

Politics in the Streets

The origins of the
civil rights movement
in Northern Ireland

by
Bob Purdie
(1990)

Originally published by
The Blackstaff Press, Belfast

PDF version included on CAIN
with the permission of the author
<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/crights/purdie/>

DERRY AND ITS ACTION COMMITTEES

The gentle rainfall drifting down
 Over Colmcille's town
 Could not refresh, only distill,
 In silent grief from hill to hill.

from 'Butcher's Dozen' by Thomas Kinsella

'An Old City Faces a New Sorrow'

headline over *Irish Times* report of events in Derry on 5 October 1968

Derry was the crucible of the civil rights movement. It was of enormous symbolic importance as the second city of Northern Ireland, as the site of the legendary siege of 1689 in which the Protestants resisted the forces of James II, and as 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, and on the streets of the city in subsequent months Northern Ireland was, again and again, ratcheted nearer to crisis. 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.

The first gerrymander of the city occurred in 1896, with the Londonderry Improvement Bill; this created five electoral wards, one of which held the bulk of the city's Catholics, and enabled the Unionists to have a majority in the others. In 1922, following a brief period of Home Rule Party-Sinn Féin rule, the abolition of proportional representation in Northern Ireland in local government elections and a readjustment of the ward boundaries enabled the Unionists to regain control of the corporation. In 1929 the Northern Ireland parliamentary boundaries were drawn up so as to attach areas of the surrounding countryside to the city centre,

creating the safe Unionist seat of City of Londonderry, while the mainly Catholic areas were put into the Nationalist seat of Foyle. In 1936 the city was divided into three local government electoral wards, two of which elected eight councillors whilst the third ward elected four. In the North and Waterside wards nearly eight thousand Unionist electors sent twelve representatives to the council, while the huge South ward returned eight Nationalist councillors on a poll of over ten thousand.

Unionist control of local government was resented because it represented minority control and the resentment was kept alive by accusations of discrimination in the allocation of council jobs and housing. But there was resentment also at the lack of industrial development in the city and its surrounding areas. A British visitor, Ian Nairn, described the state of the city in 1961:

This is one of the most unexpected and paradoxical of our cities. It is one of the remotest places in the British Isles . . . For forty years it has been the victim of a real topographical tragedy . . . a manufacturing town of 50,000 people where a rural centre of 20,000 would have been sufficient. Partition made comparatively little difference to its position as a market town for Donegal, but inevitably the industrial goods of Derry have to get to the mainland. And for this it is as remote as Inverness . . . So whenever a recession or squeeze begins, Derry is likely to feel it first. It is like being attached to the free end of a rope; a gentle pull at one end means a vicious kick at the other.¹

In the postwar era, government stimulus to industrial development failed to rescue the city. Derry's first 'advance' factory was completed in 1951, but by that time sixty-seven new industries had been established in Northern Ireland. The fragility of much of the industry attracted to Derry by government aid was shown by the Birmingham Sound Reproducers factory which was opened in the summer of 1967, employing 1,800 of the abundant supply of cheap young labour; by January 1968 it had closed down. The more successful Du Pont synthetic rubber factory could never mop up the ever-growing pool of surplus labour.

Unemployment was a clear example of Derry's less-favoured status within Northern Ireland. As Alan Robinson points out:

Before the . . . recession in March 1966, 5.9% of the insured population of Northern Ireland were registered as unemployed, but

in Derry no less than 10.1% were unemployed (23.3% males and 4.8% females). In February 1967, during the recession, unemployment in the province increased by 2.2% to 8.1% but in Derry unemployment increased by as much as 10% to reach 20.1% (23.3% males and 15.2% females). Thus in discouraging industrial development, Derry's marginal situation results not only in high levels of unemployment but is responsible for relatively high levels of increase in unemployment during periods of national recession.

Derry's inequitable share of misery was also reflected in housing. During the ten-year period from 1951 to 1961, 1,640 houses were built:

This number more than met the 1,119 houses that were needed in 1951 to eradicate undesirable overcrowding and subtenancy. But, in the same ten-year period, no less than 1,278 new families came into being in the city, with the result that the number of houses built fell short of the number required.²

This unequal share of wretchedness was itself unequally distributed within Derry. The percentage of persons living at densities of more than two per room in 1961 was 5.7 per cent in the North ward, 7.9 per cent in Waterside and 21.1 per cent in the mainly Catholic South ward. The contours of working-class Catholic life in Derry were marked out by unemployment, bad housing, emigration and close family and community life. Nell McCafferty, the Derry-born writer and civil rights activist, poignantly remembered family prayers from the 1950s: 'God send John a job; God send Jackie and Rosaleen a house; Holy Mother of God look down on Peggy in America and Leo in England; Jesus and His Blessed Mother protect Mary that's going out with a sailor.'³ There was, of course, similar deprivation among Protestants in Derry but their numbers were fewer and a smaller proportion of the total Protestant population suffered such conditions.

Population remained static during the 1960s; the 1966 census showed a total of 55,681 living in the Londonderry County Borough. At 3.8 per cent of the total population of Northern Ireland, this was the same as the 1961 percentage; it compared with a modest increase of 0.86 per cent in the three counties east of the Bann (Antrim, Armagh and Down) and a small decline of 0.23 per cent west of the Bann (counties Derry, Tyrone and Fermanagh).

Belfast had declined by 2.3 per cent, but this is largely explained by government policies of funnelling population to other areas, policies which did not apply to Derry.

One reason for organising the 5 October 1968 march in Derry was that NICRA had always considered the city to be a natural focus for its attempts to raise the question of civil rights, but the demonstration was not the first attempt to organise around the issue in Derry. In April 1964 the working committee on civil rights, which had been established at QUB in March 1963, carried out a survey based on interviews with four hundred people; an earlier survey had been made in Newry. Among those involved were Bowes Egan and Eamonn McCann, later to become prominent civil rights activists. The exercise led to a bizarre episode in 1967, when the mayor of Londonderry, Councillor Albert Anderson, produced a letter which he claimed had come from the working committee. The text was reproduced in the local Unionist newspaper, the *Londonderry Sentinel*, on 22 February. It said that as a result of these investigations the committee was satisfied that there was no evidence of Londonderry Corporation being guilty of discrimination. Unfortunately for the mayor, the *Londonderry Sentinel* also reproduced the signature on the letter – ‘Eamonn McCann, Secretary’. There was no resemblance between this and McCann’s real signature. He commented:

I have not at any time or in any capacity written to Cllr Anderson. The letter . . . is a forgery. Moreover I can reveal that the findings of the Committee were certainly not those indicated in this letter; we found that Derry Corporation had for many years been carrying out a policy of anti-Roman Catholic discrimination in employment and rigid segregation in housing.⁴

The local nationalist paper, the *Derry Journal*, gleefully published McCann’s statement on 2 May, but there was no response from the mayor or the *Londonderry Sentinel*. Nor was there an explanation as to why the letter, which was dated 10 June 1965, had waited for over a year and a half before being revealed.

The first involvement with Derry by NICRA was a visit by its secretary, Derek Peters, in August 1967. He discussed prospects for activity in the city with Terence O’Brien, a Magee College lecturer who was a member of the executive committee of NICRA. In

September, O'Brien called a meeting in an attempt to establish a Derry branch of the association but it never got off the ground; indeed even at the height of the civil rights movement NICRA had branches in north and south County Derry but in the city itself the principal civil rights organisation was the DCAC, which although affiliated to NICRA, was completely autonomous. In 1967 no one in Derry showed much interest in the civil libertarian work of NICRA. The city was dominated by material problems like unemployment and housing, which although related to the issue of discrimination, were more obviously tackled by campaigns that focused on the issues themselves. In addition, Derry was a provincial town, distant from the corridors of power where lobbying could be carried out and it was not a natural locus for a pressure group like NICRA. Another factor, however, was related to the city itself; the entrenched and static nature of politics in the city did not encourage activities which assumed that there was at least a little capacity for the political system to respond to popular campaigning. Derry politics aroused nothing but distaste for working within the system among the few people who were interested in politics but who were not already involved in one of the two main parties.

The political leadership of the majority Catholic community was in the hands of the Nationalist Party and Derry's best-known Nationalist politician, Eddie McAteer, was party leader at Stormont from 1964 until the loss of his seat in 1969. He had represented the rural seat of Mid-Londonderry for eight years when, in 1953, he challenged the incumbent MP for Foyle for the nomination. The first Nationalist nominating convention resulted in a tied vote but McAteer won the second by a short lead. He went on to win the seat, despite the fact that the former MP, Paddy Maxwell, stood as an Independent.

