

Reflections on the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement

Fifty Years On by *Michael Farrell*

I am honoured to be asked to speak about the Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement to a body named for Senator George Mitchell who played such a key role in bringing about the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (the Agreement) which, whatever its flaws, brought an end to the armed conflict here and created a space in which civil society organisations could grow and develop.

I am also glad that the remit of the George Mitchell Institute involves “*global peace, security and justice*” as I would like at the end of this paper to broaden out the discussion a bit beyond the narrow confines of this island.

When did the Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland begin?

Perhaps it was in Dungannon, Co. Tyrone, in May 1963 when a group of young mothers who had been refused council houses picketed the local council's office. One of them carried a placard with the somewhat abstruse message “*Discrimination in Alabama hits Dungannon*”, referring to the black Civil Rights movement against discrimination in the Southern states of the USA.

Or perhaps it started in Derry City the following year when people who were living in decaying corrugated iron huts in an abandoned World War 2 military camp at Springtown, on the outskirts of the city, marched to the City Corporation's offices in the Derry Guildhall demanding homes. This time one of the marchers carried a placard saying “*Springtown – Derry's Little Rock*”.

Little Rock was the state capital of the US state of Arkansas where, some years earlier, an angry white mob had prevented nine black children from enrolling in the city's racially segregated Central High School. President Eisenhower had to send in 1,000 paratroops to escort the frightened children into the school and as a result Little Rock had become a by-word for racism and discrimination in America.

The protests in Derry and Dungannon were against the failure of the local councils, controlled by the Ulster Unionist Party, to allocate council houses to Catholic/nationalist families who desperately needed them. Closely linked with this was an electoral system that restricted voting for local councils to house holders and disfranchised large numbers of Catholic families who were forced to share overcrowded accommodation with other family members. This went hand in hand with gerrymandering of council electoral wards to ensure Unionist Party control even in places like Derry City which had a substantial Catholic/nationalist majority.

There were widespread allegations of discrimination against Catholics in local government employment as well. And in 1965 when the Stormont government decided to establish a second university in Northern Ireland, they located it in Coleraine, a middle sized country town with a Unionist majority, instead of Derry, Northern Ireland's second city, which already had a small university college. This was widely seen as part of a systematic policy to neglect and downgrade Derry.

But why the connection with Little Rock and Alabama?

In 1955 when a black woman called Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, to a white man, it began a year-long boycott of the bus company by the black community that finally resulted in desegregation of the buses. The Montgomery boycott sparked a wave of black protests across the southern states that became the Civil

Rights movement. And that movement was given widespread coverage in the newsreels that were shown before the “big picture” in local cinemas even in rural mid Ulster.

That coverage continued when television sets became more common in the early 1960s and Dr Martin Luther King and other black leaders were frequently in the news and especially for the massive protest march in Washington DC in 1963 when Dr King made his famous “*I have a dream*” speech.

In Northern Ireland the Nationalist Party, which represented most of the Catholic population and was the main opposition party in the Stormont parliament, was ineffective and virtually moribund after years of unsuccessful complaints about discrimination. The Unionist government rejected all calls for reforms of the voting system or fair allocation of houses or jobs.

A group of people who were concerned about the desperate conditions of many Catholic families who had been refused council housing and who were often in long term unemployment as well, were looking for some way of securing change. They were inspired by the black movement in the United States with its emphasis on Civil Rights and its strategy of documenting discrimination and trying to get the federal government in Washington to intervene and override the segregationist state administrations.

In 1964 Patricia and Con McCluskey, a former social worker and her husband, a local doctor, set up a group of middle class Catholic professionals called the Campaign for Social Justice to document discrimination in Northern Ireland and use the figures to alert public opinion in Britain and America.

It was a significant initiative for a number of reasons. One was its sympathy and identification with the black movement in America at a time when many Irish Americans were less than friendly towards that movement. And this was also a movement largely led by

Protestant clergy and headed by a minister named after the leading figure in the Protestant Reformation. Another reason why it was significant was that the US movement was focused on practical issues like housing and employment rather than directly 'political' issues like the partition of Ireland. The American movement also set out its demands in terms of equality and rights, which could potentially apply to all the population, and those rights were spelled out in UN declarations and conventions – and, of particular interest in Northern Ireland, similar rights were also set out in the European Convention on Human Rights.

There were stirrings about the Northern Ireland situation in other quarters too. The election of a Labour government in Britain in 1964 raised hopes that it could be persuaded to put pressure on the Stormont administration to end discrimination and bring in universal suffrage. A Campaign for Democracy in Ulster was set up by a group of Labour MPs at Westminster to press for an inquiry into the administration in Northern Ireland. This was strengthened by the re-election of the Labour government with a substantial majority in 1966 and the election of Gerry Fitt as a Republican Labour MP for West Belfast. He repeatedly tried to raise the Northern Ireland situation at Westminster but with no success.

The Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the mainly pro-Union Northern Ireland Labour Party, of which I was a member at the time, also called for an inquiry into the complaints about the Stormont administration. And the Irish Republican movement, including the IRA, which had turned away from physical force and towards radical political action after an ineffective military campaign in the 1950s, also supported calls for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was set up early in 1967, modelled on the British National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) – now called Liberty. It was supported by the Belfast Trades Council, the Communist Party, Republicans, Labour Party supporters,

and a few liberal Unionists. It was originally intended as a lobbying group like the NCCL in Britain, and not an activist organisation.

So by the beginning of 1968 there were quite a number of organisations seeking change in Northern Ireland but frustration was also beginning to set in. In January 1968 Paul Rose MP, the chairperson of the Westminster MPs' Campaign for Democracy in Ulster, told Austin Currie, the youngest of the Nationalist MPs at Stormont, that he had lost hope that the Labour government would put pressure on the Unionist administration unless it was forced to do so. He said: "*Unless you and others like you can create a situation where this government will be forced to intervene in Northern Ireland, nothing will happen and the position will remain unchanged*"¹.

And this, of course was 1968, the year of revolt by youth and students across Europe and the world. It began with the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, when popular protests in the streets brought down the repressive Soviet-style regime and called for "*Socialism with a human face*". In May and June students revolted in Paris and were joined by workers in a general strike that almost toppled the government of General De Gaulle. And all across Britain, Europe and the United States there were massive demonstrations against the Vietnam War.

Europe was on fire with radical new ideas and a new generation wanted to sweep away the drab surroundings of post-war austerity and the conservative governments in the Communist East and the capitalist West. Young people believed that they could change the world.

There were set-backs as well, of course, during 1968: the assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had gone to support a garbage workers' strike, and in

¹ Austin Currie: "*Civil Rights Movement*" in Sean Farren and Denis Haughey: "*John Hume, Irish Peacemaker*", Four Courts Press 2015

August the Prague Spring was brutally crushed by Soviet tanks amid scenes of heroic resistance by students and young people. But these setbacks only fuelled the anger of radical youth, who were further outraged by images of brutal attacks by police on anti-war demonstrators outside the Democratic Party Convention in Chicago, also in August 1968.

For months students at Queens University and young people throughout Northern Ireland – and older people as well - had watched these events on television with growing frustration and with feelings of solidarity with their peers in other countries.

Meanwhile nothing had changed in Derry or Dungannon as far as allocating houses was concerned. In August 1968, after the Dungannon council had allocated a new house to a young, single woman ahead of more than 200 Catholic families, many of them with several children, local activists and Stormont MP Austin Currie staged a sit-in protest in one of the new houses and were promptly arrested. Following that the local activists decided it was time to adopt more militant tactics, like the US Civil Rights campaigners. They asked NICRA, as a non-party umbrella organisation, to sponsor a protest march from the small town of Coalisland to the council offices in Dungannon, calling it a Civil Rights march to stress the parallel with the US movement.

From there on the story is well-known. The Coalisland/Dungannon march, at the end of August, was stopped by the RUC (police) at the outskirts of Dungannon and not allowed into the centre of the town. Many of the demonstrators were disappointed and angry but after a brief protest meeting, during which one of the speakers declared to cheers from the crowd: “*We are the white negroes of Northern Ireland*”, they sang “*We shall overcome*”, the anthem of the American Civil Rights movement and dispersed.

I was there with a group of Young Socialists from Belfast, who had driven to Coalisland directly from a protest outside Belfast City Hall against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia – an example of how closely connected we thought all these issues were.

Meanwhile, in Derry the last of the Springtown Camp residents had been housed at last in 1967, but the housing crisis was now as bad as ever. A Derry Housing Action Committee, one of whose activists was Eamonn McCann, was picketing and interrupting Corporation meetings in protest but they felt they were getting nowhere. To escalate the campaign, they blocked city streets at rush hour with a homeless person's caravan and two of the activists were jailed for obstruction. Spurred on by the Coalisland march the Housing Action Committee decided to hold a march in Derry as well and they also asked NICRA to sponsor it.

The march was held on October 5th 1968. It was banned by the Minister for Home Affairs and blocked by the police after 200 yards. Gerry Fitt MP was batoned by the police and three British Labour MPs whom he had brought to witness the events were given a rude introduction to politics in Northern Ireland. The organisers held a brief meeting and suddenly the police attacked again and batoned indiscriminately everyone in sight and then used a water cannon to clear anyone that was left off the street. It was the first time a water cannon had been used in the UK and it had evidently been brought over from England especially for the march.

