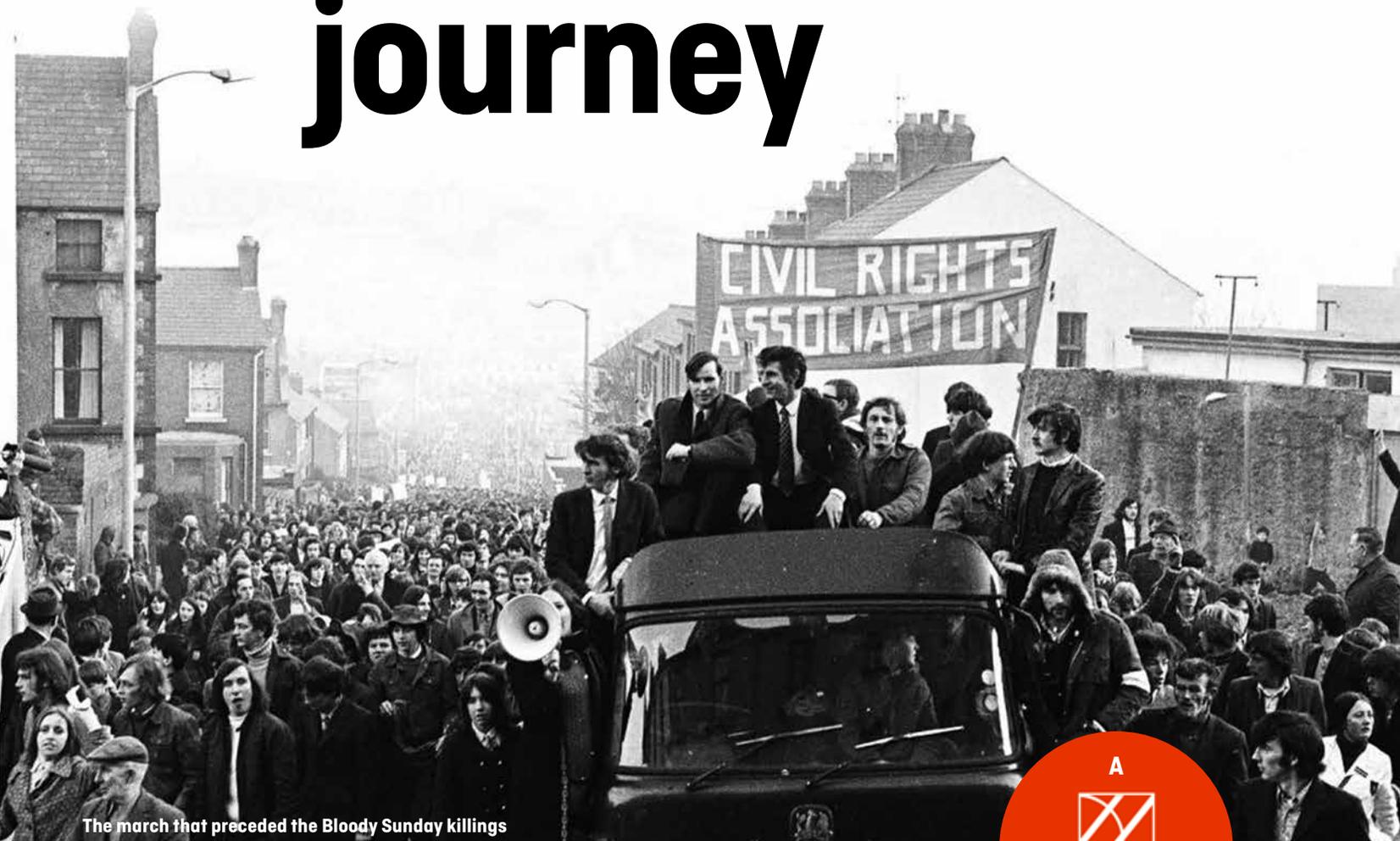


# Continuing someone else's journey



The march that preceded the Bloody Sunday killings

*Addressing the inequalities that exist in 2017 Northern Ireland is how to honour the civil rights movements of the 1960s.*



