



## **‘CIVIL RIGHTS - MISSED OPPORTUNITY’**

**West Belfast Festival / Féile an Phobail**

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The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) presented not only the people of Northern Ireland with opportunities to address many wrongs, but also presented the Stormont Government with an opportunity to address the many social, economic and political evils of an unbalanced, biased and discriminatory system of governance. Unfortunately, it rejected that opportunity.

Had the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and other progressive forces been allowed to pursue their legitimate demands, then those who engaged in the bloody and unnecessary carnage inflicted over three decades could never have purloined the issue of civil rights as a pretext to justify their despicable and unjustifiable campaign of terror. Thousands of lives were lost as was the opportunity for a united approach to tackling the social injustices of our society

### **Missed opportunities**

Opportunities were missed and opportunists have left us with a sad legacy. Fifty years on, our community is still divided: segregated education and segregated housing are still with us. Thirty percent of our children are living in poverty. Low income homes are the norm, and forty per cent of the population is blighted by fuel poverty. Life expectancy is a postcode lottery.

NICRA won many reforms but the fundamental change required to bring about real equality has yet to be realised. That can only come with the creation of a new future, based on a united working class, a bill of rights that rejects sectarianism and racism and that builds a democratic, secular and socialist society.

### **Need for change**

One of the first groupings in Irish society to recognise the need for change was the Republican Movement. Emerging from an armed campaign in the 1950s and 1960s, the new radical leadership of the movement, following detailed and searching internal examination and discussion, determined the need to develop a solid political philosophy that would champion the rights and interests of working class people across the island.

It accepted this challenge, and immediate measures were taken to establish structures designed to promote social, political and economic change across the island.

In the South, the republican leadership was to the fore on housing and other civil rights issues. These included the housing action campaign in the Dublin area and the rights of the Gaeltacht communities, which later developed into the 8 aims that included fishing rights, job creation, a comprehensive education plan and a radio station.

In furtherance of these aims the Republican Movement decided in 1963 to celebrate the bi-centenary of Wolfe Tone's birth by establishing the Wolfe Tone Society, an organisation that aimed to influence cultural and political trends in the country using democratic means.

### **Democratic reform**

The Wolfe Tone Society held meetings to establish a broad based civil rights movement. Support was sought from a wide range of political opinion and the fruit of these historic efforts was NICRA. The Republican Clubs, despite being banned by the Stormont regime, were to the forefront in the campaigning activity, and its membership played a key role in the development of NICRA. This work is continued today by the Workers Party, many of whom were founding members of NICRA fifty years ago. Members of the Republican Clubs chaired the Association.

The civil rights campaign also attracted opportunists willing to use the situation to their own advantage. As the 50th anniversary of the first civil rights march from Coalisland to Dungannon approaches, it is important that today's generation understands the politics and the purpose of the civil rights movement and the lessons it still holds.

NICRA was a broad based coalition and a mass movement dedicated to democratic reform. Some historians look to the civil rights movement in America and student protests in Paris as an inspiration for actions here. We have pointed to our own republican history of action on civil rights on the island earlier. Long after the streets of Paris were silent the towns and cities of here still resounded to the call for equality.

### **Better informed population**

The opening up of the education system in a more democratic fashion, which gave greater access to working class students, produced a more questioning and better informed population. NICRA's emergence and growth posed major political challenges at the time, not just for the ruling unionists, but also for the old nationalist party.

The Republican Movement had already moved on in preparation for a reshaped political landscape. Within a very short time, NICRA had secured major reform in the NI state. The RUC was disarmed, the B Specials disbanded, local government reformed, 'one man one vote' introduced, the NIHE formed, and by 1972, the Special Powers Act repealed. All these gains and the changes they laid the basis for, were to be undone. This was the result of a combination of recalcitrant unionism, reactionary armed nationalism, loyalist terror and state militarism.

## **Undermined**

Winston Churchill once said '*never let a good crisis go to waste*'. This might be applied to the manner in which the civil rights movement in NI was undermined. Creeping reactionary armed nationalism was to use the violent repression perpetrated against the civil rights movement as a pretext for decades of terror. The unionist fundamentalists drew community and political battle lines, and the old nationalist party re-booted itself as the SDLP.

What has been delivered since? There is still no Bill of Rights in NI; the Housing Executive is being dismantled; sectarianism is rampant, and institutionalised tribalism has reinforced British and Irish nationalism. This underscores the fact that communalism, nationalism and militarism not only carry with them their own abhorrent baggage but they also retard and impede political and social progress for generations. Yet, there are other serious lessons to be learnt by those who seek a better society for our people.

## **Sad legacy**

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