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ARTICLE

Parliamentary Activism? Northern Irish Civil Rights and the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster

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Abstract

This article seeks both to reassess the dynamics of the Northern Irish civil rights movement during the mid to late 1960s, as well as to suggest a new understanding of the role of parliamentary forces in furthering the goals of social movements. During the 1960s, Northern Ireland underwent significant socio-political upheaval, centred on the rights of the region's Catholic minority and their long-term concerns regarding democratic representation, unemployment and housing. The resulting civil rights movement sought to avoid the traditional ethno-nationalist fault lines of Ulster politics and appealed directly to the British government and people, bypassing the devolved Stormont parliament with its permanent Protestant-Unionist majority. While vital work has been done to analyse this important period, aspects of British-based activism for civil rights in Northern Ireland have not yet been fully scrutinised. One key British group was the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster (CDU). Primarily made up of backbench Labour MPs, the CDU pursued civil rights at Westminster by advocating for governmental inquiries and legislative reform to address Catholic grievances. Although highly energetic, the CDU faced deep constitutional barriers and the organisation's efforts have generally been seen as unsuccessful. However, new archival work and a reappraisal of previous studies suggests a more nuanced view. The CDU had more influence than the organisation itself believed. This has implications not only for our understanding of the civil rights movement, but also for interpreting the actions of groups such as the CDU, described here as 'Parliamentary Activists', both historically and in the present day.

Keywords: civil rights; Northern Ireland; parliamentary activism; social movements; 1960s

From the mid-1960s, the Northern Irish civil rights movement sought to transform the status of Catholics living within the six counties of Northern Ireland,[1] which had

[1]Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone. Commonly referred to interchangeably as 'Northern Ireland' or 'Ulster', despite not including all nine of the historic counties of the province of Ulster.

existed as a semi-autonomous state within the United Kingdom since the Partition of Ireland in 1921.[2] The movement focused on long-term Catholic concerns regarding democratic representation, gerrymandering, employment and housing.[3] This was a significant departure from previous models of Catholic political organisation, which had focused largely on the 'constitutional question' and contesting Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom.

The movement was a broad but fractious coalition of political groups. Despite shared aims, their approaches and motives could differ wildly. The movement had its origins in the political activism of middle-class Catholic liberals, Irish Republicans and communists.[4] As it grew, it was seen as a potential vehicle for Irish reunification by some and remained a more limited reformist campaign for others. These tensions can be seen at an elite level in the founding leadership of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), established in January 1967 as an umbrella organisation seeking to guide the movement. When NICRA was first constituted, its thirteen-strong committee included members of the Campaign for Social Justice (CSJ), the Communist Party, the Belfast Wolfe Tone Society, the Belfast Trades Council, the Republican Labour Party, the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) and more.[5] One could argue that all major strains of non-Unionist Party politics were contained within the committee. There was also at least one member – Liam McMillen – who was active within the Irish Republican Army (IRA)[6] and the committee later co-opted Robin Cole, the chair of Queen's University Belfast Conservative and Unionist Association.[7] The movement's factions 'resembled games of street football played over a school summer holiday: everyone woke up each morning not knowing for certain whom they would be playing with and against'.[8]

Within these competing factions, the need to appeal to British political and public opinion was widely recognised. Northern Ireland's status as a largely self-governing region within the United Kingdom meant that there was, theoretically, a constitutional higher authority at Westminster to which the movement could appeal, thereby bypassing the devolved Stormont parliament's permanent Protestant-Unionist majority. In this regard, campaigners were relying in part on their understanding of the American civil rights movement, with its appeal to the federal government to act over the heads

[2]Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry, *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland* (1996), 107–9. Northern Ireland's statehood has been disputed by O'Leary and McGarry, suggesting that it rather represented a particularist regime. While recognising this argument, this article treats 1960s Northern Ireland as a state, albeit a deeply flawed one, which possessed self-governing powers over most domestic issues.

[3]Lorenzo Bosi, 'Explaining the Emergence Process of the Civil Rights Protest in Northern Ireland (1945–1968): Insights from a Relational Social Movement Approach', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 21 (2008), 242–71.

[4]Ronnie Munck, 'The Making of the Troubles in Northern Ireland', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 27 (1992), 211–29; Bosi, 'Explaining the Emergence Process of the Civil Rights Protest in Northern Ireland'; Bob Purdie, *Politics in the Streets: The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1990), 82–3.

[5]Purdie, *Politics in the Streets*, 132–3.

[6]Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (2004), 91.

[7]Purdie, *Politics in the Streets*, 134.

[8]Simon Prince and Geoffrey Warner, 'The IRA and Its Rivals: Political Competition and the Turn to Violence in the Early Troubles', *Contemporary British History*, 27 (2013), 271–96.

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of the state level authorities.[9] The disparity in civil and political rights for Northern Irish citizens, compared to their nominal compatriots in Britain, was at the core of NICRA's initial campaign. The lack of universal suffrage – which inspired the powerful 'one man, one vote' slogan – and the strictures of the Special Powers Act affected both unionist and nationalist communities. But political, class and demographic realities meant that Catholics felt these effects to a much greater extent.[10] The civil rights movement was therefore asking why Northern Irish Catholics, as citizens of the United Kingdom, could not be afforded the same rights as their compatriots in Britain.

The rhetoric of this argument moved away from more traditional themes of Catholic politics. NICRA's initial platform did not, for example, include a call to end Partition.[11] This approach was endorsed by a wide range of actors, from thinkers such as Desmond Greaves and Roy Johnston, who were both involved in the politicisation of the Republican movement, through to the Dungannon-based CSJ, a middle-class liberal organisation formed on the lines of the National Campaign for Civil Liberties (NCCL). It proved to be an effective counter to long-standing Unionist arguments that Catholics in Northern Ireland – almost universally of Irish Nationalist political persuasion – were 'disloyal' to the state when compared to the 'loyal' Protestant majority.[12] Such views were difficult to explain, let alone defend, to those unfamiliar with Northern Ireland's political history and, as the 1960s progressed, liberal Unionists were alive to the need for some kind of pre-emptive reform, lest their hand be forced. As we shall see, even before the movement took to the streets in 1968, Unionists were increasingly concerned about the impact of civil rights lobbying on Harold Wilson's Labour government.

The historical context and 'Parliamentary Activism'

Any attempt to mobilise British political and public opinion in support of Catholic grievances would require building relationships with British-based supporters. This took various guises. The CSJ hoped that by gathering detailed information on discrimination in housing and employment, to be circulated via partner organisations and the press, it might shine a light on the 'second class' nature of Catholic citizens in Northern Ireland. The London-based Connolly Association, meanwhile, sought to mobilise the working-class Irish diaspora within Britain. Its leading organiser, Desmond Greaves, had been lobbying British politicians to act on sectarian discrimination in Northern

[9]Gianluca De Fazio, 'Civil Rights Mobilization and Repression in Northern Ireland: A Comparison with the US Deep South', *The Sixties*, 2 (2009), 163–85.

[10]Niall Ó Dochartaigh and Thomas Leahy, 'Citizenship on the Ethnic Frontier: Nationality, Migration and Rights in Northern Ireland since 1920′, in *Enfranchising Ireland?*, ed. Steven G. Ellis (2018), 96–8.

[11]Jonathan Tonge, *Northern Ireland: Conflict and Change* (Abingdon, 2002), 38.

[12]Examples of this are numerous even at the most senior levels of Northern Irish politics. Speaking on 24 April 1934, Northern Irish prime minister Sir James Craig told Stormont that 'I have always said I am an Orangeman first and a politician and Member of this Parliament [Stormont] afterwards ... all I boast is that we are a Protestant Parliament and Protestant State' ('Parliamentary Debates, Northern Ireland House of Commons, Vol. XVI, Cols. 1091–95′, 24 Apr. 1934). He was speaking in defence of his cabinet colleague and future prime minister, Sir Basil Brooke, who had urged 'people not to employ Roman Catholics, who were 99 per cent disloyal' (*Belfast Newsletter*, 20 Mar. 1934, 7).

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Ireland since the mid-1950s.[13] Both organisations operated, in their own way, as pressure groups seeking to influence Parliament. This is a common goal of such groups in the British political system, as parliamentary influence on legislation is significant, and the potential to guide decision-making in this manner is an attractive goal for groups who might otherwise struggle to gain traction.[14]

With the formation of the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster (CDU) in 1965, a Westminster-based group now existed to lobby the government directly. Comprised largely of backbench Labour MPs, and a sister-organisation to the Campaign for Social Justice, the CDU acted as a conduit for civil rights concerns, possessing a direct access to the government enjoyed by no other group. What makes the case of the CDU additionally interesting is that – with a membership of roughly one hundred MPs at its peak – it theoretically represented around 15 per cent of MPs.[15] Even accounting for non-active members, the CDU could reasonably expect to influence parliamentary proceedings. However, according to existing literature, this does not appear to have been the case.

