were captured on television and shown around the world. Later that night, William Craig appeared on television to defend the behaviour of the police. He accused the civil rights marchers of being communists, republicans and a front for the IRA.

The television scenes from Derry attracted the attention of many Irish-Americans in the United States. They also embarrassed the British Government of Harold Wilson. It appeared to the outside world that freedom of speech was being trampled on in a part of the United Kingdom by a violent and vindictive police force.

# Ulster at the Crossroads

Events began to move quickly after the Derry civil rights march. Four days after the march, the Derry Citizens' Action Committee was established in the city. On the same day in Belfast, students of Queen's University held a protest meeting and founded a new organisation called People's Democracy. This radical new organisation was to play a major role in the civil rights campaign in the months and years ahead. All over Northern Ireland, especially in towns with a large proportion of Catholics, new branches of the Civil Rights Association sprang up. As demonstrations continued in Belfast and Derry, the British Government decided to intervene in the situation.

The Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, summoned Terence O'Neill and two leading members of his Cabinet, Brian Faulkner and William Craig, to a meeting in London. Wilson and the British Home Secretary, James Callaghan, insisted that the Unionist Government introduce a programme of reforms in Northern Ireland. After several difficult Cabinet meetings at Stormont, O'Neill announced a five-point programme on 22 November:

1. Londonderry Corporation was to be abolished and replaced by an appointed commission.
2. Local councils would have to implement a points system to ensure fair housing allocation.
3. Parts of the Special Powers Act would be suspended.
4. An ombudsman would be appointed to investigate citizens' complaints.
5. 'One person, one vote' in local elections would be considered.

# Ulster at the Crossroads

In a few months, the civil rights campaign had gained more reforms than the minority community had gained since the establishment of Northern Ireland in 1921. These concessions produced totally different responses from unionists and nationalists. Many nationalists now believed that the civil rights campaign should keep up the pressure to gain more reforms. Many unionists, on the other hand, believed that the reforms had been introduced as a result of nationalists breaking the law.

Ian Paisley expressed the fears of more extreme unionists and their determination to resist any concessions to nationalists. He organised counter-demonstrations in towns where civil rights marches were planned. Before one such meeting in Armagh on 30 November, his supporters put up posters with the following message: 'For God and Ulster... S.O.S. To all Protestant religions. Don't let the Republicans, IRA and Civil Rights Association make Armagh another Londonderry. Assemble in Armagh on Saturday 30 November.'

# Ulster at the Crossroads

As the demonstrations and counter-demonstrations continued, Captain O'Neill made a famous television broadcast to the people of Northern Ireland on 9 December 1968. He began with the words, 'Ulster stands at the crossroads' and reminded people of the financial support provided by the British Government. He then warned that if he did not introduce reforms, the British Government would step in and take over the ruling of Northern Ireland. Having appealed to the civil rights leaders to end street demonstrations, he asked all the people of the province, 'What kind of Ulster do you want? A happy respected province... or a place continually torn apart by riots and demonstrations and regarded by the rest of Britain as a political outcast?'

The immediate response to O'Neill's speech was mostly positive. The Civil Rights Association agreed to call off street protests to allow time for the introduction of reforms. However, William Craig strongly attacked O'Neill's speech as a sell-out to nationalists. O'Neill then immediately sacked Craig from the government. Many letters of support broadcast to the people poured into O'Neill's office and he appeared more secure as the year of 1968 came to an end. However, events in the new year were to shatter hopes for an early peaceful solution to the problems of Northern Ireland.

# REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was People's Democracy?
2. Outline the five-point programme of reform introduced by the Unionist Government.
3. How did nationalists react to the reforms?
4. What was the reaction of unionists to the reforms?
5. What message was conveyed by Terence O'Neill in his television of Northern Ireland on 9 December 1968?



# Violence at Burntollet Bridge, January 1969

While the moderate leaders of NICRA were prepared to give O'Neill time to implement reforms, other groups were not. Prominent among these was the students' group, People's Democracy. They announced their intention to organise a civil rights march from Belfast to Derry early in the New Year. Each day, their route passed through some strongly loyalist districts. Eventually, on 4 January 1969, the group of around fifty marchers came under attack from loyalists at Burntollet Bridge, an isolated area in the middle of Co. Derry.

The marchers were led into an ambush. Dozens were injured by a loyalist mob using sticks, stones and crowbars. Although the march was legal and had not been banned, the RUC did little to protect the members of People's Democracy. Instead, many policemen were openly friendly to the loyalists. It later emerged from photographs that many of the attackers were local members of the reserve police force, the B-Specials.

After the marchers reached Derry, they were again attacked with stones, sticks and petrol bombs. Later that night, members of the RUC invaded the nationalist Bogside area of the city, attacked local Catholics and damaged their houses and shops.