Although the Nationalists were almost unchallenged in the Catholic community, by the early 1960s their position was more vulnerable than it appeared. For one thing they were a rural party in an urban environment. Since the 1950s and the failure of the APL to gain a foothold in Belfast, the Nationalist Party had been mainly a rural phenomenon. In Derry its elected representatives were, as in rural areas, mainly drawn from the ranks of small businessmen. In the countryside this was natural since this social grouping was the focus of local communication and leadership, but in Derry it

meant that the Nationalist leadership was drawn too heavily from one social group. And since the party was principally an election machine, it did not offer channels for new young talent. Moreover, educated young Catholics were likely to be put off by the party's style of opposition, which could often appear even more obsessed with sectarian symbolism than the Unionists were. For example, in August 1962 Alderman James Hegarty objected to the corporation paying its contribution to the equivalent of the arts council because, at sponsored plays and concerts, nationalists 'were invariably insulted by the playing of a foreign [British] national anthem'. In September he announced that the Nationalist councillors would not be attending a Battle of Britain commemoration service in St Columb's Cathedral: 'We simply had no part in this,' he said. 'Our Government in Dublin declared its neutrality.' The following June, Eddie McAteer said that the Nationalists would not be attending a ceremony conferring the freedom of the city on The Honourable The Irish Society. They had accepted their invitations only in order to disrupt the proceedings, as they had done on a previous occasion in 1953. But due to the death of Pope John XXIII they had dropped their plans. In August they objected to a Battle of Britain parade, which they regarded as a recruiting drive for the 'occupying armed forces'. The following month they made a similar objection to the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers beating the retreat in Shipquay Street. In May 1964, McAteer criticised his Nationalist colleague, Patrick Gormley MP, for saying that he had no qualms about rising for 'God Save the Queen', or the loyal toast.

Even assaults on the Unionists over alleged cases of discrimination could rebound. In January 1964, when Hegarty complained about imbalance in corporation employment, Alderman Gerald Glover, for the Unionists, was able to point out that according to the records, ninety-nine appointments out of one hundred were agreed by all members of the corporation. In July, when Nationalists protested at the failure of the corporation to appoint Nationalists to committee chairs, the mayor pointed out that fifteen or sixteen years ago the Nationalists had said that they would refuse to take such chairs and that they would only take part in corporation affairs in order to disrupt them.

In the early 1960s, however, changes within Northern Ireland were beginning to create a degree of common interest between

Unionists and Nationalists in Derry, and they were brought closer together in resistance to the industrial and commercial decline of the city. The priority for the O'Neill government was development in the area east of the Bann; the proposed new town of Craigavon underlined what was seen in Derry as neglect of the north-west. In quick succession the city was faced with plans to cut the last of its rail links to Belfast and the closure of the ferry services to Heysham and Glasgow. Then, in 1965, Derry was confronted with the Government's decision to accept the recommendation of the Lockwood Report and site the proposed second university for Northern Ireland in Coleraine – despite the fact that Derry already had a focus for third-level education in Magee College. This created an unprecedented degree of unity across the sectarian divide. The University for Derry Action Committee, formed under the chairmanship of John Hume, agitated for a reversal of the decision. At a mass rally in the Guildhall, where McAteer shared the platform with Major Gerald Glover of the Unionist Party, Hume roused the crowd with a speech which made no reference to partition or traditional nationalist grievances, but emphasised the common heritage and common interests of all the citizens of Derry.

There was no doubt about the anger felt in the city. Glover recalled in later years that 'ninety per cent of the population was bitterly disappointed, and this became a tremendous grievance shared by both Protestants and Roman Catholics'.⁵ Hume organised a motorcade from Derry to Stormont in which both Unionist and Nationalist politicians took part. The annual meeting of the City of Londonderry and Foyle Unionist Party called on the Government to change its mind and site the new university in Derry. Seventeen Stormont MPs were taken on a tour of inspection by the University for Derry Action Committee and one of them, Dr Robert Nixon, the Stormont Unionist MP for North Down, declared that they had been misled by the Lockwood Report and that there was no shortage of suitable land or amenities in the city.

The unanimity did not last long; E. W. Jones QC, Stormont MP for City of Londonderry and Northern Ireland attorney general, came under fire for supporting the Government on the issue and Dr Nixon was rebuked by Terence O'Neill for alleging that 'nameless and faceless men' from the city had conspired against the siting of the university in Derry. Shortly afterwards Patrick Gormley MP

announced the names of seven Derry Unionists whom, he alleged, had opposed the location of the university in the city. A petition calling for an inquiry into the allegations was signed by 15,118 people and a delegation headed by Raymond Wolseley of the Junior Chamber of Commerce went to Stormont to plead, vainly, for a change of policy.

The campaign petered out when it became obvious that the Government was not going to budge. But it had established three important points: first, that there was potential to cut across established Green-Orange divisions in pursuing the interests of Derry; second, that some educated young Catholics who were uninspired by the Nationalist Party would work enthusiastically on a campaign which challenged traditional sectarian prejudices; and third, many people came to believe that a section, at least, of Derry Unionists was prepared to sacrifice the interests of the city to those of its party. This reinforced distaste for party politics and the tendency to work along lines which challenged established political practices and institutions.

During the next three years, however, the initiative was seized by the radical left and not by moderate, cautious leaders in the John Hume mould. This was a surprising development; Derry had a relatively weak Labour movement and had too small a population to create a sizeable pool of individuals who were prepared to stand out against the political and social attitudes of the majority. In fact, the number of left-wing activists was never large but their impact was out of all proportion to their numbers because they found new methods of protest which caught the imagination of much larger numbers. They were able to be original in their methods precisely because the Labour movement was weak and did not trap them in the confines of established institutions and procedures. The state of Labour politics in Derry was described by a veteran, John Sharkey, writing to a friend in Dublin on 1 October 1962: 'Labour in Derry has become a dirty joke. It is an actual fact that eventually membership whittled down to about three or four.' He had worked in Belfast in the late 1940s, and compared the Labour scene in Derry unfavourably with that of the larger city: 'We may pride ourselves on being a city but politically we are still a small Ulster town.' There was no branch of the NILP in Derry, 'just a group that [Stephen] McGonagle mobilises at election time. There is no other

forward movement, nor does there appear to be any prospect for the future.' The trade-union leaders and the 'occasional professional man' who would be the natural leaders elsewhere were too interested in being 'respectable'.⁶

The NILP branch in Derry had collapsed in 1949 under the twin blows of the party's electoral losses and its split over partition. In 1962 the only focus for the local Labour movement was the trades council. This was beginning to revive, with new affiliations like the Amalgamated Engineering Union and the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU). In December 1963 it discussed whether or not it should contest the next local government elections but no decision was taken. Almost certainly it felt that its position was still too weak. In January it decided not to revive the May Day parade in Derry; there was not enough interest and most of the trade-unionists who would be likely to take part would be attending the Belfast parade.

The dominant figure in local Labour politics was Stephen McGonagle.⁷ He was district secretary of the ITGWU and had stood on the NILP ticket a number of times before the split of 1949, when he went over to the Irish Labour Party. He had been local organiser for the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers but in 1952 he led a breakaway which two years later merged with the ITGWU. The Irish Labour Party in Derry quickly collapsed, leaving McGonagle at the head of his own small Independent Labour group, which was little more than a personal election machine. In the 1962 election he stood against McAteer, making it clear that he was just as committed a nationalist but criticising the MP for the narrowness of his appeal and calling on him to send his election literature to all voters, not just to Catholics. He was defeated by 8,720 votes to 5,476. At 38.5 per cent of the vote, this was a respectable result for a candidate who was only supported by a loose group of associates. In 1965 a permanent Independent Labour group was formed, which ran McGonagle's ITGWU colleague, Seamus Quinn, secretary of the trades council. The decision to contest the election was taken against McGonagle's advice, but the percentage result was almost a re-run of 1962, with 7,825 votes for McAteer and 4,371 for Quinn, a percentage of 35.8 for Independent Labour.

In the meantime the NILP had reappeared on the scene. At a

meeting in April 1965 a Londonderry branch of the NILP was formed. The meeting was addressed by Charles Gallagher, who was elected chairman of the branch, and by David Bleakley, Charles Brett and Vivian Simpson of the NILP administrative council. Gallagher spoke about local problems and Bleakley and Simpson produced standard NILP denunciations of 'Blue' and 'Green' Tories. Brett spoke out firmly on the question of discrimination in housing, electoral laws and public employment. This was not an opportunist concession to Derry's Catholic majority, since he also stressed that any weakening of the link with the United Kingdom was unacceptable to the NILP and that the constitutional issue should not become 'a party shuttlecock'. The secretary of the new NILP branch was Ivan Cooper, who had come to public attention the previous year when he resigned from the Bond's Glen and Claudy Young Unionist Association and had stood as an Independent candidate for the Londonderry Rural District Council. He had become dissatisfied with the council's record on housing and its bias in favour of the farmers who composed its membership. He polled 32 per cent of the total vote.