The CDU's difficulty was largely due to the convention that Parliament could not discuss issues 'delegated to the Government of Northern Ireland'. Since its establishment in 1923, the convention had effectively blocked all direct debate regarding Northern Ireland at Westminster.[16] This was part of what has been described as a 'zero sum game' concerning sovereignty, which over time developed into the complete inability of Westminster to intervene in Ulster without precipitating a constitutional crisis.[17] The convention was a source of continued frustration to the CDU's MPs, who had to find convoluted ways to circumvent it when speaking in the Commons, and it proved a barrier to direct legislative reform from Westminster. As Peter Rose notes, by mid-1968 the CDU itself thought that it had achieved nothing of note, despite four years of Labour government.[18] This view has been largely reflected by other scholars. Johnathan Moore cites the organisation's inability to build a large base of support within the wider Labour Party and trade unions as a key reason for this, and that '[The CDU] failed to understand that the Labour Party was genuinely terrified by the prospect of reopening the Irish Question'.[19] Bob Purdie concurs, suggesting that the CDU's ability to recruit at Westminster was not accompanied by a successful wider promulgation of its message to the public. This was despite the organisation's successful use of limited procedural loopholes to 'vent the grievances of anti-Unionists' in the House of Commons.[20] Scholars have therefore relied on the limited British press coverage of the CDU's actions, as well as the organisation's own analysis of its impact, to assess its role in the civil rights movement. However, by considering archives in Belfast

[13]Anthony Coughlan, 'C. Desmond Greaves, 1913–1988: An Obituary Essay', *Saothar*, 14 (1989), 5–15.

[14]Bill Coxall, *Pressure Groups in British Politics* (2001), 83.

[15]There were 630 MPs elected at the 1964 and 1966 general elections.

[16]Peter Rose, *How the Troubles Came to Northern Ireland* (2000), 20–1.

[17]Alvin Jackson, *Home rule: An Irish History, 1800–2000* (2003), 215.

[18]Rose, *How the Troubles Came to Northern Ireland*, 174.

[19]Jonathan Moore, 'The Labour Party and Northern Ireland in the 1960s', in *Culture and Politics in Northern Ireland, 1960–1990*, ed. Eamonn Hughes (Milton Keynes, 1991), 69–79.

[20]Purdie, *Politics in the Streets*, 110–11.

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and London, a more rounded view of the CDU's influence is possible. This article is not, therefore, an attempt to construct a full history of the CDU; it rather aims to focus on how the organisation managed to exert an influence, both in Westminster and, more surprisingly, in Stormont. In doing so, what follows presents us with a new understanding of the 'British Context' of the civil rights movement, expanding upon much of the general literature on the movement published since the end of the Troubles.[21]

This article also views the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster as a foundational example of 'Parliamentary Activism'. External pressure groups are well established in British politics and since the 1960s, MPs have been increasingly lobbied by a wide range of organised interests.[22] Yet the CDU was a pressure group *within* Westminster. It existed as a distinct parliamentary group – rather than as an informal collection of MPs driven by external lobbying – with a constitution, executive and even a regional branch in Manchester.[23] It raised funds, printed newsletters and actively recruited among newly elected Labour MPs. Kevin McNamara recalled that, on entering Parliament in January 1966, the first message he received in the House of Commons was a note inviting him to join the CDU.[24] However, unlike many formal groupings of MPs, it was not linked to a particular ideological wing or party faction. It could, for example, count members as diverse as the Tribune's Michael Foot and the Gaitskellite Roy Hattersley.[25] And it was not seen as a vehicle for political advancement by its leaders, remaining solely focused on its parliamentary campaign.

It appears then, that the CDU does not fit the mould of a traditional party-political faction, and neither can it be said to have functioned similarly to the external pressure groups with which it collaborated. Hence the suggestion that it represents a discrete form of activity, here labelled 'Parliamentary Activism'.

Formation and objectives

The CDU was formed on 2 June 1965 after an inaugural meeting in the House of Commons. Paul Rose MP was appointed chairman. The meeting's agenda suggests that forty-four MPs had initially agreed to sponsor the group. Patricia McCluskey of the CSJ travelled from Dungannon to speak, emphasising the need to give the Catholic minority a legal route to redress their grievances and attacking the use of the convention by

[21]Bosi, 'Explaining the Emergence Process of the Civil Rights Protest'; Simon Prince, *Northern Ireland's'68: Civil Rights, Global Revolt and the Origins of the Troubles* (Dublin, 2007); Chris Reynolds, 'The Collective European Memory of 1968: The Case of Northern Ireland', *Études irlandaises* (2011), 36 (1), 73–90; Rose, *How the Troubles Came to Northern Ireland*; Lorenzo Bosi and Gianluca De Fazio (eds.), *The Troubles in Northern Ireland and Theories of Social Movements* (Amsterdam, 2017).

[22]Philip Norton, *Parliament in British Politics* (Basingstoke, 2005), 199–203.

[23]Michael Herbert, *The Wearing of the Green: A Political History of the Irish in Manchester* (2001), 143.

[24]Kevin McNamara, 'Reflections on Aspects of Labour's Policy Towards Northern Ireland, 1966–70: A Personal Narrative', in *The British Labour Party and 20th Century Ireland*, ed. Laurence Marley (Manchester, 2016), 149.

[25]D3026/1, 'Letter from the CDU to the Movement for Colonial Freedom, 29th June 1968' (June 1968), Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI).

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ministers to avoid their responsibility for Northern Ireland.[26] While linked to the CSJ, the CDU was also part of the broader world of British left-wing activism. The organisation's president, Lord Fenner Brockway, was a founding member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and chairman of the Movement for Colonial Freedom (MCF), with which the CDU would affiliate.[27] The MCF had been an influential voice in opposition to the colonial 'emergencies' in Kenya, Malaya and Cyprus during the 1950s, seeking to shape opinion in Britain.[28] Brockway therefore represented a tangible link between the CDU and a wider campaigning ecosystem. He had also made several attempts to introduce a Private Members Bill on Race Relations while a Labour MP, in the face of opposition from successive Conservative governments.[29] Brockway's final attempt, in 1964, caused disquiet in Belfast when it was suggested that a future Labour government might take up Brockway's bill and extend it to Northern Ireland.[30]

The Labour Party itself had experienced a series of post-war disagreements on Ireland, focused on the 1949 Ireland Act, which culminated in a significant rebellion of sixty-nine Labour MPs.[31] While much of this opposition had been linked to the Anti-Partition League, there was also a group of Labour MPs – the 'Friends of Ireland' – who raised concerns around divergent Northern Irish and British standards of democratic norms and 'civic rights'.[32] The Friends of Ireland's leading spokesman, the County Down-born Geoffrey Bing MP, was adamant that Westminster had a serious responsibility towards Ulster and that class conflict was at the root of Northern Ireland's divided politics.[33] The CDU's public rejection of a 'constitutional' stance aligned it firmly with this tradition.[34]

Even before the CDU's foundation, the *Belfast Telegraph* was, in April 1965, quoting Paddy Byrne from the nascent organisation's five-man preliminary committee that 'anti-partition is entirely outside of the scope of the campaign'.[35] Byrne had been joint secretary of the Irish Republican Congress during the 1930s,[36] but his involvement with the CDU did not alter its publicly stated acceptance of the constitutional status quo. Yet, fears about Labour's perceived openness to nationalism remained. Relations with the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) were particularly fraught.

[26]D2993/1, 'Agenda for the Inaugural Meeting of the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster' (June 1965), PRONI; D2993/1, 'Speech by Mrs. Patricia McCluskey to the "Campaign for Democracy in Ulster" Group of MPs Delivered 2nd June 1965 at the Palace of Westminster' (Jun 1965), PRONI.

[27]David Howell, 'Brockway, (Archibald) Fenner, Baron Brockway (1888–1988), Politician and Campaigner', *ODNB*.

[28]Erik Linstrum, *Age of Emergency: Living with Violence at the End of the British Empire* (Oxford, 2023), 29.

[29]Mark Donnelly, *Sixties Britain: Culture, Society and Politics* (2014), 114; Simon Peplow, 'The "Linchpin for Success"? The Problematic Establishment of the 1965 Race Relations Act and its Conciliation Board', *Contemporary British History*, 31 (2017), 430–51.

[30]'Wilson Bombshell', *Belfast Newsletter*, 5 Oct. 1964, 1.

[31]Richard Rose, *Governing Without Consensus: An Irish perspective* (1971), 96.

[32]Bob Purdie, 'The Friends of Ireland: British Labour and Irish Nationalism, 1945–49′, in *Contemporary Irish Studies*, ed. Tom Gallagher and James O'Connell (Manchester, 1983), 81–94.

