

*Political Opposition in Northern Ireland:  
The National Democratic Party, 1965-1970\**

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*Abstract:* This article is a study of the role of the National Democratic Party in minority politics in Ulster between 1965 and 1970. The NDP established three principles of crucial significance for the later development of minority party politics. Firstly, it established a belief in constructive political action as an effective lever to change, after the two alternative methods to change—political abstentionism and physical force—had been discredited. Secondly, the NDP formed a consistent and efficient political organisation and thirdly, an open membership. All three principles were the basic prerequisites for a modern political party and provided the basis for the Social Democratic and Labour Party when it was formed in 1970.

ALTHOUGH much has been written on the present Northern Ireland crisis, few studies have devoted any space to an examination of the political parties, and in particular, to the political parties seeking support from the Catholic minority.<sup>1</sup> In large measure this neglect is attributable to the fact that the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) has been the unanimous electoral choice of the minority during the greater part of the crisis. It is therefore easy to regard such unanimity of political expression as being a continuous theme of minority politics rather than as a recent acquisition.

Prior to the founding of the SDLP, anti-partitionist politics in Northern Ireland consisted of a large number of groups and individuals, under a variety of labels, each taking the nationalist vote in constituencies containing a high proportion of

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1. The main exception to this is (Rose 1971). To date no book-length study of the Nationalist Party has appeared and only one study of the Ulster Unionist Party. See (Harbinson 1973).

Catholics. Political activity was characterised by fragmentation, frequent schisms and numerous inter-party disputes. Up until the mid-1960s, the main burden of responsibility for the representation of the minority rested with the Nationalist Party,<sup>2</sup> which had, since 1921, been opposed to the Northern Ireland state. However, by the early 1970s the Nationalists had virtually disappeared and this function had been transferred *in toto* to the SDLP, a party which accepted that the state existed with the consent of a majority of its people. It is hard to imagine two political parties whose content and style differed so fundamentally, yet were in succession the political mouthpiece of the Northern minority.

This crucially important shift in the nature of anti-partitionist opposition was aided by an immense number of factors, both general and specific. One specific factor which has been constantly ignored is the role of the National Democratic Party (NDP) between 1965 and 1970. As an off-shoot of the Nationalist Party the NDP emerged initially as a Nationalist pressure group, but later became an autonomous political party in its own right. The principles it advocated—a belief in constructive political action, an efficient political organisation and open membership—were an original contribution to, and an innovative influence on, minority political opposition in the Province. These precedents became the foundation for the SDLP when it was formed in August, 1970. In a very real sense, then, the NDP forms a psychological, organisational and political link between the unorganised, single-issue Nationalists and the modern party organisation of the SDLP, with its wide range of policy aims.

The first part of this article will be devoted to an examination of the Nationalist Party and the contemporary criticisms made of it. The second part will describe the emergence of the NDP, while in the third section, its subsequent development will be assessed. The fourth and final section will examine the legacy of the NDP to present day minority political opposition.

### *The Nationalist Party*

Conventional conceptual definitions of the modern political party see its main functions as providing an organisational framework that can, when set in motion, nominate candidates on a cross local basis, supply them with a coherent policy, and hopefully, win elections (Neumann 1962). Organisation is an essential attribute in that it sets political activity on a stable footing, and enables the party to perpetuate itself longer than the personalities or local groups that may come to dominate it at any one time. As the main purpose of the party is to win elections, organisation comes into play in nominating candidates and equipping them with a political platform. While the elector may know little, if anything, about a candidate, a party label backed by a consistent programme lends cohesion to the political process as a whole.

In Northern Ireland only one question—that of the constitution—has dominated

2. The word "Nationalist" refers to the political party; "nationalist" refers to the broader political movement.

politics, thus political activity has been rooted in tendency rather than ideology or political programme. This has consequently overshadowed both candidate and policy (and has hence made organisation irrelevant) so long as a candidate declares his position on the constitutional issue. As the Catholics in Ulster were in a permanent minority, the Nationalist Party could never hope to win an election, so political organisation became for them an irrelevancy. By contrast, organisation was essential to the Unionist Party in ensuring a uniform approach by candidates to the constitutional question and maintaining a cohesive Parliamentary majority.

