

The case in Northern Ireland

by Paul G. Herring

Northern Ireland is a keg of dynamite waiting for a spark to ignite it: that spark may well come from the second major hunger strike in the infamous Maze prison. This second strike, begun on March 1, by politically-motivated prisoners seeking POW status from the British government, became necessary after the negotiated settlement reached from the first strike ran into trouble. The 34 page agreement was suddenly altered - after the fact - by the British government so that its administration became unworkable. To the prisoners this was just another example of Britain's attitude toward them and their cause. The new strike is therefore a sign of solidarity, and shows a renewed belief on the part of the prisoners that their purpose is justified. However, if one prisoner should die, the political powder keg will have its spark, and Westminster knows it. There will be no winners in all this, but it is important to seek the reasons behind the present crisis in the North in order to better understand the complex and frightening situation.

The partition of Ireland, finalized in 1925 following a long and bitter civil war, was the beginning of the present crisis, for by it Ulster was divided so as to guarantee a Protestant majority in this section of the Catholic-dominated island. In Northern Ireland today, of slightly over one and one half million people, about 35% are Catholic and are concentrated in the Western half of the province. The East is predominantly Protestant, part as a result of the proximity to Scotland, the original point of ancestry for many Irish Protestants.

Once established, the pattern of political and economic control began with relative calm in the 1920's and 1930's.

Throughout the Brookborough years (1943-63), the Protestant-dominated Unionist government fostered and maintained the inequality of the Catholics so that politically the Catholics were under-represented in Belfast. Predominantly Catholic Derry was gerrymandered so that the majority of the seats were contested in Protestant areas

of the city, with the Catholic majority only voting on a minority of seats. Thus a Protestant majority arose in a Catholic-dominated area. Without political say, very little could be done to bring the needed economic reforms. With the coming of O'Neill government to power in 1963, however, things began to change.

The relative decline of mainstay industries such as textiles and ship building was putting the economy through a rough period. O'Neill began to solicit multinationals to fill the gap. He also tried to heal the wound opened between the North and Eire (Republic of Ireland). The prime minister of Eire was invited to the North his arrival sparked angry reprisals from ultra-protestant members of the government led by the Rev. Ian Paisley, who saw this as a direct attack on Protestant interests. With O'Neill's moderation came a new force. The Catholic voice of discontent arose, hoping to fall upon O'Neill's somewhat sympathetic ears. The call for civil rights was on.

In Ireland, the period from 1963-68 was one of instability, characterized by governmental disruptions (i.e. breaking of party ranks) and the rise of a united Catholic presence. From initially lobbying Unionist politics, the Catholics soon became organized, and civil rights marches flourished. The main complaints were not originally political but economic. Why were Catholics paid so much less

than Protestants? Why were they confined to specific industries in lower echelon positions? Why was housing so poor?

And why was the Catholic population generally unskilled, when their Protestant counterparts were usually skilled or semi-skilled? A call for action was heard across the North.

It was not long before clashes occurred between civil rights marchers and right-wing Protestant extremists. It was not the demands of the Catholics that were threatening, because they were not excessive, but rather that Protestant interest were being threatened. If parity existed, economic demands would turn political because economic stability enables attention to turn to politics. Once this happened, the underpinning of Protestant dominance would be threatened.

On October 5, 1968, the first violent confrontation occurred. A march containing local Catholic dignitaries and about 400 members was stopped by police in Derry. As the marchers dispersed, more police came from behind and stopped them. A clash occurred and several people were injured. Media coverage of the event drew wide attention, and support for the civil rights movement mushroomed. After an ambush on Burntollet Bridge on 4 Jan. 69, where several hundred Prot. extremists (reportedly Paisleyites) attacked marchers going to Derry from Belfast, the battle lines were drawn. The realization dawned that economic reforms could come about

only as a result of changes within the political structure.

After this event, a more clearly defined Catholic conscience arose; it was realized that only through political activism could real change occur. The rest of the problem rested with the Unionist government in Belfast. Given the lack of political stability regarding the Catholic question, and police indifference towards Protestant sectarian attacks on Catholic marches, most Catholic working class people began to feel that their only hope was through unity and the marches. The position of Catholics and Protestants began to harden, with each side steadfastly resolved to achieving its ends by whatever means were necessary..

By the summer of 1969, Catholics were united for political and economic respectability, and Protestant political extremists were equally united to guard their favored position at all costs. On 12 August 1969, after a stoning incident in Derry where Catholic youths pelted a march by the Apprentice Boys, an Orange Lodge affiliate, the police attacked, chasing the youths back into the Bogside (the Catholic slum of Derry). However, the mainly Protestant police force was repelled by Bogside residents who viewed the scene as a police attack. Petrol bombs were used against the police and by midnight, police were retaliating with the use of tear gas.

As the news spread to Belfast, the Catholic population became outraged by the attack and riots broke out. It was not long before Belfast too was uncontrollable. Chichester-Clark, the new premier of Northern Ireland, realized that all was getting out of hand. Police were exhausted, and becoming tense. On London's suggestion, he deployed 8500 B-Specials (Ulster Special Constabulary) to try to gain control. The problem was that these were mainly Protestant, and their reputation was very anti-Catholic. The net result of their deployment was an incensed Catholic population, complete loss of control, and heightened violence. This intensified situation was the fault of the B-Specials, for while they initially regained control over some areas, it was not long before some of its members were ransacking