In March 1967 the NILP announced that it would contest all the council seats in the May elections. The party stood on a detailed manifesto which addressed local issues but stressed that the NILP had 'new ideas free from the old sectarian catch cries'. It linked this to the economic problems of the city, claiming that employment was affected by the 'sectarian image projected by the city fathers'. A number of demands which were to be raised by the civil rights movement were taken up by the manifesto. The NILP pledged an extension of the city boundary and the extension of the local government franchise to all citizens over the age of twenty-one, the abolition of the company vote, the realignment of electoral boundaries and the allocation of houses 'solely on the basis of need'. These objectives were wrapped up in a programme that included pledges on road safety, home helps for the elderly, bus shelters, a more comprehensive library system and the encouragement of tourism. Many of them were possible only if the NILP got control of Stormont and were propaganda points in its ideological war against the doctrines of Orange and Green.

In the Catholic South ward the NILP polled 34.5 per cent, a similar proportion to that of McGonagle and Quinn in Foyle and an

indication that the existing political mould was not going to be broken easily. In the Protestant North and Waterside wards it won 30 per cent and 27.5 per cent respectively. Here the Unionists were challenged for the first time in many years but the NILP shared the anti-Unionist vote with Independents, who polled 4.5 per cent in North and 2 per cent in Waterside. There was, therefore, a vote of about one-third of the Derry electorate which was being deployed against the established parties.

In the three years between its foundation in 1965 and the summer of 1968 the Londonderry branch of the NILP underwent a significant swing to the left. Of the officers and committee elected in May 1965 only two names remained after the annual general meeting of 1968. A majority of those elected in 1968 were later active in the civil rights movement and a number were involved in the DHAC at the time of their election. Tensions between right and left flared up in a dispute over the May 1968 by-election in the City of Londonderry constituency, and this helps to illuminate some of the characteristics of the Derry Labour left. In the 1965 Stormont general election Claude Wilton of the Ulster Liberal Party had polled 47 per cent, and some members of the NILP thought that he should be given a clear run in the 1968 by-election, in the hope of defeating the Unionist candidate. He was a Protestant lawyer who had enormous prestige among Derry Catholics for his work in combating injustices against them in the courts. The Liberals, in fact, had a much more substantial record of fighting sectarianism and discrimination in Derry than the NILP had. However, the NILP candidate, Janet Willcock, supported by the younger members of the party, insisted on standing. She was at this time secretary of the Londonderry branch of the NILP. A former schoolteacher and the wife of a Magee College lecturer, she was of pronounced left-wing sympathies and in later years she became Bernadette Devlin's secretary in London. She rejected all ideas of agreements with other parties and pledged Labour to fight Orange and Green until Derry was 'rid of Toryism once and for all. Anti-Unionism is not enough. We reject the idea that it doesn't matter which anti-Unionist force opposes the Tory candidate.'⁸ Her programme included electoral reform, housing allocation according to need and based on a points system, the extension of the Race Relations Act to Northern Ireland, and the provision of employment through

state investment. Apart from the final point, these were no different from the policies being advocated by the Liberals. The result was 9,122 for the Unionist candidate and 3,944 for the NILP. Willcock had polled 30 per cent of the vote, 17 per cent short of Claude Wilton's result in 1965.

Writing about the episode later, Eamonn McCann, one of the leaders of the Derry Labour left, saw the result as a 'glaring indictment of the continuing failure of the Northern Ireland Labour Party to make any impact on the electorate'. He did not see the failure as a consequence of the refusal to unite all opponents of Unionism, but of the NILP's willingness to compromise in order to achieve such unity:

Labour needs a clear idea of its own *raison d'être*. It must reject an analysis of Northern politics which consists of a simple division of people into Unionists and anti-Unionists. Such an analysis, beloved of silly clerics like Albert McElroy, is an acceptance of sectarianism, and as such, can never lead to its defeat.⁹

Too many NILP members, he asserted, were 'unable to distinguish between the social force represented by Labour and that represented by Liberalism'. He also insisted that 'every compromise with the existing system leaves us less capable of changing that system'. McCann was advancing a traditional Marxist view which insisted on the importance of economic and social class divisions as the basis of politics: but his analysis ignored the extent to which, in the intimate context of Derry politics, such divisions were blurred by local and personal factors. He also ignored the extent to which the concrete policies of Derry Labour, as distinct from its rhetoric, were the common currency of all opponents of the Unionist Party, including the Nationalists, for whom he had boundless contempt.

McCann had returned to Derry in February 1968 after some years' absence. He had studied psychology at QUB from 1961 and made a reputation there as a debater, winning the Orator of the Year award in 1963. He was expelled from QUB after a conviction which resulted from a too-well-celebrated student society dinner. He moved to London where he worked as a gardener with the Greater London Council and became editor of the *Irish Militant*. This fringe left-wing newspaper was produced by the Irish Workers' Group, a Trotskyist *groupuscule* which had a scattering of

supporters in Ireland but was strongest among Irish exiles in London. McCann happened to be at home in Derry on a visit when he was invited to take part in a DHAC demonstration. He stayed on, joined the NILP and became one of the leaders of the DHAC. A highly talented writer and a compelling public speaker, he quickly became the best-known left-wing agitator in Derry.

The pioneers of left-wing protest in Derry, however, were the republicans, who also experienced an influx of young radicals during the 1960s, following the turn to left-wing political agitation by the new leadership of the movement. Republicanism in Derry was weak – one activist has estimated that the total number of republicans of all shades of opinion in the city in 1968 was less than one hundred.¹⁰ This was to the advantage of the young radicals; like the leftists in the NILP, they were not hampered by tradition and did not have to placate their seniors before or after embracing heresy.

The link with the Labour left was useful to both sides. Especially after McCann's return to Derry, the NILP contained a number of talented writers and speakers. The republicans, for their part, provided muscle, discipline and willingness to undertake risky tasks – it was the republicans who smuggled placards and banners out of the Bogside and across Craigavon Bridge to the Waterside, under the eyes of the RUC, on 5 October 1968. The division of work between themselves and the Labour left put the latter into the public eye as spokespeople, and the republican contribution to developments has tended to be downplayed in consequence. Without the republicans the Labour left would have remained abstract propagandists; without the Labour left, the republicans would have been less able to communicate to people in Derry and beyond. It was a close partnership, made all the closer by the small numbers involved and the intimacy of Derry.

The Derry republicans had organised a Release the Prisoners Committee in 1962, but they then retired into obscurity until 1966, when six members were arrested for taking part in an illegal Easter Rising commemoration. One of those charged was George Finbar O'Doherty, who was alleged to have given a command in Irish to the colour party. Finbar O'Doherty was to appear in the pages of the *Derry Journal* numerous times over the next few years, under a variety of names, including George Doherty, George O'Doherty,

George F. O'Doherty, Finbar Doherty, Finbar O'Doherty and Fionnbarra Ó Dochartaigh. Eamonn McCann described him as a 'passionate Republican, much given to violent rhetoric'.¹¹ Other prominent left-wing republican activists were Eamonn Melaugh and John White. All were later to be intensely involved in the civil rights movement.

In October 1966 the Derry Young Republican Association held an open-air meeting to protest at the eviction of a family from a house in Creggan. It denounced the corporation's housing record and claimed that 'Rachmanism [is] rife in Derry'. The Nationalist councillors, it declared, would be better taking up such issues than 'attending functions behind closed doors at which toasts to the Queen are drunk'. During the same month the Young Republicans barricaded themselves into a house in Harvey Street to resist the eviction of a family that had been on the housing list for eighteen years. They left when they were assured that no eviction would take place until alternative accommodation had been found for the family. In December they picketed the Guildhall and the local Unionist Party headquarters, and called on the unemployed to become more militant. In July 1967 they were, once again, barricaded into a house in Harvey Street, this time to resist the eviction of a widow and her two teenage children. The family was all that the Young Republicans could have wished for: the mother threw crockery at police and bailiffs and the son offered physical resistance when police broke through the barricades. The eviction was successful but the family was quickly offered accommodation in Creggan. It was this episode which occasioned Derek Peters's visit to Derry in August 1967 on behalf of NICRA.

In August the Young Republicans set up a front organisation, the People's Action League, which planned to campaign on the issue of high-rise flats, and picketed the Guildhall, calling for an extension of the city boundary and, on another occasion, at the siting of a new Michelin factory at Ballymena in County Antrim instead of Derry. But the league made little impact and there was more success with the Derry Unemployed Action Committee (DUAC) which involved NILP leftists as well as republicans. It was set up by about thirty young unemployed men in January 1965. The DUAC quickly achieved considerable publicity when four of its members disrupted a corporation meeting. The mayor was in the

process of proposing a motion of sympathy with Lady Churchill, following the death of Sir Winston, when James Gallagher of Creggan Heights rose in the public gallery to read a short statement on behalf of the DUAC calling on the councillors to sink their political differences and to unite in efforts to press the Government to establish new industries in Derry. Further interruptions came from Eamonn Melaugh and Robert Campbell, but they desisted when the mayor offered to receive a deputation following the close of business.