The Nationalist Party never filled any of the criteria for a modern political party, being neither organised nor selecting candidates on a cross local basis. As Richard Rose (1971) has noted "Because nationalism appeals for votes in terms of an ascriptive characteristic, there is less need for an organisation than in a political party competing against others with attributes that all can share". Organisation was thus unnecessary for the Nationalists. Their position as a political opposition was further compounded by their intractable antagonism towards the state. To employ the typology developed by the late Otto Kirchheimer, the Nationalists were an "opposition of principle, bent not only on wrenching power from the government of today, but on ending once and for all the system on which the government rests" (Kirchheimer 1971). The two remaining categories relate to "classical opposition", as in the British Parliamentary tradition and to "opposition by cartel", a semi-permanent abandonment of the government-opposition relationship.

The partition settlement of 1921 left the Nationalist Party cut off from the nation-wide movement, with a legacy of bitterness and frustration. This frustration, coupled with the widespread belief that the border was a temporary expedient "imposed on the country by a hard pressed British cabinet" (Beckett 1971), led to intermittent abstentionism from the Stormont Parliament and to an unconstructive attitude to the institutions of the state. The abstentionist strategy was exemplified by the veteran Nationalist, Cahir Healey, when he stated that they would not allow themselves "to become an official opposition in the House. We reserve the right," he said, "to come in or stay outside, as and when our people may decide." The approach to other institutions was hardly more constructive. Writing in 1948, the future leader of the Party, Eddie McAteer, advocated Catholics to get as much from the Welfare State as possible and then "act stupid, demand explanations, object, anything at all that will clog the departmental machinery".

This negativism was motivated by the belief that "the sole aim of anti-partitionist activity should be no more than a 'holding action'." The Nationalist mode of opposition—to operate only as a Parliamentary "protest movement"—had two natural corollaries. The first was that the obsession with partition would exclude all other issues from political debate, regardless of how seriously they might affect their constituents. The Nationalists had therefore "No policy except to wait for the reunification of Ireland. No matter what the social and economic orientation of the Nationalist member at Stormont, he is first and foremost a

nationalist." (Rutan 1967). Thus such pressing issues as religious discrimination, the housing shortage and educational policy were rarely brought up by Nationalist MPs. Before the withdrawal from Stormont, the Nationalist leader, Joe Devlin, had initiated some movement on these issues, largely by cultivating a rapport with the Unionist Prime Minister, James Craig. But no attempt was made to inculcate this approach among the other Nationalist MPs or to set it on a secure Parliamentary basis; thus when he walked out in 1932 and died soon after, the rest of the party reverted to the established policy of concentration on the "National Question" and abstentionism. Until November, 1964, the Party had never issued any clear declaration of policy. Even if a set of policy objectives had been adopted, they would not have been able to press them due to the second factor, the total lack of organisation or co-ordination.

The party had no organisation whatsoever in the country, and existed in Stormont as a loose collection of individuals, acting "in harmony, but not in harness". The lack of constituency organisation meant that local energies went untapped and MPs relied on personal following for votes: "their constituencies were like dioceses and they were like bishops, answerable to no-one and answering no-one". The absence of any machinery for co-ordinating anti-partitionist groups and elected representatives was perhaps more serious in that it negated any potential political impact the minority might have. There was no effort to link up the activities of nationally-minded local government representatives and Stormont representatives. In Belfast, the anti-partitionists tempered their appeal with a socialist content, which tended to engender suspicion among the conservative Catholic politicians in rural areas.

Having no consistent organisation, the party had therefore no formal membership which presented problems in selecting candidates for elections. This gave rise to the "convention" system by which prominent Catholics in the constituency, often invited by the local priest, came together to select a candidate. A contemporary critic observed that "charges of 'fixing' and selective invitations by the sponsors to such conventions have been the rule rather than the exception". Clerical influence in Nationalist politics was, in fact, a consistent theme. Direct involvement by the Roman Catholic clergy was usually limited to election periods, especially when disputes arose between contenders for the nationalist vote. In at least one instance, the Archbishop of Armagh himself acted as an arbiter in an electoral dispute concerning rival groups. According to J. L. McCracken (1967), this identification of Catholicism and nationalism "detracted from the effectiveness of opposition criticism" and encouraged a "narrow sectarian approach on the part of some nationalist members".

