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**GERRY FITT : ULSTER POLITICIAN**

by

**MICHAEL A MURPHY**

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January

1992

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to Professor Lawrence McCaffrey, Doctor Jo Hays, Doctor Janet Nolan, Doctor Paul Bew, Gordon Gillespie, Breige McGuckin, Brian O'Rourke, Brian Griffin and Michael O'Mahoney for having read the manuscript and for the helpful and insightful criticisms they provided.

I should like to thank Mike Maultstaid of the Central Library in Belfast, where I have worked during the course of this study.

Finally, I wish to thank my mother who showed great patience in the arduous task of typing and retyping.

## PREFACE

Since the resumption of the "troubles" - a euphemism for the re-emergence of physical force republicanism that began in the late 1960s and continues to this day - historians, sociologists and political scientists have been predictably attracted to the Northern Ireland problem. As a consequence there has been a plethora of books, articles and other works produced on the subject. Nevertheless, although Gerry Fitt is often mentioned in general texts he has not been the subject of an in-depth study. This is surprising in view of the extremely high profile he held for over twenty five years in Irish politics. Indeed it would be no exaggeration to say that he has been a major protagonist in this turbulent phase in the history of Anglo-Irish relations. The primary purpose of this dissertation, therefore, is to provide an account of the political career of Gerry Fitt.

If the breaking of new ground were all, this work would be of sufficient interest. It is my contention, however, that Fitt's political career constitutes a seemingly remarkable volte-face from Socialist Republican to Peer of the Realm. Accordingly, the second purpose of this dissertation is to analyse this intriguing paradox.

Given this work's biographical nature the approach I shall adopt will be largely chronological. It will consist of nine sections: An introduction, seven chapters and a conclusion. The introduction will comprise, for the benefit of those unfamiliar with the historical background, a sketch of modern Irish history from the late eighteenth century until partition in 1921. In addition, it will attempt to ascertain Fitt's political orientation, if not philosophy, by identifying important factors in his early life which helped shape

his subsequent career.

Chapter I discusses the transformation in Catholic politics from the late 1950s to the mid 1960s. Against this, Chapter II traces Fitt's political development during the very same period. Fitt's machinations during, and his relationship with the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1960s, form the substance of Chapter III.

Chapter IV investigates the formation of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (S.D.L.P.) of which Fitt was a founder member and first leader. The basis of Chapter V is an analysis of the role played by Fitt and the S.D.L.P. in the attempts to find a solution to the political breakdown that took place in the mid 1970s. Fitt's increasing isolation within the S.D.L.P. and his subsequent disenchantment with the party in the late 1970s provide the framework for Chapter VI, the penultimate chapter.

The final chapter traces the events which led to the loss of Fitt's Westminster seat (after seventeen years) to Gerry Adams, head of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (P.I.R.A.) and Fitt's subsequent elevation to the House of Lords. The conclusion assesses Fitt's place in Irish history. There will follow a tabulation of electoral results relevant to Fitt's political career.

## VITA

The author, Michael Murphy, is the son of Christopher Murphy and Carmel (Downing) Murphy. He was born 25 February 1961, in London, England.

In September 1980, Mr Murphy entered St Mary's College, Strawberry Hill, receiving the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English and History in June, 1983.

In October 1983, Mr Murphy enrolled at the Queen's University of Belfast, Northern Ireland. He completed a Master of Social Science in Irish Politics in 1985.

In January 1985, Mr Murphy was granted an assistantship in History at the Loyola University of Chicago which enabled him to pursue the PhD degree.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Historical Background

In 1798 Wolfe Tone and his fellow United Irishmen attempted an insurrection designed to subvert British rule in Ireland and to assert Irish independence. Ironically, the most significant consequence was the Act of Union of 1800 which directly linked Ireland to the British parliament at Westminster. The forced amalgamation provoked hostility and led to opposition movements committed to its undoing.

Throughout the nineteenth century this opposition came in two forms. First, political revolutionaries, such as Robert Emmet who attempted a rebellion in 1803, the Young Irelanders of 1848 and the Fenians of the 1860s, all championed the use of physical force to overthrow British rule in Ireland. Second, the parliamentary constitutionalists who sought repeal of the Union and Home Rule for Ireland through non-violent methods. Foremost amongst these were Daniel O'Connell in the 1840s, Isaac Butt in the 1860s and Charles Stewart Parnell in the 1880s. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, constitutional nationalism gained the ascendancy primarily because of Parnell's leadership. A demand for the re-establishment of an Irish parliament to control Irish affairs became an increasingly urgent request that the British found hard to ignore because of the success of the Irish Parliamentary Party.

The situation was complicated by the attitude of the Protestant settlers concentrated in the north-east of Ireland in the province of Ulster. They viewed the development of the Home Rule movement with a great deal of anxiety. Unlike the rest of Ireland, Ulster had benefited from the union with Britain. This was due to the fact that

in economic terms Ulster was largely industrial whereas the rest of Ireland was predominantly agricultural. Shipbuilding, engineering and the linen industry generated prosperity and caused the north-east of Ireland to develop differently politically and socially from the rest of the island. In an effort to preserve this condition, Ulster's Protestant unionists were determined to resist any move towards Home Rule. Tension was further generated by Protestants equating Home Rule with Rome Rule.

Accordingly, in 1912, 400,000 Ulster Protestants, under Edward Carson, signed the Solemn League and Covenant, pledging to use all means necessary to defeat Home Rule. In 1913 the Ulster Volunteer Force (U.V.F.) was formed and 100,000 volunteers threatened to revolt against the Home Rule proposal and establish a provisional government in Ulster should Ireland be given its own legislature. Furthermore, in 1914, the U.V.F. landed 25,000 rifles and two and a half million rounds of ammunition at Larne in County Antrim.

In contrast to unionist cohesion, nationalists were divided. Occasionally the constitutional and revolutionary strands had coalesced but it was more usual for them to operate as distinct and antagonistic entities. The leader of the Constitutional Nationalist Party, John Redmond, had witnessed the formation of a large army of Irish volunteers pledged to fight for Home Rule and he feared that widespread violence might result from the existence of two private armies. To prevent such an outcome Redmond took command of the Irish Volunteers. When Prime Minister Asquith proposed that the Ulster counties be allowed to opt out of the Irish parliament for a period of six years, Redmond agreed although he insisted that there be plebiscites in each of the counties and in Londonderry. Carson,

however, rejected the compromise. He wanted all of Ireland to remain linked to Britain. Thus, by 1914 confrontation seemed inevitable and was only averted by the outbreak of the First World War. Redmond had great faith in the British parliament and was convinced that Britain would be more responsive to the Home Rule cause if Irishmen aided Britain's war effort. He, therefore, supported the British Empire and urged Irish volunteers to join the British army. Eighty thousand heeded his call.

Revolutionary republicans took a decidedly different view of events in Europe. They argued that Britain's difficulty was Ireland's opportunity. In April 1916, James Connolly, the socialist leader, allied himself and his citizens army to the revolutionary nationalists led by Patrick Pearse. Together they organized the Easter rebellion and signed the proclamation establishing an Irish republic. The rising was poorly planned and collapsed after a week. For the most part the Irish people were apathetic or even hostile towards the rebels. This hostility changed radically, however, when Britain decided to execute the leaders. Their deaths marked a watershed in Irish history and Redmond's brand of parliamentary gradualism was discredited. Sinn Fein, founded in 1907, became the main voice of mass militant republicanism and, in the four by-elections held in 1917, was successful in all. Limited self-government was no longer their goal, now they demanded a full republic.

After sweeping gains in the general election of 1918 (outside Ulster), Sinn Fein decided to ignore the British parliament. Sinn Fein subsequently formed the Dail Eireann declaring itself the legitimate governing body of Ireland. This declaration to secede

from the United Kingdom resulted in the Anglo-Irish war in which the new provisional government used its own volunteer army, now called the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.), in a guerilla campaign against the British army.

In an attempt to end the conflict, Britain proposed the Government of Ireland Act (1920). This offered limited Home Rule for Ireland with two separate parliaments in Belfast and Dublin. The unionists of the north-east now reluctantly agreed to division but opted only for six of the nine Ulster counties creating an area with a built in Protestant majority. Partition coupled with the relationship of the new state with the United Kingdom was totally unacceptable to Sinn Fein, and the Anglo-Irish war continued.

In 1921 elections took place for both the new Home Rule parliaments. In the south, Sinn Fein used the election as a referendum on national independence and won 124 of the 128 seats, while, in the north, the unionists won 40 of the 52 seats. After the elections, the British again tried to end the conflict. They offered a new treaty which afforded the south dominion status within the Commonwealth and a large degree of self-government. However, partition was still a thorny problem. Britain declared that the 1920 Act was non-negotiable, but offered a boundary commission to determine the final borders between north and south.

The southern Irish delegation to the talks with the British government reluctantly accepted the treaty on behalf of the new state. On the delegation's return, however, a bloody civil war broke out which those in favour of the treaty eventually won in 1923. Partition had become a reality. In the north the unionists took control in the knowledge that their border contained a substantial

and resentful Catholic minority deprived of the right to be part of an overall majority in a larger state. The south, on the other hand, developed into a homogeneous Catholic state that finally achieved the status of a republic in 1948.

### **GERRY FITT - FORMATIVE INFLUENCES**

Gerry Fitt is a Catholic and was raised in the working class area of Dock in Belfast. That seemingly innocuous sentence condenses information that is extremely significant and needs to be appreciated in order to gain a full understanding of Fitt's political career. I will deal with each element in turn.

First, as a Catholic, Fitt was a member of a permanent minority within Northern Ireland, which was governed by the unionist majority (Fitt was born in 1926, six years after partition). Through their hankering to be part of a majority in a single state comprising the whole of the island, Catholics were regarded by many unionists as subversives intent on undermining the link with Britain. This suspicion was regularly invoked to justify discriminatory practices in places of work which were, by and large, staffed and owned by members of the Protestant community. In other words, major sources of employment, such as heavy industry (shipbuilding etc) and administration, were closed to Catholics. They were, therefore, confined to work of an unskilled or temporary nature. Indeed Catholics often emigrated.

Second, coming from the working classes would not have enhanced a Catholic's life-choices. Prior to the creation of the welfare state in the United Kingdom in the late 1940s which was to prove so influential in the development of nationalist politics, and will be considered in later chapters, access to the normal means of

self-improvement, education, was strictly limited. The cost of secondary education, the vehicle of social mobility, would have been too great a burden for most families.

Finally, Belfast is a predominantly Protestant city. The Protestant community outnumbers the Catholic by approximately three to one. The Marquis of Donegall, the landowner who created Belfast built on land where no prior settlement existed, unlike the provinces second city of Londonderry. Protestant inhabitants tolerated, even welcomed Catholics, so much that they made substantial donations of land and money for the building of Catholic churches. However, successive waves of Catholic migrants to the city in search of employment, together with the militant revival of both the Catholic and Protestant churches from the mid-nineteenth century on led to a worsening of relations between the two communities. Conflict manifested itself in sectarian riots which increased in savagery and frequency throughout the rest of the century.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Catholics in Belfast have suffered from a certain sense of insecurity. In contrast, their counterparts in Londonderry, by virtue of their numerical superiority and history, are relatively confident of their nationalist identity. This may appear to be an unjustifiable generalization, but it is often supported by the fact that the sectarianism which has characterized the political violence in Belfast has not been evident in Londonderry. In short, Belfast Catholics differ in disposition to their co-religionists in Londonderry and the rest of the province.

As will be revealed, Fitt's early years are by no means untypical of his class, generation and community. However, an interest in politics would ensure that Fitt's life would not remain

orthodox.

Fitt's father died when he was eight years old, leaving his mother with six children. His family would not have been the only working class household in Belfast to endure poverty, but the death of the breadwinner could only have aggravated its plight. He left school in 1940 at age fourteen. He had obtained the primary school leaving certificate which would have enabled him to go to the local grammar school. Since education was considered a luxury rather than a right, he, like most working-class males, sought paid employment instead. He worked at various jobs between the ages of fourteen and fifteen, including a position as a soap boy in a barber's shop. At fifteen, he joined the Merchant Navy, two years younger than the legal age to enlist. He remained at sea until 1952, and, during the war, saw service in the North and Baltic seas in ships conveying goods to Russia. Fitt met his wife, Ann, a native of Castlederg, County Tyrone, in London where she was working as a telephone operator. In 1947 the Fitts' moved to Belfast.

After leaving the Merchant Navy in 1952, Fitt held a number of interim jobs, ranging from insurance agent, encyclopedia salesman and clerk. However, much of his time was taken up with politics. In view of his subsequent political career, it seems that Fitt was imbued with the same sense of resentment against the unionist state as his co-religionists. While at sea, Fitt had become a disciple of the Irish Marxist, James Connolly, who had been so instrumental in organizing the 1916 rebellion. Connolly argued that the subjection of the Irish working classes was a result of the unresolved national question. He saw British domination of Ireland as a continuation of neo-colonialism and an obstruction to the establishment of politics

based upon class loyalties.<sup>2</sup> Fitt now maintains that the writings of Connolly have been his main political inspiration. His own poverty and the poverty he witnessed while at sea prompted his initial interest in Connolly.<sup>3</sup> Fitt has never put his political thoughts to paper and we must assume therefore that his allegiance is more emotional than intellectual.

While on leave from the Merchant Navy in 1951, Fitt took part in his first election campaign. Fitt's goal, like Connolly's, was to unite the Catholic and Protestant working classes. He supported Jack Beattie, a Presbyterian, who stood on an Irish Labour ticket and was thus opposed to partition. Beattie won the Westminster West Belfast seat from the unionists by twenty-five votes after five recounts. The drama of the close election ensured that Fitt's concern with politics was now a commitment rather than an interest. In 1957 he stood as a candidate for the Belfast Corporation (the local government) and in 1958, for the Northern Ireland parliament. Fitt lost on both occasions, but his political profile was sufficiently raised for him to be elected in his second attempt to the Belfast Corporation. So began Fitt's uninterrupted twenty-five year period of electoral success.

## NOTES

1. See I. Budge and C. O'Leary, Belfast, Approach to Crisis: Study of Belfast Politics 1613-1970 (London: Macmillan, 1973).
2. See C.D. Greaves, The Life and Times of James Connolly (London: Macmillan, 1973).
3. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 19 December 1988, House of Lords, London.

## CHAPTER I

### CATHOLIC POLITICS IN TRANSITION

It is often argued that we never accepted the state. That is true for most of us. But we had little choice. We were the unfortunate baggage of a partitionist arrangement. We were the human flotsam floating about in the political limbo of an unfinished struggle.<sup>1</sup>

This is Gerry Adams's, the President of Sinn Fein, synopsis of the plight of the Catholic/nationalist population after partition in 1921. The historians, Lord Longford and Ann McHardy, concluded that the workings of the Northern Ireland state contained "serious genetic defects:"<sup>2</sup> The most blatant being that a substantial Catholic/nationalist minority was deprived of the right to be part of an overall majority in a larger state.

As a result of their opposition to Home Rule and the well known British tendency to compromise, unionists found themselves with their own Home Rule of sorts. In order to preserve the Northern state from what unionists perceived to be the enemy within there was considerable discrimination in housing, votes, policing, local employment and government, education and welfare spending. The results of such machinations were twofold. First, Protestants of all denominations and classes coalesced under an oligarchy; second, they reinforced the alienation of the Catholic population who were already unwilling to accept the legitimacy of the state and its institutions. The Northern parliament at Stormont Castle was totally dominated by the Unionist Party. Nationalist resentment was further fuelled by security measures designed to protect the state, namely the establishment of an exclusively Protestant Ulster Special Constabulary (the B Specials) and the Special Powers Act which

allowed for a total suspension of civil liberties in so called emergency situations. Although discrimination was in many instances intentional, its workings were considerably aided by the unco-operative attitude of the defeated Catholic minority. Michael Farrell, in his Marxist critique of the history of Northern Ireland, The Orange State, describes the consequences:

Devlin and his colleagues<sup>3</sup> were treated with contempt and forced into abstentionism, and the frustration of the minority eventually erupted into an abortive campaign by the I.R.A. This was the first of several cycles of parliamentary agitation followed by rebuff and abstentionism, then by a military campaign. All strategies proving equally unsuccessful and only confirming the total alienation of the minority from the state.<sup>4</sup>

This pattern continued until the late 1950s when a change of attitude could be perceived - on both sides of the border Catholic politics were in transition. Signs indicated that Catholics were willing to participate in the workings of the Northern Ireland state. They evidently had recognized the futility of the armed struggle.

The failure of the I.R.A. border campaign of 1956 - 1962 had discredited the tradition of physical force. Goaded into a more co-operative and conciliatory position, the Nationalist Party accepted the role of official opposition. New groups emerged such as National Unity, the National Democratic Party (N.D.P.), and the Campaign for Social Justice (C.S.J.), content to improve the lot of northern Catholics within the system with minimal reference to the border. In Britain, the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster (C.D.U.) emerged which reflected a growing awareness and sympathy for the plight of British Catholics in Northern Ireland. Perhaps the most positive sign was the fact that in 1965, Sean Lemass, prime minister

of the Republic and his northern counterpart Terence O'Neill, had enjoyed a convivial summit in Belfast, it seemed to reduce the importance of the border. In short, in the mid-1960s, the future would see less emphasis on the issue of partition and more on social reform of the Northern Ireland state. The Dublin based current affairs publication Hibernia remarked in November 1965:

The little, bitter, closed in world of Ulster is everywhere being penetrated by the greater problems of human progress and human survival. The people are less satisfied in seeing themselves as either outposts of the British Empire or defenders of the ideal Republic. They belong to Ireland and the modern world. They desire for their children prosperity, peace and progress. They want an ending to the tyranny of upholding ancient old quarrels.<sup>5</sup>

As Paul Bew and Henry Patterson note, events "... seemed to indicate that the Irish question as traditionally posed was no longer pertinent."<sup>6</sup>

At this juncture Gerry Fitt, the Catholic Republican Socialist, was elected to Westminster. To fully place his election in context, and in an attempt to gain a greater understanding of Catholic politics in the period, the rest of the chapter will be devoted to analysing the developments mentioned above.

#### THE I.R.A. BORDER CAMPAIGN 1956 - 1962

Nationalist claims for Irish unity were based upon the republican creed. Republicanism interprets the relationship between Britain and Ireland as little more than a morganatic marriage. Consequently, military insurrections designed to sever this union and establish an independent Ireland have punctuated Irish history. We have seen that after the establishment of the Northern state, the political history of the six counties was likewise characterised by

intermittent military campaigns. J. Bowyer Bell explains why this physical force reaction has endured:

For a few, generation after generation, what Pearse and Connolly began in the name of Tone on April 24, 1916, is an unfinished legacy - but a clearly defined responsibility. As long as the British border cuts across the Republic of 1916, as long as Ireland and its people are neither free of exploitation nor Gaelic in tongue and heart, then men will turn to the task as defined by Tone no matter how bleak the prospects: to do less would be to betray the past and deny the future.<sup>7</sup>

One such commitment to the "clearly defined responsibility" began with the I.R.A.'s adoption of Sean Cronin's "Operation Harvest."<sup>8</sup> Cronin's plan for the extirpation of the six county state was implemented in 1956. The strategy envisioned a guerilla campaign intent on the wholesale destruction of political, administrative, and economic centers. Such destruction, it was assumed, would paralyse the infrastructure of the state and thus bring about its demise. The strategy contained one major contradiction - Belfast, which was the main political, administrative and economic center was not attacked because of the fear of reprisals against the unprotected nationalist enclaves within the city.<sup>9</sup> This incongruity was one of the major inadequacies of the campaign which ultimately led to its failure in 1962.

Nevertheless, the taking up of arms once again aroused patriotism in the Irish Republic. In the elections to the Dail in 1957, Sinn Fein candidates polled 66,000 votes and four of them gained parliamentary seats.<sup>10</sup> Such patriotism, however, was short lived. The ineffective military strategy was compounded by a general lack of discipline throughout the movement. However, there were a number of fatalities in border areas and the campaign was significant enough for the governments of both Belfast and Dublin to

take stringent security measures.

The republic re-introduced internment in 1957, a policy which had always been a major component in the weaponry of Stormont. Despite some spectacular exploits at the beginning of 1958, internment severely weakened the I.R.A. Towards the end of 1958, when 187 men were interned south of the border, not only was military escalation greatly hindered through lack of man power, but the command structure lost any cohesiveness it had established.<sup>11</sup>

The performance of the political wing reflected the decline of I.R.A. fortunes. In the 1959 Northern Ireland Westminster elections the Nationalist Party, in what had become standard policy, stood aside in order not to split the Catholic vote. Sinn Fein contested all twelve seats but managed to poll only 73,415 votes.<sup>12</sup> This was less than half the number they received in the 1955 election and the vote was clearly indicative of declining support.