Caught on television, the scenes looked for all the world like the US police beating black protestors off the streets in Birmingham, Alabama. The TV footage was dramatic and some of those beaten by the police were Queen's University, Belfast students, or recent graduates like me. Queen's re-opened for the new academic year a few days later and there was a mass meeting to discuss the Derry events. Feelings were high, anger at the police attack on the

marchers mingled with pent-up indignation at all that had been happening in Europe and America throughout 1968 and had now arrived on their doorstep. This was their Prague, their Sorbonne, their Chicago.

The students organised a march to Belfast City Hall a few days later. It was stopped from reaching the City Hall and the angry marchers staged a sit-down in Linenhall Street. Then they returned to Queens where they decided to set up a mass protest organisation called Peoples Democracy, or PD, with its structure influenced a lot by the ‘*structureless assemblies*’ set up in the Sorbonne earlier in the year and showing some of the same suspicion of organisational forms shown by the “*gilets jaunes*” in Paris in recent days.

The PD was vibrant, exciting and colourful. Volunteers came from London to demonstrate how to design and print posters. Megaphones appeared for holding outdoor meetings and duplicating machines for running off thousands of leaflets and stickers. Hundreds of the stickers were attached to the walls, pillars and floors of the Great Hall at Stormont when PD occupied it on International Human Rights Day. Groups of students would set off at weekends – and weekdays too- to hold meetings in small country towns, sometimes being chased out of them for their pains.

It was all a bit chaotic, but enthusiastic, internationalist, and very non-sectarian and religiously and politically mixed – over the next few months, it was not uncommon for PD marchers to spot their cousins or neighbours in the ranks of the RUC who were blocking their marches.

The rest of the movement was growing as well. Local NICRA branches were being set up without much structure to coordinate them. Towns competed to have their own Civil Rights marches, while in Derry spontaneous marches, mostly by women factory workers, were

breaking out all over the place to defy a ban that had been imposed on marching in the city. On 16th November around 15,000 people marched to the city centre in defiance of the ban.

At last the British government was forced to sit up and pay attention to what was going on in its own backyard and to apply some pressure on the Stormont administration. Northern Ireland Prime Minister Terence O'Neill was summoned to London and on 22nd November 1968 he announced a package of reforms: Derry City Corporation would be replaced by a government appointed Commission, a points system would be introduced for allocating houses, an Ombudsman would be appointed and there would be a very minor reform of the local government franchise. But there would be no '*One Man One Vote*' – that was before the feminist revolution – which had become the core demand of the whole Civil Rights movement and which was vital for the reform of other local councils.

The marches and protests continued and on 9th December Prime Minister O'Neill made a rather melodramatic television appeal for a moratorium on all marches and protests. Many of the Civil Rights activists were dissatisfied with the reforms and particularly with the failure to concede the universal franchise but felt under pressure to agree to a moratorium for a month, until 9th January 1969. However, PD decided to go ahead with a planned long march from Belfast to Derry beginning on 1st January, a week before the end of the 'truce' called by NICRA and the Derry Citizens' Action Committee and I was very involved in the organisation of the march. We felt that pressure had to be kept up on both Stormont and the British governments until they conceded '*One Man, One Vote*'.

The 80 mile march to Derry was modelled directly on a major episode in the American Civil Rights campaign, a march from Selma to Montgomery in Alabama which resulted in President Lyndon Johnson pushing through the voting rights act to stop the exclusion of thousands of black citizens from the voting registers in the Southern States. The Selma

march was led by Martin Luther King and John Lewis, one of the leaders of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a younger, more militant, section of the US movement which some of us in PD looked to as a model.

We called it a Civil Rights and Anti-Poverty march after its Selma exemplar and we had planned to distribute leaflets about housing conditions and unemployment statistics in towns along the way to broaden our demands beyond discrimination to the causes of poverty that affected working class Protestants as well as Catholics. Unfortunately we didn't get the opportunity to do so. The march was blocked or re-routed by the police almost all along the way until it was finally ambushed by militant loyalists at Burntollet Bridge, on an isolated stretch of road about seven or eight miles from Derry City.

The RUC, who had repeatedly blocked us for the previous three days, on that day unusually told us that there might be some opposition up ahead but that if we wanted to continue, we should be able to get through it. Instead we were attacked by a large and well organised crowd of more than 100 men armed with sticks and clubs who badly injured some of the marchers.