Ambiguities also existed within the party in their approach to the concept of reunification. Although pledged to constitutional political action, the 1950s electoral pact by which the party contested only Stormont seats and hence left the field open to Sinn Fein candidates in Westminster elections, tended to cast doubt on this commitment. The situation was further confused by the fact that the same election workers frequently aided both parties, notably in Fermanagh

and Tyrone. For many, the distinction between physical force Republicanism and constitutional Nationalism became blurred. Owen Dudley Edwards (1970) has succinctly characterised the interaction between the two traditions: "Sinn Fein was abstentionist in principle; the Nationalists had come near to being so in practice; Sinn Fein and the IRA operated as a response to partition; the Nationalists employed anti-partitionist rhetoric as the stock-in-trade. Sinn Fein denounced the Unionist oppression; the Nationalists could hardly allow themselves to be outbid on such a point." Overall, this enabled opponents to hold the party responsible for the action of extremists and to reduce further their credibility as an opposition.

In sum, the effect of the Nationalist opposition was to help foster the endemic political parochialism of the Province and, among the minority, gave rise to "apathy and a feeling of helplessness". Not only moderate Protestants were repelled from becoming involved in anti-partitionist politics, but also the younger better educated Catholics who were beginning to emerge in the early 1960s. The disenchantment and dissatisfaction with the Nationalists manifested itself through this latter group; the first tangible expression of the reappraisal that was taking place was articulated in the National Unity movement, and later the NDP.

#### *National Unity and the Maghery Convention*

In its investigation of the causes of the 1969 Ulster disturbances, the Cameron Commission noted the rise of a larger Catholic middle class and a concomitant "decline in preoccupation with the border as an immediate political issue, and in the appeal of Nationalism to the Catholic population". This new Catholic middle class was the product of increased social mobility, occasioned in part by the 1947 (NI) Education Act. The Act provided post-primary education for the children of working class parents who would not normally have had the opportunity. In the 17 years following the Act there was an increase in pupils to grant-aided schools of almost 32 per cent and in many cases this enabled the recipients to attain middle class employment and status. As Garret FitzGerald (1973) has pointed out, the political result was that "in the 1960s, the beneficiaries of this education amongst the Catholic community began to challenge the hitherto largely rural middle class leadership of the minority. . . ."

The challenge found political expression initially in the National Unity movement, created in December, 1959. A founder member, Michael McKeown, stated that the body was not in competition with the Nationalist Party. It was "not a political party", he said, "but rather a political study group. . . ." The emergence of the movement was aided by the then *Taoiseach*, Sean Lemass, in his speech to the Oxford Union in October, 1959. Arguing in favour of a federalist solution to the Northern Ireland problem, the importance of his speech lay in the *de facto* recognition it gave to partition. Of more consequence to Northern Catholics was that the idea of force inherent in Republican ideology could at last be dropped.

With this impetus, the elements which coalesced in National Unity produced a magazine, *The New Nation*. As the title suggests, it was intended to invoke

parallels with *The Nation*, a newspaper founded in 1842 by the Young Irelanders. *The New Nation* subjected the malaise of nationalist politics to thorough criticism and endeavoured to guide the re-thinking that was taking place away from a preoccupation with the sterile effects of permanent opposition. Its main aim was to produce a more constructive belief in politics as an end in itself, and not merely as a means towards attaining reunification.

Accordingly, National Unity based its appeal, firstly, on the need to make reunification conditional on consent and secondly, the need for a united opposition. The notion of the consent of a majority was a recognition that not only Protestants but a substantial number of Catholics were apathetic to the ideal of Irish Unity. Any "new nationalism" in the Province would therefore have to spring from the integration of the two politico-religious traditions "and not from the domination of the one by the other". The aim of creating a united opposition from the existing fragmented nationalist groups made the Unity movement a focal point for the co-ordination of these groups and aroused a hope that a united opposition was an attainable goal.

The first practical attempt to realise the aims of National Unity occurred at Maghery, Co. Armagh, in April, 1964. A convention was arranged, attended by the nationalist elected representatives and their critics, in order to discuss a previously circulated motion which called for the setting up of a united, democratic political party to represent all who espoused the ideal of reunification. The elected representatives themselves were only encouraged to attend the convention by a threat that if they failed to attend, the assembly itself would "undertake the creation of such an organisation". Indeed, the only elected representative not to attend, a Nationalist Party Senator, condemned the meeting as a form of court at which the representatives were being summoned to account for their actions.