by Sarah Campbell

**L**AST MONTH in Belfast the first of many commemorative events took place to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the formal founding of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, NICRA. The organisation was pivotal in bringing together all those who were discontented with the status quo in the North. Within eighteen months, a wave of protest over civil rights engulfed Northern Ireland, forcing the Westminster government to implement a series of reforms (in access to housing, voting, and disbanding the B-Specials), which in turn toppled the local government and instigated almost thirty years of direct rule.

The Linen Hall Library holds the most extensive collection of primary materials on the civil rights movement, and it has dedicated itself for this year and next to discussing the movement's

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impact 50 years on. In this vein, the library hosted two events in April: the first, a talk by Professor Paul Arthur, who was a student at Queen's University Belfast in the 1960s and a member of People's Democracy. So far, his 1974 book is the only published account of the student movement in Belfast. The second event was a discussion panel on 'Civil Rights – a missed opportunity?' sponsored by the Connolly Association, which included speakers Professor Anthony Coughlan and Kevin McCorry. I noted three key things from both events.

First, Paul Arthur spoke about the various agendas that existed within NICRA, including the student movement of which he was part. He prefaced some of this with a quote from Seamus Deane's 1972 poem, 'Derry':

*"The unemployment in our bones  
Erupting on our hands in stones;  
The thought of violence a relief  
The act of violence a grief..."*

For Arthur, these lines best encapsulate the ever-present wavering between militancy and constitutionalism that existed in the broader civil rights movement, a debate that has been identifiable in histories of the movement since. Professor Anthony Coughlan, in an article published for this magazine in February this year, firmly lays the blame for the explosion of violence from this period onwards at the door of People's Democracy, a student-led group that was part of the broader civil rights movement. According to Coughlan, the People's Democracy march from Belfast to Derry in January 1969 "raised the sectarian temperature markedly".

This need to scapegoat and to recriminate

began almost immediately with the publication of the Cameron Report commissioned by the British government, a 1969 document that Coughlan suggests is "still the best account of the early Civil Rights period". Later historians, such as Henry Patterson and Joe Lee, have continued in the same vein. As a result, the mainstream, consensus narrative of the civil rights movement in the North, tends, unfairly, to side-line the student impact or represent it as an irrelevant irritant to the more mature, sober and minimalist activities of NICRA and to the emerging political ideologies of a newly energised nationalism. But if we look closely at the Queen's University student newspaper, the Gown, in the years leading up to this period, we can appreciate how wide the political scope of student activism had become. These students were internationalising the situation in Northern Ireland, arguably more than NICRA was, by linking it not only to the civil rights movement in the US, but more widely to student movements for free speech and freedom to assemble in Europe, to anti-colonial struggles in Africa and Vietnam, and to gender rights.

The second thing that became clear at both events is that the civil rights movement is remembered differently by different people. Arthur perceptively remarked that in his reappraisal of the movement, there was a great deal of re-remembering and mis-remembering. Issues of civil rights, past and present, remain vital to the contested political culture in Northern Ireland. Equally important are the issues of memory, legacies of conflict, and dealing with the past, which continue to threaten the stability of the government there. As the centenary commemorations of the Irish revolution (1912-23) have revealed, memory is crucial to the



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understanding of Northern Ireland culture precisely because it is an indicator of collective desires and self-definitions.

Since 1998, society in the North has been marked by a tendency towards increasingly divided memory. Events from the start of the Troubles have been interpreted in contrasting ways and the facts themselves are often disputed. There has been very little consensus about what happened, why it happened, and crucially, how to remember what happened. Even *within* communities, there has been a tendency to promote one set of memories over others.