In February 1965 the DUAC picketed a dinner in the Guildhall which was being addressed by Minister of Commerce Brian Faulkner. At this dinner Faulkner claimed that only one in ten of Derry's unemployed had any previous industrial experience; the DUAC carried out a survey at the Bishop Street Labour Exchange which, they claimed, showed that 50 per cent of those interviewed did have such experience. In May the DUAC called for a special 'industries for Derry' drive, with an office in the city as its focal point. It wrote to a number of firms pointing out Derry's potential for industrial development. In October it demanded to know what had happened to the seventy-acre industrial site and the industrial training centre promised by Faulkner and Minister of Development William Craig, and in February 1966 the DUAC lobbied the House of Commons at Westminster, led by Finbar O'Doherty, who was at this time its London representative.¹²

The DUAC disappeared from view shortly after this, although it was revived in November 1968 in the wake of the 5 October demonstration. It should be noted that while the style, rhetoric and actions of the DUAC were militant, its demands were not. It called for greater and more concentrated effort along lines which the Government already accepted as the basis for solving the problem of unemployment. It demanded development, investment, planning and greater government intervention, not an assault on the capitalist system. It appealed for sympathy with the unemployed in a way which did not challenge the consensus about the problem. It was characteristic of the radical agitational movements in Derry to echo ideas which were already widely accepted, but to put them forward in a more aggressive, combative and militant style.

The next action committee to be formed was the DHAC. It was the most important of these groupings as it was directly responsible

for bringing NICRA to Derry for the 5 October 1968 march and thus was the catalyst which turned the civil rights movement into a mass campaign. It developed the direct-action methods of earlier campaigns into new and more dramatic forms and it took up an issue which was the central and most widely felt grievance of Derry Catholics – housing. In Derry housing was a scarce resource; the city's house-building record was dismal, even compared with other Northern Ireland towns. Between 1946 and 1967 Coleraine had built 109 new houses per 1,000 of population, Newry 144, Portadown 109, Larne 140 and Limavady 137; Derry's figure was 70.¹³

Needless to say, the issue was the subject of regular battles across the floor of the Guildhall and in the Stormont House of Commons. In February 1962, Eddie McAteer asked Minister of Health and Local Government W. J. Morgan for the numbers of houses which the corporation and the NIHT expected to finish in Derry that year. When told that the total would be about 170, he asked if this was not 'pitifully inadequate as compared with an annual enrolment of housing applicants of 400-odd, not to mention a backlog of 2,000'.¹⁴ The minister had, in fact, outlined a programme of some 1,828 new houses, including corporation, NIHT and private developments, but 1,300 of these were to replace houses which were to be demolished in redevelopment, so that the plans did not envisage wiping out the existing demand for houses. Even these plans were subject to delay; in November 1962, at a special corporation meeting, Alderman James Hegarty moved a vote of censure over delays which meant that 300 out of 500 houses planned in the autumn of 1960 had been delayed. The 144 which were in progress included 18 high-rented flats at Deanfield and a redevelopment scheme of 50 houses. The Unionists accepted that this was unsatisfactory and after the deletion of the reference to Deanfield, Hegarty's motion was passed unanimously. Hegarty also attacked the NIHT for the letting policy on its Belmont estate where, of 185 families, 48 were from outside the Derry area, 25 were policemen and 71 had made applications after 1 January 1959: 'That makes 144 families who should never have been considered for housing at all,' he said.¹⁵

In January 1964, Councillor Patrick Friel (father of playwright Brian Friel), addressing a Nationalist protest meeting, said that 212 houses announced by the corporation included luxury flats and

other specialist accommodation, leaving only 22 of these houses for occupation by ordinary applicants. The corporation had agreed to let houses to ten families from the local Springtown Camp; this left twelve houses. In January there had been twenty-six fresh applications; the marriage rate in Derry was 420 per year and there were at least one thousand applicants on the waiting list. He did not explain how this latter figure squared with McAteer's figure of two thousand; Nationalists and Unionists often threw figures at each other in this way but it was not always clear exactly what they meant. In May 1964, Councillor T. J. McCabe compared Derry's housing record unfavourably with that of Lisburn in County Antrim which had built 1,556 corporation and NIHT houses since World War II. On a comparison of populations there should have been 4,500 houses built in Derry but only 3,000 had, in fact, been built. Alderman Glover said that the corporation's record would have been better had they not handed over some of their schemes ready-made to the NIHT. Alderman Hegarty claimed that of 250 houses in the Belmont estate, only 17 had been let to Catholics. He quoted the case of a man who, he claimed, had sold a house in Omagh, County Tyrone, for £3,000 in order to move into a house in Belmont. There were corporation employees whose first child was born in Belmont while other people were living in 'dog boxes'. The argument usually switched in this way from overall comparisons to individual cases, which was one reason why the dispute was so difficult to resolve.

However, in December 1967 a review of housing in Derry showed that a total of 4,420 'units of accommodation' had been provided - 2,170 by the corporation, 1,745 by the NIHT, and 505 by private enterprise. During 1967, 258 families had been provided with subsidised dwellings, 43 by the corporation and 215 by the NIHT; this included 169 families rehoused from condemned properties, so that only 89 of these households represented an overall addition to the housing stock. In the year ending May 1967 only seven corporation houses had actually been completed. The last monthly housing report to be issued before the abolition of the corporation in November 1968 showed that only four corporation houses had been built.

In September 1968 the executive sanitary officer in his annual report for 1967 said that over one thousand houses were occupied

by more than one family and in several cases seven or eight families occupied what was originally a single dwelling. Rented accommodation other than corporation or NIHT houses was rapidly diminishing, since it was uneconomic for landlords to maintain rent-controlled housing. Virtually all empty dwellings were now sold with vacant possession, at extremely high prices. Many larger houses were being split up into 'so-called flats', and he called for protection for such families. There were cases of families being made to leave by conditions being rendered difficult for them after they had made complaints to the corporation housing department. Councillors received many heart-rending pleas from families who were being forced into emigration as the only alternative to their miserable and expensive accommodation; complaints about rat infestation were not infrequent.

The argument over housing in Derry soon came to be focused on an important issue of corporation policy – the question of extending the city boundary so as to include more land for housing and industrial development. In November 1963, Councillor T. J. McCabe challenged the Unionists on the issue. Between 1951 and 1961, he said, population had increased by 10,000, but 6,500 had left the city because they were unable to find accommodation. In 1962 the increase in population had been 1,172 but in the same year only nineteen new houses had been built; land had to be found for new housing. In September 1964 a special meeting of the corporation finance committee, which included all councillors, adopted an amended motion which gave the boundary extension subcommittee the power to include in its remit the progressive expansion of Derry, so as to maintain its position as the second city in Northern Ireland. By the end of 1965 there was an accumulation of evidence supporting a boundary extension. The city accountant had compared Derry's acreage, which had not changed for a century, with other Northern Ireland towns. Derry had an average population density of twenty-five per acre, compared with towns that had extended their boundaries which had average densities of twelve per acre or less. Reports from the city's sanitary officer, director of education, and city surveyor also supported an extension. Nevertheless, the Unionist majority on the council voted not to submit these reports to the Ministry of Development, Londonderry County Council, or Londonderry Rural District Council,

whose co-operation would be needed to extend the boundary. In May 1967 the mayor ridiculed a Nationalist proposal to submit a draft memorial to the Ministry of Development asking for an extension. He proposed instead that

we should build more intensively in some areas and build higher in many cases . . . We could only acquire areas outside our own boundary with the consent of the two other local authorities. We would need their agreement to build houses outside the city boundary and you know that this is part of what the Steering Committee will propose . . . I therefore think that [the] motion is out of place at this time and that it is proposed for a certain purpose.¹⁶

The most acute of Derry's housing problems was the Springtown Camp. This former United States military base had been occupied by homeless families when the American forces left at the end of World War II. The corporation had assumed responsibility for the site in 1945 and had purchased the land in 1957, although technically it was in the rural district area. When the corporation took control, all the families living there had moved in from the city area. In 1964, when the problem again came under scrutiny, there was a total of ninety-two families living in the camp but some of these had moved in subsequently from the rural area. The corporation and the rural district council were in dispute about who should rehouse them. The rural district council relied on the assumption of responsibility by the corporation in 1945, while the corporation denied responsibility for the former rural district families and claimed that the 1956 Housing Act had made the rural district council responsible for all the families in the camp.

Conditions in the camp were deplorable; the temporary buildings had deteriorated considerably and the site had few amenities. In addition to the squalor, residents suffered from prejudice when they had to give a Springtown address. Early in 1964 the Springtown Residents' Association staged a protest march to the Guildhall, which was reported in the *Derry Journal* of 31 January under the headline 'Derry's Little Rock Calls for Fair Play'. During a corporation debate the Nationalists pressed the Unionists to give greater priority to rehousing Springtown residents and to increase the total number of houses available for let. They were told that consideration would be given to allocating houses which became

vacant to Springtown residents and that discussions had taken place with the rural district council and the NIHT about allocations of houses by them. In June the Springtown residents launched a petition calling for the families living there to be rehoused before the winter and for the camp to be closed. Later that month it was presented at Stormont with 21,428 signatures. The mayor and the chairman of the rural district council met the Minister of Health and Local Government on the issue, and Eddie McAteer also raised with the minister the additional problem of thirty-one subtenants, mostly the sons and daughters of Springtown residents, who had not been mentioned in the statement issued following his meeting with the two local authority leaders.