Given the gulf between the representatives and their critics, it was not surprising that the meeting took the form of a confrontation. One trade unionist caught the mood of the meeting when he opened a speech by saying: "I come here out of frustration". Only one MP, Paddy Gormley, spoke in favour of the motion and only a small proportion of the floor (mainly from Derry) supported the elected representatives. In the course of the second session the momentum of pressure for reform became more intense and forced the Parliamentary parties to agree to steps to achieve it. Eventually an amended motion was passed with only one vote against and a few abstentions. This committed the participants at the convention to create a "National Political Front" to "stimulate the growth of nationalist constituency organisations" which would contain "all the machinery of a normal political party".

The significance of the Maghery Convention was that for the first time, Catholic discontent with the traditional form of Nationalist Parliamentary representation, focused through National Unity, had been effectively brought to bear on those representatives. The unspoken implication was of more immediate importance. The Nationalist Parliamentary representatives were being forced to eschew the border issue and pushed in the direction of issues such as unemployment

and housing (and hence religious discrimination) which had a more pressing concern for their constituents. Moreover, the Maghera resolution defined the twin aims of a united opposition and party organisation while setting up the structures which could bring them about. The traditional hegemony of the Nationalist Party was beginning to disintegrate.

However, the high hopes that the National Political Front marked "an end to the weakening divisions in nationalist political ranks" went unfulfilled. Tensions developed within the guiding body, the Provisional Council, between the elected representatives (who had a place on the Council by right) and those who had obtained their seats by co-option. The Nationalist Party leader, Eddie McAteer, asserted that they would not abdicate their position as elected representatives "in favour of people who have no claim to representation whatsoever . . .". At the root of this dissension was the lack of will on the Nationalist side to implement the Maghera aims. In defence of their position, McAteer believed that "political organisation . . . is simply a matter of degree . . . we have always kept in touch with the people—one of the main objectives of organisation". On the plans for open membership, he believed that "too much importance is given to 'card-carrying'" and in conclusion stated that there was a danger "too formal or rigid organisation might be inclined to repel people from joining".

Nationalist hostility towards reform and the concept of opposition unity forced their critics to set up an autonomous political party in the Belfast area from the remnants of the National Political Front. The inaugural meeting of the new party was held in February, 1965, the aims being firstly, to set up associations in Belfast's four Westminster constituencies and secondly, to try and effect a merger with the rural associations of a reorganised Nationalist Party. Significantly, the new party did not adopt the title of the parent party, but rather took the title "National Party". The Chairman, E. G. Quigley, explained that "this designation is more acceptable in the Belfast area . . . the title 'Nationalist' is acceptable in rural areas . . .". While this was undoubtedly a factor in the choice of name, it was also indicative of the conscious attempt that was being made to break away from the sectarian alignment of the Nationalist Party. At a press conference after the meeting, a rare invitation to join the party was made to Protestants "who accept the aims of the party". Later in 1965, a special conference was convened to reaffirm the twin aims of the party as being the creation of a united, as well as an organised, Nationalist political party. A resolution was passed renaming the party the "National Democratic Party": this was again evidence of the efforts being made to give the party an independent political identity.

#### *The National Democratic Party*

The substance and outlook of the NDP is best seen in an examination of three of its attributes. Firstly, in its political organisation, secondly, in its policies and thirdly, in the electoral strategy of the party.

The organisation and structure of the NDP was laid down in the Party constitution, adopted in June, 1965. Modelled closely on the constitutions of the two

major parties in the Irish Republic, it established permanent machinery and efficient procedures. The constitution made the annual conference the "supreme governing authority in the party". Because the party had a relatively small membership and spawned no real Parliamentary entity which could have gained ascendancy within the party, there was no contradiction between the theoretical function of the conference and its practical reality. Between 1965 and 1970, six conferences were held and these provided an important focal point for the formulation of policy and for the leadership to gauge rank and file thinking. The conference also elected the two governing bodies of the party, the Central Council and the Executive.