[33]*Ibid*., 88–9.

[34]Graham Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party: Protest, Pragmatism and Pessimism* (Manchester, 2004), 155.

[35]'"The Campaign for Democracy in Ulster"', *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 Apr. 1965, 12.

[36]Richard English, 'Socialism and Republican Schism in Ireland: The Emergence of The Republican Congress in 1934′, *Irish Historical Studies*, 27 (1990), 48–65.

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The NILP had reaffirmed its unionist stance in the late 1940s as it struggled to attract Protestant working-class voters who had 'rallied to the flag' in the post-war period.[37] When Byrne visited Belfast in 1967, the NILP pressed him to make the organisation 'friends of Ulster', in a pointed reference to the past Labour 'Friends of Ireland'.[38]

As Rose's autobiography suggests, the CDU was envisaged as a civil liberties pressure group. It was not an attempt to start a mass movement of its own, but rather to amplify the work of Northern Irish activists through action at Westminster. Focusing on the 'political and civil rights' that would later be the focus of NICRA's core campaign[39] the CDU's constitution established the following aims:

> To secure by the establishment of a Royal Commission, a full and impartial enquiry into the administration of Government in Northern Ireland, with particular reference to allegations of discrimination on religious or political grounds in the fields of housing and employment, and into the continued existence of the Special Powers Act.
>
> To bring electoral law in Northern Ireland at all levels into line with the rest of the United Kingdom and to examine electoral boundaries with a view to providing fair representation for all sections of the community.
>
> To amend the Race Relations Act to include discrimination on religious grounds, and to press for its operation throughout the whole of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland.[40]

While the constitution did not propose the overturning of the parliamentary convention, the need to do so was implicitly understood. Prior to the inaugural meeting, McCluskey had suggested to Rose that she was waiting to see 'how far the Westminster Unionists try to "gag" you with points of order'.[41] Indeed, as recently as February 1965, Rose and others had been blocked when trying to raise the issue of discrimination during a debate on Northern Ireland, through a combination of points of order raised by Unionist MPs and interventions by the Deputy Speaker.[42]

The CDU's other task was to educate MPs, not only in terms of civil rights, but also to address the general lack of interest in Northern Ireland at Westminster: 'Our main problem was to penetrate the blank wall of incomprehension and ignorance about Ulster. Members who knew about Saigon or Salisbury [Rhodesia] seemed to know nothing of Stormont.'[43] One contemporary commentator described British policy towards Northern Ireland as one of 'benign neglect'[44] and this only served to

[37]Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, 110–11.

[38]Aaron Edwards, *A History of the Northern Ireland Labour Party: Democratic Socialism and Sectarianism* (Manchester, 2009), 123–4.

[39]Ó Dochartaigh and Leahy, 'Citizenship on the Ethnic Frontier', 97–8.

[40]D3026/1, 'Constitution of CDU', PRONI.

[41]D2993/1, 'Letter from Patricia McCluskey to Paul Rose MP, 23 Apr. 1965', PRONI.

[42]House of Commons Debates [hereafter HC Deb] 22 Feb. 1965, vol. 707, cols. 45–105.

[43]Paul Rose, *Backbencher's Dilemma* (1981), 179.

[44]Richard Rose, *Northern Ireland: A Time of Choice* (1976), 20.

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further Westminster's disinterest. Rose had personal experience of this. While parliamentary private secretary to Barbara Castle he was astonished when she asked why he was so concerned about Northern Ireland, rather than 'Vietnam or Rhodesia'.[45] In one sense then, the CDU was organising along conventional lines: using parliamentary procedure, lobbying and the press to further their cause. Yet simultaneously, it was seeking to raise an issue that had become a taboo at Westminster and break four decades of convention.

Early efforts and the 1966 General Election

During its first year of activity, the CDU made several attempts to raise the civil rights cause at Westminster. Although unsuccessful in breaking the convention, these attempts show both the organisation's tactical approach and the concerns this raised, not in London, but Belfast. A notable early attempt came on 26 October 1965, during the debate on Northern Ireland which opened the new parliamentary session. This was seen as a fresh opportunity to challenge the convention, with the CSJ circulating a briefing to Labour MPs beforehand that highlighted allegations of housing discrimination and concluded that 'no reasonable person could possibly dismiss this travesty of British Justice by saying that: "The matters in question come within the field of responsibility of the Northern Ireland Parliament."'[46] Although much of the debate was focused on the aircraft industry and the closure of Royal Navy facilities in Derry, a group of CDU MPs – Bernard Floud, Eric Heffer, Simon Mahon and Eric Ogden – all attempted to raise the issues of discrimination. Despite repeated interventions, they were ruled out of order.[47]

Paul Rose was more successful. He had visited Northern Ireland in the days before the debate, fulfilling the 'solemn undertaking' made during the 1964 General Election campaign to do so. Hosted by the NILP's Charles Brett, Rose's itinerary shows that he visited Belfast, Derry and Dungannon, meeting with John Hume, the CSJ, Home Affairs Minister Brian McConnell, Republican Labour MPs Harry Diamond and Gerry Fitt, and members of the NILP.[48] Unlike later visits, Rose's short tour went largely unremarked upon. It was reported as a fact-finding visit, with Rose hoping to raise the importance of regional development during the upcoming debate.[49] This is what he did, opening his speech in the Commons by linking Northern Ireland's fortunes to the success of the government's national economic plan, and calling for greater action from the Board of Trade – a Whitehall body – to promote Northern Irish growth and exports.[50] Yet, Rose also partly circumvented the convention, challenging Unionist MPs on their record of speaking and voting on British legislation; he also suggested a review of electoral boundaries, and the appointment of a parliamentary ombudsman for Northern Ireland. Unionist MPs could not 'have their cake and eat it' indefinitely when it came to

[45]'Paul Rose, Labour MP – Obituary', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 Feb. 2016, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/12158044/Paul-Rose-Labour-MP-obituary.html (accessed 7 Jul. 2025).

[46]D2993/1, 'Draft Letter to MPs from the Campaign for Social Justice, October 1965', PRONI.

[47]HC Deb, 26 Oct. 1965, vol. 718, cols. 22–114.

[48]D2993/1, 'Visit of Mr Paul Rose MP, 24–25th October 1965', PRONI.

[49]'Labour MP on Fact-finding Tour', *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 Oct. 1965, 9.

[50]HC Deb, 26 Oct. 1965, vol .718, cols. 22–114.

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their relationship with Westminster, Rose said. He concluded in language that typified the quasi-romantic view of the 'Irish Question' still common in Westminster:

> I hope that the Government will pay real attention to the economic needs of the area and that, tactfully and if necessary, in private, pressure will be brought to bear to try to get a bettering of relations between the two communities in the interests of all Irishmen ... the charm of Ireland and its people is bewitching, its politics are bewildering, but it is time that we bothered to do something about Northern Ireland, particularly economically. I believe that, in the long run, only the people of Northern Ireland themselves can decide their political future.[51]

In the Belfast press, there was mostly interest in the intervention of Northern Irish MPs during the debate.[52] However, the *Belfast Telegraph* noted that 'Government backbenchers took a lively interest in the debate, which was better attended than most Ulster debates in recent years.'[53] A few days later, the Northern Irish prime minister Terence O'Neill wrote to Robin Chichester-Clark, Unionist MP for Londonderry, that he was 'glad the Northern Ireland debate went off so quietly'.[54] He added that 'You perhaps know that Sam Napier [NILP party secretary] was sent over to stifle any further strident protests from Paul Rose and like-minded Labour Members about discrimination, etc.' This brief passage underscores the complex nature of the NILP–CDU relationship. Having hosted Rose in Belfast before the debate, the party's most senior official then travelled to Westminster to curtail his efforts.

The role of Unionist MPs at Westminster was a point of friction which the CDU sought to exploit. During the 1964–6 parliament, Labour bills on Rachmanism and Steel Nationalisation were both nearly defeated due to Unionist votes, as Wilson possessed only a single-digit majority. This precarious position caused Wilson to call the 1966 General Election after less than eighteen months in power. The election saw a substantial strengthening of Labour's power, with a new majority of ninety-eight MPs, the largest margin of victory for any government since 1945.[55] Yet, this did not end concerns about Unionist activity. In November 1966, while replying to a question from the CDU's Kevin McNamara, Wilson told the House of Commons that: 'There is certainly illogicality here ... when a government could have fallen on a Northern Ireland vote on "Rachmanism" in London although nothing could be said about housing conditions in Belfast.'[56] Records show that, in their discussions between 1964 and 1968, Wilson repeatedly emphasised to O'Neill the need to control the activity of Unionist MPs.[57]

[51]HC Deb, 26 Oct. 1965, vol. 718, cols. 22–114.

[52]"'MPs Hit Out in Debate on Ulster"', *Belfast Newsletter*, 27 Oct. 1965, 2.