The civil rights movement circulates through Northern Irish memory in forms and through channels that are at once powerful, dangerous, and hotly contested. Debate continues on how much discrimination existed in Northern Ireland during the Stormont years (1921-1972) as well as the movement's relationship to the violence of the 1970s and the 1980s. Yet remembrance is also a form of forgetting, and the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement – distilled from history and memory, twisted by ideology and political contestation, and embedded in museums, murals, public rituals, and textbooks – distorts and suppresses as much as it reveals.

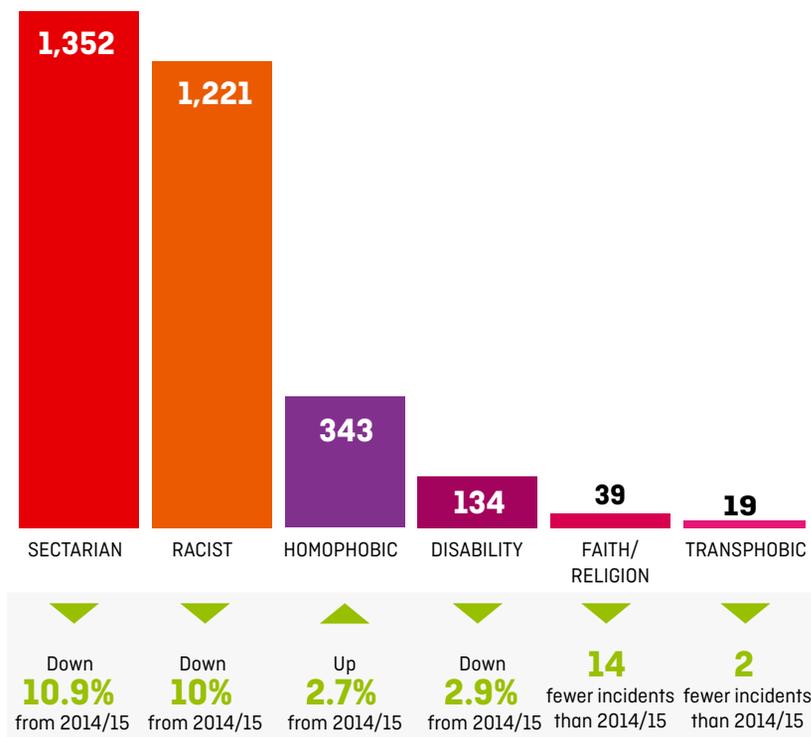
Current realities (the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 that enshrined civil rights at its core, the ongoing issues since over how to deal with the past, and austerity policies implemented since 2009 that affect living standards) combine and influence the ways in which people relate and integrate the dimensions of past and present experience. A battle over the movement's legacy has been waged within the Catholic community over the last decade, with both Sinn Féin and the SDLP claiming to be the true inheritors of the movement. How the Protestant and unionist community remember the movement has yet to be explored.

In the commemorations of the civil rights movement, and the origins of the conflict that are approaching in the next number of years, it is not enough simply to 'debunk' or 'explode' the

## Equality legislation in Northern Ireland

Same-sex sexual activity legal	✓ (Since 1982)
Equal age of consent	✓ (Since 2001; reduced to 16 in line with rest of UK in 2009)
Anti-discrimination laws in employment	✓ (Since 2003)
Anti-discrimination laws in the provision of goods and services	✓ (Since 2007)
Anti-discrimination laws in hate speeches	✗
Anti-discrimination laws in hate violence	✗
Same-sex marriage(s)	✗
Recognition of same-sex couples	✓ (Since 2005, UK-wide)
Step-child adoption by same-sex couples	✓ (Since 2013)
Joint adoption by same-sex couples	✓ (Since 2013)
Gays allowed to serve in the military	✓ (Since 2000, UK-wide)
Right to change legal gender	✓ (Since 2004, UK-wide)
Access to IVF for lesbians	✓ (UK-wide)
MSMs allowed to donate blood	✓ (Since 2016, one year deferral)

## Hate incident types (PSNI records for 2015/16)



myths that are associated with the movement over the last fifty years, but also to explore how they originated and evolved, how they were manufactured and transmitted. It is also important not to prioritise one set of memories over another, or to shy away from confrontational memories. This will tell us more about the processes by which identity and society in Northern Ireland are shaped and formed, and may point us towards a more consensual, less fraught approach of dealing with the past.