The Central Council was empowered "to further the policies of the party, to give general oversight to its management and to promote its development". The Council membership consisted of five officers elected by conference, and the balance of about 30 was made up of representatives of local associations admitted on a sliding scale. The function of the Council was to oversee the running of the local associations and to report to conference on its work and carry out its directives. While the Council met every three months, the Executive met monthly and had the task of promoting the "day-to-day management of the affairs of the party". Executive membership was made up of five officers elected by conference and ten elected by the Central Council from among themselves. In the absence of any Parliamentary body within the party, the Executive necessarily performed a crucial leadership function.

The final and most important element in the NDP's structure was the local associations. Because they could not organise in areas where the Nationalist Party was already predominant, the party was generally restricted to Belfast and its environs. By 1967, ten local associations were active, covering Belfast, Co. Antrim and parts of Counties Down, Armagh and Tyrone and an association was also established in Queen's University, Belfast. Until 1968 the University constituted a constituency electing four MPs by proportional representation. The functions of the associations were two-fold: firstly, to provide a vehicle for National Democratic propaganda, to carry on a continuing system of recruitment and to educate politically the existing membership. The second, more important function was to contest elections, select candidates and to maintain an efficient electoral machinery.

An important aspect of the local organisation was that it rarely came into conflict with the central party machinery. The local orientation of politicians and the parochialism of politics in Ireland as a whole has often led to the fragmentation of parties and friction between the centre and peripheries. However, the NDP avoided this, in part because of the strong commitment to their aim—a united opposition—and also because the local bodies had regular and easy access to the Central Council to voice grievances or discontent. The small membership and its social homogeneity ensured a high level of general cohesion. In contrast to the unorganised Nationalists, the NDP organisation marked a substantial innovation. The substitution of the Nationalist Party policy of concentration on reunification



by a number of comprehensive policy aims, again marked the establishment of a crucially important precedent.

The approach of the NDP, and of the other Catholic minority parties which followed it—to advocate reunification only by consent—created a political vacuum which could only be filled by an extensive programmatic content. No single issue, aside from partition, existed with the capacity to mobilise electors and rally support around the two opposing parties: any lessening of its saliency was therefore likely to have wide repercussions on their political stances. In the 1960s, a period of reduced communal tension initiated by the end of the 1956–62 IRA border campaign, it appeared as if the saliency of the perennial problem might, at last, be declining. The mild reformism of Terence O'Neill coupled with the Nationalist Party's decision to accept (after 44 years) the title "Official Opposition", contributed in large measure to a belief that politics in Northern Ireland was changing—and changing for the better. The 1968 Loyalty Survey found this trend to be marginally stronger among Catholics. Of all the Catholics interviewed, 65 per cent believed things were changing for the better, while only 27 per cent saw no change and 4 per cent felt things had got worse (Rose 1971).

This environment helped the NDP to bring socio-economic aims to the fore. Although they had a strong commitment to opposition unity, inherited from National Unity, their policy programme formed the substance of its political platform. This programme was at least nominally socialist. Previously most opposition groups had neither seen the need nor had the resources to produce a coherent body of policy. However, as the introduction to one NDP policy document put it: "Any political organisation which aims at becoming an alternative government to the Unionist Party has an obligation to prove its credibility by . . . producing a comprehensive body of policy". Various publications were produced on a wide range of topics, including social welfare, housing and regional development. The two main priorities were seen as the elimination of unemployment and a rapid acceleration in the Council house building programme. The general theme of all the Party's declared policies was the belief in a left-of-centre approach, emphasising extensive state intervention and control in the private sector.

The NDP was able to produce such detailed policy statements and strive to gain votes on that basis rather than rely on their religion, for two reasons. Firstly, although socialism was anathema to the Catholic electorate, their appeal was largely focused on the more politically sophisticated Belfast. Secondly, the party had the potential to produce them due to the intellectual ability of the membership. This ability stemmed from the middle class nature of these individuals, based on the teaching profession. It did, however, have the drawback in that it created a "middle class professional image" for the party and also created a point of friction when disputes arose with other anti-partitionist parties.

The policy content of the NDP was not dissimilar to that of the pro-union, but anti-Unionist Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP). But because of the Unionist "step-by-step" policy by which they adopted all welfare legislation

approved by Westminster (and between 1964 and 1970 legislation emanating from a Labour government), the NILP was almost bereft of criticism. Their opposition was ineffectual; rather in Kirchheimer's (1971) phrase it was "the waning of opposition". The NILP could be "against nothing 'British' and cannot advocate anything 'un-British'. They are forced into a position of being an Opposition by Cartel" (Rutan 1967). The NILP and also the Nationalist Party had, therefore, in different ways, allowed themselves to be so positioned that the impact of their opposition was negligible—the NILP as an "opposition by cartel" and the Nationalists as an "opposition of principle". The NDP hoped to avoid these pitfalls and appear as a "loyal" and responsible opposition—a "classical opposition"—despite their somewhat contradictory dual emphasis on nationalist and socialist symbols.