[53]"'Hard-Hitting Debate on Ulster"', *ibid.*, 6.

[54]CAB/9/B/205/3, 'Letter from Terence O'Neill to Robin Chichester-Clark MP, 29th October 1965'.

[55]David Butler and Anthony King, *The British General Election of 1966* (1966), 259–60.

[56]HC Deb, 15 Nov. 1966, vol. 736, cols. 224–8; Rose, *How the Troubles Came to Northern Ireland*, 36.

[57]See: PREM 13/2266, 'NORTHERN IRELAND. Records of meetings with Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Terence O'Neill', The National Archives (TNA); PREM 13/2847, 'NORTHERN IRELAND. Visits of Prime Minister of Northern Ireland to London: Records of Meetings with Prime Minister; Part 2', TNA.

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During this period, the Westminster government's general attitude towards Unionism was also decidedly mixed, a situation which the CDU also hoped to leverage. While disinclined towards direct involvement in Northern Ireland, Wilson was willing to pressure the Stormont government, while remaining keen to operate through it, even after October 1968.[58] This suggests a wariness of the potential pitfalls of inflaming Unionist opinion – something which, as we shall see, O'Neill was keen to exploit. However, this wariness did not preclude efforts to encourage reform, however well caveated with talk of constitutional precedent, and Wilson publicly argued that the actions of 'thugs' and 'extremists' pressuring O'Neill should not be used as an excuse to rule out 'a fundamental reappraisal of our relations with Northern Ireland'.[59] Instead, concerns about alienating the unionist/loyalist population at large only developed fully after British troops were deployed to Northern Ireland in 1969. As Thomas Leahy notes, by the early 1970s, as key reforms were delayed 'British policy switched from appeasing nationalists to pacifying unionism'.[60] Fears of civil unrest from the Protestant majority helped to drive this change and led in turn to the increasing Catholic alienation. But it is important to emphasise that a genuine fear of a 'war on two fronts' within British security thinking developed only post-deployment.[61]

Thomas Hennessey has suggested that Wilson's large majority after 1966 negated the pressure which the CDU might have placed him under.[62] However, the picture is not so clear cut. Labour's increased majority meant that the government no longer risked Ulster Unionist MPs blocking legislation by voting with the Conservatives. Wilson therefore had greater leeway when seeking to address civil rights grievances, should he choose to do so. Of direct importance to the CDU, the new 1966 intake of MPs contained many members 'deeply concerned about human rights'.[63] The CDU was proactive in recruitment and its numbers increased after the election, so that its paper membership remained large enough theoretically to challenge the government's majority. While there is no evidence to suggest the CDU was considering such a course of action at this time, from 1966 onwards it could pursue its campaign from arguably a stronger position, even as Wilson found himself free of the practical challenges imposed by his previous, much smaller majority. Not only had the CDU gained a new cohort of members – including Gerry Fitt, the newly elected Republican Labour MP for West Belfast – but the Labour Whips could no longer keep restive backbenchers quiet with talk of a single-digit majority and the need to counter Unionist MPs.

In Fitt, the CDU had gained a new parliamentary figurehead who could act as a bridge between Ulster and Westminster. His impact was immediate, with his maiden speech taking place on 25 April 1966. Fitt was an experienced parliamentarian, having been a Belfast City Councillor since 1958 and a Stormont MP since 1962. He exploited the considerable latitude given to MPs during their maiden speech[64] to present the

[58]Geoffrey Warner, 'Putting Pressure on O'Neill', *Irish Studies Review*, 13 (2005), 13–31; Peter Neumann, *Britain's Long War: British Strategy in the Northern Ireland Conflict 1969–98* (2003), 43–4.

[59]HC Deb, 22 Oct. 1968, vol. 770, cols. 1087–90; HC Deb, 5 Nov. 1968, vol. 772, cols. 688–93.

[60]Thomas Leahy, *The Intelligence War against the IRA* (Cambridge, 2020), 15–17.

[61]Huw Bennett, *Uncivil War: The British Army and the Troubles, 1966–1975* (Cambridge, 2023), 59–61.

[62]Thomas Hennessey, *Northern Ireland: The Origins of The Troubles* (Dublin, 2005), 387.

[63]Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government, 1964–1970: A Personal Record* (1971), 270.

[64]During a maiden speech MPs are usually uninterrupted by points of order and free to speak on any issue.

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broad civil rights argument, using much of the same language previously employed by the CSJ and CDU.

Fitt first clarified that he should not be thought of as an 'Irish Republican' because he had not 'given up hope' in Westminster. He sought to represent his constituents in the House of Commons because 'I will be able to appeal to every reasonable Member in this Chamber, and, through them, to every reasonable member of the British public.' As with the wider civil rights movement, Fitt had recognised that Westminster's constitutional role in Northern Ireland could not be ignored, even if only to use it as a vehicle for change. On the franchise, Fitt was emphatic: 'I insist that Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom. The people there are British subjects and are entitled to the same rights and privileges as are possessed by any other persons living in these islands.' He also made direct reference to gerrymandering and a link between discrimination in housing allocations and the need for Unionist councils to ensure that 'anti-Unionist' voters did not become enfranchised as ratepayers. At any other time, these topics would have been impossible to raise under the auspices of the convention. He also summarised, most concisely, the core argument of the CDU in Westminster when he stated: 'I am not asking for preferential treatment or making an outlandish request on behalf of my constituency; I am asking for exactly what British constituents have.'[65]

With this reiteration of the 'British Rights' appeal, Fitt had, in the words of one writer, challenged Westminster with the proposition 'Here I am, a British subject, what are you going to do about it?'[66] Compared to previous attempts by the CDU to raise civil rights at Westminster, the speech was a milestone. As a Nationalist and Catholic politician, Fitt's insistence that Northern Ireland was 'integral' within the UK was doubly powerful. Not only was he bringing a rare, non-Unionist voice from Ulster to Parliament, but he was also demonstrating a rhetorical willingness to disregard what had been the prime shibboleth of Catholic politics in Northern Ireland for decades. Yet, his speech also demonstrated the power of the convention. For none of the allegations of discrimination and poor governance that Fitt made were new. Without the convention, any MP who possessed the campaign literature of the CSJ could have delivered a similar argument, albeit with far less emotional resonance.[67]

The speech caused Unionist MPs so much alarm that they sought an unprecedented right of reply.[68] The *Belfast Telegraph* predicted that Fitt and sympathetic Labour backbenchers would present an unfamiliar challenge to Unionist MPs and, while Westminster would be the venue for 'politically-charged' exchanges, 'The attack has to be met in Northern Ireland itself … and that defence must be the proof that the province is well and fairly governed and that devolution is a constitutional success.'[69] The paper generally represented liberal Unionism, and its editor, Jack Sayers, was an

[65]HC Deb, 25 Apr. 1966, vol. 727, cols. 366–497.

[66]Maurice Hayes, 'Fitt for Anything', *Irish Independent*, 10 Feb. 2007, https://www.independent.ie/news/fitt-for-anything/26275229.html (accessed 7 Jul. 2025).

[67]Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland, *Northern Ireland: The Plain Truth*, 1st ed. (Dungannon, 1964).

[68]'Anger at "Unfair" Maiden Speech', *Belfast Newsletter*, 26 Apr. 1966, 1; 'Unionists Demand Reply to Mr Fitt', *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 Apr. 1966, 1.

[69]'Viewpoint: Let Battle Commence', *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 Apr. 1966, 1.

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ally of Terence O'Neill.[70] Indeed, O'Neill would make similar arguments in the face of internal Unionist opposition to his reforms over the coming years.

By the summer of 1966, the CDU's post-election momentum meant that it could now directly influence government decision-making. We can see this in the contents of a briefing prepared for Wilson and Roy Jenkins in July 1966, ahead of a meeting with O'Neill. Describing the situation in Ulster, the document directly cited Fitt's interventions, Labour backbench opinion and recent deputations from the CDU.[71] The memo provided a clear breakdown of the major civil rights issues, particularly the 'long history' of gerrymandering and the use of housing allocations to ensure Unionist majorities in local government. It also described the domestic challenges faced by O'Neill, particularly the growing loyalist reaction to his liberalising agenda.