This pattern of Sinn Fein decline was repeated in the Republic - in the 1961 Dail election the votes polled were likewise less than half received previously and no republicans were elected. Thus, on both sides of the border popular support for the campaign had been greatly reduced. Tim Pat Coogan in his sympathetic history of the I.R.A. explains the attitudes to which that fall may be attributed:

In the North the nationalists refer to the campaign to day as "the incidents" because this is in fact what it was, a series of incidents along the border, impinging very little on Belfast and annoying rather than terrifying the Northern administration... But once it became obvious that the campaign could have no effect on the permanency of the Northern regime public interest diminished.

As regards the sentiment in the South, Coogan concludes:

At no time did this interest ever betoken any hostility to England or indeed towards the North. Most people in the Republic were rather puzzled by the whole thing and were inclined to write the whole thing off as the "I.R.A. at it again", without any clear

appreciation of why it should have been at it again.<sup>13</sup>

The I.R.A then became increasingly isolated. The organization finally ended the struggle in February 1962. Its statement read:

The decision to end the resistance campaign has been taken in view of the general situation. Foremost among the factors motivating this course of action has been the attitude of the general public whose minds have been deliberately distracted from the supreme issue facing the Irish people - the unity and freedom of Ireland.<sup>14</sup>

The declaration contained no self criticism, no recognition of inherent strategy inadequacies. Instead, the I.R.A. blamed the people. The campaign had resulted in fifteen deaths, damage estimated at a million pounds, and increased security in the six counties was estimated at ten million pounds.<sup>15</sup>

In retrospect, it is apparent that the I.R.A. in the late 1950s and early 1960s did not really reflect the aspirations of nationalists. In the North, the Irish News (the Catholic daily newspaper) editorialized that the physical force tradition was no longer enough:

Unionists in commenting on the I.R.A. decision to abandon their campaign of violence against the North describe it as an admission of defeat. It is forgotten that the I.R.A. were from the start doomed to defeat without the support of the Irish people and that they did not receive.<sup>16</sup>

Elsewhere, the physical force tradition was seen as no more than an historical relic. In the United States the New York Times argued:

Partition is resented but the present generation knows that if partition is ever to be ended it must be by peaceful arrangements. The few young thugs who make up the tiny remnant that now lays down its arms used a grand and famous name for their organization, but the Irish Republican Army belongs to history, and it belongs to better men in times that are gone. So does the Sinn Fein. Let us put a wreath of roses on their grave and move on.<sup>17</sup>

Above all things, the failure of the border campaign showed that political and social conditions within Northern Ireland were not

conducive to the creation of a mass movement striving for a united Ireland through physical force. The collapse of this campaign represented a crisis for militant physical force republicanism, and the response was the re-emergence of social republicanism. A more grass-roots movement replaced the elitism of physical force republicanism. Policy was transformed from a rigid refusal to recognise the status quo to an involvement in left wing politics, combined with a resolve to bring down the system from within. Quintessential physical force republicanism was apparently a thing of the past.

Accordingly, the New Nation magazine in Northern Ireland argued in 1964:

As nationalists our first concern is with all those who wished to see the ultimate unity of Ireland brought about by peaceful means. In this statement we do not wish to deny that there have been times when Irishmen were justified in using other means and that such times may come again, but we do maintain that at the present time there is no justification whatever for violence.<sup>18</sup>

Apart from the odd symbolic gesture of defiance, the most spectacular being the destruction of Nelson's Pillar in Dublin on March 7, 1966, physical force republicanism in the mid 1960s kept a very low profile. In the words of J. Bowyer Bell:

Physical force as a means to break the connection with Britain had never seemed more irrelevant. Ireland in the sixties seemed more concerned with the fruits of the good life than the bootless ambitions of the romantic past. All the wild dreams were dead and gone, the roads were clogged with traffic and the pubs with whiskey drinkers.<sup>19</sup>

### THE NATIONALIST PARTY

Any difference between Sinn Fein and the constitutional strand of Irish nationalism as represented by the Nationalist Party - the direct descendant of John Redmond's party-concerned only what method

to use to obtain a united Ireland. Both were essentially Catholic conservative organizations, with anti-partition and abstention policies. The word "party" as a collective noun for the constitutional nationalists of the North was something of a misnomer, for they did not resemble a modern political party in structure or organization. From the inception of the state, the nationalists denied its legitimacy. It was only after 1945 that they attended the Northern parliament with some regularity. Prior to that time their refusal to acknowledge the existence of Northern Ireland was reflected in frequent abstention. Ian McAllister presents the unenviable dilemma of the nationalists and their response to it:

They had no incentive to participate in the normal political activity of the state because they could never hope to influence, let alone become, the government, yet they were committed to parliamentary politics.

In the event, the nationalists overcame the dilemma by a half hearted commitment to constitutional politics. They failed to organise and restricted their activities to enclaves where they possessed a numerical majority moreover they frequently abstained from parliament and continued to emphasise partition to the exclusion of other social issues affecting the welfare of their supporters.<sup>20</sup>

These social issues included matters of housing, employment and welfare spending. To the Nationalist Party, all social problems were summed up in the word "discrimination" and this position was maintained from 1921 to the 1960s. Thus, to the constitutional nationalist, a united Ireland was the panacea for all social grievances.

Nationalists, then, made no real attempts to work within the system. Their efforts probably would have been ineffectual but the failure even to articulate measures of reform outside the national question, which would have benefited the people they represented, led

in turn to disillusionment and general apathy within that community. The Nationalist Party, with the exception of the partition issue was thus highly conservative. Its close clerical links only strengthened this characteristic. The stagnant nature of its profile was reflected in the only legislation that it saw through Stormont, the politically unimportant "Wild Birds Act" of 1931.<sup>21</sup> It is little wonder that Bernadette Devlin (now McAliskey) would come to refer to them as the "Green Tories of Ireland."<sup>22</sup>

Eddie McAteer, a Derry Catholic, and the 1960s leader of the Nationalist Party, articulated its passivity when he said: "Our policy is a realistic one. Broadly speaking we realise that partition is a matter between Dublin and London. On that issue ours must be a passive role. We oppose partition as a great evil, but we ourselves cannot change the partition situation."<sup>23</sup>

There were, as we shall see, groups on both sides of the border who were no longer convinced of the validity of this "passive role." They challenged what they perceived as the futile indulgence of isolation and non-co-operation. During the 1960s, the Nationalist Party came under increasing pressure to improve its performance and profile.

One of the party's most vociferous critics south of the border was the Dublin-based current affairs review Hibernia. It was particularly critical of the party's lack of structure. In 1961 Hibernia complained: "The nationalists of course have no organization whatever. The party is not a party in any political sense but rather in an Alice in Wonderland sense."<sup>24</sup> Later in 1963 it argued:

In order to hold and improve its standing in the 'Province' to the

point where it can be considered as an alternative to the Unionist government, the Nationalist Party must become a more purposeful, vigorous and progressive looking organization.

It must organise in every constituency in Northern Ireland and not as heretofore in safe constituencies only.

It must plan and produce for the electorate vigorous progressive policies covering all aspects of economic and social endeavours in Northern Ireland, policies which could become a real and dangerous challenge to the unionists policy of step by step with Britain.

Most important of all: the future policies of the Nationalist Party, even allowing for the ideal of a united country, must appeal to all sections of the community and not at present, to one section only.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout the early 1960s Hibernia was consistently critical of the irredentist profile of the Nationalist Party. The narrowness of its nationalism was envisaged not only as an obstacle to reunification but actually a bulwark of partition and a main condition of its continuance.

North of the border, criticism of the "Green Tories" was equally strong. The leader of the Ulster Liberal Association, Albert McElroy, when asked in 1962 what he thought of the Nationalist Party in Stormont replied: "Politically speaking, it is the other side of the unionist penny. Most of its members, had they been born Protestants instead of Catholics, would find themselves quite at home on a Twelfth of July Platform."<sup>26</sup>

However, the nationalists would have been most sensitive to the criticism which came from within their own community. In 1964, John Hume, a Derry school teacher, who later became a civil rights activist and leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (S.D.L.P.), chastised the Nationalist Party in an Irish Times article. While rebuking the Unionist administration for the plight of Northern nationalists, Hume also blamed the Nationalist Party for

the situation:

Good government depends as much on the opposition as on the party in power. Weak opposition leads to corrupt government. Nationalists in opposition have been in no way constructive. They have quite rightly been loud in their demands for rights, but they have remained silent and inactive about their duties. In forty years of opposition they have not produced one constructive contribution on either the social or economic plane to the development of Northern Ireland which is, after all, a substantial part of the united Ireland for which they strive. Leadership has been the comfortable leadership of flags and slogans. Easy no doubt but irresponsible.

With regard to the Nationalist Party's ambiguous attitude toward the Westminster parliament, Hume expressed an opinion which but a few years previously would have been construed as virtual heresy. He argued that acceptance of the constitutional position could be reconciled with the aspiration of a united Ireland

There is nothing inconsistent with such acceptance and a belief that a thirty-two county republic is best for Ireland. In fact, if we are to pursue a policy of non-recognition, the only logical policy is that of Sinn Fein. If one wishes to create a united Ireland by constitutional means, then one must accept the constitutional position.<sup>27</sup>

The Nationalist Party could not ignore such criticism which was becoming more and more vocal. In November 1964, under pressure from converging forces, it published a thirty nine-point policy statement which pledged it to work within the system. The party also declared a commitment to become a modern political organization. In addition, the statement demanded an end to discrimination and gerrymandering, and made reference to economic considerations.<sup>28</sup>

In January 1965, the premier of the Republic of Ireland, Sean Lemass, visited his counterpart in the North, Terence O'Neill. This meeting, the first of its kind, was correctly considered a major watershed in the relationship between the two states.

One immediate tangible result of this summit was that the

Nationalist Party, prompted by Lemass, decided for the first time in its history to form the official opposition.

Eddie McAteer made the following statement:

The Nationalist Party has reviewed the whole political landscape and has reached the following conclusions. Stormont must be seen as a federated or regional Irish parliament to continue in existence until fears of an all Ireland parliament are finally resolved. There must be co-operation to ensure that the Stormont parliament makes good or better laws for the benefit of all the people thus promoting better harmony.<sup>29</sup>

The nationalists had ended a negative policy which had endured for over forty years and had finally accepted the status of Northern Ireland. They had committed themselves to co-operate within the system wherever their principles would permit, and superficially at least, Northern Ireland appeared to be entering into a period of conciliation.

#### **NATIONAL UNITY AND THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY**

The questioning of traditional beliefs and the resultant criticism of the Nationalist Party stemmed from a new generation of Northern Catholics, more concerned with social and economic conditions than with the ideal of a united Ireland.

John Hume's Irish Times article was indicative of a growing change in attitude. Now there really was a Catholic nationalist desire to pursue a reasonable political dialogue as regards the constitution and government of Ireland. Hume and others were activated by a sense of frustration with their position in public life and an exhaustion with the seemingly endless cycles of violence. Catholic grievances over discrimination continued, but there was a willingness to adopt a fresh approach to old grievances. Much of the impetus for improving the status of Catholics within the

existing political framework sprang from a new middle class which was no longer prepared to tolerate discrimination.

In November 1959, the Catholic organization National Unity was formed. It was largely composed of University graduates who had benefited from higher education opportunities resulting from the 1947 Education Acts.

Initially, members of National Unity saw themselves as an integral part of the Nationalist Party, a reform body that would push it towards more progressive socio-economic positions.<sup>30</sup> The concept of National Unity suggested that a united opposition to unionism was now an attainable goal. Hibernia commented in 1961: "At the moment, there is no Nationalist Party to join, a circumstance which has brought into existence a group, National Unity, which aims to unite the nationalist people with a solid blow."<sup>31</sup>

Middle class National Unity saw itself as providing (for the Northern nationalist community) an intellectual and moral leadership which had been lacking within the Nationalist Party. Its aim was to instill confidence in members of the minority community so that they would play a part in political life and influence the course of nationalist politics. In short, National Unity hoped to provide a rallying point for a new brand of nationalism.

Towards the end of 1963 it had become apparent to National Unity that the Nationalist Party was irreformable - its profile had remained stagnant for so long that any change at all in policy verged on the revolutionary. Thus, the party's conservative nature militated against any worthwhile adaptation to the changing times.

In January 1964 National Unity published the first issue of an independent quarterly journal for social, cultural and political

comment on Irish affairs. This magazine was New Nation, and, as Ian McAllister points out, its title was intended to "invoke parallels"<sup>32</sup> with the newspaper of the Young Irelanders founded in 1842.<sup>33</sup> The growing rift between the group and the Nationalist Party was made clear in the April 1964 edition.

It was one of the minor ironies of history that the Parnellite line of succession from the first Irish party should be maintained to this day in the persons of the Nationalist parliamentary representatives in Stormont. The irony is contained in the fact that the Irish party was the first example of an organized political party in these islands while the present nationalist representation is the very antithesis of party organization.

For the academic historian such a reversal provides a lengthy footnote to a political history of Ireland. For the nationalist electorate on the other hand it implies a state of confusion, frustration and bewilderment.<sup>34</sup>

A major effort to establish some uniformity in nationalist policy was attempted when National Unity called a convention of anti-partition groups in Maghera, County Armagh in April, 1964. This convention was attended by nationalist elected representatives. Other delegates included Republican, Labour and Independent senators and M.P's as well as many members of the professions which composed National Unity itself - doctors, teachers, solicitors and a number of university students. They discussed a previously circulated motion calling for the creation of a united democratic political party to represent all components of the nationalist movement and fulfil its aspiration for a united Ireland. The outcome of the meeting was the formation of a new political unit - The National Political Front. Afterwards McAteer said that "The keynote was unity of national forces and the end of weakening divisions." Thus, the resolution contained the following:

In conjunction with the Nationalist parliamentary representatives and with other M.P's, who support the national ideal to take

immediate steps to create such a national political front with all the machinery of a normal political party in such areas where these do not already exist.<sup>35</sup>

An Irish News editorial welcomed this outcome.

Any political movement .... that works for the unity of national groups deserves encouragement and support. Wise counsel and single hearted purpose can repair past errors and mend broken friendships. Force has proved a failure. But there should be no other failure in fresh and determined efforts to heal the wound that has weakened the country and to end the friction that has kept so many unity workers in rival camps.<sup>36</sup>

It seemed, therefore, as if a start had been made on the creation of a united political party. The political domination of the Nationalist Party was certainly drawing to a close.<sup>37</sup> However, it still retained sufficient prestige to ensure the fragmentation of the nascent "National Political Front."

In September 1964, the N.P.F. condemned the Nationalist Party via a resolution censuring its decision not to contest the Fermanagh/South Tyrone seat at the forthcoming Westminster election. This decision was consistent with the party's policy of standing aside at imperial elections and allowing Sinn Fein a straight fight with the unionists. The resolution also declared: "That the present situation has developed due to the failure of the Nationalist Parliamentary Party to co-operate within the National Political Front in the creation of a normal democratic political party."

Commenting on the Resolution, McAteer said:

This has placed the future of the front in grave jeopardy. In my opinion it has crumbled and will require rebuilding from the foundation ....

I am disappointed that it has not been found possible to build a new organisation. In my judgement the materials were incompatible. Certainly the high hopes of the Maghera Convention are a long way from fulfilment but I am hopeful that a new phoenix may arise from the ashes.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately for McAteer and his fellow Nationalist M.P's, what

did emerge from the ashes was a new political party which would further fragment Catholic politics. The Nationalist Party's thirty nine point plan in November of 1964 was too little and too late.

Finally in 1965, National Unity created the National Democratic Party (N.D.P.). Its open membership was designed to attract the best talent from the total nationalist community. N.D.P. made little impression upon the electorate despite its secular and progressive profile, and had little success in uniting the anti-partition forces. McAllister explains the failure of the party strategy:

The overall aim of the 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 N.D.P.<sup>39</sup>

In the mid 1960s, unionism thus seemed as secure as ever and nationalists had deemed it necessary to work within the system - yet their ability to do just that was hindered by continued fragmentation and disunity.

#### **THE "CAMPAIGN FOR DEMOCRACY IN ULSTER" AND THE "CAMPAIGN FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE."**

National Unity and the N.D.P. were not the only organizations to evolve from Catholic frustration in the 1960s. Two other groups, which were to make a great political impact on both unionism and indeed the history of Ireland also emerged, the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster (C.D.U.) and the Campaign for Social Justice (C.S.J.).

Ed Moloney and Andy Pollack, in their biography of Ian Paisley correctly consider July 1960 as a watershed in Northern nationalist politics.<sup>40</sup> In that month, Orangemen were given permission to

march through the Catholic village of Dungiven by the Home Affairs Ministry; "Paisley's pressure had established the right of Loyalists to parade their triumphalism through Catholic districts."<sup>41</sup> Frustration with the attitude of Stormont led nationalists to seek a meeting with a British Home Office Minister to vent their anger, and Dennis Vosper, a Parliamentary Secretary, agreed to see them. The meeting did little to pacify the nationalists; Vosper refused to stray from unionist policy. The importance of that meeting, however, lies in the fact that it was the first time a British Minister had listened to Catholic grievances and therefore encouraged a significant change in nationalist tactics. Thereafter, nationalists would begin to strive for justice in Northern Ireland via Westminster.<sup>42</sup>

This change in tactics came to fruition in June 1965, when a group of backbench Labour M.P.'s set up the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster their aim being an enquiry into the affairs of Northern Ireland. This group had been founded as a result of the House of Commons' refusal to change the Convention whereby Ulster's affairs could not be discussed at Westminster. The C.D.U. based its demand on Section 75 of the Government of Ireland Act of 1920. This stated that supreme authority over Northern Ireland remained at Westminster. One of the most prominent members of the reform group was the M.P. for Blakeley, Manchester, Paul Rose. He argued:

What riles us above all is that when we question injustices in the six counties we are accused of interfering, yet there is no question of any Constitutional limit on the voting powers of the unionist members in the House ....

He insisted that the border was not a concern of the new group.

It is not for us to raise the issue of the border in this campaign. We are intent on drawing attention to injustices over

which the House of Commons has direct or indirect control. The Irish people themselves will solve the border problem in time.<sup>43</sup>

As we will see, the C.D.U. gained considerable impetus when Gerry Fitt was elected M.P. for West Belfast in March 1966.

The struggle against discrimination in Northern Ireland took another step forward in January 1964 when the Campaign for Social Justice was inaugurated in Belfast. This non-political body had sprung from the Homeless Citizens League which had been established in Dungannon, County Tyrone, by Doctor Con McCloskey and his wife Patricia. The League was a protest organization against housing discrimination in the county. Reflecting the new civil rights consciousness in the Catholic community, the League evolved into the C.S.J. This movement, like National Unity and later the N.D.P. was composed largely of middle class, professional Catholics and declared its immediate aims:

The first objective was a fact finding investigation of injustices against people of all creeds and political opinions ....

The government of Northern Ireland's policies of apartheid and discrimination have continued to be implemented at all levels with such zeal that we have banded ourselves together to oppose them.<sup>44</sup>

The campaign endeavoured to rise above political parties by striving to end injustice for any group or individual Protestant or Catholic with the question of the border being incidental. The C.S.J. was the start of what was to become the Civil Rights Movement.

#### THE WELFARE STATE

The question that now begs an answer is why in the 1960s did a significant number of Catholics abandon their passivity and demand first class citizenship in Northern Ireland?

The establishment of the British welfare state seems to provide an answer. Social policy in Northern Ireland underwent radical changes in the 1940s.<sup>45</sup> Considerable improvements were made in areas of public transport, health and social services, housing and education. These measures compared favourably with the static situation south of the border. Northern Ireland appeared materially superior in comfort to the Republic.

Perhaps the most significant of all the welfare state advances to the Northern Catholic was the 1947 Education Act, based on the 1944 British Act. This facilitated free post-primary education, which enabled children of working class parents to continue at school until the age of fifteen. Improvements in the University grants system also created the opportunity of further education. Michael Farrell believed that in the late 1950s and early 1960s:

The first generation to go through University on scholarships under the post-war education scheme emerged. They had no experience of the previous defeats and were not demoralised. They chafed at their own second class status and began to articulate the grievances of their community.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, National Unity and the C.S.J. can be construed as examples of the changing social structure. A Northern Irish Catholic middle-class emerged. It started to become involved in the public life of Northern Ireland without endangering the ultimate aspiration of a united Ireland. In fact, since the Republic seemed to compare so poorly with the Northern state, those people were in no particular rush for immediate unity - which again contributed to their willingness to participate in the existing political framework. To borrow Professor J.A. Murphy's phrase: "Thus, the Education Act of 1947 sowed Dragons Teeth."<sup>47</sup> The American journalist and historian, Kevin Kelley, also suggests:

Seemingly tangential events like the election of President John F Kennedy and the installation of Pope John XXIII were in fact key morale boosters for nationalists in the North. A dashing young U.S. President of Irish Catholic descent and a Pope committed to social justice and ecumenism had their effect on the Northern minority's self esteem and its own sense of potential.<sup>48</sup>

In retrospect then, there are grounds to suggest that the emergence of a new minority attitude in the 1960s was a direct result of the establishment of the welfare state and international changes in the status and focus of Catholicism. A new Catholic intelligentsia became dissatisfied with the moribund nationalist politics of the previous forty years. It reacted angrily to the I.R.A. border campaign and thus initiated a new less militant brand of nationalism prompted in part by the liberalising tendencies of Vatican II on Catholic politics.