As intended by some of its radical young leaders, such as Michael Farrell and Bernadette Devlin, People's Democracy march of January 1969 had broken the truce and put more pressure on the O'Neill Government. However, it also greatly deepened sectarian bitterness between Protestants and Catholics. Protestants were outraged at People's Democracy 'invasion' of their territory when the march had passed through loyalist districts. Catholics, on the other hand, were angry at the attack on the marchers and the undisciplined and biased behaviour of the police.

The focus of attention shifted clearly to O'Neill as people in Northern Ireland waited to see how he would cope with the worsening situation.

# The Fall of Terence O'Neill

In a television broadcast on 5 January 1969, O'Neill condemned People's Democracy marchers and strongly praised the police for having 'handled this most difficult situation as fairly and firmly as they could'. However, most outside observers, including the British Government and the British media, had seen for themselves on television how badly the RUC had behaved. The Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, now increased pressure on the Northern Ireland Government to speed up the implementation of reforms. At the same time, civil rights marches in Newry and other towns became more violent as control passed from moderate leaders to more radical young republicans.

Caught between pressure from the British Government and the civil rights movement on the one hand and his own more extreme unionist supporters on the other, O'Neill tried to follow the middle path. On 15 January 1969 he announced an enquiry into recent disturbances, to be chaired by a Scottish judge, Lord Cameron. As a result, Brian Faulkner resigned from the government in protest and twelve unionist MPs met and called for O'Neill's resignation.

O'Neill then decided to appeal to the people and called a general election for 24 February. In a bitter election, O'Neill had to campaign against opponents within his own Unionist Party and against Ian Paisley's Protestant Unionist Party. Although none of his party's candidates was elected, Paisley humiliated O'Neill by standing against him in the Bannside constituency and coming to within 1,414 votes of defeating him. Of the thirty-nine unionists elected, only twenty-seven were definitely pro-O'Neill.

# The Fall of Terence O'Neill

On the nationalist side, the old Nationalist Party under the leadership of Eddie McAteer lost out badly to younger civil rights activists such as John Hume, Ivan Cooper and Paddy Devlin. The 1969 election undoubtedly further weakened O'Neill's position because he could not trust many of the newly elected MPs in his own party. He had also failed to convince the nationalist community that he was seriously committed to introducing reforms.

In April 1969, unionists suffered a defeat in a by-election for the Westminster constituency of mid-Ulster. Bernadette Devlin, a twenty-one-year-old final-year student at Queen's University and a leading member of People's Democracy, defeated the unionist candidate. Her maiden speech in the House of Commons was a devastating attack on the Unionist Government in Northern Ireland. She instantly became a media personality who spread the civil rights message far and wide.

O'Neill had to face a more sinister threat from extreme unionists. Unionists who were prepared to use violence were known as loyalists. There were a number of paramilitary loyalist organisations, including the extreme Protestant Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). In the years ahead, more loyalist organisations appeared and their violent campaigns were marked by death, injury and destruction.

During March and April 1969 a series of explosions took place at electricity stations and reservoirs across Northern Ireland. Although the IRA was immediately blamed, in reality the attacks were carried out by the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in an effort to remove O'Neill from power and put an end to the reform programme. The plot was successful and such was the pressure on O'Neill that he resigned from office on 28 April 1969. O'Neill later claimed that the explosions 'quite literally blew me out of office'.

# REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What occurred at Burntollet Bridge in Co. Derry on 4 January 1969?
2. What impact did events at Burntollet have on community relations in Northern Ireland?
3. What difficulties did Terence O'Neill have in January 1969?
4. How did the general election in February 1969 weaken O'Neill's position?
5. Why did Terence O'Neill resign on 29 April 1969?



## Key Personality **TERENCE O'NEILL (1914-90)**

Terence O'Neill was born in Co. Antrim in 1914. He was educated at Eton College in England. He joined the British Army and served in the Irish Guards during World War II.

In 1946, he was first elected as a Unionist MP for the Bannside constituency in the Stormont Parliament. He served as Minister of Finance in the Brookeborough Government from 1956 to 1963. During this period, he was quite successful in attracting industries and foreign investment to Northern Ireland.

O'Neill succeeded Lord Brookeborough as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland in 1963. One of his key aims was to improve relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities in the north. He also wished to advance the industrial development of Northern Ireland and admired the economic progress of the Irish Republic under the leadership of Seán Lemass. In January 1965, O'Neill invited Lemass for talks in Belfast. He made a return visit to Dublin later in the year. These meetings met with strong opposition within the Unionist Party and from more extreme unionists such as Ian Paisley.