The meeting itself, held in Downing Street on 5 August 1966, was dominated by discussion of the political situation in Northern Ireland. O'Neill argued that implementing reforms too quickly might lead to a '1912 situation' – a repeat of the Home Rule crisis – while Wilson and Jenkins suggested franchise reform and the appointment of an independent Ombudsman to receive minority complaints. Both were key pillars of the CDU's programme and would, in theory, address the main civil rights grievances highlighted in the earlier memo. Even more directly, Wilson told O'Neill that he 'could not and would not' try to restrain indefinitely backbench MPs who pursued the issue at Westminster.[72] But he stopped short of a formal ultimatum. This is in line with the final recommendations of the pre-meeting briefing, which advised that any action from Westminster to suggest a lack of confidence in O'Neill would encourage 'extremist elements'.[73]

Four days later, the Northern Irish cabinet met to assess the situation. Ministers discussed a note by cabinet secretary Harold Black, who had accompanied O'Neill to London, which identified 'backbench pressure at Westminster' as the primary matter of concern. According to Black, Wilson had stated that a considerable number of Labour backbenchers were 'uneasy about certain aspects of Northern Ireland affairs'. As backbenchers could be expected to become more fractious during the life of a parliament, Wilson suggested that pressure on his government to act might become irresistible unless progress was made.[74] The Northern Irish cabinet noted that 'a threat seemed to be hanging over Northern Ireland'.[75]

The CDU did not, however, know what was being said behind closed doors in Downing Street, let alone at Stormont. Despite the organisation's links to the party of government, it had no direct knowledge of cabinet-level discussions. As such, it was unaware of its influence on debates between the prime ministers and was unable to communicate this success to its supporters. This was a fundamental problem with the approach the CDU took and is a weakness of 'Parliamentary Activism' more generally.

[70]Kenneth Bloomfield, *Stormont in Crisis: A Memoir* (Belfast, 1994), 101.

[71]CAB 164/574, 'Memo for Prime Minister and Home Secretary on the situation in Northern Ireland, 27th July 1966', TNA.

[72]PREM 13/2266, 'Notes of Meeting between Prime Minister and Northern Irish Prime Minister, 5th August 1966', TNA.

[73]CAB 164/574, 'Memo for Prime Minister and Home Secretary, 27th July 1966', TNA.

[74]CAB/4/1338, 'Note: Discussions at Downing Street on 5th August 1966', PRONI.

[75]CAB/4/1338, 'Supplemental Cabinet Conclusions: Meeting of 9th August 1966', PRONI.

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Maintaining support for elite-level lobbying requires either tangible public success or a consensus that elites can be trusted to deliver on their assurances. The CDU could provide neither.

1967: the CDU, in Ulster

The CDU, despite its name, had never intended to campaign directly *in* Ulster. While it was prepared to clash with Unionists at Westminster, it was firmly focused on activity within Britain. However, the CDU's growing voice could not help but influence the Unionist political elite in Northern Ireland. The presence of an organised group at Westminster calling for reform was of deep concern to Unionist politicians, who viewed it as a firmly 'anti-Unionist' group. An early indication of this unease came in January 1967, when the *Belfast Telegraph*'s London Editor, Percy Dymond, predicted what the year ahead might hold for relations with Britain. After years of relative lack of interest in Ulster:

> With the arrival in office of Mr Harold Wilson, and on the Labour backbenches of a number of new MPs showing active concern over Northern Ireland grievances, the subject reacquired an urgency, and ability to stir the passions in the Commons, that it had not possessed for more than a decade.[76]

A failure to carry through reform, Dymond warned, risked the British public becoming 'impatient over outdated attitudes that it cannot comprehend. Such impatience could soon have embarrassing expression at Westminster.'

The general tone of the article was optimistic, and it presented senior figures in the British government as sympathetic to O'Neill's efforts. But the warning was plain, and the influence of the CDU was clear: 'Mr Wilson cannot ignore the feelings about Northern Ireland among so large a section of his backbenchers.' There was not unlimited patience at Westminster. Indeed, shortly after the article was published, O'Neill and a delegation of ministers visited London on 12 January 1967 for a 'frank and friendly exchange of views'.[77] Wilson told his guests that there was still 'strong feeling' on his backbenches about discrimination in Northern Ireland, particularly in local government, and the ongoing operation of the convention. He suggested that, without reform, MPs might push for a change in the financial arrangements with Stormont, or that he would need to explore a more comprehensive change in the relationship between the two parliaments in the coming years.[78] When O'Neill returned to Belfast, he told his wider cabinet that direct legislative intervention from Westminster appeared imminent.[79] Discussion turned on what potential financial pressure the London government might be able to apply, and what level of reform would be acceptable to forestall this. Wilson's 'strongly feeling backbenchers' were clearly having an

[76]'Attitudes in Britain in 1967: Why Ulster Still Stirs Feelings in Whitehall', *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 Jan. 1967, 12.

[77]PREM 13/2266, 'Downing Street Press Release, 12th January 1967', TNA.

[78]PREM 13/2266, 'Notes of Meeting Between the Prime Minister, The Northern Irish Prime Minister and Members of Both Cabinets, 12th January 1967', TNA.

[79]CAB/4/1353, 'Cabinet Conclusions: Meeting of 24th January 1967', PRONI.

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influence. Adding further to Unionist concern, on 14 April 1967, a CDU delegation of Paul Rose, Maurice Miller and Stan Orme arrived in Northern Ireland. Over three days, they visited Belfast, Dungannon, Coalisland, Strabane and Derry. They met with civil rights campaigners – including Austin Currie, Betty Sinclair and a group of Derry activists led by John Hume – as well as NILP, Nationalist and independent politicians. There was no meeting with a government representative.

In its subsequent report – sent to Wilson and Jenkins, and then circulated throughout Westminster – the CDU delegation repeated claims of discrimination in housing and employment, as well as of electoral malpractice. Derry was cited specifically regarding gerrymandering. There was also mention of the economic challenges facing Northern Ireland in both shipbuilding and agriculture. The report recommended the establishment of a 'Royal Commission to investigate the operation of the Government of Ireland Act and Ireland Acts'.[80] This would effectively be an inquiry into both the governance of Northern Ireland and alleged religious discrimination, against which the Government of Ireland Act contained provisions. The visit also produced a flurry of press coverage. The *Belfast Telegraph* reported on the visit on a daily basis, as well as several days later on the CDU's subsequent recommendation to Harold Wilson for a Royal Commission.[81] In line with the paper's O'Neillite editorial line, it also warned that 'it would be a mistake to dismiss the latest emanation from Mr. Paul Rose, following hard on the heels of the strangely one-eyed and out-of-character report in "The Times" [see below] as mere sniping'. In the nationalist press, the *Derry Journal* carried a photo of the visiting MPs on its front page, enthusiastically reporting that the CDU delegation had identified Derry as the prime example of the injustice they were seeking to highlight: 'Derry focal point of Westminster fight'.[82] Meanwhile, when interviewed by Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), Rose was asked how it felt to be described by some as 'The most hated man in Ulsterrafter the Pope'.[83]

The visit was closely followed by a lengthy article in *The Times* on 24 April 1967 titled 'Ulster's Second-Class Citizens' which reported widespread accusations of religious discrimination following an investigation by the paper's news team.[84] The article, in a traditionally Tory-leaning newspaper, detailed allegations of religious bias in the planning of the new city of Craigavon, as well as reporting on discrepancies in the local electoral system, local authority housing and employment. Citing various civil rights groups – including the CSJ and 'Labour backbenchers' – *The Times* also interviewed William Stewart, the Unionist chair of Dungannon Council, and O'Neill himself. Stewart told the paper that 'There has always been segregation [in housing]' and that the practice of housing Catholics in electoral wards already represented by Catholic councillors had not been changed since the 1920s. He was effectively admitting to gerrymandering. Meanwhile, O'Neill was described as responding to detailed evidence of discrimination presented by *The Times* with 'charmingly varied versions of the proposition "Reform takes a long time"'. Unsurprisingly, such unusually detailed coverage of

[80]Rose, *Backbencher's Dilemma*, 194–8.

[81]'Ulster: Rose Seeks a Royal Commission', *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 Apr. 1967, 9.

[82]'Derry Focal Point of Westminster Fight', *Derry Journal*, 18 Apr. 1967, 1.

[83]'The Most Hated Man in Ireland?', *RTÉ News*, 25 Apr. 1967, https://www.rte.ie/archives/2022/0330/1289274-paul-rose-on-northern-ireland/ (accessed 22 Jan. 2025).

[84]'Ulster's "Second Class Citizens"', *The Times*, 24 Apr. 1967, 8.