In July 1964 the corporation, the NIHT and the rural district council came to an agreement to share responsibility for housing Springtown families over a period of time, but this did not end the problem. Two weeks later Springtown residents staged a demonstration in the public gallery of the Guildhall, a tactic which was becoming a regular resort of protest groups. A delegation of the residents complained that they were not getting the priority in rehousing which had been promised them and demanded to know whether or not they would be moved before the winter. The mayor told them that he could not add to what had been said in the statement about the agreement between the three housing authorities. The corporation meeting proceeded with Nationalist protests and barracking and interjections from the protesters, until the mayor ordered the gallery to be cleared. Thereafter controversy over the issue subsided until June 1967, when eviction proceedings were taken against eleven families who had refused accommodation offered to them by the rural district council because it was at some distance from the city. In the end the matter was resolved amicably and Springtown was cleared of residents and demolished. It had, however, served to draw attention to the acute housing problem in Derry and like the HCL in Dungannon, it gave an example of effective protest and direct action.

A different form of direct action was taken by the Derry Housing Association, set up in October 1965. The association was chaired by John Hume and drew on the self-help traditions of the credit unions. It was inspired and created by Father Anthony Mulvey; he had been influenced by Father Eamonn Casey, later to become

Bishop of Galway, who had experience of setting up a housing association for Irish people in London. The association provided flats for young couples who after two years were given a return of half the rent they had paid to be used as a deposit on the purchase of a house. In the first year one hundred families were housed through the scheme. Another project resulted in the erection of twenty-seven houses on the Buncrana Road, in the South ward. But the association was frustrated in its attempts to build larger schemes in the Waterside and in the North ward on the site of the old Birmingham Sound Reproducers factory. The corporation cited planning and zoning regulations for refusing these applications but it was generally assumed that the real reason was that the new houses would have been built in Unionist-controlled wards but would have been inhabited by Catholics.

Underpinning all of these disputes was a suspicion, amounting to a certainty in the minds of most Catholics, that the Unionists were unwilling to provide substantial new housing and to extend the city boundary because that would upset the existing political balance. Because of overcrowding in the South ward, any major new development would have to take place in the other two wards. This in turn would mean shifting Catholics into these wards. A boundary extension would require new electoral boundaries and these could not easily be adjusted so as to retain Unionist minority control. In addition, better housing conditions, more industrial development, and the fillip for the city that would result from siting the new university there would reduce the flow of Catholics from Derry. By the mid-1960s opponents of the Unionists were firmly convinced that the party, both in the Guildhall and in Stormont, made a simple equation that what was good for Derry was bad for the Unionists and vice versa.

The bitterness created by these disputes and the importance of housing as an issue not only in Derry but in the United Kingdom as a whole in this period helps to explain the choice of this issue as a focus for agitation by the radical leftists of the DHAC. The general bitterness also helps to explain why the DHAC was tolerated within the Catholic community. The intensely provincial, Catholic and Nationalist environment within which the DHAC operated was not conducive to its kind of class-based, quasi-Marxist political rhetoric which would, ten years earlier, probably have unleashed a

backlash that it would have found difficult to survive; even the mild leftism of Stephen McGonagle had in the past made him an object of suspicion among Derry Catholics. The DHAC did, in fact, provoke a backlash but it was by no means as intense as the persecution which many earlier Irish leftists had to suffer. By the mid-1960s the influence of Irish McCarthyism was beginning to wane and there was a generally more tolerant atmosphere, which even Derry shared. But what was probably more significant was the fact that the target of the DHAC, the Unionist administration at the Guildhall, was so widely execrated and the fact that the ammunition it fired had already been prepared by more traditional anti-Unionists.

The DHAC originated in the abortive attempt to set up a branch of NICRA in Derry. One of those who had attended the initial meeting in September 1967, an independent radical Matt O'Leary, had been dissatisfied with the aims of NICRA. He wanted a campaign of direct action and mass protest, not an organisation which would take up individual cases of discrimination. He organised a meeting of some of the more militant people who had attended the NICRA meeting and about two months later the DHAC was launched. It attracted some of the activists of the DUAC and leftists from both the NILP and the republican movement. O'Leary was elected chairman and he immediately drew criticism on the committee. During a DHAC demonstration in the Guildhall, Alderman Hegarty of the Nationalist Party called out to the demonstrators: 'It is just unfortunate that you have come under the influence of card-bearing members of the Communist committee.' In July 1968, O'Leary resigned from the chair because, he said, he had 'become the target of agents of the establishment and their many Judases'. In November he called a press conference to deny that he was a member of the CPNI. He was a Marxist and might be called a 'Christian Communist', but he could not answer the question 'was he a communist?' directly, he could only state his beliefs.¹⁷

The first DHAC demonstration took place when its members turned up, uninvited, to the March 1968 meeting of the council. Despite the efforts of the mayor to stop him, one of its number read out a statement:

[The DHAC] regarded the Corporation as representing primarily the interests of property owners and business speculators and not the

interests of the working class of Derry. They demanded that the Corporation immediately extend the city boundary and embark on a crash housing programme. They demanded the immediate appointment of a rent assessment officer and a halt to all rent increases. Tenants . . . were no longer prepared to accept the appalling housing conditions and would take whatever action was necessary . . . 'Finally we believe that the only long-term solution to the social cancers which beset Derry lies in the establishment of workers' power and public ownership of all land, banks and industries. The formation of this committee marks the beginning of a mass movement away from the false political leaders and against the exploiting capitalist class who have in their wake a trail of human misery, degradation and decay.'¹⁸

During the reading of the statement the Unionists withdrew; the Nationalists stayed but Alderman Hegarty made his accusation about Communists. Eventually the police were called and the protesters left quietly. The language of their statement was more extreme and militant than that of earlier protest groups but the concrete demands were already the common currency of anti-Unionists in the city and, as such, were neither new nor especially radical. An indication of the tension between these moderate demands and the DHAC's extreme rhetoric was the fact that almost immediately after this first demonstration there was a split. Nine of the seventeen original members resigned, claiming that the DHAC was being used to further the aims of a 'political group'. They set up a new organisation called the Sub-Tenants' Committee, which would campaign 'not on political but on humanitarian grounds'. However, it quickly disappeared from sight and was never an effective rival to the DHAC.

In May the DHAC was back at the Guildhall, where Matt O'Leary told the corporation that its members 'filled him with nausea'. Members of the DHAC showed their distaste for the Nationalists when Councillor James Doherty and some Nationalist supporters in the gallery created a disturbance. The DHAC withdrew from the chamber and said that it 'did not wish to become involved in another pseudo-sectarian Puck Fair'. The DHAC's policy was to 'go through all the existing channels before taking extreme action'.¹⁹ It had made its final appeal to the corporation and the response had been unsatisfactory.

Its next action was much more original. One DHAC member had discovered John Wilson, his wife and two children living in a small caravan in the Brandywell. Although one of the children suffered from tuberculosis, the corporation housing department had told them that they were unlikely to be housed. According to Eamonn McCann:

Mr Wilson's case was tailor-made. On 22 June, a Saturday, about ten of us manhandled the Wilsons' caravan on to the Lecky Road, the main artery through the Bogside, and parked it broadside in the middle of the road, stopping all the traffic. We distributed leaflets in the surrounding streets explaining that we intended to keep the caravan there for twenty-four hours as a protest against the Wilsons' living conditions and calling for support. We then phoned the police, the mayor and the newspapers, inviting each to come and see.²⁰

The mayor did not respond, but the police did, although they took no action and the caravan stayed put for twenty-four hours. The DHAC announced that the exercise would be repeated the following weekend; although the police warned that they would have to intervene this time, the demonstration went ahead and was extended to forty-eight hours. It was decided to block the city centre the next weekend, but during the week the Wilsons were given a house and eleven DHAC members and supporters were summonsed.