The march kept going and after two more attacks by crowds armed with bricks and stones it finally got to Derry to be welcomed by the Derry Citizens Action Committee but that night RUC men attacked the Bogside area of the city smashing doors and windows and terrorising the inhabitants.

The Burntollet ambush and the failure of the RUC to do anything to stop it caused a good deal of shock and anger in Britain as well as Northern Ireland. It could have been the occasion for the British government to insist on the introduction of *One Man One Vote* but unfortunately nothing was done.

The Civil Rights campaign resumed again and eventually universal suffrage was conceded in April 1969. In the meantime there were changes in the movement. In February 1969 Prime Minister O'Neill called a snap election and several leading figures in the Civil Rights movement, notably John Hume, Ivan Cooper and Paddy Devlin, were elected to the Stormont parliament. Peoples Democracy also contested the election to build support for a more socially radical policy but, still influenced by the anti-establishment attitudes of the Paris students, we deliberately chose constituencies where we were unlikely to be elected. One PD candidate appeared to have been elected on the first count and was mightily relieved when his opponent called for a re-count that reversed the decision.

PD also sought to broaden the debate in another direction by holding a march to Dublin at Easter 1969, criticising a serious housing crisis in the Republic (some things do not change), the conservative economic policies of the Dublin government, the political influence of the Catholic Church, and bans on divorce and contraceptives. And, of course, Bernadette Devlin, as she was then, was elected MP for Mid Ulster in the Westminster Parliament in May 1969 and became a voice for the underdog and for radical social change throughout these islands.

With 'Civil Rights' MPs in the Stormont parliament who also had access to the British government as well, the role of NICRA and its branches changed. With its best known leaders now in parliament and putting more emphasis on parliamentary questions and debates, and negotiating with Westminster, there was less reliance on the politics of the streets. And PD was becoming more of a left wing movement than just a Civil Rights organisation. Marches and protests continued but the subject matter changed as well. There were increasing clashes between the RUC and angry working class youths in Catholic areas, and that together with harsh public order legislation meant that public protests were increasingly focused on police misconduct and repressive laws.

The 'Battle of the Bogside' in August 1969, when local youths in Derry fought a pitched battle with the RUC until British troops were mobilised on the streets, and the outbreak of major violence in West Belfast and Ardoyne that followed, changed the whole dynamic of the situation. Barricades were erected in Derry and Belfast and increasingly people in Catholic/nationalist areas were looking for physical protection rather than civil rights and the IRA re-entered the scene.

After that a succession of major aggressive actions by the security forces: the Falls Road curfew in July 1970, the introduction of internment without trial in August 1971, and Bloody Sunday in January 1972 escalated the situation into a full-scale military conflict.

What remained of the Civil Rights movement was left to campaign against internment, cruel and inhumane treatment of prisoners, and miscarriages of justice - all difficult but necessary work but depressingly different from the high hopes of ending sectarianism that had inspired the campaigns of 1968-9. NICRA eventually faded away by the end of the 1970s and PD dwindled to a small leftist ginger group.

The armed conflict was to last for almost 30 years and cost over 3,700 lives while many more were injured and atrocities were committed by all sides. No-one could be unmoved by the suffering caused but the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, which Senator Mitchell played such an important role in bringing about twenty years ago, suggested that "*the achievement of a peaceful and just society would be the true memorial to the victims of violence*".

What progress have we made towards that goal?

Although the structures of the original Civil Rights movement had effectively disappeared by the early 1980s, new organisations and initiatives were beginning to take their place.

A number of young lawyers, legal academics and peace activists committed to human rights and the rule of law, and believing that state violence and breaches of the law could only

prolong the conflict, began, cautiously at first, to challenge emergency laws, the use of ‘supergrasses’, and ‘shoot to kill’ policies. They took no position on the constitutional position of Northern Ireland and called themselves the Committee on the Administration of Justice or CAJ.

In another area, a young female trade unionist, Inez McCormack, who had been active in PD, began to organise low-paid women workers, especially in the public sector. And then she began to challenge religious discrimination in employment, becoming one of the key forces behind the “*MacBride Principles*”. The *Principles* urged US public pension funds not to invest their money in firms operating in Northern Ireland that did not have a religiously balanced workplace and to press for much stronger anti-discrimination laws in Northern Ireland.

Modelled on another US campaign, directed against apartheid in South Africa, the *MacBride Principles* had a significant effect on US companies in Northern Ireland and led to considerable strengthening of Fair Employment legislation and implementation structures.

Meanwhile, CAJ was growing in confidence and expertise and was becoming expert in using European and United Nations conventions and monitoring bodies to challenge breaches of human rights by the UK government and security forces.