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Ulster in a Fleet Street newspaper caused consternation. The *Belfast Telegraph* reported "'Times" probe says there is electoral discrimination' and placed particular emphasis on O'Neill's quotes.[85] Political Correspondent Roy Lilley argued that the article's timing – just as the CDU were presenting the results of their fact-finding trip and after the recent announcement of the Society of Labour Lawyers' inquiry into Northern Ireland – placed mounting pressure on O'Neill. 'There is apprehension that the build-up of attack[s] ... will increase a climate of hostility, making difficult the task of those anxious to see the liberalisation of Northern Ireland.'[86]

The *Times* article presented readers in Britain with a grim picture of discrimination in Ulster. It provoked a direct response from O'Neill, who despite having been interviewed, appears to have been taken aback by the piece. A press release issued in response called much of the article 'a mere repetition of the stock-in-trade of the so called "Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland" ... [whose publications] are highly tedious and often inaccurate'.[87] Subsequently given right of reply, a full response from O'Neill appeared in *The Times* a few days later. O'Neill insisted that he had promoted a 'more friendly and relaxed' atmosphere between communities and that journalists did not have to content themselves with 'the realism of a politician, who has to cope with problems on the spot'. Concluding, O'Neill directly rebuffed the idea of Westminster legislation:

> Certainly, this is not the moment for an ill-judged intervention in our affairs. As I said at the beginning, the long history of Anglo-Irish relationships warns that such intervention may produce effects which no one can foresee ... For, in the last resort, a truly happy and stable society [in Northern Ireland] must depend not upon legislation by Stormont or by Westminster but upon mutual trust.[88]

The article was later reprinted as a pamphlet and circulated to MPs, the cost of which appears to have been borne by the Northern Ireland government itself.[89]

While this was aimed at an audience in Britain, O'Neill also sought to assure his domestic supporters that he was not to be cowed by Westminster. The same day as his *Times* article was printed, O'Neill used his speech at the Annual Conference of the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) to deliver a strongly worded rebuke to the CDU, Rose and Fitt. The UUC was the Unionist Party's de facto governing body, and that O'Neill used his address in this manner is clear evidence of the seriousness with which he viewed the CDU threat. His focus was on Rose's visit to Northern Ireland, and the subsequent open letter sent by the CDU, repeating its call for a Royal Commission.[90] Delivering a point-by-point response, O'Neill warned of the 'pitfalls of pontificating about Northern

[85]"'Times" Probe Says There Is Electoral Discrimination', *Belfast Telegraph*, 24 Apr. 1967, 4.

[86]'O'Neill Hits Back: Strain on Relations with Britain', *ibid*., 1.

[87]CAB/9/B/205/4, 'Northern Ireland Information Service Press Release, 24th April 1967', PRONI.

[88]'Ulster's Prime Minister Replies to His Critics', *The Times*, 28 Apr. 1967, 11.

[89]CAB/9/B/205/4, 'Letter from T. M. Roberts to Eric Montgomery, 4th May 1967', PRONI; Shore/6/14, "'Ulster's Prime Minister Replies to his Critics" – Article reprinted from *The Times*, 28 Apr. 1967', London School of Economics (LSE) Archive.

[90]CAB/9/B/205/5, 'An Open Letter to Captain Terence O'Neill, MP., PC., Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, April 1967', PRONI.

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Ireland affairs without intimate knowledge of the social and historical background', and described the recent visit as 'the weekend charade enacted by Mr. Paul Rose and his colleagues'. O'Neill denied the existence of discrimination, citing economic and historical reasons for the apparent disparity between Catholic and Protestant fortunes. He emphasised his own efforts to modernise the region and also Ulster's pride and loyalty to Britain: 'Some English observers may find it difficult to appreciate, but we are proud of being British.'[91] It is clear that O'Neill felt that he must be seen by his party to be robustly defending Unionism from this external attack and that, given the flurry of publicity generated by Rose's visit, he needed to do so publicly.[92]

Meanwhile, Unionists at Westminster continued to worry about the impact of Fitt in particular. Stratton Mills MP wrote to Northern Ireland cabinet secretary, Harold Black, in June 1967 requesting more information on Fitt's relationship with Republicans: 'I am wondering if you have any useful quotations showing him allied with those sections of the community who wish to keep relations at boiling point. Incidentally, has he ever condemned the IRA?'[93] Black was unable to provide more than a few newspaper clippings, containing nothing 'likely to appeal to the Labour backbenches'.[94] At least one of these cuttings was provided directly by the RUC.[95]

The threat that a vocal caucus of Labour backbenchers was seen to pose is clear from how – in both private and public – the Unionist Party responded. For O'Neill's 'reformist' faction, the interference of Westminster MPs could only hinder attempts at liberalisation and community cohesion. For other Unionists, the CDU was at best a group of gullible MPs who had fallen sway to Republican propaganda. The group's activity, coupled with Wilson's insistence that he could not indefinitely resist 'back-bench pressure', meant that the CDU became the prime antagonist for senior Unionists in their perceived struggle to retain constitutional autonomy. When analysing the CDU's campaign, this factor has not been captured in existing literature, which has largely been guided by the CDU's own emphasis on Westminster as its prime area of focus. It is perhaps an example of how 'Parliamentary Activism' can be highly influential, even when it fails to secure defined legislative goals.

For its part, the CDU was not daunted by O'Neill's response. In August 1967, the *Belfast Telegraph* published a full-page article by Paul Rose entitled 'The Cancer at the Heart of Ulster Life'. Rose insisted that the CDU had 'a duty to ensure that civil rights and liberties conform to the pattern of the rest of the United Kingdom. We cannot tolerate discrimination against minorities any more than in Smethwick, and we will fight against both.'[96] The reference to Smethwick was particularly pointed, as the election in 1964 of a right-wing Conservative MP, who ran an virulently

[91]CAB/9/B/205/5, 'Speech by the Prime Minister, Captain the Rt. Hon. Terence O'Neill, D.L., M.P., at the Annual Conference of the Ulster Unionist Council, in the Ulster Hall, Belfast, on the evening of Friday, April 28, 1967', PRONI.

[92]O'Neill's response had initially been drafted as a letter, before being used as the basis for his UCC speech.

[93]CAB/9/J/75, 'Letter from Stratton Mills MP to Harold Black', PRONI.

[94]CAB/9/J/75, 'Letter from Harold Black to Stratton Mills MP', PRONI.

[95]CAB/9/J/75, '"With Compliments of the Inspector General" Covering Note from RUC Inspector General to Northern Ireland Cabinet Secretary', PRONI.

[96]'"A Cancer at the Heart of Ulster Life"', *Belfast Telegraph*, 3 Aug. 1967, 6.

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anti-immigration campaign, had seen it labelled 'Britain's most racist town'.[97] Later in the year, addressing a NCCL meeting at Labour Conference, Rose also warned of the danger of 'extra-parliamentary measures' such as civil disobedience if reform was not soon achieved.[98]

Lobbying of ministers also continued into 1968, with the new home secretary James Callaghan telling Paddy Byrne that he 'fully shared' the organisation's concerns, and claimed he had made this clear in private talks with O'Neill.[99] There were even discussions on abstaining at Westminster, with Fitt proposing at the CDU's annual conference that MPs exploit internal Labour disenchantment with Wilson over public expenditure, social policy and Rhodesia to help broaden a potential rebellion.[100] Although this suggestion came to nothing, the conference did unanimously pass a motion proposed by Fitt, calling for the CDU's MPs to 'use whatever means are available to question the legality of the convention whereby they are unable to discuss matters relating to Northern Ireland'.[101]

After October'68

On 5 October 1968, a march organised by civil rights campaigners in Derry was held, despite a hastily announced government ban, that would transform the civil rights campaign in Northern Ireland. The march, which was endorsed by NICRA but planned locally, has been the subject of a wide range of accounts.[102] Seen by many as the day when civil rights finally took to the streets – despite not being the first civil rights march that year – it was a date that gained understandable significance. Organiser Eamonn McCann would recall that 'Had all those who now claim to have marched that day actually done so, the carriageway would have collapsed.'[103]

Undeniably in attendance was a delegation of Labour MPs: Anne Kerr, her husband Russell Kerr, and John Ryan. They had been invited by Gerry Fitt – acting as a bridge between the CDU and events on the ground in Northern Ireland – who was at the front of the procession, underneath a 'Civil Rights' banner. When the march was stopped at an RUC cordon, ordered to disperse and then driven back by a disorganised baton charge, Fitt was among the first casualties.[104] His head was cut open by a policeman's baton. The violent dispersal of a peaceful civil rights protest, documented as it was by television cameras, rapidly became a major news story. The movement had finally

[97]Rachel Yemm, 'Immigration, Race and Local Media: Smethwick and the 1964 General Election', *Contemporary British History*, 33 (2019), 98–122.

[98]'Action On Ulster, Or Else – Rose', *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 Oct. 1967, 5.

[99]'Callaghan Concerned about Ulster', *ibid.*, 22 Jan. 1968, 4.

[100]'"Abstain" Call to Labour MPs', *Irish Times*, 29 Jan. 1968, 1.

[101]D3026/1, 'Conference Resolution Proposed by Gerry Fitt MP', PRONI.

[102]See: Prince, *Northern Ireland's'68*; Malachi O'Doherty, *Fifty Years On: The Troubles and the Struggle for Change in Northern Ireland* (2019); Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (1993); Bernadette Devlin, *The Price of My Soul* (New York, 1970).

[103]McCann, *War and an Irish Town*, 83.