Among those brought to trial were Finbar O'Doherty, Eamonn McCann, Matt O'Leary, Eamonn Melaugh, Jerry Mallett and Janet Willcock. All the defendants were bound over for two years on a personal bail of £350 and some were also fined. After the hearing Willcock issued a statement saying that the action had been symbolic: 'They could not move the hovels in which hundreds of decent men and women were forced to live in deprivation and degradation, or they would.'²¹ She forecast that if nothing were done, violence would erupt. That was why they had taken non-violent direct action. The members of the DHAC were delighted with the outcome:

It had very publicly been made clear that outrageous tactics worked, that blocking roads worked better than MPs' intervention . . . The court proceedings provided us with a platform; fines and suspended

sentences conferred on us an aura of minor martyrdom . . . We really began to believe that we had the Nationalist Party on the run.²²

The next demonstration was on 3 July 1968 at the opening of a new carriageway of the Craigavon Bridge. No sooner had the mayor cut the tape than five DHAC members ran to the centre of the road and sat down, holding up placards. Finbar O'Doherty, John Lafferty, John Anthony Doherty, Neil O'Donnell, Roderick Carlin and John McGettigan were charged in connection with the event. O'Doherty, who had not taken part in the obstruction, was fined £5 for allegedly leading the singing of 'We shall overcome' (a charge he denied), and the others were bound over for two years on £50 personal bail. Two Young Republicans, Carlin and O'Donnell, refused to enter bail and were sent to Belfast's Crumlin Road jail for one month, receiving a hero's welcome on their return.

In July, DHAC members accompanied three women and their seven children to the corporation housing manager's office to protest at the allocation of a house to a former Belfast prison officer. The women complained that the officer could only have been on the housing list for a few weeks, while they had waited for periods of between eighteen months and four years. In August the DHAC announced a public meeting at the Diamond with a list of invited speakers which included the Catholic Bishop of Derry, the mayor, three Nationalist councillors, a curate from St Eugene's Catholic Cathedral, the city's medical officer of health and John Hume. As they had expected, none of the invited speakers turned up, but Eamonn Melaugh, who did speak, forecast violence if houses were not built. The following week the DHAC picketed the house of a landlord who, they alleged, charged exorbitant rents and refused to supply rent books.

At the August meeting John White said that the DHAC intended to organise tenants' associations. During that summer, tenants' associations which had been formed in Rossville Flats, Meenan Park, Shantallow, Rossville Street, Lecky Road and Foyle Hill set up a central council to co-ordinate their activities. However, there is no evidence of any link with the DHAC. Among the issues which they pursued were proposed NIHT rent increases, resettlement grants, poor soundproofing and finishing in their accommodation

and the refusal of the NIHT to provide a communal television aerial for Rossville Flats which would enable the tenants to receive Radio Telefís Éireann (the Irish television network). The methods adopted by these tenants' associations were those of lobbying and persuasion and the issues they took up were specific grievances affecting their own members, not the problem of housing as it related to the political system in Northern Ireland. The DHAC was concerned with homelessness and the poor quality of housing as part of an assault on the capitalist system. It also contrasted with the tenants' associations in that it was not directly representative of those whose cause it espoused. It was a loose group of freewheeling radicals who had chosen a particularly acute social problem as a vehicle for broader political aims.

By the summer of 1968 the DHAC had achieved, according to its lights, considerable success in attracting publicity and in embarrassing the political establishment in Derry. But there was a problem about what to do next. It would be difficult to keep up the momentum of its campaign and in addition it had created tensions within the two organisations from which most of its members came, the NILP and the republican movement. It was under pressure, therefore, to find new issues and new methods of campaigning. According to McCann:

By this time our conscious, if unspoken, strategy was to provoke the police into over-reaction and thus spark off a mass reaction against the authorities. We assumed that we would be in control of the reaction, that we were strong enough to channel it. The one certain way to ensure a head-on clash . . . was to organise a non-Unionist march through the city centre.²³

The summer of 1968 saw the centenary of the birth of James Connolly, the man who epitomised both socialism and republicanism in Ireland. McCann suggests that the idea of having a march through the city centre to commemorate him was inspired by this desire to provoke the authorities; but given the importance of the centenary, it is likely that some kind of parade would have been organised in any case. McCann throws doubt on his own assertion when he reveals that the Connolly commemoration committee, which had been initiated by the DHAC radicals, was thrown into a 'welter of recrimination' when the planned march was abandoned.

He suggests that this was because of a dispute over the carrying of the Irish tricolour; the NILP would not march with it and the republicans would not march without it. He does not mention the fact that the police banned the parade from the city centre, thus testing to destruction the resolve of the radicals to confront them. Janet Willcock accused the RUC of 'trying to make a sectarian event out of an occasion which was intended to symbolise the non-sectarian nature of the ideals of Connolly'.²⁴ And it was this concern to avoid any sectarian connotations which seems to have been uppermost in the minds of the organisers. When the police tried to get them to accept a re-route through an entirely Catholic area, they abandoned the march altogether and confined the event to a rally which was held in the open air in a car park in Foyle Street.

This rally was addressed by Gerry Fitt, Betty Sinclair, Roddy Connolly, Sean Nolan of the Irish Workers' Party (the name of the Communist Party in the south), and three of the Young Turks from the Derry Labour and republican left. Janet Willcock called for the unity of all radical opinion in Derry; Eamonn McCann said that Terence O'Neill could not be distinguished from Lord Brookeborough and that reference to liberal unionism was double talk. The recently formed Council of Labour should summon a rank-and-file conference of all the radical political movements in Ireland and call on them to discuss the creation of an all-Ireland socialist party. In Derry they should take their politics out on to the streets and he urged an extension of direct action. Finbar O'Doherty presided and denounced the RUC ban on the original route: 'On future occasions the question of a police ban at the dictates of their Orange masters would be a matter for meeting in a different manner.'²⁵

Despite the débâcle over the march, the rally had been a success and the DHAC returned to the Guildhall in late August for its largest and most successful demonstration so far, in the council chamber. The *Derry Journal* of 30 August reported that shortly before the beginning of the corporation's monthly meeting, 'the Guildhall foyer was crowded with men, women and children waiting to voice their protest'. The NILP was represented by a strong contingent which carried the party banner and for the first time Ivan Cooper took a prominent part in the proceedings. When the mayor ordered the lobbyists standing round the side of the chamber to move into the public gallery, Cooper protested that they had every right to be

there: 'They are not peasants to be roped in.' Eamonn Melaugh told the mayor that he would have to take the consequences of any violence caused in trying to clear the chamber. In the event the crowd left quietly when the police arrived.

An impromptu meeting was held in the foyer, which began with the crowd singing 'We shall not be moved'. Finbar O'Doherty was cheered loudly when he mounted the stairway to address the crowd. He called for working-class unity across the sectarian divide and accused both Unionist and Nationalist members of the council of not representing the interests of the working class. Ivan Cooper called on the people of Derry to fight for their rights, 'as the Blacks in America were fighting'. Councillors were jeered and heckled as they emerged and the mayor was given the Nazi salute as he drove off. While the meeting in the foyer was going on, the corporation gave a clear indication that it felt under pressure. It adopted a motion from Councillor Doherty of the Nationalist Party, instructing the city architect to publish target dates for the completion of seven housing schemes and for all possible steps to be taken to press on with other housing projects. However, a Nationalist motion calling for the setting up of a small committee to be responsible for housing allocations was rejected. This would have abolished the system under which such allocations were the individual prerogative of the mayor. Eamonn McCann later scorned this proposal as evidence of 'political nappy-rash', since such a committee would have a built-in Unionist majority. The Nationalists, he said, had no idea of how to rectify Derry's social ills and alternated between 'semi-hysterical outbursts of militancy [and] silly moderate suggestions . . . building and burning bridges simultaneously'. The party's problem was that it was a Catholic organisation and could not see the class basis of the problems. It could, therefore, only operate as a 'movement of middle-class protest'.²⁶

However, McCann's assumption that because the DHAC espoused a theory of fundamental class antagonisms, this was accepted by all who applauded their actions, was not borne out by events. The DHAC had proved that new and imaginative methods of protest could make an impact on the Unionist administration at the Guildhall, but for most opponents of the Unionist Party in Derry this was a reason for achieving a greater degree of anti-Unionist unity in order to press home their advantage, not to become equally

hostile to the Nationalist Party. This was shown by the first major DHAC protest following the 5 October 1968 demonstration, when the committee supported an NILP delegation to the council on the housing issue. There was uproar when the council refused to hear the delegation and the meeting was adjourned, the Unionists withdrawing but the Nationalists remaining in their seats. Eamonn Melaugh went over to the mayor's chair and sat down. He shouted to the protesters: 'I ask you citizens of Derry, do you approve of a crash programme of 2,000 houses?' There were cries of 'yes'. They also approved his call for an extension of the boundary and he commented, 'This is democracy.' He then vacated the chair saying, 'on second thoughts, it is not a decent chair for a man to be seen in'.²⁷ When the Unionists returned they approved a motion for the council to go into committee, which would require the gallery to be cleared. At this point a protester shouted to Alderman Hegarty, 'I do not agree with your personal politics, but take the chair.' There were cries of 'take the chair' and Hegarty walked up to the mayor's chair. There was a minor scuffle between Hegarty and a Unionist councillor and before desisting, Hegarty shouted to the gallery: 'Whom do you want to see in the chair?' There were cries of 'Hegarty'. There was further confusion during which Hegarty told the Unionists, 'You were the cause of October Fifth', and Councillor Anderson called the protesters a 'rabble'. The protesters withdrew, but were angered by news that the council had again refused to meet the deputation, although accepting an amendment that the next general purposes committee would receive it. The DHAC and NILP supporters sought to get back into the chamber; finding the doors locked, they got in through the mayor's parlour and were joined in the gallery by Alderman Hegarty and Councillor Friel. Finally a police sergeant was called and the demonstrators withdrew.