#### THE O'NEILL/LEMASS SUMMIT

Another important factor in the transformation of Catholic politics within Northern Ireland, was the significant change in the politics of the Republic. Northern nationalists had traditionally looked South for the impetus to end partition. However, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, politicians in the Republic began to realise that partition would not be ended by dramatic gestures, but rather by a slow process of atrophy. This change of perception, combined with a conversion in the mentality of certain elements in the unionist ranks, would it was believed ensure the end of the political petrification which had characterised the history of Northern Ireland.

In the mid 1950s, the Republic was in the throes of an economic depression. Unemployment and inflation were rising, resulting in

poor living standards for its citizens and large scale emigration. Furthermore, the economic indicators did not suggest any improvement in the foreseeable future. A new brand of politicians and economists argued that the traditional policy of protectionism had become redundant by the late 1950s. They maintained that economic expansion required the establishment of free trade relations with the rest of the world.

In 1958, the new Fianna Fail government accepted the validity of this argument. They abandoned the old Sinn Fein economics of high tariff barriers to develop Irish industry and agricultural self sufficiency in favour of an economic expansion programme designed to inject foreign capital into the country through tax and plant incentives. Accordingly in 1961, the Republic's government announced its intention to join the European Economic Community (E.E.C.), and to participate in free trade with Britain and the rest of Europe. Bew and Patterson point to the significance of the twenty year period after World War II for the Republic, and, in particular, the watershed of the late 1950s and early 1960s:

... the significance of the period analysed in the study (1945-65) lies in the fact that we can see the emergence of a quite novel attitude. We are no longer dealing with a formal programme of agrarian radicalism and a nationalist industrialisation drive which only a few really believe in but which is also never rejected outright. In this epoch - by the late 1950s and early 1960s at any rate - the dominance of grassland production, foreign capital and economic liberalisation is openly recognised and avowed.<sup>49</sup>

Much of the impetus for this policy change can be attributed to Sean Lemass, who replaced DeValera as Taoiseach (prime minister) in 1959. On becoming leader of Fianna Fail, his rhetoric suggested that co-operation between North and South made economic sense, without threatening the aspiration of Irish unity.

We desire to see our people and country reunited. Our method is, and we are making clear - to try and abolish memory of past dissensions and to strengthen contacts and promote co-operation between the two areas into which the country is now divided.<sup>50</sup>

and

The fact that we have that hope of eventual unity is not a reason why people in the North should refuse to consider even now possibilities of converting activities for the practical economic advantages that may result.<sup>51</sup>

These overtures, made to the North in 1959, were ignored by the then prime minister, Lord Brookeborough. Nevertheless, the nationalism of Lemass was to become sufficiently diluted as to eventually undermine the traditional antagonisms between Britain and Ireland that had perpetuated partition. Furthermore, the new political philosophy dramatically improved the living standards of those south of the border thus reducing the importance of partition.

This modernising trend in the Republic was paralleled in the North. It also featured a new style politician, in this instance, one intent on regenerating unionism. When Captain Terence O'Neill succeeded Brookeborough in 1963, the machinations that for over forty years had kept the heterogeneous unionist bloc together were dropped in favour of a policy ostensibly designed to woo the Catholics.

O'Neill was more moderate than his predecessors at least in tone and was the first prime minister of Northern Ireland to visit a Catholic school and be photographed with members of the Catholic clergy. His seemingly non-sectarian style was part of an attempt to modernise the Northern economy. Like the politicians of the Republic, he realised that in order for Northern Ireland to survive, foreign capital would be required to stimulate expansion. O'Neill intended to attract potential investors by selling Northern Ireland

as a state of religious concordance.

The extent to which O'Neill had distanced from the traditional tenets of unionism was no more radically manifested than in his invitation to Lemass in 1965 to meet in Belfast.

This meeting was perhaps the most sensational event in Irish politics since the establishment of the border some forty five years earlier, and was a direct result of both states adopting free trade policies. They could now expect considerable profits through increased trade and other forms of economic co-operation. The politics of pragmatism had, it seemed, triumphed. Lemass had not gone as far as to recognise Stormont, yet it looked as if the traditional antagonisms between unionism and republicanism had begun to wane.

Both premiers feared the political risks involved from the militants in their respective camps as a consequence of this summit - yet these fears proved groundless.<sup>52</sup> On the unionist side, O'Neill went to the electorate in October 1965 to seek public endorsement for co-operation between North and South. He swept the country and then asked "where was the backlash against my invitation to Mr Lemass? It did not exist except in the minds of the extremists...."<sup>53</sup>

In the Republic, Hibernia commented:

A reassessment of Captain Terence O'Neill is necessary. His meeting with Mr Lemass was not only an act of courage the whole manoeuvre was carried off with greater political skill than his past record would have promised. The Northern premier begins to fulfil the hopes of those who welcomed his accession as the beginning of a new era in the six counties.<sup>54</sup>

The response from Northern Catholics was also favourable. The New Nation reported:

Men and women of every political allegiance, of every denomination, and of all classes welcomed the meeting between Captain O'Neill and Mr Lemass, and in their almost universal welcome revealed the fanatics for what they were - a divided and meaningless rabble of inconsequential men whose apparent power was founded only upon the silence of the majority, a silence that too often was taken as approval.<sup>55</sup>

The Irish News editorial also fully endorsed the historic meeting:

If this and further meetings are fruitful it is the whole people, and especially the working population in Ireland, who will benefit from this co-operation and harmony in high political quarters. The two Premiers need have no misgivings. They and the majority of the Irish people know that they are doing the right thing.<sup>56</sup>

The healthier atmosphere in relations between North and South seemed to bode well for the future and there was a feeling that perhaps at last the old Orange and Green cliches were losing their appeal. Optimism that ancient hatreds were abating grew in Belfast, Dublin and London.

## NOTES

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32. I. McAllister, "The National Democratic Party 1965-70," Economic & Social Review Volume 1 (1975), 358.
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CHAPTER II  
FROM DOCK TO WESTMINSTER  
GERRY FITT 1958 - 1966

From the late 1950s to the mid 1960s Catholic politics had changed from stagnation to a greater involvement in Northern Ireland politics. In the same period, Gerry Fitt was building his own political career. Electoral success in Northern Ireland was followed in April 1966 by election to the Westminster parliament as M.P. for West Belfast. Hibernia commented on this his greatest triumph thus far:

The most melodramatic event was, of course, Gerry Fitt's elevation to the Palace of Westminster as the simultaneous holder of the offices of city councillor, Stormont M.P. and Member of Parliament in London. This is quite some attainment for a working class boy who left to become a seaman and entered political life while being an unemployed man on the dole. He has become something of a myth in Belfast. He has already made his mark in Irish history. It is bound to deepen with time.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to clarify Fitt's politics in the period. It will demonstrate that his republicanism was opportunistic. It will further demonstrate that he was very much a nationalist politician who held strong views on the reunification of Ireland. The following pages will also prove that his socialism was not doctrinaire. It was based on bread and butter issues rather than a strict adherence to a Marxist creed. Although he used the rhetoric of James Connolly, we will see that the two men were completely different. Fitt was a moderate reformer, Connolly a revolutionary socialist. Fitt, unlike Connolly, believed in change through parliamentary tactics; Connolly, on the other hand, believed in change through working class militancy. We will also see that Fitt had to cope with the sectarian complexion of life in Northern

Ireland. Therefore, he had to expand much of his undoubted energy redressing discrimination at both local and national government levels.

This chapter makes two further assertions. First, it will prove that Fitt's 1966 election victory was not symptomatic of the metamorphosis in Catholic politics outlined in chapter 1. Although Fitt was possibly aided by the increased hankering for representation and attendance, he was essentially a "lone operator" uninterested in large parties and fundamental re-organization. This contrast would have important ramifications in Fitt's later political career. Second, it will show that there is some substance to Fitt's claim that he obtained Protestant support in his early career which enabled him to win West Belfast in 1966.<sup>2</sup> His contention has important implications due to the fact that political analysts at the time claimed that the religious divide in the constituency was about equal.<sup>3</sup> Considering the sectarian nature of Northern Irish politics, this was a considerable achievement. For Fitt had not only to contend with sectarian politics but had also to compete with the new aggressive Catholic middle class who wished to lead nationalist politics.

Middle class strength should not be over estimated, however. For the rank and file of the nationalist community was overwhelmingly working class. Also the dichotomy between classes was not the only division in nationalist politics. E. Rumpf and A.C. Hepburn discern a geographic factor: "One of the clearest characteristics of anti-partitionist politics between 1945 and 1969 was the total rift between Belfast and the rest of the Province."<sup>4</sup>

The strained relationship between the rural and city

nationalists was a product of the conflicting interests of the societies which they represented. Fundamentally, policies which would benefit the farmer as regards the price of agricultural commodities would be, by necessity, to the detriment of urban dwellers wishing to see food prices kept low. There were antagonisms within the Unionist Party for the same reasons.

In Belfast, nationalists used socialist rhetoric which alarmed their conservative colleagues in the countryside, particularly west of the River Bann, where rural constituencies predominated. The conservative characteristics of nationalist politics in these areas were reinforced, if not produced, through clerical influence. Outside Belfast, the Catholic church paid for the services of a full time Registration Agent whose function was to compile a register of the eligible Catholic voters. The agent was the Nationalist Party's only constituency organization and, therefore, quantified the Catholic rural community vote. That vote was employed to support the Church's opinion on how society should be run, as directed from the pulpit. Furthermore, in most instances the local parish priest was chairman of the convention called to select a candidate. As Eamon McCann says "Nationalist candidates were not elected, they were anointed."<sup>5</sup>

Rural politics contrasted with the more secular inclinations of Belfast anti-partition politics. Attitudes prevailing in rural areas found it difficult to thrive in a large industrial urban setting, e.g. Catholic doctrine as regards family planning and mixed marriages did not receive quite so easy an acceptance. Therefore, in Belfast, national identity gradually became separated from its religious base. By 1952 the Nationalist Party was no longer an electoral force in the

capital.

Belfast anti-partition politics were not however, devoid of division. Schism and fragmentation were common. This can be explained by the failure of local Belfast nationalists to agree on a united political party to replace the discredited Nationalist Party and the Northern Ireland Labour Party (N.I.L.P.) that in 1949 formally acknowledged that it was pro-partition.

Belfast working class Catholics, no longer content to listen to traditional nationalist and Catholic rhetoric, became more concerned with the social problems of housing and unemployment. They could choose between a multiplicity of Labour parties - one was pro-border, more were anti-border, and some based on individual personalities. Of the anti-border groups Rumpf and Hepburn note:

The various groups all had in common a radical stance on social questions and an ability to bring the socialist republican arguments of James Connolly into play when necessary, but they relied far more for support on their own efforts and individual popularity than on any formal Trade Union backing, while their socialism, unlike Connolly's would scarcely have alarmed the most moderate member of the British Labour Party.<sup>6</sup>

One can assume that the Belfast working class had little knowledge of socialist theory, yet it was the recipient of the tangible benefits of post war parity policies implemented by the British Labour government. The creation of the welfare state gave the term "labour" positive connotations, particularly in an urban area where there was a great deal of deprivation. The deprivation being somewhat reduced by socialist policies.

Gerry Fitt was an anti-unionist, but astute enough to realise that in order to have electoral success in Belfast, he needed to have the term "labour" on his ticket.

Although Belfast is predominantly Protestant and unionist, there

were three Stormont seats within the city that were potentially nationalist - Falls, Central and Dock. The latter was unique because it had never successively elected the same party or politician; always alternating between unionist and some form of labour. Unlike Falls and Central which had large Catholic majorities, Dock had a small Protestant majority.

Gerry Fitt became part of a fairly sophisticated political machine in this waterfront area. He became a member of the Dock Irish Labour Party, financed in part by Catholic publicans and turf accountants, Dock Irish Labour's stated intention was to unite the working class and break down unionism. Fitt became one of the group's most prominent operators in the 1950s; so much so, that in March 1958 he was chosen to contest the Stormont election for Dock Labour in a straight fight with the unionists.

From its establishment in 1921, unionists dominated Stormont. The Northern parliament served merely as a rubber stamp for policies that shored up sectarianism. Elections were invariably fought on the issue of partition, rather than social and economic questions. Focus on the border ensured that voting would be conducted on factional lines - Protestants, turning out in favour of maintenance of the border; Catholics, for the restoration of the territorial unity of Ireland. The 1958 election was no exception.

In Dock, like every other constituency, orange and green arguments prevailed over social and economic problems. The Belfast News Letter (the Protestant daily newspaper) sketched the character of electioneering in the area with particular reference to Fitt:

The Unionist Party in Dock have no difficulty persuading the electorate of the paramount importance of the constitutional position. It is placed there, priority number 1, by the Eire

Labour candidate (sic) who is opposing Alderman William Oliver with the aid of a van flying the flag by O'Casey in "The Plough and the Stars".<sup>7</sup>

At the time of the 1958 election, Fitt was employed as a clerk and his opponent, William Oliver, a shopkeeper, was also a member of Belfast Corporation, working as chairman of the Housing and Redevelopment Committee. The see-saw nature of the seat made for its close observation by the press.

In 1949, Alderman T.L. Cole had won this Dock seat for the unionists by 284 votes, but lost it to Murtagh Morgan (unofficial Eire Labour) by 179 votes in 1953 - the smallest majority in that election. Given the margin of success and failure in the past, party workers were of the opinion that whichever coterie could get closest to a 100% turnout would win the day.

Oliver's appeal to his supporters lay primarily in stressing the benefits of social services in Northern Ireland compared with those available outside the United Kingdom.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand Fitt and the Dock Irish Labour Party employed non-sectarian rhetoric, but their instincts and tendencies were always in line with Irish nationalism. Fitt proclaimed "James Connolly came into this historic division forty-five years ago to ask for your vote and we come to you under his flag."<sup>9</sup> Michael Ferran, chairman of the party, declared that it was "fighting the same enemies, under the same banner and for the same ideals for which Connolly fought and died."<sup>10</sup> To supporters of the union the name of Connolly was synonymous with the concept of a united Ireland. Although Fitt's words were couched in terms of labourite solidarity, it was quite clear to which section of the community he was directing his appeal. He argued: "There was no fear of losing the contest if the people

rallied to the cause of Labour. It was the duty of the nationalist minded electors to cast their vote as he was not only fighting a unionist opponent but the full weight of Glengall Street."<sup>11</sup>

Conforming to the nationalist ideal that it was the panacea for the country's economic problems, Fitt made no attempt to hide his wish to see a united Ireland: "Ulster's economic problems will never be solved by the Unionist Party. The only way it could be would be through a 32 county republic."<sup>12</sup>

Fitt was clearly anti-unionist and hence anti-Stormont. Yet he made an appeal to the Protestant workers. Jack Brady of the Irish Transport & General Workers Union ( I.T.G.W.U.) assured the people of Dock "that if elected Gerry Fitt would prove a worthy representative and serve the people of all classes, irrespective of religion."<sup>13</sup> This aspect of Fitt's political philosophy would later become very important when he did take public office, but in this election he tended to seek redress for the traditional Catholic grievance of discrimination in the face of Protestant privilege.

In an attempt to swing the election in favour of the unionists, Prime Minister Brookeborough announced a proposed visit to the constituency. Fitt fulminated that he would: "Personally conduct the provincial Lord on a tour of the working class area. Perhaps he would see the misery which had resulted from the Unionist Party policy and their mismanagement of affairs for the past 40 years."<sup>14</sup>

Fitt endeavoured to focus attention on the rich-poor divide regardless of religion. These "Parliamentary Marionettes ... had no interest whatsoever in the well being of the common people."<sup>15</sup> He also stated: "I am determined to fight the Unionist Party and if

elected will show unrelenting opposition to the vicious policy of discrimination being practised by our opponents."<sup>16</sup>

Nationalist politicians had always asserted that discrimination in housing had been one of the mechanisms which had kept the heterogeneous unionist bloc together. The argument ran that protestants were granted advantages in housing allocation in an effort to ensure their loyalty to the state. Another reason for the charge of housing discrimination was that the restricted local government franchise (a person could only vote in local government elections if he or she was a property owner) meant that the allocation of local authority houses in effect also meant the allocation of votes. Therefore, constituencies and wards could be gerrymandered.

Fitt's 1958 campaign was very much concerned with housing. He claimed the Housing and Redevelopment Committee of Belfast Corporation had shown a consistent policy of discrimination in siting new estates. As for his own area he declared: "This division has already been cruelly gerrymandered and with the erection of flats in Victoria Barracks which would be handed to Unionist supporters the nationally minded majority would be wiped out."<sup>17</sup>

Oliver contemptuously dismissed Fitt's charges of discrimination:

Mr what-do-you-call-him this man talks about discrimination. Roman Catholics know what treatment they are getting from the Ulster Government. Instead of the 50% grants they get towards their schools in Great Britain, here they get 80 or 90%. Yet this man talks about discrimination.<sup>18</sup>

As polling day drew closer, the unionists became confident of victory - it was after all their turn. Brian Faulkner, then chief whip of the Unionist Party and later prime minister of Northern

Ireland, speculated: "We have a really good chance of winning this seat because our candidate has been active in housing and social work and is well known in the constituency. Dock is always a see-saw seat but our chances were never better."<sup>19</sup>

Faulkner's conjecture proved correct. On March 20, 1958, it was the Protestant community that turned out in greater numbers. Oliver polled 3,156 votes to Fitt's 2,900. The unionists had established a majority of 256 with a swing of 500 votes. However, Oliver's poll was below that of Cole's who lost the seat in 1953, and, in the not so distant future, Oliver would recall the name of his opponent a little more readily.

In May 1958 elections for the Belfast local government took place.<sup>20</sup> The Dock Irish Labour Party forwarded two candidates, namely: Fitt and James O'Kane, a spirit merchant.

In the Dock ward, Fitt and O'Kane campaigned against three unionists and one independent unionist, and although this was an election for local government, the issues were essentially the same as the Stormont election two months earlier. Fitt again focused on what he considered a sustained policy of discrimination in the allocation of houses. He alleged that unionists' "ultimate aim was to denude Dock ward entirely of the nationally minded voters."<sup>21</sup>

On the eve of the poll, Fitt again made no attempt to hide his nationalist sentiment and brought the issue of partition to the forefront. He claimed:

The Unionist Party would throw everything into this fight and only the good will of the working class people of the area could prevent Dock from once again being handed over to the unionist reactionaries. If he was successful in this election his policy would be based on the ideals of the labour movement in Ireland - a

policy that will lead the working class people of not only the six counties, but all Ireland to an Irish socialist working class republic.<sup>22</sup>

In a recent interview with the author, Fitt claimed he was always more of a socialist than a nationalist:

In the context of Ireland I am a socialist. Unhesitatingly socialist. I would like to see Ireland united in the belief that in a united Ireland you would have Protestant Labour supporters and Catholic Labour supporters, you would have the class division that you would have say in London and elsewhere. But put to the crunch I would say I was many more miles a socialist than a nationalist.<sup>23</sup>

At the risk of being churlish, it certainly seems that in 1958 the relationship between Fitt's nationalism and socialism was at best ambivalent and at worst opportunistic. Nevertheless, Dock Irish Labour was very successful in the election. Its two representatives ousted the returning unionist members with Fitt leading the poll.

Fitt's success can be attributed to the fact that it was a local government election, and, although the constitutional issue was again used as an election tool, the electorate would have considered it a secondary issue as regards community politics.

If Fitt's and O'Kane's non-sectarian, socialist rhetoric somewhat blurred the sectarian nature of elections in Dock, their party's victory parade clearly showed the divide in the district. The Irish News reported:

The parade which was headed by the Wolfe Tone Pipe Band, was large and a number of people carried green flags, the tricolour having been banned by a police order. The two successful Dock Irish Labour Councillors travelled in a brake on which the Plough and the Stars, flag of the Labour movement, was carried in addition to a number of green flags.

During the parade, unionist supporters - a number of them teenagers - assembled around bonfires on blitz ground adjacent to Earl Street waving Union Jacks and singing orange songs. Police had to patrol the area to keep the parties apart.

In the aftermath of his victory, Fitt showed that he was quite

capable of playing the nationalist card. He commented that on polling day the electors had dealt the Unionist Party one of the most telling defeats in the whole history of the Municipal battles in the six counties. During the election campaign he claimed that they had been faced with all sorts of handicaps and were not permitted to fly the National Flag in the Ward.<sup>24</sup>

Other indications of the sectarian characteristic of Dock were two questions tabled for answer at Stormont after the election. After defeating Fitt in March, Oliver, the unionist member for Dock, asked the minister for Home Affairs, Mr. W. Topping: "Whether his attention has been drawn to the fact that on the declaration of the result of the municipal elections in Dock Ward a Union Jack was snatched from a person and trampled on the ground, and whether the police have made an arrest?"