[104]John Cameron, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland: Report of the Commission Appointed by the Governor of Northern Ireland: Presented to Parliament by Command of His Excellency the Governor of Northern Ireland, September 1969* (Belfast, 1969), 28–9; Simon Prince and Geoffrey Warner, *Belfast and Derry in Revolt: A New History of the Start of the Troubles* (Dublin, 2011), 92–4.

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achieved the sort of national, and international, platform to which it aspired. As Sarah Campbell notes, Fitt's injury itself was enough to fatally undermine the convention: 'The CDU had prepared the groundwork for concern about civil rights in Northern Ireland and the cut on Gerry Fitt's head brought the issue into the House of Commons. Westminster was concerned that peace was not being maintained, and on 4 November, Harold Wilson summoned O'Neill to London.'[105] For their part, the CDU delegation quickly reported back to Wilson. Their account, dated 8 October 1968, was among the first detailed reports of the incident he received, and they later held an hour-long audience with Callaghan to press their case.[106] Meanwhile, the day after the march, an impromptu rally in London's Hyde Park was addressed by Michael Melly, the CDU's treasurer. Another London rally, organised by the MCF later in October, saw several thousand participants addressed by both Fitt and John Ryan.[107]

In the British press, there was significant coverage of the violence in Derry, although it was not universally front-page news. However, ITV's flagship investigative news programme *World in Action* aired 'Backs to the Wall' on 21 October, which featured damning footage of the RUC using water cannons and batons to break up the march, alongside interviews with residents, activists and politicians.[108] In America meanwhile, where the Irish American diaspora was to become a key international supporter of the civil rights movement, coverage of events in Derry began almost immediately.[109] *The Boston Globe* and *Los Angeles Times* both reported on Wilson's demand for an inquiry, with the latter discussing long-standing 'Laborite complains'.[110] The US television network NBC sent an investigative team to Derry, although it was not until 7 November than their report was aired.[111]

Perhaps preoccupied with Labour's Annual Conference – held from 30 September to 4 October – the CDU leadership seems not to have immediately grasped the importance of developments. On 9 October, for example, an article by Rose in the *Guardian* focused not on the events in Derry, but on government policy towards Rhodesia. Only a throwaway reference – that Ian Smith had shown himself more capable of dealing with internal opposition than 'Captain O'Neill closer to home' – was made to Northern Ireland.[112] In hindsight, this appears a baffling misstep. The CDU was, however, more proactive in Parliament and spearheaded the erosion of the convention in both chambers. Brockway was the first to break the convention in the House of Lords, when he asked on 7 October whether the government would order an inquiry into events in Derry.[113] Later in the month, Kevin McNamara asked formally in the Commons for

[105]Sarah Campbell, *Gerry Fitt and the SDLP: 'In a Minority of One'* (Manchester, 2015), 20.

[106]PREM 13/2841, 'Three Eye-Witnesses Report on Londonderry' (Oct. 1968), TNA; CAB/9/B/205/8, 'Letter from James Callaghan to Terence O'Neill, 14th November 1968', TNA.

[107]Herbert, *The Wearing of the Green*, 149–50.

[108]'Backs to the Wall', *World in Action*, 21 Oct. 1968, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhQAifiSwes&t=1007s (accessed 10 Mar. 2025).

[109]Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites* (2005), 56.

[110]'Wilson Orders Probe of N. Ireland Riots', *Boston Globe*, 8 Oct. 1968, 1; 'Wilson Orders Probe of Londonderry Riots', *Los Angeles Times*, 8 Oct. 1968, 4.

[111]Brian Dooley, *Black and Green: Civil Rights Struggles in Northern Ireland and Black America* (1998), 109.

[112]"'If You Can't Win the Case, Then You Settle'", *Guardian*, 9 Oct. 1968, 11.

[113]House of Lords Debates, 7 Oct. 1968, vol. 296, col. 790.

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the convention to be revised.[114] Ben Whitaker then asked the prime minister whether he would now reconsider the CDU's demand for a Royal Commission. Wilson replied that he would consider the matter ahead of his upcoming meeting with O'Neill.[115]. He was then questioned further on his discussion with O'Neill by CDU MPs in November, while in December reports of fresh disturbances at a civil rights march in Armagh were raised.[116] While the convention was still invoked, by both the Speaker and ministers, it was no longer the barrier to discussion it had previously been.

This mounting pressure on the government eventually brought matters to a head. O'Neill travelled to London on 4 November, where he and his colleagues were grilled by Wilson and directly threatened with the withdrawal of financial support if reforms were not implemented.[117] That evening, Wilson even told a senior Fleet Street journalist that he had 'roughed up' the Unionist delegation.[118] The resulting 'Five Point Programme' announced on 22 November promised action to address many civil rights concerns, and O'Neill's subsequent 'Ulster at the Crossroads' speech enjoyed a cautious, but mostly positive, reception. Yet, there were questions over the timescale of reform and the lack of a commitment to the introduction of 'one man, one vote', which O'Neill had been unable to persuade his cabinet to include.

The British government's continued willingness to let O'Neill set the pace of reform frustrated even moderate campaigners. Writing to Paul Rose, the CSJ's Conn McCluskey bemoaned Labour's passivity. For McCluskey, who had previously argued that a Labour government would be sympathetic to Catholic grievances, the situation now seemed little different than if the Conservatives had been in power. He told Rose that the CSJ now planned to directly challenge the British government over its inaction, rather than Stormont: 'I am sour, sick of British Labour and sick of being a "second class citizen", and, for the first time, not disposed to attribute our ills to Messrs O'Neill or Craig.' He predicted, with some accuracy, that the broad movement was convinced that more 'public action' was required to force through reforms: 'I have the greatest confidence in the people's judgement. Their view is that they have a method of showing up British shortcomings here through the world television, and, by God, they are going to have more of it.'[119] Considering the CSJ's close relationship with the CDU, such frustration could not be easily ignored. While McCluskey emphasised that he was writing in a personal capacity, it seems clear that his appraisal of the situation carried weight. Rose would later say of the strategy of allowing the Unionist Party to set the agenda for reform that 'It was thought then that the best policy was to back these "moderate" men of the ascendancy, later rejected by the very masses they had misled under the blanket of the Union flag. They represented nobody but the Anglo-Irish dynasty.'[120]

[114]HC Deb, 21 Oct. 1968, vol. 770, cols. 882–5.

[115]HC Deb, 24 Oct. 1968, vol. 770, cols. 1583–4.

[116]HC Deb, 5 Nov. 1968, vol. 772, cols. 688–93; HC Deb, 14 Nov. 1968, vol. 773, cols. 606–7; HC Deb, 2 Dec. 1968, vol. 774, cols. 1038–44.

[117]Rose, *How the Troubles Came to Northern Ireland*, 125.

[118]Hetherington/15/5, 'Points from a Meeting with the Prime Minister (Harold Wilson), 4 November 1968′, London School of Economic (LSE) Archive.

[119]D2993/2, 'Letter from Conn McCluskey to Paul Rose MP, 4th December 1968′, PRONI.

[120]Rose, *Backbencher's Dilemma*, 182.

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Whether McClusky's suggestion of a change of approach for the CSJ in 1969 would have been accompanied by a parallel change in tack by the CDU is impossible to say. Not for the first time, the plans for future campaigns were overtaken by events on the ground.

Burntollet and British intervention

On 4 January 1969 a protest organised by the student-led People's Democracy (PD) was attacked by over 200 loyalists at Burntollet, County Londonderry. The march, from Belfast to Derry, had been organised despite a NICRA moratorium on demonstrations, but it was not subject to a government ban. The pre-prepared nature of the attack, with stones piled nearby for use as missiles, as well as the RUC's inability to protect the protesters, was noteworthy.[121] Unionists saw the incident as the result of a provocation by radicals. O'Neill declared that 'We have heard sufficient for now about civil right let us now hear a little about civic responsibility' and branded some of the marchers and their supporters 'mere hooligans'.[122] The *Guardian*, however, described Burntollet as having 'lost' the breathing space O'Neill had won with his 'Crossroads' speech in December.[123] Confidence in the state among Catholics was wrecked by the RUC's apparent inaction. Historian Paul Bew, who took part in the march, later recalled 'the total disapproval of the Catholic middle-class for the march when it started, then the total transformation to "these are fine young people, who are being attacked by vicious rednecks, and the police are not doing a good job in protecting them"'.[124] The incident, and the rioting that followed when the march arrived in Derry, has been widely identified as a turning point for the civil rights movement and a tactical mistake by the PD which made further violence more likely.[125] While this latter assessment has been challenged,[126] there can be little doubt that the deteriorating security situation in early 1969 saw a significant change in attitudes towards civil rights concerns from Westminster and Whitehall.