What had occurred was precisely the sort of 'semi-hysterical outburst of militancy' which McCann had criticised, and far from exposing and isolating the Nationalists, an informal united front had been struck up and the politicians were being allowed to clamber onto the DHAC's bandwagon. This was hardly surprising since the differences were ones of style and rhetoric, not of fundamental demands. A week later, when the NILP delegation was received, the Nationalists were able to achieve concrete results by

having six important motions accepted, including acceptance of a points system and a committee for the allocation of houses. The DHAC had softened up the Unionists by publicising the housing situation in Derry and causing embarrassment for the Stormont government, but it was the Nationalists, as elected representatives, who were able to press home the advantage and force the concessions. The mayor also outlined plans which, if implemented, would have gone a long way towards mopping up the demand for houses in Derry. It is a matter for speculation whether or not this would have been enough to cut the ground from underneath the feet of the DHAC, but in any case the situation had been radically transformed by the 5 October march and by the prorogation of Londonderry Corporation announced on 22 November 1968 by the O'Neill government.

Even before 5 October 1968 it was clear that the radicals around the DHAC were beginning to lose the initiative and would be unable to consolidate themselves as an alternative leadership for anti-Unionists in the city. Eamonn McCann is frank about the lack of perspectives and the frenetic activity which characterised the Derry left. 'Often,' he notes, 'we resembled a rather violent community welfare body rather than a group of revolutionaries.'²⁸ In so far as they were looking forward, it was with a much more gradual pace of development in mind. McCann reveals parts of a 'perspectives document' which was circulated within the left of the NILP prior to 5 October. This was realistic about the difficulties of achieving anything substantial within the conservative and sectarian environment of Derry. It advocated action on housing and unemployment as a way in which Labour could begin to communicate with workers on both sides of the sectarian divide. The NILP should 'assume a quasi-educational function in tracing the connection between the political system and bad housing, unemployment and the negation of democracy'.²⁹ The Labour and republican radicals were essentially propagandists, not mass leaders. Their direct-action tactics did not aim at involving large numbers of people in militant action; they were propaganda stunts designed to attract an audience. They then harangued their audience with long and complex arguments about the exploitative nature of capitalism and the need for working-class unity which no one, apart from themselves, wanted to hear. It was not surprising that after 5 October,

leadership of the mass movement which they had evoked was gently, but firmly, taken out of their hands.

The 5 October march was very much outside the mainstream of Derry politics. The members of the DHAC represented only themselves and NICRA was a group of well-meaning outsiders. The smallness of the demonstration, compared with the Dungannon march, showed the modest scale of the organisers' influence, although McCann is probably right in saying that they made a mistake in starting it in hostile territory. But the events of 5 October traumatised the city as a whole and the rioting which followed showed that there was serious danger of a major sectarian conflict. The more respectable leaders of the Catholic community could not possibly sit back and leave things to the radicals of the DHAC.

An independent oppositional movement like the DHAC had emerged in Derry because of the narrowness of the Nationalist Party's politics. But because it already occupied the existing space for electoral politics, the layer of educated and professional younger community leaders who might have become involved in politics was atomised. John Hume is an example; he had become prominent in the credit union movement and from this had taken the leadership of the University for Derry Action Committee. But when that failed, he retired from public activity in order to pursue his own business interests. The events of 5 October convinced him of the need to get involved again. Other leaders, like McAteer, McGonagle, Wilton and Cooper, also saw the need to unite in order to provide responsible and moderate leadership.

On Tuesday 8 October there was a meeting in the City Hotel of fifteen of the left activists, and it was agreed to call another demonstration on Saturday, 12 October, over the same route. However, on the evening of Wednesday 9 October another meeting was called, also in the City Hotel. This time about 120 people turned up, mainly business and professional people, clergy, trade-unionists and political leaders. Their motives were later explained by the editor of the *Derry Journal*:

The new situation presented all the leaders of nationalist [sic] protest with a large and looming problem – how to harness the energies and enthusiasm of the people in a disciplined manner. Unless the growing spirit of the movement could be harnessed

coherently, mob rule would replace Unionist minority rule. Clear leadership was essential, and quickly.³⁰

Eamonn McCann was invited to take the chair and in *War and an Irish Town* he relates:

We, the organisers of the march, would be interested in what they had to say. Various speakers congratulated us on the marvellous work we had done over the past few months. A few expressed their regrets, apologies etc. that they had not 'been as active in the past as I would have liked'. All now urged that we now all work together. Finally it was proposed that the meeting elect a number of people who, together with the original organisers, would constitute a new committee. I explained that the meeting could elect anything it wished so long as it understood that the 'original organisers' . . . would make up their own minds what status, if any, to accord those elected.³¹

Eleven people were then elected from the floor. McCann refused to be nominated; he took the quite accurate view that the meeting had been called in order to incorporate the militants, attach the lustre of their achievements to a new, more moderate group of leaders and thus deny them any significant influence. But McCann found himself alone in his hostility to the new committee. The other radicals who were present argued that they should join with the eleven newly elected people, 'reasoning that since we held the initiative we would be able to force the pace, drag some of them along in our wake and force the others quickly to resign'.³² McCann 'stomped out', denouncing the new group as 'middle-aged, middle-class and middle-of-the-road'. He thus denied himself any further influence, but the radicals who did join what was now called the Derry Citizens' Action Committee did not dictate the pace of events and had little which was distinctive to say or propose within the new body. The strength of the DCAC was not simply that it had the backing of the existing leadership of anti-Unionist opinion in Derry, but also that it succeeded in attracting new people who had not previously been involved in any kind of political activity but who found unsuspected reservoirs of energy and initiative.

One such person was Dr Raymond McClean, medical officer of the local Du Pont factory. A man of sincere, but unformed, liberal political convictions, he had been angered by the events of

5 October and had given medical treatment to some of those injured on that day. Like many others, he attended the founding meeting out of a conviction that 'something had to be done'. He was bewildered by McCann's behaviour and felt too inexperienced to accept nomination to the committee. He was, however, appointed as one of the leaders of the stewards who were to control the DCAC's first demonstration, which was to be held on 19 October:

I didn't say much at those early stewards' meetings, but realised very quickly that many of the very excellent people present were somewhat lacking in the ordinary muscle a steward requires to carry out his job quietly and efficiently. As a result, during the next week, Micky McGuinness and myself toured the boxing clubs, the wrestling clubs and the youth clubs in the city, gathering as many new stewards as possible.³³

This demonstrated the advantages which the DCAC derived from its ability to attract fresh minds like McClean's and the good will it had from the Catholic community in general. It also showed that the DCAC, unlike the DHAC, took seriously the likely outcome of its actions and prepared carefully in order to give effect to its determination to avoid violence. This further increased its authority and enabled it to keep control over events, at least for the next few months. Its authority was quickly established when it called off the demonstration called by the meeting of radicals on 8 October. No one, not even McCann, challenged what was a fairly high-handed decision, given that the event had been called by a different body.

The first DCAC-organised protest took place on 19 October and consisted of a mass sit-down in Guildhall Square.³⁴ Between four thousand and five thousand people took part and the demands of the rally were for a crash housing programme, a fair points system for the allocation of houses and legal control over the letting of furnished accommodation. John Hume, addressing the protesters, stressed that 'we are a peaceful and dignified people, but . . . we are a determined people and we will stand for these social, economic and political injustices no longer'. He went on to deny that they had any political ends other than an end to discrimination: 'It has been said against this movement that its purpose is to unite Ireland and to unite the working class . . . We are not

dealing with political issues, civil rights is not a political issue but a moral issue.³⁵

The speeches of Finbar O'Doherty and Eamonn Melaugh were more militant in tone but they did not demur from Hume's denial of what had been the central purpose of the DHAC – the unity of the working class around a material grievance. Moreover, they were outstripped in militancy by Ivan Cooper, who pointed to the city walls and said: 'We are denied the right to walk within these walls which are loved by every citizen . . . In a peaceful civil rights march we will walk within the walls of this city . . . We mean business.'³⁶ There had been a morning of heavy rain before the event and this must have reduced the expected numbers present and made it more subdued than it might otherwise have been. Loyalist opposition was minimal; Major Ronald Bunting's Loyal Citizens of Ulster had threatened a counter-demonstration but this was banned by Minister of Home Affairs William Craig, and the RUC sealed off the stairways to the top of the walls and erected barriers which would prevent any clash. In the event the Loyal Citizens failed to appear and the only incident occurred when a small group began to sing 'God Save the Queen' as the demonstrators struck up with 'We shall overcome'. The counter-demonstrators were quickly surrounded by stewards and they dispersed quietly. Not long afterwards the protesters also dispersed, obeying the order of the chief steward to take with them the newspapers on which they had been sitting.