These and other, more localised or single issue organisations, such as the campaigns against the wrongful convictions of the Birmingham Six, Guildford Four and Judith Ward, began to demonstrate to angry communities, distrustful of the police and the legal system, that there were ways of stopping abuses and getting remedies for their grievances other than using violence.

When serious negotiations to try to end the conflict began in the early 1990s, CAJ was able, through the widespread contacts it had developed in the human rights community at home

and abroad, to build a very effective coalition to lobby and campaign to ensure that any peace agreement should be based on human rights and equality principles.

That coalition involved the major human rights organisations in England and Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, together with Amnesty International and the New York Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, all working closely together. And it had its effect. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement provided for a Human Rights Act in Northern Ireland that allowed the courts to strike down any legislation by the new Northern Assembly, or actions by its Executive, if they are not in compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). It provided for a more powerful Equality Commission, an independent Human Rights Commission, and a police service that would be required to conform fully to the ECHR.

It also envisaged a new Bill of Rights that would supplement the ECHR with provisions to deal with rights issues that were peculiar to Northern Ireland but unfortunately that has not been delivered on.

In many ways the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement represented the final acceptance and achievement of the objectives of the Civil Rights movement, but in a more modern and comprehensive form and with powerful built-in mechanisms to ensure the implementation of its commitments. And CAJ and the other NGOs working in the field of human rights and equality in more recent years have done a lot to complete the work begun 50 years ago. But in the area of human rights and equality, the work is never finished.

The Agreement also, of course, contained arrangements to encourage the main political blocs to work together to ensure stability and deliver the promised 'new dispensation' for Northern Ireland. Sadly that aspect of the Agreement has not worked well and has now reached total paralysis leading to a good deal of disillusionment with the settlement. The human rights and

equality provisions, on the other hand, have worked a good deal better, and particularly when they have been used by the highly skilled and experienced civil society organisations that have developed in Northern Ireland.

They have also been reinforced by ongoing developments in European Union law, in particular the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which incorporates and updates all the provisions of the ECHR as well as new concepts such as the rights to dignity, to good administration, and to protection of the environment and has strengthened the existing equality and anti-discrimination provisions.

As a result there is still a degree of confidence in the human rights and equality provisions of the Agreement and they are part of the glue that holds it together.

Of course Northern Ireland changed a lot in 50 years – though, regrettably, not in some ways. There are new challenges now and some challenges that were always there but that could not speak their name in previous times. There are new battles to be fought against racism and for the rights of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees; for members of the LGBTI community; for women’s reproductive rights; for persons with disabilities; for privacy rights; and for protection of the environment.

The human rights and equality provisions in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and their elaboration through the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and other subsequent legislation could be used to meet those challenges. But it is important to note that Brexit and the UK’s proposed withdrawal from the EU pose a serious threat to those provisions. The Brexit legislation already passed by the UK Parliament specifically excludes the Charter of Fundamental Rights after a UK withdrawal and the Conservative Party is committed to repealing the Human Rights Act and replacing it with a watered down Bill of British Rights.

So the struggle for human rights and equality in Northern Ireland is not over yet. A new battle may be needed to protect the provisions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and there is work still to be done to meet the new or newly recognised challenges already mentioned.

Fifty years ago men and women went out full of high ideals to try to end prejudice, bigotry and discrimination in Northern Ireland and create a fair, just and non-sectarian society. They have worthy successors to carry on that task today in the former of organisations like CAJ, the Human Rights Consortium, and the whole spectrum of human rights and equality NGOs working to complete the Civil Rights struggle and to meet the newer challenges as well.

And, finally, I stressed at the beginning the importance of the influence of the black Civil Rights movement in America and the 1968 uprising on the Civil Rights movement here, and the strong current of anti-racism and international solidarity that permeated the movement.

Fifty years later the situation is almost reversed. Today there is a growing threat from right wing populism, xenophobia, homophobia, and downright racism that has been sweeping across Europe from East to West, while anti-immigrant hostility has been a leading factor in the pro-Brexit campaign in the UK.

Thousands of desperate asylum seekers and migrants fleeing violence and famine in their home countries have died in the Mediterranean trying to get to Europe and more are dying when they are forcibly returned to Libya.

Perhaps it is time now for us on this island to begin to look beyond the horizon of our own problems and join with colleagues in the rest of Europe in a struggle to turn back the tide of populism, racism and homophobia and defend the values and principles that we learned from Europe and the US Civil Rights movement half a century ago.

*Michael Farrell was a prominent activist in the Civil Rights movement and Peoples
Democracy in Northern Ireland in 1968-9*