My third observation from the events in Belfast last month is to do with the longer term legacies of the civil rights movement, and what they mean in Northern Ireland in 2017. Professor Arthur spoke of civil rights *movements* (plural), suggesting that there was not one overall movement, but many movements with different approaches and agendas, all working towards the attainment of a more equal society. While I agree with his description of civil rights movements, it might be better to explain it as a LONG civil rights movement, and one that is still needed. Anne Devlin was sensitive to this in her 1984 play *The Long March*, when the main character reflects on that pivotal People’s Democracy march in 1969:

“I still remember that time when we thought we were beginning a new journey: the long march. What we didn’t see was that it began a long time before with someone else’s journey,

we are simply getting through the steps in our own time”.

Most participants and attendees at April’s commemoration events agreed that, while the political terrain and setting in Northern Ireland has changed dramatically, the work of the civil rights movement is still incomplete. The activism of the 1960s achieved much in terms of legal reform, addressing many of the civil rights demands by the mid-1970s: the introduction of universal adult suffrage in local elections in 1969, the extension of the Prevention of Incitement to Hatred Act to Northern Ireland in 1970, the foundation of the Housing Executive in 1972, along with the establishment of a uniform points system for housing allocation, and the Fair Employment Act and the Sex Discrimination Order of 1976.

Discrimination has been illegal for quite some time, therefore, but there is little evidence that sectarianism or complaints of discrimination have decreased in the years since. The speakers at the two events and members of the audience, commented on the ongoing and increasing intensity of sectarianism, despite the legislation, and despite civil rights being enshrined at the core of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. In 2015-16, a total of 1,352 sectarian incidents were reported in Northern Ireland according to the PSNI statistic for hate crimes (that’s just under four per day). What went unmentioned at these



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commemorative events was the even higher figures of racist, homophobic, and transphobic incidents in the same period: 1,583 (just over four per day). The Polish community is most likely to experience a hate crime in Northern Ireland, and homophobic motivated incidents have generally increased year on year since 2006. The figure for 2015/16 (343 incidents) is the highest level recorded since data gathering began in 2004/05. Racist and homophobic incidents are as big a problem as sectarianism in post-conflict Northern Ireland, and yet they are barely making their way into the critical debate.

Another glaring omission from discussions on ‘missed opportunities’ and ‘legacies’ of the civil rights movement was gender inequality in Northern Ireland. While some of the speakers nodded to the peculiarity of the time of asking for ‘one *man*, one vote’ (which highlighted not just electoral inequality but also identified gender equality as the next issue that needed to be tackled in order to create a fairer society) none of the (all male) speakers commented on the need to address this in 2017. A PSNI report in 2016 found that domestic abuse in Northern Ireland has risen to its highest levels in over ten years. In 2014-15, over 28,000 domestic abuse incidents were reported to the police and over 13,000 domestic abuse crimes (approximately 13% of the overall crime in NI), while police officers were called to an incident every 19 minutes. A significant degree of inequality in the gender composition at executive level of the Northern Ireland public sector continues to exist: males hold 70.8% of all executive positions, while females hold 29.2%.

These are just some of the social, political and civil rights that need to be addressed fifty years on from the formation of the civil rights movement. In our enthusiasm to commemorate events of 100 years ago and 50 years ago, it is tempting to think of the present tense as the final outcome of a history of conflict. Acknowledging and attempting to address some of the inequalities that exist in 2017 might be the best way we can honour those who confronted ‘John Bull’s political slum’ in the 1960s. 

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