After Burntollet, the British government began to view the civil rights movement with apprehension. A handwritten note from January 1969 suggests that the Home Office had 'No sympathy with PD. They have ruined Captain O'Neill and the Prime Minister's case.'[127] There were concerns that the movement at large had been infiltrated by radical elements. This coincided with the establishment of the Northern Ireland Cabinet Committee, a dedicated body for senior ministers to discuss Northern Ireland. From the outset, the committee was as concerned with restoring public order

[121]Cameron, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*, 46–7.

[122]'Ulster is sick of Marchers and Counter-Marchers – Capt. O'Neill', *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 Jan. 1969, 3.

[123]'Fragile Truce in Ulster', *Guardian*, 18 Jan. 1969, 10.

[124]*Voices of '68: Burntollet* (9 vols.), 7, National Museums NI, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HklNGciEYac&list=WL&index=98 (accessed 25 Jan. 2025).

[125]Paul Bew, '"The Blind Leading the Blind"? London's Response to the 1969 Crisis', *History Ireland*, 17 (2009), 46–9.

[126]Daniel Finn, 'The Point of No Return? People's Democracy and the Burntollet March', *Field Day Review*, 9 (2013), 4–21.

[127]CJ 3/74, 'Unsigned Home Office Note Concerning People's Democracy' (Jan. 1969), TNA.

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and supporting O'Neill's position, as they were with reform to a 'British standard'.[128] Although the convention had been broken, the CDU now found itself increasingly at odds with government policy rather than acting as a critical friend seeking to encourage action. The dynamic of its campaigning had changed. At Stormont, Unionist attitudes were hardening with a split into pro- and anti-O'Neill factions. By the time of the 1969 Northern Ireland General Election – called by O'Neill in an unsuccessful attempt to outmanoeuvre his internal opponents and demonstrate he had widespread public support[129] – the ability of the CDU to influence key decision-makers in either London or Belfast had waned.

Conclusion

A reappraisal of the CDU's activity during the 1960s provides us with a better historical understanding of the civil rights movement. From its formation, the CDU had ambitious political goals that aligned with the reformist stance of its Northern Irish ally, the Campaign for Social Justice. Yet, the CDU was ranging itself against significant constitutional obstacles while attempting to secure reform via Westminster, and in doing so, fell short of its own standards for success. However, the CDU was not aware that, from 1966 onwards, its persistent agitation was shaping the views of senior government figures. Not only was its activity cited in internal government briefings, but the spectre of 'backbench pressure' was used directly by Harold Wilson in his dealings with O'Neill to encourage speedier reforms. In turn, O'Neill's anxiety over the CDU influenced both his cabinet and party. Unionist elites felt threatened by the prospect of a vocal 'anti-Unionist' political voice in Westminster and responded with hostility. This was particularly evident during 1967, when Terence O'Neill used his Ulster Unionist Council speech to deliver a point-by-point rebuke to the CDU and Paul Rose in particular. As this article's analysis of government archives shows, the CDU arguably had the most influence in Northern Ireland, not Britain. This has not been recognised in previous scholarly work.

On reflection, Unionist fears produced an exaggerated view of the CDU's direct influence in London. For, as we have seen, the persistence of the convention at Westminster and Wilson's willingness to back O'Neill suggests that direct legislative intervention was highly unlikely before October 1968. As Moore identified, the CDU appears to have missed the 'terror' felt by the government of reopening the 'Irish Question'.[130] O'Neill and his allies were themselves cognisant of this fear. Writing in reply to the initial findings of the Society of Labour Lawyer's 1967–8 report on Northern Ireland, O'Neill warned that unilateral intervention from Westminster would mean 'the "Irish question", which was so disruptive and destructive an issue in British politics for many decades, would inevitably become active once again, with results which no one could foresee, and there would most certainly be deep resentment in

[128]CAB 130/416, 'Minutes of Cabinet Committee on Northern Ireland Meeting – MISC 238 (69) 1st Meeting – NI Cabinet Committee Meetings 1–6 (1969)' (Feb. 1969); CAB 130/416, 'Memo from Home Secretary on the Northern Irish Political Situation – MISC 238 (69) 1'.

[129]Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, 170–2.

[130]Moore, 'The Labour Party and Northern Ireland in the 1960s', 69–79.

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Northern Ireland at the subversion of a constitutional status'.[131] O'Neill's repeated emphasis on the danger of Westminster interference in Northern Ireland was a clear, if less extreme, mirror of the positions held by earlier Ulster leaders. Unionist reaction to the announcement of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921 had, for example, been to suspect a betrayal from Westminster and Ulster prime minister Sir James Craig warned of Ulster's right to take up arms as 'violence is the only language understood by Mr Lloyd-George and his Ministers'.[132] For nearly five decades, the forceful assertion of Stormont's sovereignty from London had repeatedly served to discourage intervention. Yet despite this, it is now clear that O'Neill was deeply concerned that pressure from the CDU would finally persuade the government to disregard the convention. This explains his energetic denouncement of the CDU, as well as his cabinet's focus on finding a way to blunt demands for reform from Westminster, which after August 1966 were 'applied with intermittent strength, and varying degrees of friendliness'.[133] O'Neill may have cast himself as a reformer who simply needed more time, but there is now little doubt that liberalising tendencies were shallow at best. Pressure from Westminster played a vital part in forcing his hand, with the CDU's perceived influence shaping how O'Neill and his colleagues responded to the demands made of them by Westminster in the autumn of 1968.

The CDU was also central to the breaking of the convention – catalysed as it was by violent conduct of the RUC in Derry in October 1968 – which further contributed to the pressure for reform in the weeks that followed. Yet, with the subsequent end of O'Neill's tenure and the increasing direct role of the British cabinet, the concern felt by the Unionist government over the CDU's activity waned. The new Northern Irish prime minister, James Chichester-Clark – whose brother Robin had frequently clashed the CDU at Westminster – now had the direct involvement of British ministers to worry about. Meanwhile, these ministers found themselves trying to balance their public commitment to reform with a fear that the situation was spiralling out of control. For, as the security situation worsened and community divisions deepened, Westminster's main concern became how to avoid further entanglement. In this context, the CDU with its focus on legislative reform was left out in the cold.

What does the example of the CDU suggest about the prospects for similar groups? As an organisation it is, in many ways, an archetype of 'Parliamentary Activism'. It was a pressure group *within* Parliament, not an ideological faction. It operated across factional lines within the Labour Party, with a limited set of political goals, and was not seeking to change Labour's overall direction or to install one of its members as leader. It focused largely on elite opinion, not mass mobilisation. And while it cooperated with external pressure groups, most notably the CSJ, it remained independent from them. It sought to become an authoritative, alternative voice on Northern Irish civil rights within Parliament.

Yet equally, the CDU's activity demonstrates that MPs are rarely as single minded on an issue as members of an external pressure group or social movement. Their political capital will be spent on a variety of issues. And, while membership of the party of government gave the CDU a significant platform, the party system in Westminster

[131]CAB/9/B/205/6, 'Draft Reply to the Society of Labour Lawyers' (Jan. 1969), PRONI.
[132]Kevin Matthews, *Fatal Influence: The Impact of Ireland on British Politics, 1920–1925* (Dublin, 2004), 58–9.
[133]Jackson, *Home Rule*, 237.

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also constrains individual MPs. In taking the Labour whip in Westminster, most CDU members were still tied to a wider duty to their party and local constituency. In contrast, Gerry Fitt's role as a figurehead for the CDU after April 1966 was due not only to his personal charisma and the constituency he represented, but also to the fact that he was not bound by party-political affiliation in the House of Commons. Fitt was able to act in Westminster, in Ireland, and even internationally, with far more freedom than other CDU members. Finally, the specific cause to which the CDU dedicated itself also makes it a challenging case study. It was attempting to bring about reform on an issue from which Parliament had repeatedly isolated itself. By the mid-1960s, there had been four decades of precedent supporting the idea that any Westminster intervention in Northern Ireland would be a fatal blow to the constitutional settlement, a settlement, we must remember, that was seen in Westminster as having decisively solved the Gordian Knot of the 'Irish Question'. As such, the CDU could only seek to cajole and embarrass the government into action. It was not able to propose motions or Private Members' Bills of its own.

However, despite these caveats, the CDU still provides an example of a discrete form of political activity, which differs markedly from the actions we might expect from external pressure groups, individual MPs, party-political blocs or the government itself. 'Parliamentary Activism' deserves further study, as it may offer insights into the workings of past social movements, as well as instructive examples that current and future movements might follow. An expanded theoretical framework, informed by a comparison to the Eurosceptic 'Maastricht Rebels' of the 1990s, is one future avenue of inquiry. In addition, the CDU's continued activity into the 1970s – particularly its relationship to the anti-Internment movement – might provide insightful examples of how the organisation functioned after the advent of Direct Rule after 1972. Having advocated so vocally for a measure of involvement from Westminster, how did the CDU respond when the British government eventually assumed direct responsibility for Ulster?

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