The third and final element that marked the NDP out as a new force in minority politics was its electoral strategy. Previously the Nationalist Party had fought only constituencies where it was virtually assured of success. This policy resulted in the very high levels of uncontested seats at Stormont general elections. The Unionist viewed the phenomenon of the unopposed return as symptomatic of the lack of Nationalist commitment to Parliamentary politics and indicative of his own undeniable majority. The Nationalist saw it as stemming from the gerrymandering of the electoral boundaries and the abolition of proportional representation. While the true cause probably lies somewhere in between these extremes, it is clear that the abolition of PR was a major factor. The simple majority system was re-instated for local government in 1922 and for the Stormont Parliament in 1929, this reversal being, as has been pointed out, "in breach of the spirit if not the letter of the Government of Ireland Act" (Budge and O'Leary 1973). The reason for its abolition was that Craig feared the growth of third parties, particularly Labour, who might combine with the Nationalists to rob him of his majority. Thus in abolishing an electoral system which benefited Labour most (and ironically, the Nationalists least) his publicly stated aim was to abolish all minorities except the Nationalist Party. The Nationalist leader, Joe Devlin, described the move as "mean, contemptible and callous". The lasting consequence was, *inter alia*, the high level of unopposed returns. In the nine elections for Stormont between 1929 and 1965, this never fell below 38 per cent of the total seats and in the 2 elections of 1933 and 1958, a majority of the seats were uncontested. The situation in local government was consistently worse.

It was with the intention of challenging the "scandal of the unopposed return", as a party manifesto called it, that the NDP formulated their electoral strategy. They fought two Stormont general elections, in 1965 and 1969, putting up four and seven candidates, respectively. Only one candidate was successful, in 1965, and ironically he was returned unopposed. The constituencies they fought—which were to all intents and purposes unwinnable—were contested in an attempt to break the minority political apathy which gave rise to the uncontested seats. A more practical reason was that as the party had emerged outside the traditional preserves of the Nationalists, these were, *ipso facto*, Protestant areas. Despite some

early threats of encroaching on Nationalist dominated constituencies, any such intention was quickly renounced. There was also a desire to promote the image of a "socialist" rather than a "pan-Catholic" party: indeed, for any of the seats (but one) to have been won by the NDP would have required an unprecedented degree of voting across the sectarian divide.

The overall aim of this strategy was to form a radical and viable alternative to Unionism and to appear as a responsible and constructive opposition in the British tradition. In a Province with a permanent opposition and an equally permanent one party government, this was a forlorn hope. The failure to achieve a credible Parliamentary representation had lasting consequences in shortening the life of the NDP: a party with a mass membership "cannot survive without foreseeable success. Its final fate becomes a race against time" (Neumann 1962). Moreover, the urge to contest winnable seats brought the party into conflict with other minority parties, particularly Republican Labour. The most divisive dispute came over a decision by both the NDP and the Republican Labour Party to nominate a candidate to contest the traditionally anti-partitionist West Belfast seat in the 1966 Westminster general election. In the event, pressure by Catholic politicians forced the NDP to withdraw their candidate to avoid splitting the Catholic vote. The dispute precipitated much bitter internal recrimination and a party rift was only narrowly avoided. The outcome of the West Belfast election was that the Republican Labour candidate, Gerry Fitt, received a narrow majority, and for the first time in 11 years Northern Ireland had put "an authentic working class spokesman" (O'Leary 1971) into Westminster.

The party's fortunes in local government elections fared somewhat better. This was due to the less rigid politico-religious boundaries at the local level outside Belfast and the fact that at this level, the local constituency organisations were able to exert a greater influence. In the 1967 local government elections, the party had half of its 58 candidates returned, and in 2 towns, Downpatrick and Strabane, the party held a majority of the seats.