Topping was aware of this incident but answered that no arrests had been made. Oliver then suggested that a riot could have resulted but for the timely intervention of the police. Cahal Healey, the Nationalist Party member for South Fermanagh, then asked:

Does the Right hon. and Learned Gentleman not think that the time has come when the party opposite (Unionist) should cease carrying the Union Jack as a party flag in order to incite their opponents? Does the Minister not know that Councillor Fitt was assaulted in Belfast City Hall in the presence of the police by a lady carrying the Union Jack with a very robust stick attached to it? He merely threw the stick back and it fell to the ground.<sup>25</sup>

It is clear that religious and hence political allegiances in Dock were quite evident at all elections. Although Fitt mostly used non-sectarian rhetoric, it was obvious that the vast bulk of his supporters came from what he himself termed the "nationally minded" population - the Catholics. Fitt had achieved public office and it

was as a Belfast city councillor that he would endeavour to make Dock a non-polarized constituency.

Fitt now maintains that the three most important years in his political career were between 1958 and 1961 because it was during this period that he established himself as a working class representative who helped both Protestant and Catholics in a very underprivileged area.<sup>26</sup> He did indeed make himself available to all sections of the community both at home and at the window ledges of Belfast City Hall. His hard work and warm personality quickly overcame the reservations of many Protestants. However, it was also at this point that Fitt began a campaign against unionist discrimination in housing, votes and jobs. His maiden speech at the Belfast Corporation indicated the dual purpose of his politics - to represent the working class and focus attention on Catholic inequality.

Fitt claimed that his attitude in the council would be one of an open mind and any criticism he had to offer would be done with honesty and sincerity. Yet he also asserted that if he saw something taking place in the council which was worthy of commendation, or beneficial to the working class he would not hesitate to commend it.<sup>27</sup>

In August 1958, the Dock Irish Labour Party held its quarterly meeting. Michael Ferran, chairman of the group, referred to the work of both Fitt and O'Kane in local government. He said "that in the three months they had been members of the Council they have interviewed over 300 people of all creeds and classes concerning houses and other matters." Many of these other matters pertained to unemployment benefit, then called National Assistance. At the time

entitlements to National Assistance were somewhat vague. More often than not people were not receiving their full allowance. Fitt familiarised himself with the features of the National Insurance Acts, and represented both Protestants and Catholics who had been previously rejected at local tribunals. For fighting for his constituents, he acquired the name Perry Mason, after the aggressive American television lawyer. If Fitt secured Protestant support, much of it stemmed from his concern for their interests. Nevertheless, Ferran also drew attention to the main composition of the party of which Fitt was now vice chairman: "The membership at present was a record, and it proved that the nationally minded people of the area were behind the party."<sup>28</sup>

Fitt neglected socialist theory, replacing it with short-term remedies based on welfare improvements designed to assist the working class. Housing was one of his prime concerns - resisting evictions and generally safeguarding working class interests.

In August 1959, Fitt made one of his strongest attacks against discrimination against Catholics in housing. Belfast Corporation allocated houses on a points system which allowed none for more than three children. As Catholics tended to have larger families than Protestants, this policy worked against them. He also argued that the Estates Superintendent should not be allowed the discretionary powers which enabled him to accept or reject a family's suitability to be rehoused, regardless of how many points they had. Fitt argued that this denial of justice to Catholics was a violation of the Government of Ireland Act, which explicitly said that there should be no discrimination against the minority. While Catholic families of nine and ten were being refused houses, Protestant married couples

with only one child were being given three bedroomed houses. He claimed that was an outrageous state of affairs crying out for amendment. He knew a Catholic family where the father had to sleep in the armchair at night because there was no room, and yet although registered for years this family were refused a house.<sup>29</sup> Fitt's motion describing the system as unsatisfactory, and calling for a review and appropriate amendments, was defeated by 28 votes to 8. Such defeats prompted indignation and action in Catholic circles.

As we have seen in Chapter I, National Unity was formed in November 1959 to press the Nationalist Party to organise and thus be better equipped to contest such discrimination. Fitt's reaction to it at the time is not on record but he now says they were completely sectarian: "National Unity was a misnomer. National Unity meant Catholic nationalist against Protestant unionist." If Fitt's opinion at the time was similar it demonstrates that he was not part of the transformation in Catholic politics inspired by the new middle class.

As for the Nationalist Party, he says:

They got the Catholic vote. A Catholic Registration Officer meant that they got Catholic votes and the Protestants had to look after themselves. It was totally tribal. I would have agreed with the nationalists in their opposition to the unionist treatment of Catholics that was about all.<sup>30</sup>

In 1960, Fitt continued to champion causes for the working class, challenging proposed increased rate charges from local government, objecting to salary increases for the heads of major departments and their deputies in the Corporation, and exhibiting a tendency to push for Belfast jobs for Belfast people.<sup>31</sup>

In December 1960, Fitt began his campaign to highlight discrimination in voting. He lodged an objection to two limited companies holding local government votes in the Dock Ward and

considered them test cases.<sup>32</sup> In the event, Fitt's case was rejected. However, it would not be long before the principle of "One Man One Vote" in local government elections would become a basic demand from the Catholic community.

In 1961, Fitt had to defend his local government seat. The election tested his success in attracting the Protestant working class vote. As the election drew near the dichotomy in the community was further highlighted by Fitt's objection to the re-siting of a polling station, in, as he said a, "hostile area." He maintained that positioning the new station in the heart of a unionist area would reduce the anti-unionist vote considerably.<sup>33</sup> The complaint was rejected. Yet the fact it was made at all further confirms the polarization at election times in Dock.

The election was in May. Fitt said the coming months would be very trying for the ordinary people of Belfast. He claimed the city was entering a period of recession comparable with the "hungry thirties." He argued that the working class needed a strong representative to speak on their behalf.<sup>34</sup> Harry Diamond, the Stormont M.P. for Falls, who would later form the Republican Labour Party with Fitt, spoke in favour of his future party colleague. He said that he had known Fitt for many years especially as a member of the City Council and he felt that he had proved in the last three years that he was a capable and authentic representative of the interests of the working class people of Dock. In fact, as a constant attendee at the City Hall, Councillor Fitt had made himself available to everyone - regardless of creed, politics or where they resided - who needed his assistance.<sup>35</sup>

Fitt was confident of victory. Again referring to the moving of

the polling station to a "hostile area", he declared that "knowing the people of this area where I have been born and reared, I feel that they would travel to Sandy Row (an ultra-Protestant and Loyalist area in Belfast) to record their vote for me in this election."<sup>36</sup> Evidently, he was still aware that his main support base lay within the Catholic community and his optimism proved accurate when he again topped the poll.

At the enthusiastic Dock victory parade, Fitt declared:

I attribute my magnificent majority to the fact that I received support from all sections of the community in Dock Ward, irrespective of creed, in this election. This indeed has been a vindication of the policy which I have carried out during the past three years and I solemnly pledge to the electors that I will continue with that policy, should any man or woman in Dock Ward be in need of a friend at any time, I will be at their service.<sup>37</sup>

It would not be unreasonable to conclude that Fitt's growing reputation for hard exertion as a public representative for the working class, provided him with a stick to break, partially at least, the barrier of religious politics.

Fitt's commitment to the working class was further illustrated in October 1961. In the previous August, he had voiced querulous opposition to rent increases in the Ward. At that time the Lord Mayor warned that as Fitt was himself a tenant, he would be open to the accusation of self interest. Fitt decided to disregard the advice and face the consequences.<sup>38</sup> They turned out to be a Corporation enquiry in which Fitt was named for an alleged breach of the statute in "voting or taking part on a matter in which he had a pecuniary interest." He represented himself, did not deny the facts, but questioned their interpretation, saying that when he decided to speak it was not on his own behalf. He argued that he was not a man

of affluence and had a similar financial position to his tenants and concluded: "I regard myself as a working class representative, and I will fight tooth and nail against anyone who attempts to take away my right to usurp my functions."<sup>39</sup> The Corporation inquiry found that Fitt took his stance from conscientious motives.

1962 was an election year for the Northern parliament, and in March Fitt was unanimously selected as the Dock Irish Labour Party's candidate. This nomination came as no surprise. He had been narrowly defeated by Oliver in 1958, and since then had topped the poll at two successive Corporation elections. Ferran declared: "I feel there can be no doubt about the outcome of this election as the working class people in the area of all creeds have found Councillor Fitt a sincere friend and a valuable representative."

In accepting the nomination, Fitt exhibited his blend of nationalism and working class solidarity. He said that he: "Felt proud and honoured to be asked once again to carry the banner of Connolly into the contest against the traditional enemy of the working classes in Dock."<sup>40</sup>

Whatever rhetoric Fitt may have used, and however he was perceived by the Protestant electorate in Dock itself, it is noted by Moloney and Pollack that the "Ulster Protestant Action" organization (U.P.A. was an association formed by Paisley in 1959 ostensibly to encourage the employment of Protestants in industry) was aware of "a Republican Labour Councillor called Gerry Fitt, who was making his mark as an aggressive exponent of the nationalist cause."<sup>41</sup> Evidently not all strands of Protestant opinion were impressed with Fitt's non-sectarian oratory.

As usual, the 1962 election was characterised by accusations of

sectarianism. Fitt challenged Oliver to an open debate on the economic situation in the six counties: "But I know it will be a challenge which will not be accepted. My information is that my unionist opponents, far from meeting me on the economic issue, are endeavouring to make the forthcoming election a sectarian wrangle."<sup>42</sup>

Fitt endeavoured to focus on economic and social issues. He challenged Oliver to deny "that the constituency has suffered a greater degree of unemployment and poor housing than any other in Belfast."<sup>43</sup> He also argued that Lord Brookeborough was afraid to enter Dock to put his record to the working class people.<sup>44</sup> He castigated the Unionist Party record in the Ward:

They are a party that has shown no conception of the industrial problems as they affect the working class in 1962. It has always been the unionist boast that the constitutional position has safeguarded the employment in the shipyards. What is their answer now? When the ships are lying empty and thousands of workers are walking the streets of the city?<sup>45</sup>

Fitt's election address also was overwhelmingly concerned with social and economic issues:

When I contested the last parliamentary election a slogan was written on a wall in North Queen Street drawing attention to the fact that there were 40,000 people unemployed. Today that slogan has faded a little but the terrible scourge and heart break of unemployment is still with us, more poignant than ever.

He emphasized his connection to the ward:

Unlike my opponent I was born and reared, and I still reside, in the area which I seek to represent at Stormont. I am married with a family of four little girls of school age and it is my humble opinion that I am more in touch with the everyday needs of the working classes than any representative of the reactionary Tory Unionist Party.

Fitt presented himself as a man of the people regardless of their religious faith and relied on his record as a councillor:

I have now represented this area on the City Council for over four

years and during this time I have endeavoured at all times to give of my utmost for the poor and underprivileged, irrespective of creed. My home has been my Advice Centre and no one seeking my help has done so in vain.

The only hint of republicanism was his conclusion: "Under the banner of Connolly I go forward with confidence."<sup>46</sup>

In contrast to Fitt's, Oliver's campaign emphasized the partition issue. "I intend to keep unionism in Dock, the only way to prosperity."<sup>47</sup> In 1958 Oliver's majority was only 256, and in a seat which regularly changed hands, Fitt predicted a "working class revolt with an Irish Labour victory."<sup>48</sup> Even the avidly pro-unionist Belfast News Letter suggested "It is Eire Labour's (sic) turn to win. They have a 256 unionist majority to upset, not a Herculean task."<sup>50</sup> A prophecy that proved correct. Fitt polled 3,288 votes to Oliver's 2,781.

Fitt's victory was the only unionist defeat in the city, and the swing to Dock Irish Labour was 6.4%. After the results were in, Fitt declared in what was fast becoming a hackneyed, although necessary sentiment: "I regard it as a signal honour. I now feel I am the spokesman for the working class and I will continue to serve the working class in Dock irrespective of their creed."<sup>50</sup>

Fitt now says that he won both the 1961 local government election and the 1962 Stormont election with the help of the Protestant community. "I was breaking through to the Protestant unionist where no other nationalist had."<sup>51</sup> The election figures support his claim, although his remark also reveals that Fitt was indeed a nationalist.

Paddy Devlin, then a member of the N.I.L.P., and thus very involved in Belfast politics, makes the interesting observation that

Fitt's victories are due in part to Oliver's unionist patronage working against him, thereby making the Dock Irish Labour Party's success more pronounced. As we have noted, Oliver was chairman of the Housing and Redevelopment Committee of the Belfast Corporation. Devlin suggests that by rehousing his own supporters, for services rendered in elections, Oliver effectively transported his political machine out of Dock. Devlin does, however, acknowledge that Protestants voted for Fitt because of his work on the Corporation and the Tribunals.<sup>52</sup> Devlin's account reinforces the image of Belfast politicians' dependence on brokerage.

All in all, it seems that despite the sectarian nature of the Dock seat, Fitt's victory was, to some extent, a tribute to his popularity in the area, and an appreciation of the service which he had provided since entering local government. The Protestant vote is hard to quantify, yet it seems the triumphs could not have been won without some cross community support. Charles Stewart, M.P. for Queen's University at Stormont, commented on Fitt's greatest victory to date: "In the see-saw constituency of Dock, Mr. Fitt won a comfortable victory. The result was not exactly a surprise and was due to the great work done by him in the Corporation and to a well planned campaign."<sup>53</sup>

The fusion of Protestant and Catholic working class under Gerry Fitt should not be exaggerated. After the election result it was unionist losers who received the oration outside the Ulster Hall, and Fitt deemed it judicious to leave by the side door following the announcement that he was the victor.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the police presence at the victory parade is evidence that the authorities had expected communal strife. The Irish News reported:

Belfast's Dock Ward showed its support for Councillor Gerry Fitt last night when 2,000 people turned out for a victory parade. The parade started in the New Lodge and wound its way around the entire constituency. At times the victory wagon carrying Councillor Fitt and his supporters was almost stopped by the enthusiastic constituents. Throughout the parade, the entire constituency was circled by a water tight contingent of police. At every strategic point the police were noticeably in force with vans, land rovers, walkie-talkies and man force.<sup>55</sup>

Fitt now had a larger platform to express his views. His maiden speech at Stormont contained the same components of the oratory that put him there. He began by explicitly attacking the entity of Northern Ireland. He described the Queen's Speech as an "innocuous and insignificant document" relating to an artificially composed artifice which could not exist if it had to rely on its own resources. Fitt argued that the situation would remain the same until Ireland was reunited:

This Government, this puppet Government in Northern Ireland, this artificial Government has been bolstered up and subsidised by the Lancashire lassies and the boys from the Chiltern Hills. They may be ignorant of that fact, but it remains that it is purely and simply from the subsidies of the English working-classes that this Government exists at all. The Government could never exist on their own economic foundations and will never exist until the industrial north is joined to the agricultural south and Ireland is once more united.

Housing was again one of Fitt's main topics of concern. Again he did not exhibit doctrinaire socialist theory but reacted against injustice.<sup>56</sup>

As noted in the first chapter, the I.R.A. border campaign was called off at the end of February, 1962. During that campaign Fitt had represented the Dock Irish Labour Party at the annual 1916 Easter Rising commemoration ceremony held at the republican plot in Milltown Cemetery, Belfast.<sup>57</sup> In retrospect, Fitt maintains that he saw the I.R.A. offensive "as a completely sectarian fight."<sup>58</sup> Evidence suggests that his attitude at the time was a little more

equivocal. Again, in his maiden speech, he made a strong appeal for the release of over twenty men who were still in prison as a result of the campaign. Fitt argued for compassion, claiming the prisoners were only guilty of adherence to a widely held maxim:

After all, these men had a principle and they had the courage to go out and try to put that principle into practice. They may have acted wrongly. Perhaps they did act wrongly, but in the state of affairs that exists in our community the Minister would be doing nothing wrong in releasing those men.

Fitt's sympathy for the plight of the republican prisoners could well stem from the notion that the physical force tradition was now superfluous to contemporary politics. He did not envisage a resumption of political violence and made it clear that he was committed to constitutional reunification. "Ireland within my lifetime will be united constitutionally and it is my ideal to see Ireland united under the terms of Connolly who founded my party and that it will eventually finish as an Irish workers republic."<sup>59</sup>

The wrangle over the republican captives persisted throughout the year. In October 1962, Fitt, Republican Labour M.P., Diamond, and Independent Labour M.P., Hanna, tabled a motion calling for the release of all those imprisoned for actions arising from political activity during 1956 and 1961. In December the debate began. Brian Faulkner, then Minister of Home Affairs, refused to accept the motion, insisting that the government could not act on the assumption that the I.R.A. was finished. Fitt again was dismayed by what he felt was a lack of compassion from the administration. He also bestowed a measure of political credibility upon the I.R.A. "If the government had one spark of humanity or christian charity they would have relented over the past months. But they were still activated by an implacable hatred towards their political opponents."<sup>60</sup>

The prisoners' debate was concluded on December 18 when a government amendment asking for approval of the status quo was passed. Fitt said of the prisoners' condition:

If he was incarcerated he would not get down on his bended knees and ask for forgiveness and seek the prerogative of mercy from the Minister. As these young men did not recognise the court he could not see how they could be expected to ask for the prerogative of mercy.<sup>61</sup>

It would be fair to say that Fitt's attitude to the I.R.A. at this point of his career was at least supportive. He was shrewd enough to realise that an attentive concern for the predicament of the prisoners would strike a chord with those of his supporters who had a republican inclination. In short, he used the situation for his advantage. As we will see, Fitt's relationship with the re-emerged I.R.A. in the 1970s was not so accommodating.

In March 1963, Terence O'Neill became leader of the Unionist Party and prime minister, heralding, many hoped, the beginning of a new era. In hindsight, Fitt says that he believes that O'Neill did try to reform the Unionist Party:

But he was like Botha trying to reform South Africa and they have exactly the same mentality, the unionists in Northern Ireland and the whites in South Africa. It was an impossible task. Consequently, he fell between two stools, the unionists regarded him as some sort of a traitor and the Catholics as some sort of a liar that could not deliver.<sup>62</sup>

Throughout the rest of 1963 at Stormont, Fitt continued in his capacity as a working class representative, attacking the Unionist Party's handling of the economy, highlighting discrimination in housing and employment, and frequently denouncing the machinations of the Orange Order.<sup>63</sup>

Towards the end of the year his political profile was seemingly altered when, with Harry Diamond, he formed the Republican Labour

Party. The coalition was anti-partitionist and comprised former members of the Dublin-based Labour Party. Thus, there was now an Irish Labour Party with local leaders, which despite its republican label, was committed to participate within the system. Fergus Pyle of the Irish Times recently asked Fitt about the formation of that party and reported:

Looking back on nearly 40 years in local and national politics, Fitt says that he was never interested in nationalism and that the Republican Labour tag that he took to form a two-man party with the veteran M.P. for Falls, Harry Diamond in the 1960s was purely tactical. A Journalist launched the idea and he found himself swept along.<sup>64</sup>

Fitt's recollection that he was never interested in nationalism is not reflected in his political rhetoric at the time. On the other hand the term "Republican" is misleading for it conjures up different images for different people. In the recent sequence of violence it has taken on pejorative connotations largely due to the methods of the I.R.A. In the 1960s, a republican in Northern Ireland was simply someone who wished to see the restoration of the territorial unity of Ireland in the form of a republic. The term was respected throughout the nationalist community. Nevertheless, Fitt, working in a marginal constituency, was taking more of a gamble than Diamond, who was from the predominantly Catholic Falls area. When asked "How republican was Republican Labour?" Fitt replied:

It was not republican as such. Harry Diamond had the term Republican Labour before I had it. He could afford to have it in the Falls Road where the Protestant vote did not count. In Dock it was totally different, so I took a calculated chance in bringing Republican Labour into Dock and succeeded in winning election after election even with that term. I won them not because they were voting Republican Labour; I won them because they were voting for Gerry Fitt.<sup>65</sup>

Paddy Devlin also concurs that "Republican Labour" was only a label.<sup>66</sup> Fitt made the name decision without consulting his

colleagues in the Dock Irish Labour Party. Although he managed to persuade them to come with him, it is an episode which reflects an individualistic and opportunist streak, a trait repeated during his political career. The amalgamation was well received in nationalist circles. New Nation commented:

The recent news of the formation of the Republican Labour Party following the merger of the Dock and Falls groups is heartening news, especially in view of the forthcoming Westminster elections, in which the party will be contesting West Belfast. By their action this group has given a lead to all the other political groupings on the National Front throughout the six counties, and one would hope that there would be further mergers before the election comes round.<sup>67</sup>

Hibernia remarked:

The coming together of Mr. Harry Diamond and Mr. G Fitt to form the Irish Republican Labour Party could be of real significance if they can create a genuine Irish socialist group which would take up where James Connolly left off and bring some passion and intelligence to the solution of economic problems, especially in relation to the unemployment crisis.<sup>68</sup>

The two politicians frequently proposed motions aimed at government reform. For example at Stormont in April 1964, they called for a reform in parliamentary and local government elections, urging that legislation be introduced to provide the right for all persons over eighteen to vote in such elections and asked for removal of restrictions in the local government franchise.<sup>69</sup> This motion was predictably defeated by 20 votes to 14 and a major Catholic grievance remained intact.

The local elections with which Diamond and Fitt were concerned were held in May 1964, and constituted the first indication of whether or not the "Republican" tag had adversely affected Fitt's non-sectarian credibility. He argued that they would be the most crucial elections which had ever taken place in Dock and suggested that the result would decide if the Ward was to exist as a

residential district or be developed as a commercial centre.<sup>70</sup>

Fitt insisted that his record since being elected as a public representative would defy all comers, that he had consistently served the interests of all sections of the community in the Dock area, and would continue to do so.<sup>71</sup> He ran with two more prospective councillors from the Republican Labour Party - Tom Fitzpatrick and James McMenamin.

The unionists, for their part, selected candidates with strong connections in Dock to counter the reverses they had been suffering: Sean McMaster, chairman of the Local Unionist Association and a craneman by occupation; Charles Maginnis, a labourer, also a native of the area; and Billy McDowell, a shop owner who had lived there for twenty years. Paddy Wilson, who ran on a straight Labour ticket, was also a native of Dock working in an aircraft factory. Thus, Fitt's opponents could not be considered as opulent outsiders.

The Belfast News Letter conveyed something of the carnival atmosphere of electioneering in the locality:

The other Wards had nothing on Dock, where pacemaker Gerry Fitt set a swinging pattern for his Republican colleagues Messrs Fitzpatrick and McMenamin. Youngsters and adults alike turned out in their hundreds to add something of the 'Lagan beat' to the proceedings and to add that final touch. St Peter's Brass and Reed Band provided the music and accompaniment.

But wait, Gerry and his boys didn't quite have it all their own way in Belfast's dockland. For although his party set a cracking pace and the band struck up to the music of the 'Minstrel Boy' a few yards around the corner was none other than a party of unionists singing and dancing to the music of 'Derry Walls'.<sup>72</sup>

The results of the election were impressive for Republican Labour - all three candidates were returned, with Fitt again topping the poll. Gerry Fitt and the Republican Labour Party had achieved dominance in Dock. The next opportunity which the party had to test

their electoral strength was the October 1964 United Kingdom general election.

Diamond was chosen by Republican Labour to contest the West Belfast seat. (It should be noted that the Dock Ward was within the East Belfast constituency - one which always returned a unionist). The unionist candidate was Jim Kilfedder, a Donegal born barrister. The N.I.L.P. selected Billy Boyd, whose platform was pro-border yet non-sectarian and the Republican candidate was Liam McMillan. Gerry Fitt was Diamond's election agent.

The election became particularly noteworthy due to rioting which broke out on Divis Street at the foot of the Catholic Falls Road. On his Divis Street headquarters, McMillan displayed traditional republican regalia - pictures of James Connolly and Patrick Pearse and the Irish Tricolour. This was in direct violation of the 1954 Flags and Emblems Bill, which stated that it was illegal to display any symbol that would cause provocation and lead to the disruption of public order. In such a situation the Royal Ulster Constabulary (R.U.C.) were empowered to remove the objectionable material.

Loyalists, led by publicity-hungry Ian Paisley, made it known that they were offended by the republican display and threatened to remove it if the R.U.C. did not. The Minister for Home Affairs, Brian McConnell, capitulated under this pressure and ordered the R.U.C. into Divis Street.

The police presence caused a riot, with Catholics emerging to defend the republican symbols. It was the worst disturbance in Northern Ireland since the 1930s, lasting for three days and ending with twenty-one policemen and fifty civilians injured.

Fitt tried to end the fray by asking the Belfast Corporation to

pass an emergency resolution calling upon all sections of the community in the city "to desist from any action which could lead to a further exacerbation of relations."<sup>73</sup> This action showed that Fitt made some effort to end the internecine episode although he was not convinced that all politicians shared his attitude.

After the riots, Fitt was very critical of the unionist administration. He spoke at Stormont and alleged that the whole affair was an intrigue, and further maintained that the government announcements to have the flags taken down were designed to bring out the largest possible crowd to witness their removal. In short, the riot was a political stunt to swing votes away from Diamond.<sup>74</sup>

It was thus in these abnormal conditions that the election in West Belfast took place. If Fitt's alleged machinations of the Unionist Government were true, it calculated correctly - the unionists won, but on a minority vote. Kilfedder polled 21,337 votes, Diamond 14,678, Boyd 12,571 and McMillan 3,256.

It is unlikely that Diamond secured any Protestant support; he had no need to cultivate such a foundation as M.P. for Catholic Falls at Stormont. The Republican Labour support in Dock was inaccessible and anyway much of it from Protestants would have been of a personal kind for Fitt. It is also possible that Boyd made some inroads on the Catholic vote; certainly the republican element was not formidable. McMillan lost his deposit, as did his three colleagues in the other city constituencies. Indeed, he would perhaps have got fewer votes but for the unrest in Divis Street, which no doubt propelled a percentage back to a more militant viewpoint. Even with this motivation the republican vote was still only 6%.

The New Nation, still voicing a demand for greater method within

nationalist politics, commented on the defeat of Diamond: "The failure of the Republican Labour candidate in West Belfast clearly indicates that a large number of enthusiastic helpers is no substitute for a good machine."<sup>75</sup>

In the Republic, Hibernia communicated disillusionment:

The Anglophiles, intent on guarding their dominant position, behaved as though they were the injured party, the opposition pathetically divided made feeble attempts to find a united banner, aired their grievances without hope of redress, and lost their deposits. The result was the same as before. Twelve true men and blue<sup>76</sup> represent us in the mother of Parliaments.<sup>77</sup>

Diamond and Boyd both polled reasonable figures, 28.3% and 24.3% respectively, which combined, would have defeated the unionists. As it was, both gained sufficient support to allow the common enemy to win to the detriment of labourist politics.

The next time, with Fitt as the candidate, the results of the West Belfast election for the United Kingdom parliament were different. The 1964 election had one wider implication for Northern Ireland politics. In Britain, the Labour Party under Harold Wilson was elected. Labour politicians did not enjoy the cosy relationship that their Conservative counterparts had with the unionists and there were many of them who became concerned and sympathetic to Catholic complaints of discrimination.

In the same month as the 1964 election, McAteer, under increasing pressure to formulate a vigorous nationalist coalition, invited the Belfast "Labour orientated anti-partitionist" M.P's to join in a new organization and the Republican Labour Party agreed to enter into talks. Any optimism that there may have been about a merger between nationalists of the rural areas and the Republican Labourites was soon dashed, for on December 6 the party decided to

postpone consideration of a possible link-up. Commenting on this decision, Fitt told the Irish News that he had been disenchanted in the past that attempts at unity had fallen through. Fitt added that while he was very pleased to see the nationally minded moving in the direction of unity, there would have to be definite guarantees that all sections of the working class were represented in any such united front.<sup>78</sup>

The voting of the party's executive was very close. The Dock branch was totally opposed to the prospect of a merger but on the other hand, Sean McGivern of the Andersonstown branch and party secretary resigned because of what he felt was a reluctance by the leadership to create a unified national movement.<sup>79</sup> It is possible that Fitt and his Dock colleagues felt that to freely enter an openly nationalist structure would have alienated Protestant support in the area. However, it is also possible that careerist concerns mitigated against unity - a point noted by the New Nation:

We regret the breakdown in the negotiations between the leaders of the Nationalist Party and the Belfast anti-partitionist groups especially as the reason given seems to amount to little more than distrust arising over past experiences. In such an attitude there is evidence of a pathetic lack of vision and a miserable concern with merely personal prestige, which creates divisions and prevents any real progress.<sup>80</sup>

The episode illustrates that Fitt's nationalist and socialist sentiments could not be reconciled in an Irish context. Fitt had frequently posed as a champion of Irish unity, but when his possible affiliation to a coalition geared to fulfil that aspiration was proposed, he fell back on his working class socialist credentials. Fitt was something of a political chameleon.

Fitt's political activity was temporarily interrupted on December 9, when he suddenly collapsed while speaking at Stormont.

He was admitted to the Royal Victoria Hospital and required a blood transfusion for a gastric haemorrhage. This was not the only time that the rigours of political life would hospitalise Fitt, but on this occasion he was well enough to return to the House on January 19, 1965, and was personally welcomed back by O'Neill.<sup>81</sup>

Five days previously, and just three months after the sectarian riots in Divis Street, O'Neill and Lemass met in Belfast. Although Fitt would have considered his politics to be substantially different from the two premiers, he considered the meeting a welcome gesture and articulated his feelings at Stormont. In the same speech he also voiced his approval on the Nationalist Party becoming official opposition, a step which he felt had brought about "a more realistic political atmosphere in Northern Ireland." In keeping with the conciliatory spirit of his speech and indeed with the apparent normalising of Northern politics at the time, Fitt re-affirmed his own brand of constitutional nationalism and showed that he was no socialist revolutionary:

In my constituency there are many people who believe in the ultimate ideal in which I believe, the eventual reunification of this country. The way to bring this about is to recognise that Stormont exists, to use this House and all its institutions to further the interests and well being of all constituents, irrespective of their political beliefs. If we can bring peace and harmony to this community it will be only a little step before we can eventually bring about a unity of mind in the whole island.<sup>82</sup>

Two days after these words, the divisions within the Republican Labour Party were becoming more apparent. On February 5, 1965, the Irish News reported that the Andersonstown Branch of West Belfast had unanimously voted to disaffiliate from the party.<sup>83</sup>

Evidently there were elements in the party who were more concerned with the Republican than the Labour tag and the fact that

Andersonstown is a Catholic area may well have accounted for this emphasis.

The unionist administration was remarkably adept at taking decisions which lacked political sensitivity and brought traditional attitudes to the forefront. One such decision was made by the Minister of Development, William Craig, to name the new city in Armagh, Craigavon, after the first prime minister of Northern Ireland, James Craig. James Craig was considered an arch bigot by the Catholic community. The Irish News reported Fitt's reaction:

The name could only be accepted as a calculated insult to the minority in Northern Ireland. It was the final insult at this time when there was so much talk about building bridges between different sections of the community.

The minority had often been charged with having long memories but it was within the memory of many members that Lord Craigavon said this was a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people.

The minority could never forget this statement and the naming of the city seemed to show that the policy of the Northern Ireland Government was to maintain a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people.<sup>84</sup>

The above statement was an emotional response from an emotional politician. Indeed much of his fluent rhetoric stemmed from fervent reaction to prejudice. The following day he argued that if the inhabitants of the new city were going to be faced with sectarian strife then any advantages would be negated. He fulminated: "Why not go the whole hog and call it Paisleyville? This would be accepted just as well by the people who are now congratulating the Minister on the name selected."<sup>85</sup>

Despite tension generated by Craigavon and other matters, such as the siting of the new university in largely Protestant Coleraine rather than largely Catholic and depressed Londonderry, and later in early 1966, the controversy over the naming of a bridge over the

river Lagan, there was an optimism about a thaw in community relations.<sup>86</sup> This was noted by Hibernia, which re-published two editorials: one from the staunchly pro-unionist Belfast News Letter, the other from the more moderate pro-unionist Belfast Telegraph, both confirming new attitudes:

Senator Lennon<sup>87</sup> is entitled to call for more from the Government than expressions of greater goodwill - deeds must follow words if bridges are to be built between the two sections of the population but he should appreciate that progress towards a new order must be slow if it is to be sure, and that too precipitate action could wipe out the advances already made.<sup>88</sup>

As for the Unionist Party, the curiosity, some would say the tragedy of the situation is that despite the knowledge of the way rising living standards have dulled anti-partition protest, it will not make a direct move to enlist support for the constitution from members of the steadily growing Catholic population.

If a policy of co-operation is to mean anything more than window dressing it must have this end in view. But what unionist will brave the Protestant flank and say so? when in fact will the attempt be made to diminish the influence of religion in politics.<sup>89</sup>

In the midst of this seemingly cordial era, Fitt had to defend his Stormont seat since O'Neill called an election for November 25, 1965. Dock, as we have seen, had never been retained. Fitt was fighting against history. The sectarian reputation of the Ward would again be put to the test. The Unionist Party again put forward William Oliver to contest the Dock seat.

In an attempt to swing the election, O'Neill decided to visit the constituency himself. The Irish News reported Fitt's reaction to this attempt to "cadge votes": "No Arab tribesman or African pearl diver could be more foreign to the people of Dock or more ignorant of their needs and problems than the Eton-bred schoolboy who proposed to descend on the place with scarf flying on election eve."<sup>90</sup>

Also worthy of mention in this issue of the Irish News, was the

publication of a telegram from James Connolly's daughter, Ina, to Fitt: "I wish you every success and return once more to parliament for this historic division which my father contested in 1913. I sincerely pray that the electorate of Dock will, to his memory, give you an overwhelming majority."<sup>91</sup> There can be little doubt that Fitt had an acute sensitivity to what was required on the ground, and was well aware that an amalgam of Republican and Labour would unite the various strands of potential voters.

Fitt's prediction for the result was assured. "There can be no doubt about the outcome. I, as one of the people have faith in the peoples' verdict."<sup>92</sup> His optimism was well founded since he was again successful.

The result was the only substantial unionist reverse in the Stormont election. Fitt more than doubled his majority despite a lower poll and the Belfast News Letter acknowledged:

Dodgy Dock turned up trumps for Republican Labour man, Mr Gerry Fitt, who withstood the unionist challenge, from Mr William Oliver, whom Mr Fitt beat by 507 votes in 1962. He built on this vote this time, adding nearly 1,000 votes. The result represents a substantial swing to the anti-partition candidate.<sup>93</sup>

The Newsletter clearly still considered Fitt to be a nationalist. Fitt on the other hand claimed that his victory was one for the working class and socialism. Yet it seems, that although the election had perhaps lost some of its sectarian crudity, it was still Protestant unionist versus Catholic nationalist. Hibernia reported Oliver's reaction to his defeat:

Alderman Oliver explaining on television why he had lost in Dock to Republican Labour said some of his people had stayed at home. Asked why they had done this he said it was because they favoured Labour or Liberal or other parties. His people presumably include all Protestants.<sup>94</sup>

At the end of the year, Harold Wilson called another United

Kingdom general election for March 31, 1966. The newly formed N.D.P. stated its intent to contest West Belfast.<sup>95</sup> In the following week Fitt announced his candidacy for the same seat. He combined his nationalist and socialist credentials.

I believe that this Division can only be won by someone adhering to the principles of James Connolly and fighting tenaciously for the ultimate reunification of this country. I realise that many of the electorate in this area are of a different religious persuasion to my own, but I also am aware that these people know me as a Labour representative who has taken an unequivocal stand where the needs of the working classes have been concerned. I will be fighting this election on my record as a Labour representative, and as such, I feel confident that the working class in West Belfast will ensure my return to Westminster.<sup>96</sup>

Fitt's intervention clearly threatened to split the nationally-minded vote and leave it open for the unionists to retain the seat. When I asked Fitt why he decided to stand and perhaps split the nationalist vote, he replied:

The new party were totally anathema to me. They were Catholic middle class schoolteachers and they called themselves the National Democratic Party. They were people I had nothing in common with. They were Catholic middle class who believed they had been educated and there was a God-given right for them to represent the Catholic working class... People who had no idea how the Catholic people live in Dock or Falls or Ballymurphy. They appointed themselves as such and totally infuriated me.<sup>97</sup>

Evidently the middle class professional image of the N.D.P. caused friction with other nationalist elements.<sup>98</sup> There was some debate within the Republican Labour Party about whether they should contest the election or not. Fitt was in favour of participation regardless of the result, because he felt that if the N.D.P. established their presence, then the political influence of the Republican Labour Party would be greatly diminished. Harry Diamond, on the other hand, was against splitting the Catholic vote, arguing that West Belfast was a sectarian constituency. Without

consulting his party colleagues, Fitt leaked Republican Labour's intention to the press - another indication of the individualistic nature of his politics to which he now admits: "I am very much of an individualist. I make my own mind up on something and think that I am right and other people have their point of view but it is not going to change my opinion - so I was never the ideal party leader."<sup>99</sup> On this occasion, Fitt's dogmatic attitude won the day, and as we have seen, was selected to contest the election although Diamond was recorded dissenting to party involvement.

On March 2, 1966, the N.D.P. announced their candidate - a thirty six year old primary school teacher, Mr Joseph Lavery, who claimed: "The time has now come when elections in Northern Ireland must not be fought on shibboleths and slogans, but rather on intelligent and rational argument about the issues involved."<sup>100</sup>

Fitt went on record regretting the N.D.P. decision, which he believed would lead to the unionists retaining the seat:

The N.D.P. entered the political arena last year with the intention of unifying the nationally minded forces against the Unionist Party... and since then they have adopted the attitude that they are the only spokesman for the nationally minded electorate. In effect they are one more splinter party in opposition to the unionists.<sup>101</sup>

The dispute between the two parties precipitated bitter recrimination in the following week. On March 6, Fitt declared:

Not one single vote has so far been cast for the National Democratic Party in the City of Belfast and I am certain that the electors of the Falls area will show in no uncertain manner their distaste for the tactics being employed by the National Democratic Party.<sup>102</sup>

Answering suggestions that the N.D.P. withdraw from the contest to avoid a split vote, a party spokesman argued with an undisguised

gibe at Fitt:

The Northern Ireland electorate is sick to death of the lone operator and the opportunist in politics. We want to help build a proper political party because this is the only way to get rid of the unionists. We believe that the electorate recognises this and will continue to support us accordingly.<sup>103</sup>

Fitt retorted that the N.D.P. were campaigning on a purely sectional appeal.<sup>104</sup> On the following day, March 10, the rift between the two parties widened as both indicated that they intended to remain in contention. An N.D.P. spokesman declared that they would not be stampeded by the "Tammany Hall tactics that are being used in the West."<sup>105</sup>

Meanwhile, Fitt acquired the backing of eight Nationalist M.P.'s, including McAteer and Austin Currie.<sup>106</sup> This mounting support for Fitt from the Nationalist Party forced the N.D.P. to seek a compromise, and they suggested that he could win the nomination from a united party - a merger between the two. Diamond strongly opposed this suggestion, his comment reflecting the temper of the conflict:

A proposal of a shotgun wedding or merger with a faction outside of this unity (the unity of support for Fitt) on the eve of the election cannot be taken seriously when accompanied by taunts and sneers and statements dripping with hatred and abuse of a popular hard working representative.<sup>107</sup>

The threat of a three-cornered challenge for West Belfast was finally ended on March 13 when the N.D.P. capitulated to the increased pressure and withdrew Lavery. The statement announcing the withdrawal followed an appeal from McAteer to the party's Central Council. Fitt's inflexible attitude had won the day. His determination had ensured that he would be the only nationalist in the contest against the unionists. Nevertheless, the severity of the clash revealed a great deal of enmity between the "working class nationalists" and the "middle class nationalists." There would be

important implications for Fitt in the 1970s due to this discord.

If Fitt was to overcome Unionist Party incumbent Kilfedder, he had to gain at least 5,000 of the voters who had previously plumped for the N.I.L.P. However, many of the people who would have voted for Boyd would have been appalled at Fitt's republican tag. Kilfedder, therefore, predictably laid great emphasis on his opponent's republicanism and the question of the constitution: "Why doesn't Mr Fitt talk about his policies - his republicanism which will put us in with the south."<sup>108</sup> He told a Belfast Telegraph reporter: "No amount of pretence at being the Labour candidate by my Republican opponent can hide the fact that the contest is a simple referendum - a vote for or against the Ulster constitutional position."<sup>109</sup>

Fitt, however, as was typical, was ambiguous in his election speeches, managing both to emphasize his socialist credentials as well as his nationalist aspiration.<sup>110</sup> This approach did not fool all Protestant electors, as the following appraisal from the Belfast Telegraph indicates: "Mr. Fitt, for all his engaging personality and his avoidance of an exclusively religious appeal, is primarily an anti-partitionist, and it will be an elastic conscience which is able to support both him and the constitution at the same time."<sup>111</sup>

In a letter to the Telegraph, Michael Farrell, then chairman of the Queen's University Labour group, and later to become an important member of People's Democracy (P.D.), wrote that he recognised the dilemma facing Labour voters in West Belfast due to the importance of the constitutional issue. Farrell appealed to the people who had voted for Boyd in 1964 to vote for Fitt in 1966, citing three

inducements:

Because the border is not an issue in this election and Mr Fitt has made it clear he does not intend to make it one.

Because the issue in the election is whether there should be a Labour or Conservative government at Westminster, and Mr Fitt has made it abundantly clear that he will support a Labour government.

Because we believe that Mr Fitt has shown, since his election to the Stormont parliament, that he is prepared to work extremely hard for all his constituents and indeed for many outside his constituency. By this he has proved his claim to be a working class and Labour representative.<sup>112</sup>

Presumably Fitt's victory and majority of over 2,000 was a product of these factors. Fitt polled 26,292 votes to Kilfedder's 24,281.

Fitt had become the first candidate to wrest West Belfast from the unionists since 1955, achieving this despite one of the most concentrated campaigns ever mounted by the Unionist Party machine. His victory was the most sensational, but the unionist support in the other three Belfast constituencies was also severely reduced. After his victory, Fitt exclaimed:

West Belfast has shown its repulsion of unionism, and while the majority of the support which I received came from those people who believe in the national unity of this country, I also received the working class support on my record as a public representative.

I have been elected on the Republican Labour ticket which to me consists of the twin ideals of the unity of the island and the betterment of all the people. In Westminster I will support the Labour government on its initiation of social and progressive legislation. I will maintain my stand to propagate the unity of Ireland and I have no doubt that I will receive the support of many progressive British Labour M.Ps in this connection. This is the happiest day of my life. It is a victory for sanity in Northern Ireland politics. I have received the confidence of the working class. Now I will carry on my efforts to bring the workers under the Labour umbrella.<sup>113</sup>

Reaction to the outcome of the election in West Belfast predictably corresponded to political and religious affiliation. Nationalist sentiment was obviously delighted. Diamond described the

result as a "sensational breakthrough. It is a tribute to the people who disregard the sectarian appeal of unionism." McAteer sent Fitt a congratulatory telegram which read "and then there was eleven." Nationalists clearly regarded Fitt as one of their own, and, despite his non-sectarian and labourite rhetoric, he was. Unionist reaction reinforced this perception. Captain Willie Orr, leader of the Unionist Party at Westminster, said, "It is a sad thing for Ulster, when the famous constituency of West Belfast has chosen to go republican."<sup>114</sup>

To what extent then did Protestants vote for Fitt? A degree of elucidation can be provided by looking at past elections for the constituency.

The 1964 election was, as we have seen, a four-cornered contest, with the opposition split three ways. The Unionists Party was victorious but it was outpolled by 9,000 votes. In that contest, Kilfedder received 21,337 votes while the anti border candidates representing the Republican Labour Party and republicans achieved a combined total of 17,934 votes. The pro-border socialist Northern Ireland Labour Party (N.I.L.P.) polled 12,571 votes. In 1966, therefore, the unknown quantity were the voters who had previously supported the N.I.L.P. It was these votes which would decide the election. Fitt's task, therefore, was to gain Protestant votes from Kilfedder, without alienating his nucleus of nationally minded supporters. The last straight unionist versus anti-unionist Labour contest was Jack Beattie's triumph. Beattie, as we have seen, won by 25 votes. This would reinforce the claim that the religious divide in the constituency was about equal. If this is the case, it seems Fitt did succeed in his assignment (although it is worth noting that

Fitt's vote was exactly 3,113 below the total opposition vote in 1964, and that Kilfedder polled 2,844 more than he had done in 1964 - suggesting that many who had previously voted N.I.L.P. were merely dissatisfied unionists). One factor which would have persuaded this element was Fitt's commitment to support the Labour Party at Westminster on social issues. In addition he had already proved his ability in local government elections to win Protestant working-class votes. It is also likely that he won the votes of a high proportion of people who had previously voted republican. It was indeed an odd combination of religious and political loyalties that saw Fitt elected to Westminster.

## NOTES

1. Hibernia (Dublin), May 1966.
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3. C. O'Leary, "Belfast West," in The British General Election of 1966, ed. D.E. Butler and A. King (London: MacMillan, 1967), 254.
4. E. Rumpf and A.C. Hepburn, Nationalism and Socialism in Twentieth Century Ireland (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1977), 88.
5. E. McCann, War and an Irish Town (London: Pluto Press, 1981), 13.
6. E. Rumpf and A.C. Hepburn, op. cit, 190 - 191.
7. Belfast News Letter, 19 March 1958.
8. Belfast Telegraph, 18 March 1958.
9. Belfast News Letter, 19 March 1958.
10. Irish News (Belfast), 12 March 1958.
11. The Headquarters of the Unionist Party is situated in Glengall Street, Belfast.
12. Belfast Telegraph, 11 March 1958.
13. Irish News (Belfast), 17 March 1958.
14. Belfast Telegraph, 12 March 1958.
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16. Ibid., 17 March 1958.
17. Ibid., 20 March 1958.
18. Belfast News Letter, 19 March 1958.
19. Ibid., 20 March 1958.
20. In the election for Councillors to Belfast Corporation electors could vote for up to three candidates.

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24. Irish News (Belfast), 23 May, 1958.
25. Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol 42 (1958) Cols. 1072 - 1073.
26. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 19 December, House of Lords, London.
27. See Irish News (Belfast), 3 June 1958.
28. Ibid., 14 August 1958.
29. Ibid., 5 August 1959.
30. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 19 December, House of Lords, London.
31. Irish News (Belfast), 3 May, 4 October, 2 December 1960.
32. See Irish News (Belfast), 16 December 1960.
33. Ibid., 8 April 1961.
34. Ibid., 4 May 1961.
35. Ibid., 10 May 1961.
36. Ibid., 16 May 1961.
37. Ibid., 20 May 1961.
38. Ibid., 2 August 1961.
39. Ibid., 7 October 1961.
40. Ibid., 15 March 1962.
41. E. Moloney and A. Pollack, Paisley, (Dublin: Poolbeg Press Ltd, 1986), 101.
42. Irish News (Belfast), 15 May 1962.
43. Belfast Telegraph, 17 May 1962.
44. Ibid., 25 May 1962.
45. Irish News (Belfast), 29 May 1962.

46. G. Fitt, Election Manifesto, 23 May 1962.
47. Belfast Telegraph, 30 May 1962.
48. Ibid., 30 May 1962.
49. Belfast News Letter, 31 May 1962.
50. Ibid.
51. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 19 December 1988, House of Lords, London.
52. P. Devlin, interviewed by author, 25 March 1989, Belfast.
53. Hibernia (Dublin), July 1962.
54. Belfast News Letter, 18 June 1962.
55. Irish News (Belfast), 19 June 1962.
56. Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol 52 (1962), Cols. 138 - 140.
57. See Irish News (Belfast), 18 April 1960.
58. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 19 December 1988, House of Lords, London.
59. Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates (Commons) Vol 52 (1962), Cols. 146.
60. Irish News (Belfast), 5 December 1962.
61. Ibid., 19 December 1962.
62. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 19 December 1988, House of Lords, London.
63. The Orange Order is the largest Protestant Organization in Northern Ireland. It was founded in 1795. The group are often charged with promoting discrimination against Catholics.
64. Irish Times (Dublin), 3 October 1988.
65. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 19 December 1988, House of Lords, London.
66. P. Devlin, interview by author, 25 March 1989, Belfast.
67. New Nation (Belfast), January 1964.
68. Hibernia (Dublin), March 1964.
69. Irish News (Belfast), 22 April 1964.

70. Ibid., 12 May 1964.
71. Ibid., 15 May 1964.
72. Belfast News Letter, 16 May 1964.
73. Irish News (Belfast), 2 October 1964.
74. Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol 57 (1964), Cols. 2873 - 2874.
75. New Nation (Belfast), October 1964.
76. There were twelve seats at Westminster for representatives from Northern Ireland.
77. Hibernia (Dublin), November 1964.
78. Irish News (Belfast), 7 December 1964.
79. Ibid.
80. New Nation (Belfast), December 1964.
81. Irish News (Belfast), 20 January 1965.
82. See Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol 58 (1965), Cols. 295 - 296.
83. See Irish News (Belfast), 5 February 1965.
84. Ibid., 7 July 1965.
85. Ibid., 8 July 1965.
86. The new bridge spanning the Lagan was initially named "Carson Bridge", after Edward Carson 1854 - 1935, leader of the Opposition to Home Rule for Ireland. To the Catholic population he epitomised Protestant ascendancy. The row eventually led to the bridge being named after Queen Elizabeth II.
87. Lennon was Nationalist Opposition leader in the Northern Ireland Senate, 1965 - 1971.
88. Belfast News Letter, August 1965 quoted in Hibernia (Dublin), October 1965.
89. Belfast Telegraph, 16 August 1965, quoted in Hibernia (Dublin), October 1965.
90. Irish News (Belfast), 24 November 1965.
91. Ibid.
92. Belfast Telegraph, 25 November 1965.

93. Belfast News Letter, 26 November 1965.
94. Hibernia (Dublin), December 1965.
95. Irish News (Belfast), 8 December 1965.
96. Ibid., 15 December 1965.
97. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 19 December 1988, House of Lords, London.
98. See I. McAllister, "The National Democratic Party 1965 - 1976" Economic & Social Review, (Vol 1, 1975) 301.
99. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 19 December 1988, House of Lords, London.
100. Irish News (Belfast), 3 March 1966.
101. Ibid.
102. Ibid., 7 March 1966.
103. Ibid., 10 March 1966.
104. Ibid.
105. Ibid., 11 March 1966.
106. Ibid.
107. Ibid.
108. Belfast News Letter, 29 March 1966.
109. Belfast Telegraph, 30 March 1966.
110. See C. O'Leary, op. cit, 257.
111. Belfast Telegraph, 29 March 1966.
112. Ibid.
113. Irish News (Belfast), 1 April 1966.
114. Belfast News Letter, 2 April 1966.

## CHAPTER III

### CIVIL RIGHTS OR NATIONAL RIGHTS

Chapter I summarised what had seemed to be positive political developments within Northern Ireland during the mid 1960s. In retrospect, it is obvious that these apparent improvements were illusory. Indeed, they proved to be negative rather than positive portents for the six counties.

The Nationalist Party as an official opposition, became even more aware of its impotence in stagnant political circumstances. Lemass' visit signalled an end to the Republic's indifference to the North. The Campaign for Democracy in Ulster's sympathy for the plight of British Catholics in Northern Ireland developed into demands for the liberalisation of the Stormont regime, electoral reform and the abolition of all forms of discrimination. Most importantly, the Campaign for Social Justice evolved into a comprehensive Civil Rights movement which would achieve more reforms than any armed struggle had managed.

Terence O'Neill in his capacity as prime minister, pinpointed the year of deterioration as 1966, the same year that Fitt was elected to Westminster.<sup>1</sup> Fitt promised he would ensure that the discrimination which existed in Northern Ireland would be vigorously exposed. At Westminster, his attempts to highlight the iniquities of unionism, were met with an almost total ignorance of the reality. However, four years later, the Unionist government was fighting for survival. Fitt had fulfilled his promise and must take some credit for destabilizing the state. This is not to say that the Labour government of the time was instrumental in helping him. But

if it were not for the Civil Rights movement, that government would have adopted the policy of its predecessors towards Northern Ireland and done nothing. Even with the advent of the Civil Rights movement, little was achieved.

This chapter will trace Fitt's political career in this crucial period of Irish history. James Callaghan considers that Fitt was a "guiding spirit" of Civil Rights.<sup>2</sup> Fitt did indeed use his personal qualities and high profile to highlight the condition of the Northern Catholic. He clearly enjoyed the freedom that his individual style of politics allowed. We will see, however, that by 1969 there emerged a new group of articulate and pragmatic political operators - Paddy Devlin, John Hume, Bernadette Devlin, Ivan Cooper, Paddy O'Hanlon and Austin Currie, who, although they did not obscure Fitt, did make him slightly less distinct. This circumstance also created the impression that Fitt was the elder statesman of nationalist politics. The contacts with senior members of the Labour Party, which he alone established, further reinforced this image. By 1970, therefore, Fitt would increasingly be regarded as the voice of moderation, which was bound to lead him into disagreement with radicals like Bernadette Devlin who was also elected to Westminster in this period. Fitt says of their time at parliament:

There was no relationship. I was quite happy when Bernadette came here to show her around. She was after all an anti-unionist representative but Bernadette always had a crowd of student minders all around her. Michael Farrell, Loudon Seth and Eamon McCann - and all these "nutters" were all around. They dragged her up and down the country you just could not talk to Bernadette. She was under the influence of all the people who were on her bandwagon.<sup>3</sup>

Fitt's socialism in this period retained its intuitive characteristics but his nationalism was not unvarying. On occasion

between 1966 and 1970, Fitt showed himself to be militant, though much of this militancy was voiced against a background of apparent stability within Northern Ireland. He would not have been the first Irish politician to promote constitutional change through the threat of the revolutionary scenario. Furthermore, there is evidence that Fitt's nationalism is more discernable in Northern Ireland and the Republic than it is in London, he had different voices for different venues. This wavering suggests that Fitt had no clear political ideology. It also left him open to the unionist charge that although he said he did not want the border removed by force, in fact his actions showed the opposite.

Chapter II established that Fitt's "Republican" label was essentially tactical. This chapter confirms this and also reveals that he was totally unprepared for the re-emergence of the I.R.A. in 1969. He recalls their appearance in his home constituency: "In the Dock area the I.R.A. formed the Third Battalion. They were the scum of the earth. They were people who had all sorts of convictions for petty theft - social rejects, and then all of a sudden they were the I.R.A."<sup>4</sup> He clearly allowed the "Republican" part of his label to become totally inappropriate and was quite happy that British soldiers were on the streets when the violence began. The Belfast Telegraph quoted him saying "Thank God for the British troops."<sup>5</sup>

Although Fitt was responsible for much of the unionist dilemma in 1969, he, like all constitutional nationalists, was totally unprepared for the discontinuity of the state.<sup>6</sup> His loose commitment to the idea of a united Ireland was no substitute for a coherent political philosophy. In other words, it is easy to aspire

for a united Ireland - it is not so easy to implement it. In 1969 Fitt had not the strategy for promoting the ideal he had espoused through the decade. As the nationalist mood became more militant and Civil Rights was replaced by a demand for national liberation, Fitt and his fellow constitutionalists fell into a period of temporary political limbo. Thus, nobody represented the Catholic community in any political discourse and this was only resolved a year later with the establishment of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (S.D.L.P.). By then, however, the I.R.A. had filled the vacuum. Much of the blame for this eventuality can be blamed on unionist politics.

Although O'Neill could claim to have made some effort to win the minority over to unionism, his liberalism was essentially a facade. However, his style of unionism was sufficiently removed from traditional tenets that the monolithic unionist bloc which had been maintained for over forty years began to disintegrate. He had no greater critic than Ian Paisley who adjudged the new politics to be a betrayal of both Protestantism and unionism. Bew and Patterson comment:

The effect of O'Neill's policies was therefore to create tensions between his government and some of the most backward elements of the Unionist Party, and this allowed him to represent himself as a progressive force whilst in fact no actual strategy of reforming sectarian relations existed.<sup>7</sup>

On April 18, 1966, the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rebellion was celebrated in Belfast with a colourful procession. O'Neill had exhibited the typical unionist fear of nationalist expression by banning trains from Dublin to Belfast - an action which exacerbated rather than reduced tension.

In the parade, Fitt walked with the I.T.G.W.U. and was loudly

applauded by the crowds, reflecting his tremendous popularity.<sup>8</sup> He had actually not intended to march but O'Neill's move prompted him to break a prior engagement in London to take part.<sup>9</sup> The march, as always, was a tribute to the republican martyrs. Fitt's attendance presumably meant that he endorsed the ideal behind the Easter Rebellion. This conflicts sharply with his present view, he now maintains that Connolly made a grave error in his involvement:

I believe Connolly may have made a mistake by getting involved in 1916 because he was a Labour man, a socialist, an internationalist but he was caught up in the whole nationalist upheaval of the time. Patrick Pearse and James Connolly were like chalk and cheese.<sup>10</sup>

In Fitt's view, Pearse and Connolly were fighting for different Irelands. Pearse was an Irish cultural nationalist who put social issues in a secondary position. The Easter rebellion would thus be a blood sacrifice to rejuvenate the Irish people's desire to assert their independence; an independence which history had shown they had continually strived to achieve. Connolly on the other hand, wanted a independent workers' republic of Ireland.

Onlookers of the 1966 parade would not have made such a distinction and Fitt was astute enough to know that his identification with such a parade would have secured him some support. Yet, to be fair, there was no perception that such physical force as a political weapon would ever be used again. In 1966 the I.R.A. was practically defunct in the North. Danny Morrison, then Education Officer of Sinn Fein, remarked "As far as we were concerned there was absolutely no chance of the I.R.A. appearing again. They were something in the history books."<sup>11</sup>

Bowyer Bell talks of the relationship between Fitt and Sinn Fein

at this juncture: "In Belfast relations with Gerry Fitt who as good as owned and operated the new Republican Labour Party, were good if not intimate. His tactic of using his seats in Stormont and Westminster to harass the unionist machine was analysed if not emulated."<sup>12</sup> The display of mutual respect between Fitt and republican elements in the 1960s would not continue in the 1970s.

Fitt made it clear that he wished to retain his individuality at Westminster by discounting rumours that he would apply for the Labour Party Whip. He told the Irish News:

I am contemplating no such move but as I have already indicated I will support the government on its initiation of social and progressive legislation. As a socialist I have admired Mr Wilson's government in the last session and I have no doubt that in the next session we will have a great deal in common in our approach to present day problems.

Fitt went on to describe his relationship with the C.D.U: "I am on the friendliest terms with at least 60 members of the new Labour government. They regard my victory in West Belfast as a signal breakthrough and I feel I can now propagate the cause they have been advocating."

Fitt then made clear his position on the twin ideal of national unity and social and economic justice for the Irish working class. "Never at any time will I renounce either. I realise that there are many members in the British Labour Movement who agree with the eventual reuniting of the country."<sup>13</sup> Fitt, evidently was still a nationalist.

Considering this commitment to a united Ireland, in addition to other statements throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, one would have expected a maiden speech at Westminster heavily spiced with nationalist sentiment. It did not happen. The contradiction in what

Fitt told the Irish News and what he asked for in his speech at Westminster is revealing. It is evident that Fitt had one voice for London and another for Belfast.

The fact that there was little or no nationalist bravado is not to say that the speech was not dramatic. Fitt was a skilful orator, and, although he was mindful of the Westminster convention that the Imperial government would not interfere in Ulster's affairs, he used the opportunity to make a decided impact on the House. The speech is worth looking at in some detail as it is indicative of much of his political conviction. He began with an elucidation of his personal brand of republicanism.

Since the election I have read in sections of the British press that I have been classified as an Irish Republican. I should take this opportunity to classify my political allegiance. To classify me as an Irish Republican is not strictly correct. The Irish Republican Party in Ireland does not recognise the authority of this House in any part of Ireland and its members would indeed refuse to take their seats in this House.

He then reveals a trust of the British parliament and the British people, a trust that he would never relinquish:

I have not given up hope, and I have not yet determined to follow the line of the Irish Republican Party, because I believe that during my term as the representative of West Belfast in this House I will be able to appeal to every reasonable member in this chamber, and, through them, to every reasonable member of the British public. I feel certain that at the end of this parliament dramatic changes will have taken place in the north of Ireland.

Fitt was intent on presenting himself as a parliamentarian rather than a revolutionary socialist, which was indeed the case. His intuition that British measures would solve the Irish problem, remained a dictum of Fitt's political philosophy and would eventually lead him into confrontation with more radical elements.

In the next segment of his speech Fitt demonstrated a distinct proclivity towards integration. Rather than lament the existence of

the border, he explains the differences in elections in Great Britain and Northern Ireland showing that in the latter, they were devoid of economic and social content.

In Northern Ireland, at every succeeding election there are no economic issues involved. In this island of Britain, the recent election was fought on the different policies and philosophies of the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party and the Labour Party, and the Labour Party were victorious. In Northern Ireland, no such issues entered the contest.

Fitt's demand for assimilation focused on the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, which implemented devolved administration in Northern Ireland. He asked for the Act to be modified to deprive Stormont control over the electoral process.

The changing social conditions over the past 50 years make the Government of Ireland Act completely unworkable. When we realise how every concept of British democracy is being flouted in Northern Ireland we conclude that now, immediately, is the time to amend that Act.

A further demand for equity between the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland was voiced through a request for the extension of the British Representation of the Peoples Act of 1949 to the province. Fitt claimed that the fundamental basis of democracy, that is One Man One Vote was abused in the six counties:

We have an anti-democratic electoral system. This would not be tolerated in any other freedom-loving country. In Northern Ireland the same people are elected to administer the different Acts - the one applicable to Northern Ireland and the one applicable for Imperial elections. Can we expect these same people to administer their own electoral laws, on the one hand, and then to wear a different hat and administer the 1949 Representation of the People Act? The first aim of the Northern Ireland Unionist Party is to perpetuate its own existence there. Let there be no mistake about that.

Fitt was determined to inform the House that Northern Irish elections revolved around whether one was a Catholic or a Protestant.

Although Fitt went on to declare his socialist values, he did not propose a socialist hypothesis to resolve the political

anachronism.<sup>14</sup> As had been his habit, he resorted to highlighting discrimination through anecdotes reinforced by facts compiled by the McCluskeys of the C.S.J.

Although Fitt's nationalist sentiment was conspicuous by its absence, the address provoked a medley of responses. Willie Orr, leader of the Unionist Party in the Commons, described it: "As quite the most controversial maiden speech I have listened to in my 16 years in the House. It contained, I regret to say, some of the wildest and most irresponsible assertions in any speech at the House of Commons."<sup>15</sup>

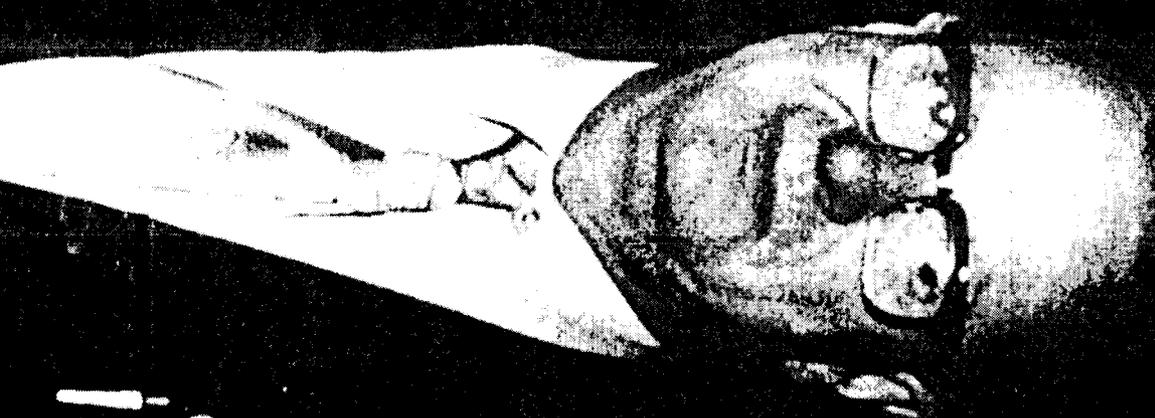
The Belfast Telegraph suggested:

By delivering the most discussed maiden speech of the new parliament, Mr Gerry Fitt ... succeeded in putting himself on the Westminster map at a single stroke. It was not just that the speech defied convention by being strongly controversial it was delivered fluently and with confidence, and a wealth of gesture added to its impact. From now onwards, Mr Fitt can be assured of considerable attention in the Commons.<sup>16</sup>

In the Republic, Hibernia talked of "Fitt's fireworks ... eleven to one and none (to date) capable of a coherent reply."<sup>17</sup> By the end of April 1966 he had undeniably made his mark and enjoyed one of his finest moments. Conversely, media coverage was virtually non-existent in Britain. This is in itself indicative of both British ignorance of and lack of interest in Northern Ireland.

Fitt endeavoured to consolidate the impact his maiden speech had aroused in parliament. His gregarious personality gave him a distinct advantage in this task and made him very popular with Labour ministers and backbenchers alike. At the end of May, he managed to secure Wilson's commitment to talk about the "goings on" in Northern Ireland. In the Commons, he asked the prime minister:

Would my Right hon. friend agree that under section 75 of the



Government of Ireland Act 1920, the ultimate responsibility for everything which happens and good government in Northern Ireland is with the United Kingdom government? Would he further agree that in the 46 years which have elapsed since this Act was put on the Statute Book it has been made increasingly obvious that democracy does not exist in Northern Ireland?

Wilson's reply indicates both the jurisdictional dilemma Fitt's question posed and a distinct underplaying of the gravity of the situation.

This question raises some very difficult issues because of the division of functions between the United Kingdom parliament and government and the Northern Ireland parliament and government. We are all aware that hon. Members in more than one part of the House are very disturbed about certain things which go on. I am not taking sides in this because there are allegations and counter allegations by one side or another within Northern Ireland.

I do not believe that this is a matter to be dealt with in the manner suggested [setting up of a Royal Commission to investigate the workings of the Government of Ireland Act]. I think that the right thing would be for my hon. friend the Home Secretary and myself to have informal talks with the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland to see whether some of the difficulties which all of us recognise exist might be overcome in an informal way.<sup>18</sup>

It was a minor victory for Fitt, but a victory nonetheless. Wilson had at least acknowledged that all was not well in Northern Ireland. The C.D.U. had tried unsuccessfully to gain a comparable recognition since 1964.

Fitt quickly followed this up with twenty amendments to the soon to be debated British Finance Bill. These amendments were grievances which he had been articulating, and he insisted that clause 48 should not come into operation until they had been redressed. Clause 48 of the Bill provided for payment from the British Treasury to Northern Ireland.<sup>19</sup> He said:

I have taken this action because I believe that the electoral laws here are completely unfair and react against working class people and are loaded in favour of the business vote. I contend that while we are British subjects, allegedly members of the U.K. we are entitled to the same electoral laws. Several of the amendments refer to discrimination in Northern Ireland, and I

believe that it is only right that I should highlight this state of affairs in the British Parliament, since entry into political life I have always opposed discrimination or sectarianism in any way. This is not applicable to one religion only, because if anyone not of my own religion was a victim of discrimination, I would be the first to fight on his behalf.<sup>20</sup>

Fitt was still playing the role of the constitutional nationalist.

In June, speaking at the Irish Club in London, Fitt discounted force as an instrument to unite Ireland arguing that to love Ireland did not mean it was necessary to hate England:

Ireland cannot be united by the use of force. Today, the world is contracting. The advent of the E.E.C. and economic factors will lead to the abolition of the border. It is because Sinn Fein advocates a Republic immediately that they win no seats and lose their deposits. Their slogan is: Give us a Republic now whether everybody will starve or not is no concern of ours.<sup>21</sup>

This declaration from the most well-known nationalist politician was the only bright spot in a damaging month for the unionist regime. Fitt's machinations had prompted the British media to probe into Northern Ireland affairs a little more than they had been accustomed to, resulting in some derogatory conclusions.<sup>22</sup>

Events in Northern Ireland did not help. Ian Paisley's demagoguery had led to two days of sectarian riots at Cromac Square in Belfast, and at the end of June there were fatalities. The Ulster Volunteer Force (U.V.F.), a Protestant paramilitary force completely opposed to what they perceived as the liberal unionist regime, ambushed four Catholics at Malvern Street in Belfast, killing one and seriously wounding two. Although the crisis point had not yet been reached, these were arguably the first deaths of the "troubles."

In the immediate aftermath of the murders, Fitt and Paul Rose called an emergency meeting of M.P.'s at Westminster and decided to form a deputation to see Prime Minister Wilson and Home Secretary,

Roy Jenkins. Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland, O'Neill announced at Stormont that the U.V.F. was to be declared illegal and he equated them with the I.R.A. At Westminster, Wilson labelled the U.V.F. a "quasi-Fascist organisation masquerading behind a clerical cloak." Mere denunciation from Wilson was not enough for Fitt and he again called on Britain to exercise her responsibility. "It is for the government to take action and not the government of Northern Ireland."<sup>23</sup>

In August, "the informal" meeting between O'Neill and Wilson took place, with Fitt having made sure that Wilson was equipped with the facts about Northern Ireland. The agenda included discussion on electoral practices, discrimination in housing and jobs - the details that Fitt had highlighted at Westminster. Evidently Wilson was more conscious of minority charges than any of his predecessors. Fitt for his part, was optimistic about the meeting's results.<sup>24</sup>

O'Neill's autobiography reveals, despite Fitt's hopes, that the encounter between the two prime ministers was very cordial. The exchanges were along general lines, with Wilson exhibiting sympathy for the circumstances in which O'Neill had to operate.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, it was Fitt who was responsible for bringing about this meeting through his persistence at Westminster. Three days later, he launched yet another attack on what he considered as Britain's dereliction of responsibility in not conforming to the dictates of the Government of Ireland Act.

I say, Sir, that this Act gives ultimate and over-riding responsibility to the parliament of the United Kingdom, and as the representative of Belfast West, as the representative of 26,000 people, I stand here to demand of the British government that they accept the responsibility which they themselves have written into this Act of 1920.

He then launched a scathing barrage on unionist policy in the north, claiming that unemployment percentage figures in places like Strabane, Newcastle, Dungannon, Enniskillen and Londonderry had never been brought to the attention of the London parliament. He argued that every one of these areas had an anti-unionist majority and consequently, money dispensed by Westminster was denied them:

These areas are denied any industrial development on the ground that they are not worth it, that they are anti-unionist and worthy of no consideration ... As a socialist I do not want to see any unemployed man in Northern Ireland, irrespective of his religious or political beliefs. This is not so with my unionist colleagues, who deliberately deny employment to areas in the country because they do not support the Unionist Party.

Fitt finished this parliamentary offensive with a plea to be relieved of the restrictions of the Westminster Convention, a plea which the Deputy Speaker rejected.<sup>26</sup>

In the following week the Irish News contained an editorial which summed up the nationalist perception of what Fitt had accomplished thus far at Westminster. It also revealed the respect that he had gained. Entitled the "Voice from West Belfast" it read:

In his direct and unaffected fashion, Mr Gerry Fitt is making a habit of disturbing that august and leisurely institution at Westminster to which he was elected earlier this year. Making no genuflections to convention, he wants the House to remember that there are other voices in this area than those of the cohort of Unionist M.P's who sit so complacently on the Tory benches; silent in their subservience to the Tory Whip, and trudging dutifully into the division lobby against the government. Mr Fitt's hard hitting speech on Tuesday night was another example of his efforts to bring six county affairs to the attention of the British government. Whilst he provides much needed illumination, he is also adding considerably to the education of the new M.P's who are less informed about this area than they are about Bangkok or Bechuanaland.<sup>27</sup>

After the summer, pressure on Wilson from Labour backbenchers slackened somewhat. The lull can be attributed to the crisis which had arisen in Rhodesia and which occupied much of the prime

minister's attention but, nevertheless, Fitt had made a mark on the Westminster scene. Although tangible reforms were negligible if not non-existent, he had succeeded in isolating the Unionist M.P's, and with the help of Paisley's actions, had focused attention on the undemocratic set-up in Northern Ireland. It seemed as if the unionist administration at Stormont would not be permitted to press on regardless, as in the old days of Conservative government.

In 1967, Fitt continued to push the Northern Ireland unionist administration into a defensive position. In February, a conference on the Irish question was held in London and attended by delegates from the British Trade Union and Labour movement. In sharp contrast to his maiden speech at Westminster, Fitt's address to the conference was much more "nationalist" inspired. Although again calling for parity between Northern Ireland and Britain, Fitt also addressed the problem of partition. He warned that if matters in Northern Ireland did not improve 'men of principle' would take matters into their own hands:

Many people in Northern Ireland have a Sinn Fein outlook, and indeed in years gone by I have disagreed with them on the question of violence. As an Irish socialist I do not want to see one Irishman shooting another Irishman. I do not believe that they will solve the Irish question. But these people have a principle - they say that the partition of Ireland has existed now for forty-seven years, that it is useless to try to talk to a British government that they will not listen, that they themselves created the problem and they are unwilling to take any steps to solve it, and I have been told time and time again that the only answer to the partition of Ireland, lies in the hands of Irishmen themselves and it can only be reunited by force.

He again, as he had done at Westminster, recounted the various Catholic grievances and then again reissued his clear warning that the minority would not wait forever for civil justice:

There is no time for delay in facing up to the problem which exists in Northern Ireland. Those people in Northern Ireland who

are at the moment British subjects and citizens of the United Kingdom are not being treated as such, and are looking to the British parliament for reforms. If reforms are not forthcoming who could blame them for taking whatever action they see fit in the circumstances? I for one ... would certainly not blame them.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1970s, Fitt did what once he claimed he would not do. When the P.I.R.A. emerged and embarked on a military campaign to oust the British from Ireland, he continually denounced them. To be fair, he would not have been the first Irish politician to capitalize on the perceived threat of unconstitutional methods of political agitation to gain constitutional reform - both O'Connell and Parnell were prone to employ such methods to add weight to their political rhetoric. In 1967 sabre rattling would not have been taken seriously and Fitt, like all constitutional politicians, was totally unprepared for the revival of the I.R.A. in 1969. Yet despite this, there is a clear inconsistency in Fitt's politics.

As already stated, the principal contradiction in O'Neill's liberalism was that it raised Catholic expectations but avoided authentic reform. Northern Ireland remained a Protestant state for a Protestant people. Thus, the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association (N.I.C.R.A.) was formed in February 1967 to combat religious inequalities. This organization sprang from the amalgamation of the C.S.J. and the Northern Wolfe Tone Society. It is wrong to suggest that the movement was an entirely Catholic one.<sup>29</sup> However, throughout its life, unionists claimed that it was a front for the I.R.A. In reality it was a broad coalition of socialists, nationalists, communists, liberals and even the leader of the Young Unionists.

The N.I.C.R.A. aims were: one man one vote in local elections,



Gerry Fitt, M.P., leader of Northern Ireland's Social Democratic Labour Party

the ending of gerrymandered electoral boundaries, apparatus to eliminate discrimination by public authorities, the fair allocation of public housing, the disbandment of the 'B' Specials and the repeal of the Special Powers Act. The campaign was not designed to end partition and eschewed the historic tradition of violence and bloodshed. Like Fitt, it was intent on seeking "British" rights for all the people in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, unionist opinion was convinced that they were dealing with the customary bout of nationalist agitation, albeit in a somewhat unconventional form. The N.I.C.R.A., it was thought, was simply subverting the constitution. Although it was Londonderry rather than Belfast which provided the inspiration for the movement, it was not to be long until its strengths and Fitt's would complement each other.

An indication of how Fitt was viewed by the more extreme elements in the Protestant community was revealed in April. In that month, the Protestant Telegraph (a violently sectarian newspaper, launched by Paisley) demanded "ARREST FENIAN FITT."<sup>30</sup> Fitt complained at Westminster, arguing that it was an attack on his integrity as an M.P. The Speaker ruled that in publishing the demand, the newspaper was guilty of a prima facie breach of privilege, and referred the grievance to the Committee of Privileges. The Committee declared that the publication was in contempt for using such statements. It resolved to take no further action in the matter as it would only highlight the abusive statement.<sup>31</sup> The incident shows that Fitt was considered a blatant nationalist and detested by certain elements of the unionist population. Undeterred, Fitt continued to attack the unionist administration.

Also in April, Fitt brought three Labour M.P's over to Northern Ireland - Paul Rose, Maurice Miller and Stan Orme, intending to show them the North's "ugliest spots" in an effort to verify the allegations he had been making at Westminster.<sup>32</sup> The four toured the towns west of the Bann, including Coalisland, Dungannon and Strabane. Austin Currie remarked that Fitt delivered the most "powerful oratorical performance" he had ever witnessed at the last stop.<sup>33</sup> Unionist M.P's were outraged at the intrusion, and not impressed by the report submitted to the Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, severely criticising the unionist administration. Miller maintained that despite all its problems and difficulties, India had more democratic rights than Northern Ireland. Orme told the Irish News:

There was a crack in the Tory edifice when like a breath of fresh air Gerry Fitt came as a true Irish representative to Westminster. The Unionist Party at that time decided that Gerry Fitt would not have much influence on his own, but Mr Fitt had brought the Irish question fully and fairly before the British M.P's. He had been able to refute the quasi liberalism of the unionists who were sweet reasonableness in Westminster.<sup>34</sup>

Fitt promised that the fact-finding mission was only the first. In 1968 this policy would pay handsome dividends.

In May, the local government elections took place. This was another occasion to see if Fitt's machinations at Westminster would cause his Protestant support to diminish. The conflict between the Republican Labour Party and the N.D.P. continued during the election. Initially the two parties formed a pact designed to prevent them competing against each other for Catholic votes in the same wards. The N.D.P. claimed that the concord collapsed because Fitt failed to carry out an undertaking not to put Republican Labour candidates into the Falls Ward. Fitt, on the other hand, claimed there was a faction in the West Belfast branch of the N.D.P. which was bitterly opposed

to him and the Republican Labour Party. He felt, therefore, that the only honourable course was to fight for as many seats as possible.<sup>35</sup> The clash between Fitt and the N.D.P. is a clear indication that the antagonisms of the previous year had not abated. It also shows that Fitt was quite capable of renegeing on an agreement if he felt it politically expedient.

During the election, Fitt was opposed for the Aldermanship in Dock but as was becoming customary he was successful, as were his three colleagues who were elected as councillors. The results meant that the Republican Labour Party had gained complete control of the Dock Ward. Fitt polled 2,499 votes and won with the highest majority ever in local government in the history of Dock, presumably with the help of non-Catholic support. He now also had the backing of seven party colleagues at the City Hall; the three councillors elected in Dock and two each from Smithfield and the Falls. Republican Labour were firmly established in Belfast. After his triumph he reasserted his nationalist attitude:

For far too long the opposition forces in the North have been divided against themselves to the advantage of our unionist masters. I think that the results of this election prove that the only alternative to unionism is a progressive labour and socialist movement embodying the principles of the eventual reunification of this country into a 32 county republic.<sup>36</sup>

Fitt remained very much the darling of the Irish News. In the wake of his victory its editorial stated:

Only Mr Fitt, it seems, has the sort of influence that can diminish prejudices, even among those not normally his supporters, to carry his standard to victory at the polls. His rousing victory in Dock, with three colleagues riding in on the tide, was no inconsiderable achievement, and the overwhelming defeat of his avowedly sectarian opponent set the pattern for a general rejection of Protestant unionists in other Wards.<sup>37</sup>

At the end of the month, Glasgow Celtic became the first British

soccer club to win the European Cup. That success produced utterances from Fitt which have taken on a mythical dimension and the episode is often cited as an example of the "real" Gerry Fitt. As such, it deserves some attention. Glasgow Celtic were and are traditionally supported by Scottish Catholics; Glasgow Rangers on the other hand are traditionally supported by Scottish Protestants - this support extends to Northern Ireland with the same religious cleavage. A crowd of fifteen thousand took part in one of the largest parades ever seen in the Falls Road district to celebrate Celtic's victory. Fitt was invited to the revelry and addressed the crowd on May 29:

As I stand on this platform and witness such a vast concourse, I am more than ever convinced that the ordinary people of West Belfast are prepared to take a stand in defence of all the ideals which have been their way of life for so long. 1966 has indeed proved to be a year of great significance to Falls, Central, Dock and many other areas. We have beaten our opponents in politics, sports and in every other field they dare to confront us and I have no doubt that this will be the continuing trend in the years to come.<sup>38</sup>

In certain circles in Belfast today it is commonly assumed that Fitt's remarks were a direct reference to a Celtic victory over Rangers, a Catholic victory over Protestantism. The irony of this is that in order to win the cup Celtic defeated Inter Milan of Catholic Italy in the final. The misconception may have occurred due to the fact that on May 31 Rangers were defeated in the second major European soccer competition final, the European Cup Winners Cup, two days after Fitt's bravado.

Nevertheless, Fitt at the time was severely criticised for his bluster. An editorial in the Belfast Telegraph disparaged him.<sup>39</sup> Also a resolution was passed by the Belfast Young Unionist Association reading: "The remarks were deliberately

intended to incite bad community relations and this would appear to be another illustration of Mr Fitt's hypocrisy."<sup>40</sup>

Fitt was reported to be amused at the sectarian allegations:

When I said we had beaten our opponents I was referring to the ordinary working class people who supported the Glasgow Celtic football team and to those around who were listening to my remarks - many of whom were supporters of mine in the West Belfast election. I insist I was not bringing religion into sport and I repeat that at no time have I regarded myself as a representative solely of Catholic people as opposed to Protestants.<sup>41</sup>

For all his back peddling and prevarication it is clear that Fitt, for an instant at least, was taken up with the spirit of the moment. In this celebrated instant he again displayed a propensity for emotional outburst. There seems little doubt that in this case, he classified the opponents of Republican Socialism as those who were not Catholics and those who did not support Glasgow Celtic. He was not the first Northern Irish politician to tell the crowd what they wanted to hear, yet this was the most blatant example of his playing of the sectarian card. He was clearly at ease in the role of the "Green politician." Other incidents confirm this.

In June, Fitt spoke at a rally in Trafalgar Square, attended by some British Labour M.P's. The meeting proved to be another occasion when there was controversy over what Fitt did or did not say. The accuser this time was Prime Minister O'Neill who, at an Orange Order function in Cloughmills, alleged that Fitt had advocated a return to violence in Ulster politics. He quoted Fitt as saying: "If constitutional methods fail, the people of Northern Ireland who are at present the victims of this oppression are quite entitled to take what means they can to end it."

Fitt in his own defence claimed that O'Neill had distorted the meaning of his words:

What I did say was, if the Northern Ireland government continues its present policies of discrimination, gerrymandering and social injustice, some members might in desperation resort to extreme methods. I believe that this is a risk which exists in the unhealthy atmosphere of Northern Ireland and which persists in the absence of any tangible evidence of bridge building activities by the prime minister, about which he talks so much and does so little.<sup>42</sup>

It seems that the only certain conclusion that can be drawn from the episode is that Fitt's rhetoric was not always totally unambiguous. The indeterminate nature of Fitt's politics left him open to accusations of indulging in political intrigue. The ill-feeling between unionists and nationalists continued. In November, O'Neill said that both Fitt and Austin Currie were playing with fire. Fitt took the opportunity to declare, "I have never at any time in my political career in Northern Ireland incited or will incite anyone to violence."<sup>43</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that he goaded people to violence. Fitt, like constitutional politicians before him, utilised a perceived threat of violence to force constitutional change. However, it can not be denied that he must have been aware of the encouragement such speeches would have given to more extreme nationalists. A dispassionate assessment might conclude that there was a contrast between the voice of moderation at Westminster and his speeches outside the House.

The long awaited Northern Ireland debate at Westminster finally came in October. Fitt's contribution showed how little the Labour government had changed conditions in Northern Ireland. It had been fourteen months since the regions problems had last been debated by parliament and Fitt had hoped dramatic changes would have taken place within the province. It was with deep disappointment that he told the House that no changes in Northern Ireland had taken place.