Good organisation, popular support and tacit collaboration from the police had enabled the DCAC to protest peacefully and responsibly. The next event was just as successful, although it sailed closer to the wind. On 2 November the ban on the 5 October route was challenged by fifteen DCAC members who walked it, accompanied by a large crowd who followed them on the footpaths. On reaching Carlisle Square, at the city end of Craigavon Bridge, they were jeered by a crowd of loyalists, but stewards lining the square prevented any clash. At Ferryquay Gate they were met by a blockade of loyalists which was being addressed by Bunting. There was a brief sit-down by some DCAC supporters but stewards quickly cleared a path. By this time the crowd following the marchers had spilled out across the roadway, effectively breaking the ban on a march within the city walls. They gathered in the Diamond where Eamonn Melaugh's eleven-year-old-son Martin read the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights and the crowd sang 'We shall overcome'. Shortly before the end of the rally, Bunting and his followers made their way up Ferryquay Street towards the Diamond but they were blocked by the police and the rally ended peacefully. Once it had dispersed, Bunting was allowed to hold a meeting in the Diamond and for a short time afterwards there was tension as rival groups of teenagers faced each other, but police and DCAC stewards persuaded them to disperse before any trouble broke out.

On 16 November the 5 October route was traversed again, this time by a mass demonstration. The police imposed a change of route which involved marching to Craigavon Bridge via Duke Street, instead of Distillery Brae and Spencer Road, and to the Diamond via John Street and Foyle Street instead of Carlisle Road. The DCAC accepted the change to Duke Street but rejected any further re-routing. A crowd, which the *Derry Journal* estimated at 15,000, set off across the bridge, to be brought to a halt by the stewards thirty yards from the police barriers at Carlisle Square. A delegation asked the police to clear the way and when this was refused, four DCAC members made a token protest by leaping over the barriers. John Hume returned to the head of the march to ask the demonstrators to accept this as the limit of their defiance. At this point a Union flag was waved by loyalists at the foot of Carlisle Road and there was a surge forward by DCAC supporters, but the stewards restrained them. Eventually the crowd dispersed down John Street; any enthusiasm for the original route was dampened by the presence of a large crowd of loyalists who were being restrained by the police behind the barriers. As it was, marchers approaching John Street had to dodge a fusillade of missiles thrown by the loyalists. The crowd made its way to the Diamond where there were some minor brushes with the police before stewards restored order. Some of the demonstrators were denied access to the Diamond by police tenders drawn up across Shipquay Street but after a time the RUC withdrew altogether and the Diamond was filled by the vast crowd. Some loyalists who approached the Diamond from Bishop Street were restrained by the police and the rally ended peacefully.

Once again the DCAC had shown its ability to mount a peaceful protest and to maintain discipline over its followers. But the committee's rank-and-file supporters were becoming increasingly

militant and ready to respond to provocation by loyalists. Peace hung by the slender thread of the DCAC's moral authority. Ray McClean describes his mild surprise on several occasions, when demonstrators accepted the authority of his steward's armband and obeyed his orders. Had the crowd not been prepared to accept the directions of the stewards at Carlisle Square and had they made an attempt to follow the original route, there would have been a major clash with the RUC and the loyalists and large-scale violence. It was in the course of these protests that the civil rights movement realised most fully its aims of defying authority without provoking violence or a direct sectarian confrontation. But the increasing activism of its supporters, particularly young Catholics living in ghetto areas, made it more and more difficult to exercise restraint. Following the 16 November demonstration, the DCAC was drawn into a series of fire-brigade operations, rushing around trying to prevent minor flare-ups. There had been a foretaste of this the previous Saturday, when a loyalist march and rally, led by Ian Paisley, was held in Derry. During a meeting at the Diamond police restrained attempts by loyalist and Catholic youths to break through their lines. Several smoke bombs were thrown by Catholic youngsters who had gathered at Shipquay Street, stones were thrown and a policeman was knocked unconscious. The police moved the youths down Shipquay Street, despite a brief sit-down which ended after an appeal by Paul Grace, chief steward of the DCAC. A few teenagers refused to leave with the others, but after about ten minutes they joined the crowd in Guildhall Square where the recently revived DUAC was holding a teach-in.

On Monday 18 November the DCAC was faced by a number of spontaneous demonstrations which could have resulted in trouble. The defendants arrested on 5 October were appearing at Derry courthouse and by the time the hearing was in progress, a crowd of about one hundred had gathered outside. About fifty people attempted to gain entrance, but were held back by the police. Paul Grace and Councillor James Doherty came out of the court and appealed for restraint, and after negotiations with the police about a dozen relatives of defendants were allowed in. After the short hearing, the crowd, by this time about three hundred strong, carried Gerry Fitt and Ivan Cooper shoulder high down Bishop Street, through the Diamond and down Shipquay Street to Guildhall

Square, where there was an impromptu meeting. There was a short scuffle with police, who thought the demonstrators were trying to get into the Guildhall, but Cooper successfully diffused the situation. They marched back to the Diamond and down Butcher Street, where they dispersed.

Some thirty minutes later a crowd of about four hundred dockers left work and marched through the city centre to their trade-union headquarters in Orchard Street. They told reporters that they were protesting at a police attack on the demonstrators at the Guildhall. They were addressed by their branch secretary, George Hamill, and by Vincent Coyle and John Hume on behalf of the DCAC. Hamill assured them that he had sent telegrams on their behalf to Terence O'Neill and Harold Wilson protesting about the incident at the Guildhall. They marched back to the docks and resumed work after another address by Hume. The DCAC had earlier called off a proposed token strike by shirt-factory workers, but at about 3 p.m. about one thousand workers, mostly young women from some half-dozen factories, left work and marched up Strand Road, through Guildhall Square and via Shipquay Street to the Diamond. They were addressed by Hume and McCann, who congratulated them on breaking the ban on city-centre marches. They marched back to Great James Street, where they dispersed. A group of about fifty teenagers who had followed them then set off on their own march through the banned area. They dispersed quietly after a short meeting on top of the city wall, over Magazine Gate, which again was addressed by Hume.

The following day Ivan Cooper appealed for an end to unplanned marches; clearly the leaders of the DCAC were aware of the large amount of good luck, as well as careful planning, which had enabled them to avoid any major violent incidents. On 9 December they responded to O'Neill's 'crossroads' address by announcing a moratorium on marches until 11 January 1969. In the meantime there had been a major change in the political landscape of Derry, with the announcement on 22 November of the imminent abolition of Londonderry Corporation and the appointment of a Development Commission to run the city's affairs. This fell far short of the change which the Catholic majority wanted – which was the transfer of power to their elected representatives – but the DCAC could afford to take a sanguine view of the change. The clear implication was that,

eventually, their full demands would be met and in the meantime the Unionists had been obliged to accept that they could no longer rule with total disregard for the feelings and aspirations of Derry's Catholics.

There was, therefore, something of a ritual character to the DCAC's statement on the appointment of the commission. It expressed resentment at the failure of the Government to concede majority rule, but welcomed the commission in principle, reserving judgement until full details were available. It pledged to continue the struggle for democratic representation but appealed to its supporters to continue to exercise restraint. John Patton, press officer of the DCAC, refused to comment on plans for a fresh campaign but it was clear that the committee was extremely cautious about getting involved in further large-scale demonstrations. Early in December it channelled its supporters' energies into a mass petition calling for the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Northern Ireland, obtaining the signatures of nearly half the population of the city. After the Queen's Speech at the opening of the new session of the Stormont parliament, it criticised the failure of the Government to give any commitment on a universal franchise and the Special Powers Act, but the only action it proposed was a low-key educational programme.

The year 1968 drew to a close and with it the life of Londonderry Corporation. It was entirely fitting that it should end with a sit-in at the Guildhall by a number of homeless families and with a dispute over the allocation of houses. The new year would see a disintegration of the unanimity of the DCAC's supporters; the committee had grave doubts about the wisdom of the PD march from Belfast to Derry, although it arranged material support and a welcoming rally for the marchers. These doubts were confirmed when the march was savagely assaulted at Burntollet Bridge and again on entering Derry. A Paisleyite rally in the Guildhall, and the DCAC rally to greet the marchers, led to serious rioting, and in the aftermath there were ugly incidents in which the police used violent and provocative tactics. By March things had settled down sufficiently for the DCAC to mount a mass demonstration which successfully traversed the original 5 October route – this time without diversions, but this was the last occasion on which the DCAC was able to organise a peaceful

mass demonstration. Already, by February, the unity of the committee had been disrupted by disputes over the incursion of some of its leading members into politics during the Stormont general election. In August violence, which began in Derry, spread to Belfast where it led to serious sectarian clashes and resulted in the intervention of the Westminster government and the arrival of British troops. In Derry the civil rights movement achieved its greatest moral authority and it was in the city that its authority first began to crumble.