## Key Personality **TERENCE O'NEILL (1914-90)**

In 1968, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association demanded an end to discrimination against Catholics, especially in the areas of housing, employment and local government. In November 1968, O'Neill announced a five-point programme of civil rights. While nationalists welcomed these measures, there was growing criticism of O'Neill's conciliatory approach within the unionist community.

Matters came to a head when a march organised by People's Democracy in January 1969 was accompanied by violence at Burntollet Bridge. There was public demand for an investigation into the conduct of the police and, under pressure from the British Government, O'Neill announced the establishment of the Cameron Commission. Brian Faulkner, deputy leader of the Unionist Party, resigned in protest.

In an attempt to avert a challenge to his leadership and to unify the party, O'Neill called a general election for 24 February 1969. He was nearly defeated in his own Bannside constituency by Ian Paisley. Under mounting pressure, he resigned as leader of the Unionist Party and as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland in April 1969. He retired from politics in January 1970, and in the same year he was created a life peer as Baron O'Neill of Maine. He died in England in 1990.

# REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What government position did O'Neill hold between 1956 and 1963?
2. List two of his main aims on becoming Prime Minister of Northern Ireland.
3. Who opposed O'Neill's meetings with the Taoiseach, Seán Lemass?
4. What measures did O'Neill announce in November 1968?
5. Why did he resign from office in April 1969?
6. What were the political successes and failures of Terence O'Neill?

# AN ASSESSMENT OF TERENCE O'NEILL

## SUCSESSES

- Attempts as Minister of Finance and later as Prime Minister to modernise the economy of Northern Ireland
- Invited Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, to Belfast, in an effort to improve co-operation between North and South
- Expressed a willingness to reach out to nationalists in Northern Ireland
- Agreed to introduce some reforms in 1968-69 as demanded by the civil rights movement and the British Government
- Willingness to confront hard-line unionists within his own party and in Northern Ireland generally

## FAILURES

- An aloof figure who found it hard to relate to ordinary people
- Failure to confront the Orange Order or to ban contentious marches
- Too slow in implementing necessary reform after 1968 and failed to convince the nationalist community that he was serious about reforms
- Unable to control his own Unionist Party or to confront wider unionist resistance to the introduction of reforms
- Failure to locate a new university in Derry (instead of Coleraine), which was a missed opportunity by O'Neill's Government to reach out to the Catholic community in Northern Ireland

# The Battle of the Bogside

Terence O'Neill was succeeded as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland by his cousin, Major James Chichester-Clark, who declared his commitment to continue to implement the reform programme. However, the situation on the streets was worsening all the time and there was rioting in several places during the Orange marches on 12 July 1969. Although the RUC was under severe pressure, its leaders refused help from the British Army and claimed that they could cope with the security situation. Events in Derry in August were to prove otherwise. Despite several warnings, the Unionist Government refused to ban the Apprentice Boys of Derry parade scheduled for 12 August. The majority Catholic community in the city was still extremely angry over police behaviour during the civil rights march the previous October and after the Burntollet march in January. If the Apprentice Boys' march went ahead, it was quite likely to lead to a confrontation between the Catholics from the Bogside and members of the RUC who were protecting the Apprentice Boys. In the event, this is exactly what happened.

Over the next two days the RUC tried in vain to enter the Bogside but were driven back by locals who had erected barricades and were using petrol bombs to halt the police advance. CS gas, also known as 'tear smoke', was used by the police for the first time in Northern Ireland.

As the street fighting raged, the Taoiseach of the Irish Republic, Jack Lynch, made a famous television broadcast concerning the situation in Northern Ireland.



# Jack Lynch Intervenes

Ever since the civil rights marches began, the Irish Government had been observing events in Northern Ireland with increasing alarm. Lynch's own political party, Fianna Fáil, called itself a republican party and had the reunification of Ireland as one of its main aims. Indeed, supporters of all political parties in the Republic strongly sympathised with the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland and fully supported the civil rights campaign.

In his momentous television broadcast, Lynch strongly criticised the Northern Ireland Government:

*“It is evident that the Stormont Government is no longer in control of the situation. Indeed the present situation is the inevitable outcome of the policies pursued by decades of successive Stormont governments. It is clear also that the Irish Government can no longer stand by and see innocent people injured and perhaps worse.”*

Despite these words, the Taoiseach had no intention of sending Irish troops across the border. However, he did send army medical teams to treat people who might not have wished to go to hospital in Northern Ireland in case they were questioned by the RUC. He also rejected the deployment of British troops on the streets of Northern Ireland and called instead for a United Nations peacekeeping force. However, the British Government would never allow this, as they regarded Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom.

Lynch's speech did not calm the situation in Derry. It failed to meet the Catholic expectations that Irish troops would cross the border, while simultaneously angering Protestants by criticising the Unionist Government and the RUC.



# REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who succeeded Terence O'Neill as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland?
2. How did the RUC respond to offers of help from the British Army in July 1969?
3. Why was the Catholic community in Derry likely to react badly to an Apprentice Boys' march in the city in August 1969?
4. What was the Battle of the Bogside?
5. Describe the attitude of the political parties in the Irish Republic to the civil rights movement.
6. In a television broadcast in August 1969, what had Taoiseach Jack Lynch to say about the Northern Ireland Government at Stormont?

# The Arrival of British Troops in Derry

As the RUC had ground to a halt in Derry, the Northern Ireland Government of Chichester-Clark had no choice but to request the deployment of British troops. On 14 August 1969 the first group of soldiers arrived in Derry and replaced the RUC. Their arrival was clear proof that the local people had won the Battle of the Bogside and they were welcomed by most Catholics, who looked to them for protection against the RUC and the B-Specials. As the situation calmed down in Derry, events were about to take a very serious turn in Belfast.

# Sectarian Riots in Belfast

As Catholics rioted in several towns across the north to overstretch police resources and take pressure off the Bogside in Derry, the most horrific events occurred in Belfast. By 14 August 1969, tension was extremely high throughout the city. Catholics were happy that the police had lost the Battle of the Bogside. Protestants, however, were resentful and fearful. They believed that the Unionist Government was losing control over certain areas of Northern Ireland and they were outraged by Jack Lynch's speech, which they regarded as outside interference in the affairs of Northern Ireland.

Massive rioting took place over several nights, with Protestant mobs burning out whole streets of Catholic homes. Fully armed groups of B-Specials supported these mobs. During or immediately after the riots in Belfast, 1,850 families fled from their homes; 1,505 of these were Catholic.

# Sectarian Riots in Belfast

Soon, working-class areas of Belfast resembled a war zone, with barricades, walls of corrugated iron and barbed wire separating Catholic and Protestant areas. As in Derry, the British troops were also initially welcomed by the local Catholic population in Belfast, who regarded them as protectors.

Because the IRA was very weak after the defeat of the Border Campaign, it was not present in Belfast to defend nationalists from attack in August 1969. Some local people chalked up the slogan 'IRA = I Ran Away' on walls at this time. However, the IRA had not disappeared but would re-emerge in a new and more ruthless form the following year. With this development, the honeymoon period of friendship between Belfast nationalists and the British Army would come to an end.



# REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did Prime Minister James Chichester-Clark request the deployment of British troops in August 1969?
2. How did most Catholics react to the arrival of British troops on the streets?
3. Why did loyalists riot in Belfast in August 1969?
4. Outline the results of the riots.
5. Did the IRA have a role in these events? Explain your answer.

## Key Personality **BERNADETTE DEVLIN (1947-)**

Bernadette Devlin was born in Co. Tyrone in 1947 into a Catholic nationalist family. As a student at Queen's University, Belfast in 1968, she played a prominent role in People's Democracy, a student-led civil rights organisation. She was one of the leaders of the People's Democracy march in January 1969 that received worldwide publicity because of the violence at Burntollet.

In the general election of 1969, Devlin opposed James Chichester-Clark. She subsequently won a by-election and, at the age of twenty-one, was the youngest MP in the Westminster Parliament at the time. She represented the mid-Ulster constituency in the Westminster Parliament from 1969 to 1974.

She was convicted of incitement to riot in December 1969 for her role in the Battle of the Bogside and served a short period in prison. Later she was temporarily suspended from Parliament when she slapped Reginald Maudling, the British Home Secretary, who had made a statement that the army had acted in self-defence when they fired on the marchers on Bloody Sunday.

## Key Personality **BERNADETTE DEVLIN (1947-)**

As a socialist republican, Devlin helped form the Irish Republican Socialist Party in 1974 but subsequently left the party. In 1976, she condemned the Peace People as dishonest. She supported the prisoners' protests at the Maze Prison and stood as an independent candidate in the European elections in 1979 in support of their demands. She was a leading spokesperson for the Smash H Block campaign, which supported the hunger strikes of 1981. In the same year, she and her husband, Michael McAliskey, were shot and seriously injured by loyalist terrorists who broke into their remote Co. Tyrone home.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Bernadette Devlin remained an active commentator on Northern Irish politics. She was to strongly oppose the Good Friday Agreement and was to be especially critical of Sinn Féin's decision to enter into government in Northern Ireland.

# REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Name the student-led civil rights organisation in which Bernadette Devlin played a leading role.
2. To which parliament was she elected in 1969?
3. What role did she play in the Battle of the Bogside in August 1969?
4. Why was she suspended from parliament in February 1972?
5. What was the attitude of Bernadette Devlin to the IRA hunger strikes in 1981?
6. What contribution did Bernadette Devlin make to the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland?