

“THE MOST HOPEFUL TIME”:
A CONTEXTUALIZATION AND
EVALUATION OF
NORTHERN IRISH STUDENT ACTIVISM
ON THE CUSP OF THE TROUBLES

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The Catholic civil rights movement—which swept through Northern Ireland in the late 1960s—was, in many ways, both a culmination of centuries' worth of sectarian tensions and a pivotal 'flashpoint' for the ensuing civil conflict known as the Troubles. Student activists involved in this movement were primarily affiliated with a radical political organization called People's Democracy (PD). Though PD's role in the Catholic civil rights movement was ultimately short-lived, its significance to the movement is unmistakable—giving rise to 'household name' leaders like Eamonn McCann, Michael Farrell, and Bernadette Devlin, and contributing to the swift polarization of moderates that set the tone for the next thirty years of civil violence.



Figure 1. Students led by Bernadette Devlin march in Belfast, October 9, 1968, as a young boy holds a poster of an outstretched hand—the newly-minted emblem of PD (Buzz Logan/Linen Hall Library). *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com>.



A Brief History of Northern Ireland

- The genesis of sectarianism
 - The establishment of the Church of England
 - The Plantation of Ulster
 - A centuries-long series of rebellions, uprisings, and movements
- The context and effects of the partition of Ireland

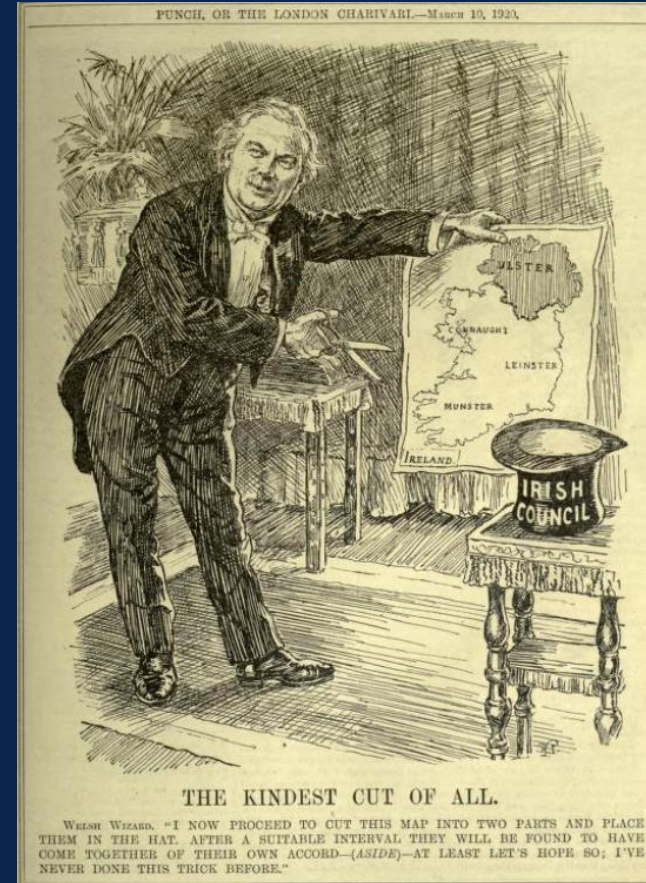


Figure 2. "The Kindest Cut of All," *Punch*, Volume CLVIII, March 10, 1920, p. 191.



The Catholic Civil Rights Movement

- Political and social grievances
 - The allocation of public housing
 - Disproportionate unemployment rates
 - Gerrymandering and the 'ratepayer' policy
- The birth of the movement
 - The Campaign for Social Justice and the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association
 - The Caledon Affair
- The early course of the movement
 - The August 24 march to Dungannon
 - The October 5 march in Derry

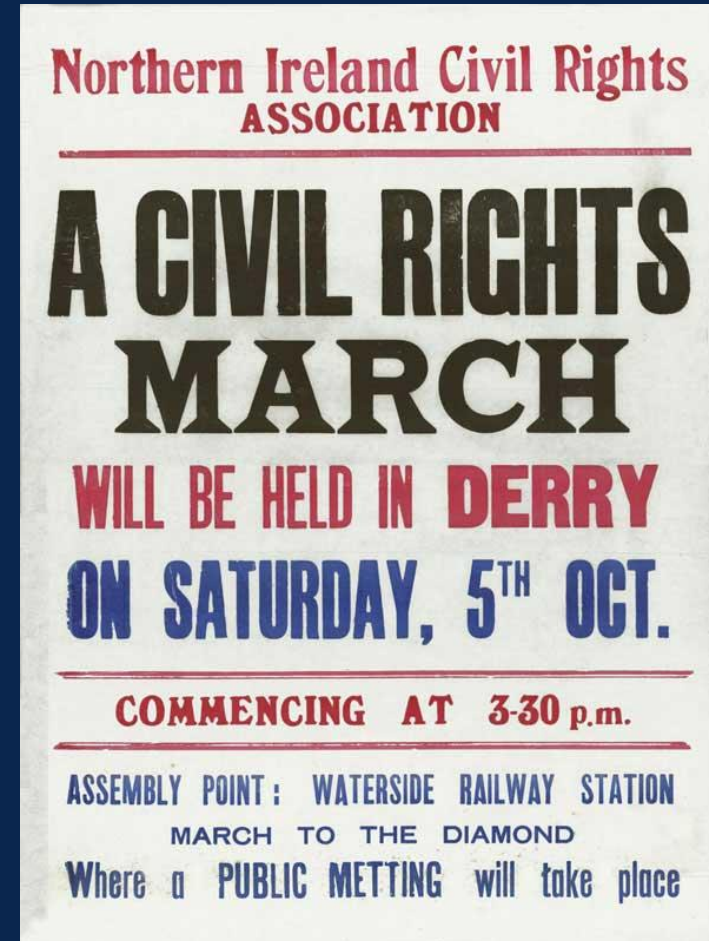


Figure 3. Poster for Derry Civil Rights March, October 5, 1968 (NICRA). *The Museum of Free Derry*. <https://museumoffreederry.org>.



Student Involvement in the Movement

- Student activism before 1968
- “Leaders of calibre and tenacity”¹
 - Michael Farrell
 - Eamonn McCann
 - Bernadette Devlin
- The People’s Democracy
 - Early initiatives
 - The ‘Long March’ and the Burntollet Bridge incident
 - The group’s deterioration



Figure 4. People’s Democracy March, January 1, 1969. *Raidió Teilifís Éireann Archives*. www.rte.ie/archives.



¹ Paul Arthur, *The People’s Democracy: 1968-73* (Belfast, UK: Blackstaff Press Limited, 1974), Chapter 1, n.p.



Figure 5. Michael Farrell as a PD candidate for Stormont, 1969 (John Walters). *Shutterstock*. <https://www.shutterstock.com>.



Figure 6. Eamonn McCann speaking in Derry, April 1969. *British Broadcasting Corporation*. <https://www.bbc.com/news>.



Figure 7. Bernadette Devlin as a PD candidate for Westminster, 1969. *Field Day*. <https://fieldday.ie>.

The Movement's Legacy: The Troubles

- Rioting and violence
 - Battle of the Bogside
- The arrival and intervention of British troops
- The resurgence of paramilitarism and the rebirth of the IRA
- The commencement of the Troubles



Figure 8. British soldiers in Northern Ireland with pro-IRA graffiti in the background (Mirrorpix/Getty). *Business Post*. <https://www.businesspost.ie>.



“The civil-rights movement:
people even to this day still think that
that was the best time, really, and that
was the most hopeful time.”²

Eamonn McCann



² Margot Gayle Backus, “‘Not Quite Philadelphia, Is It?': An Interview with Eamonn McCann,” *Eire-Ireland* 36, no. 3 (Winter 2001): 186.

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