By March, 1969, however, the NDP had still failed to make any significant impact on the political scene. After the February 1969 election, it had no representation in Stormont and its cardinal aim of opposition unity was still left unfulfilled. Moreover the increasing socio-economic emphasis of politics in the 1960s had been superseded by a more strident and uniform demand for civil rights. At this time "what Catholics wanted . . . were militant champions of the Catholic community" (O'Brien 1972). All three of the established political parties drawing support from that section of the community—the Nationalists, the NDP and Republican Labour—failed to provide this. It is not surprising therefore, that the first successful translation of civil rights demands into an electoral platform was realised by three individuals standing *independently* of any established political party.<sup>3</sup> The common denominator of the victors was that they possessed "a

3. Namely, John Hume, Paddy O'Hanlon, Ivan Cooper; all three defeated their Nationalist competitors, Hume defeating the Party leader Eddie McAteer.

greater social consciousness, activism and ecumenical image than their predecessors" (Edwards 1970).

The "crossroads" election and its aftermath marked the beginning of a period of volatility in the Northern party system which has not, as yet ended. The new political environment produced parallel but opposite changes within the respective political camps: while the Unionists embarked on a long road of fragmentation, the civil rights movement provided a new unifying force for Catholic politicians. Out of this new force the SDLP was born.

### *The Emergence of the SDLP*

The SDLP was launched at a press conference in Belfast on August 21, 1970, and its initial membership consisted of seven Parliamentary members.<sup>4</sup> Faced with the formation of a party which appeared to fill all the criteria the NDP stated as prerequisites for an effective opposition—reunification by consent, a democratically based political organisation and socialist policies—the only feasible path was to dissolve the party and join the SDLP on an individual basis. This decision was taken at a special conference of the party membership convened in October 1970.

There were three reasons why the NDP played no part in the formation of the new party, and why a "merger" was effected only by a dissolution of the NDP. The first was that the NDP appeared, in electoral terms at least, a spent force, and its formal inclusion in the SDLP could have created an initially bad image. Similarly, it was closely associated by the electorate with the Nationalist Party which had been decisively repudiated at the 1969 election. Finally, it was felt that the new party, with a new title and utilising new (and non-Catholic) political symbols, would have the best chance of assimilating the various splinter groups which comprised the opposition.

The innovations and precedents established by the National Unity movement, and later the NDP, had a considerable legacy for the SDLP. Firstly, the principle of positive constitutional political action was established as an end in itself and not merely as a means towards reunification. This was achieved by the notion, derived from National Unity, that reunification could only come through the consent of a majority of people in the *Province* (and not necessarily the whole island, as the Nationalists and Republicans had traditionally asserted). Secondly, a comprehensive political organisation was constructed as a lever towards effective political action. This organisation began at constituency level and was linked to an elective leadership; the principle of open membership was established and both the leadership and membership were brought together in a democratically organised conference. The whole structure and organisation of the party was laid down in a written constitution, itself a substantial innovation. Thirdly, the assimilation of these principles into Catholic party politics—and particularly those involving

4. Namely, Gerry Fitt, Paddy Devlin, Austin Currie, John Hume, Ivan Cooper, Paddy O'Hanlon, Senator Paddy Wilson.

permanent procedures—implied the freeing of anti-partitionist politics from clerical control. Together they were a *sine qua non* for a modern political party. Thus the innovations of National Unity and the NDP came to maturity in the political opposition of the future, the SDLP.

At the inaugural press conference, the leader of the new party, Gerry Fitt, announced that the guiding principles of the party would be the presentation of a strong socialistic alternative to Unionism, to the extent of contesting seats of other Catholic members of the opposition, if need be, and to seek the unity of Ireland only by consent. He committed the party to organising in each of the 52 Stormont constituencies, with open membership, a central party office and a democratically organised party conference. Fitt also rightly pointed out that “for the first time in Northern Ireland politics . . . we have brought the town and country together”.

The most easily traceable legacy of the NDP was in terms of political organisation. It is clear that the SDLP constitution was modelled closely on that of the NDP. As the SDLP was formed at the Parliamentary level down, rather than vice versa, the experience of the old NDP members in constituency organisation and co-ordination proved invaluable in giving the new party a residue of support and ability in the country when setting up their constituency organisation. The considerable contribution of the NDP towards contemporary minority political opposition in Northern Ireland is an acknowledgeable, if neglected fact.

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