Fitt proceeded to press for the Race Relations Act to be implemented in Northern Ireland. He argued that the same protection afforded to Pakistanis, Indians and other immigrants to Britain should be applied to all United Kingdom citizens, including the Catholics of Northern Ireland.

Fitt again made a plea for parity between Northern Ireland and Britain and made it explicit that he did not require anything else. "That is all we ask. We do not ask for more." He again forecast future disorder, claiming, "As a pacifist, I do not want to see violence, but I do not want to see the people trampled under by the jackboot Unionist Party."<sup>44</sup>

Replying to Fitt's speech, Jenkins acknowledged that the Labour government was "deeply concerned" about the situation in Northern Ireland. He cautioned Stormont that Westminster would not interfere in Ulster "provided" it was satisfied things were moving in the right direction. Despite the Home Secretary's salutary warning, it is evident from Fitt's utterances that the situation in Northern Ireland remained unchanged. Fitt's goal to speed up the liberalisation of the Stormont regime had not materialised. He had secured a ready hearing among Labour M.P's, ministers and backbenchers alike, and had proved himself an able orator and an astute political operator, but although his presence at Westminster had put the unionists on the defensive, the parliamentary convention of non interference relating to Northern Ireland remained intact. Furthermore, in his book, A House Divided, James Callaghan stresses how little public attention was paid to Northern Ireland.<sup>45</sup> If the truth be told, the Labour government stood "idly by."

Nevertheless, Fitt remained optimistic, and in his political

review of 1967 written for the Irish News he concluded:

It is my sincere hope that on the next occasion when the people of these constituencies have an opportunity to elect representatives they will ensure that the nationalist ideal will be given expression in the corridors of power at Westminster.

On entering into the year 1968, I can only pledge myself to carry on as I have been doing in the past and I am confident that the New Year will bring further defeats for unionism in Northern Ireland.<sup>46</sup>

Although much of Fitt's wrath was vented on the unionist administration he was not adverse to criticising the government in the South. In these instances, his rhetoric was again often set in a framework of nationalist resentment, a component missing in his Westminster addresses.

In January 1968 he spoke at University College Galway's Literary and Debating Society. He reiterated his wish for the integration of the Labour Movement in the North and the South and likened the Republic's Fianna Fail Party to the Unionist Party, calling them "Siamese twins."<sup>47</sup>

In October 1967, in a speech calling for stronger action to end partition, he attacked the Fianna Fail government's attitude to the issue of the border. Fitt told the United Ireland Association in Manchester:

I wonder sometimes if the Southern government is prepared to accept the responsibility of the reunification of Ireland. If they are, they have not taken any very dramatic steps to achieve this. They could be much more forceful in demanding their right to the six county territory.<sup>48</sup>

Evidently Fitt envisaged that the Southern administration had a catalytic role to play in the ending of partition. In his address to the Galway students, he argued that there were hundreds of thousands of Northern Irish holding an uncompromising allegiance to the ideal of a united Ireland who looked in vain for support from successive

Southern governments.<sup>49</sup> Fitt's nationalism was undeniably more perceptible in the Republic than at Westminster.

In the same month, Fitt tabled an emergency resolution which was adopted at a C.D.U. conference in the Irish Club in London. This resolution called on those M.P's at Westminster who were sponsors of the C.D.U. to take "all possible action in the House of Commons to question the legality of the existing convention." In his speech he argued, "Northern Ireland seemed to be the forgotten child of British politics and the British Prime Minister is not prepared to risk a constitutional crisis over it."<sup>50</sup> The resolution was further evidence of the lack of vigour from Fitt's fellow socialists in government.

Fitt's continued attacks on the unionists brought him into inevitable conflict with O'Neill. In a speech in Strabane, O'Neill described Fitt as a political opportunist who could not go on being a republican in Belfast and a socialist in London. He said:

Mr Fitt is like that remarkable animal, the chameleon which changes its colours to suit its background. He did not recall much use of the term British subject when Mr Fitt marched behind the Tricolour in Belfast to celebrate the 1916 Rebellion.

... I believe that the political opportunists, although they may win short term successes, generally fail in the long run, because in due course people find them out. One cannot forever be a republican in Belfast and a socialist in London - a nationalist at Stormont and a British subject at Westminster. Nor can one build an enduring political career upon a great heap of irresponsible criticism and denigration.

O'Neill's speech compounds the critical allegations that were made in this period against Fitt. Fitt for his part retorted:

This speech will be recognised for what it is the sordid attempt by a puny politician who is fighting for his political life. As I have said before if the day ever dawns when the prime minister congratulates me, I shall hastily re-examine my conscience to see what I have done wrong.

Fitt then went on to reaffirm his allegiance to the Connolly ideal:

He (O'Neill) recognises that during my political career I have sought to unite and serve the working class people of this area, irrespective of religion or political adherence, and so hasten the day when all people of the six counties will find their true place in the establishment of a Irish Socialist Republic for the 32 counties of this island.<sup>51</sup>

In June, Fitt had a further opportunity to express his fealty to the Connolly doctrine at a ceremony on the Falls Road honouring the hundredth birthday of his hero. Fitt addressed the crowd and said: "They had gathered to commemorate the birth and death of one of Ireland's greatest sons who bound himself to the cause of the working class." He argued that when Connolly died from the bullets of a firing squad the oppressors of the people thought they had seen the end of him and his ideals but they were wrong. They did not foresee that young men would take up the banner that he laid down. Fitt, declared, that like Connolly, he believed that there could be no peace in Ireland until a socialist republic existed.

The most revealing aspect of Fitt's address was the time span envisaged for the transformation of Ireland. Fitt hoped that "as a result of this week of remembrance they would dedicate themselves to the task of establishing an Irish socialist republic within the lifetime of the oldest member of the platform party."<sup>52</sup>

The dissimilarity between the content of this discourse and the speeches at Westminster is very apparent. Thus, there is certainly evidence to suggest that although Fitt may have demanded only civil rights in London, he was equally vociferous in his demand for a united Ireland in Belfast.

In retrospect, Fitt maintains that the legitimate civil rights campaign began on June 20 when Austin Currie began a squat in

Dungannon to highlight the discrimination in housing.<sup>53</sup> At the time he fully supported Currie. He claimed that he regretted that the situation had escalated to such an extent but argued that Currie had used every parliamentary vehicle to right the wrongs in the area. He believed responsibility for the situation rested with the Unionist Party.<sup>54</sup>

Three days later a protest meeting was held in the town. Fitt argued that the Unionist Party had undergone a recent right-wing fascist attempt to take over the administration:

We have been told that Captain O'Neill is a great Liberal - he is a great Liberal but he certainly does not act as a great Liberal. We have been told that he is the best of a bad bunch, that the minority of Northern Ireland should not do anything to upset Terence's plans. I say this. A lot of people try to impress upon you that Paisley would walk over you with hobnail boots and Captain O'Neill would walk over you with bedroom slippers. So far as I am concerned nobody is going to walk over me whether they are in their bare feet or not.<sup>55</sup>

This was further evidence that Fitt was easily capable of filling the role of the radical politician.

The Civil Rights movement had begun and Fitt was determined to be a part of it. At Westminster, he continued to raise the Northern Ireland question through the only vehicle available to him, question time.

Fitt continually demanded that the British government take responsibility for the problems of Northern Ireland. Although Wilson acknowledged that Fitt had been very active in raising the issues of human rights and discrimination since he had entered the Commons, he was as steadfast in his reliance on Stormont putting its own house in order as Fitt was in his appeal to the Imperial parliament. He told Fitt: "I think these matters must be left for discussion with the government of Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister of Northern

Ireland and his colleagues know we cannot continue indefinitely with the present situation. Something has to be done."<sup>56</sup>

Yet nothing was done within Northern Ireland to appease minority leaders. Fitt responded with undisguised sabre-rattling. At a James Connolly commemoration meeting in Derry in July, he announced his intention to establish the Republican Labour Party in that city.

I am prepared to take my ideals and my philosophies out of Belfast because by staying in the city I am only denigrating every principle for which Connolly ever stood. When I come to Derry I promise you I will change the system ... The day for talking has gone, the day for action has arrived. If every individual here to day goes home and re-dedicating himself to change the system as it operates in Derry, then we will change the system as it operates in the six counties and in the whole island of Ireland. If constitutional methods do not bring social justice, if they do not bring democracy to Northern Ireland, then I am quite prepared to go outside constitutional methods ...<sup>57</sup>

The disparity between Fitt's remarks here and his moderate tone in London is patently obvious. McAteer predictably disapproved of Fitt's move into Derry, plainly feeling that it would damage his own party's prominence in the city. He remarked: "It is a rather poor way to seek the unity which is preached to us on all sides. It is enough to make James Connolly turn in his grave."

Fitt remained unrepentant, and, although unwilling to attack the integrity of the Nationalist Party, he argued that the Derry people had not been given the leadership to fight unionism to which they were entitled. He did not want his party to remain confined to Belfast:

In the past we have been roundly attacked just for this. I am sure on reflection Mr McAteer will realise that his gimmicky reply to my Derry speech will be no answer to the problems which beset that city ... The decision was taken in line with the party's policy to extend its sphere of influence and to propagate the ideals and philosophy of James Connolly.<sup>58</sup>

This episode was indicative of the ever present divide in

nationalist politics. It also shows that Fitt did, at least on this occasion, advocate "unconstitutional" methods of political agitation. It is not clear what he meant by "unconstitutional" but the gathering would have considered it an exoneration for the use of violence to achieve political aims.

On August 24, 1968, the C.S.J. backed by the N.I.C.R.A. organized the first big Civil Rights march from Coalisland to Dungannon in County Tyrone. The protest arose as a result of discontent at discrimination in housing, rather than over specifically political issues. Nevertheless, it offended Paisley's brand of Loyalism and he announced a counter-demonstration. This led to the Civil Rights march being banned from entering the town centre - an attempt to restrict it to Catholic areas. Fitt called for support, exhibiting, yet again, a shift in emphasis away from his moderate Westminster stance:

Ireland's history teaches us that unless the ordinary citizens are prepared to fight on their own behalf victory will not be achieved. I now ask all those who have supported this campaign to let our unionist opponents and the whole world see that the time has arrived.<sup>59</sup>

The march attracted 2,500 people and passed off without any major trouble. Fitt was one of the speakers. The Irish News reported him saying: "A fire has been lit tonight which will not go out until Civil Rights have been established."<sup>60</sup>

Bernadette Devlin, who was to attain a very high political profile within a year, recalls a far more colourful account of Fitt's contribution to the march. It was her first encounter with him and her account gives a valuable insight to his career: "It was the first time in my life that I ever heard a politician in public use foul language. That is my first memory of Gerry Fitt, he was

blackguarding the police and just kept referring to them as those black bastards."<sup>61</sup>

The repercussions at Westminster were minimal in the wake of the demonstration. Fitt had a ten minute meeting with Wilson and he put down a motion objecting to the banning of the march. By the evening of August 28, he had acquired 59 signatures.<sup>62</sup> Despite the meeting with the prime minister and the tabled motion, the consequences of the August march had not been sufficient to invoke alarm at Westminster. The situation was to be altered in October.

The demarcation line for politics in Northern Ireland to become "fashionable" was October 5, 1968, the day of the seminal Civil Rights march. Two days previously, in a speech in Blackpool, the venue for the Labour Party Conference, Fitt addressed a large gathering of the C.D.U. He reiterated the requests which he had petitioned for two and a half years:

I do not consider I am making any outlandish requests. All I am asking for is that the same rights and privileges which are enjoyed by the people in Doncaster should be afforded to the people of Dungannon and Derry.

If you consider this is too much to ask then I must say in return that the six counties should no longer be considered an integral part of the U.K.

In a reference to the forthcoming Civil Rights march, he predicted that there would be trouble from the R.U.C: "I have no doubt that once again we will be subjected to police intervention and I am now in the process of inviting six of my Westminster colleagues to attend this march in what is allegedly an integral part of the U.K."<sup>63</sup>

Londonderry was the obvious venue for the demonstration. It was there that discrimination was at its most institutionalised and

efficient, where two thirds of the people were denied basic civil rights and placed in the position of a persecuted majority. In the autumn of 1968, a collective consciousness altered the pattern of events.

After the Apprentice Boys of Derry announced an annual parade on October 5 over the same route as the Civil Rights march, William Craig, Minister of Home Affairs, banned all parades, except in Catholic areas, on that date.<sup>64</sup> Fitt considered it a stupid act by the Minister. "It is a deliberate attempt to provoke a peaceful demonstration. This is the only interpretation that can put on it."<sup>65</sup> It seems by banning the march, the unionists had again blundered. It is likely that more people attended because it was banned than if the government had ignored it. To avoid characterisation as a nationalist parade, no Irish Tricolours were permitted by the N.I.C.R.A. For the march, Fitt brought three Labour backbenchers over from Blackpool who had a brief to report back to Wilson and his Home Secretary, James Callaghan. An alliance had developed between Fitt and young radicals in Northern Ireland which was to prove a short-lived but potent combination.

Despite N.I.C.R.A. efforts, the authorities perceived the protest as a nationalist conspiracy, a smoke screen for the I.R.A. The marchers were prevented from entering the city by a barrier of constables, Fitt was at the front of the march and as it tried to breach the R.U.C. cordon he was batoned. There followed a vicious baton charge on the demonstrators with over seventy injured - the police were quite simply guilty of indiscriminate violence.

The events in Londonderry were relayed in newspapers and television not only in Ireland and Britain, but throughout the

world. Fitt had previously established a close contact with Mary Holland, a journalist for the Sunday Observer. A photograph of him with the injury he sustained, a head wound, was consequently on the front page of the following day's edition. The appearance of a British M.P. being attacked for protesting against abuses of democracy was a forceful image. The fact that television had captured the moment meant that any official whitewashing was impossible, and in the aftermath all forms of the media began to carry features on the problems of Northern Ireland. It was not unreasonable to infer that if Fitt had not been beaten this would not have happened. He described the moment to the Irish News:

As I approached the police cordon at the top of Duke Street, a crowd of police ran over and attacked me. They didn't seem to be attacking anyone else and this is proved conclusively by the film. While I was completely surrounded by police one of them hit me on the head with his baton. I fell to the ground and tried to put my hand up to protect myself. I was hit again. I was then dragged away and thrown into the police van.<sup>66</sup>

Bernadette Devlin, also on the march, took a slightly different view of the incident:

This was the Gerry Fitt I came to know. Gerry stuck his head under a police baton. There was never any doubt about that. He never denied it. It was a measure of the man. I'm not saying that to criticise him. The police attack was devastating. Gerry Fitt made a very astute political decision that if the press were going to be interested in it, there would have to be an interesting head, so Gerry stuck his in the way and got sliced - proceeded to bandage it up very ostentatiously and give interviews outside the City Hall. In between interviews he would come into the bar and take the bandage off and have a few drinks and go out again when he was called upon.<sup>67</sup>

In retrospect, Fitt himself does not deny that he utilised the political opportunity that presented itself:

I knew long before that they were going to beat me up. I wasn't going to retaliate. I wasn't going to throw stones. I got pins and needles and I felt the blood running down. I thought to myself, I'm going to let that blood run because the cameras are there.<sup>68</sup>

The most significant repercussions of the Londonderry march occurred at Westminster where the Labour government was greatly embarrassed by the damaging international publicity. Rose quizzed Wilson as to what he now intended to do about the R.U.C. Willie Orr resented this and asked the prime minister if he was aware that the R.U.C. was being disparaged. Wilson was curt in his reply: "Up to now we have had perhaps to rely on the statement of himself and others on these matters. Since then we have had British television."<sup>69</sup>

Although parliamentary procedure had not been the vehicle Fitt's message to the government had finally been received. In November, he clarified his position, or at least his Westminster position, when he told the Commons: "I say that the present situation is in no way aimed at the achievement of an Irish Republic. The question of partition does not enter into the demand of Civil Rights."<sup>70</sup>

In November, Fitt was again criticised for the duality of his politics. He had criticised Fianna Fail for its attempt to replace proportional representation with a new electoral system via a referendum. Neil Blaney the T.D. for Donegal, also accused Fitt of being a chameleon:

He is something of a chameleon who rings his colours up and down as it suits his purpose. He criticises the Taoiseach for referring to partition and says this has strengthened the Unionist case and could be very injurious to the Civil Rights movement. I question Mr Fitt's motives in regard to the nationalist population of Derry city for he no sooner got himself batoned in Derry than he was off over the border to use this incident in a most despicable and dishonest way in relation to the referendum.<sup>71</sup>

The contradiction in Fitt's politics is reflected in his reply:

Over a great number of years I have been appalled at the deafening silence that has emanated from Fianna Fail sources in relation to the situation in Northern Ireland. I do know from quite authentic

sources in the Republic that Fianna Fail supporters had been advised not to associate themselves with the Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland. And now at this rather late stage, after the overwhelming defeat in the referendum, Fianna Fail now proclaim themselves as the great Republican Party of Ireland. I think their past inactivity in this matter is sufficient to condemn them out of hand.<sup>72</sup>

Fitt therefore criticised Taoiseach Lynch for associating Civil Rights with anti-partitionism yet also criticised Lynch's Fianna Fail Party for not being republican enough and for not involving itself in the Civil Rights struggle.

Whatever the contradictions and inconsistencies in Fitt's politics, there can be no doubt that he was hugely popular with the minority community after the Londonderry rally. His direct and dramatic involvement was arguably his finest moment in politics. Yet the episode also marked the juncture when events began to subsume the individual. The batoning of Gerry Fitt had at last convinced the Labour government to take notice. Fitt was an important mouthpiece of a minority becoming increasingly conscious of their position.

When Fitt was elected in 1966 to Westminster, the Catholic community with low expectations were generally unsophisticated politically. October 5, 1968 radically altered the political climate. The formation of a new student group at Queen's University, The Peoples Democracy (P.D.), a radical leftist group that by and large adhered to Connollyite republicanism, was the most important manifestation.

The ruthless rout of the marchers by the R.U.C. in Londonderry meant that Civil Rights became increasingly concerned with the security machinery of the Northern Ireland state. Londonderry also altered Protestant understanding of the issues involved.<sup>73</sup> The N.I.C.R.A. could not be discredited as republican and the R.U.C. had

been unable to intimidate it off the streets. O'Neill endeavoured to mollify it, but once the organization began to press for reforms, the contradictions in the state began to surface, and led to his demise. Civil Rights exposed the inherent discrimination and sectarianism within the infrastructure of the state; and its opposition to equality demands eventually led to the re-emergence of the I.R.A. in the summer of 1969. Fitt, like all constitutional nationalists, was unprepared for the sequence of events sparked by the Londonderry march. As seen in Chapter I, political indicators suggested further stabilising of the Northern entity rather than its erosion.

In November of 1968, O'Neill announced a reform package conceding some of the Civil Rights demands. However, the principle of "One Man One Vote" was not among them and the movement would not be placated without it.

On December 9, O'Neill made a further attempt to defuse the increasing tension by making a television appeal for support. He maintained that Northern Ireland stood "on the brink of chaos" and called for an end to the growing civil disorder. O'Neill told Civil Rights organizers that "Your voice has been heard, and clearly heard. Your duty now is to play your part in taking the heat out of the situation before blood is shed."<sup>74</sup> While the speech was generally welcomed, there was disappointment that an auspicious statement as regards "One Man, One Vote" was not forthcoming. This, it was thought, would have cleared the streets of Civil Rights protest. O'Neill was hindered by opposition within his party to the extension of universal franchise to local government elections - a point not lost on Fitt:

Mr O'Neill has appealed to the Civil Rights marchers to desist

from further activity on the streets, and yet he had it within his power to ensure that this would take place by granting the elementary principle of One Man One Vote. I think this proves that Mr O'Neill is shackled to a reactionary Unionist Party and while this situation remains the Civil Rights association must remain in existence and continue their demands for concrete reforms.<sup>75</sup>

Although O'Neill's appeal was somewhat melodramatic, the N.I.C.R.A. responded to it with one month's moratorium on demonstrations. Fitt followed suit when he announced a "Christmas truce" with the government. He said that he was going to be the "quiet man" of Ulster politics, and had decided to cease his attack on both the government and O'Neill, to allow them the opportunity to implement O'Neill's programme of reforms.<sup>76</sup>

The P.D., however, was unimpressed with O'Neill's television address and lack of substantial reform. In an effort to break the truce and relaunch the Civil Rights movement, a march from Belfast to Londonderry was announced for January 1, 1969. The organizers were well aware that they would be harassed. Leaders of the N.I.C.R.A. opposed this march, fearing that a strategy designed to provoke a predictable reaction would itself be construed as provocation. In the event, about eighty marchers left Belfast and were duly molested at various locations, the most serious incident occurring at Burntollet Bridge. It was there that an ambush had been planned, and the marchers were brutally attacked by Loyalists, including off-duty members of the 'B' Specials. The marchers eventually made their way to Londonderry city and were welcomed by a large crowd. That night rioting broke out, culminating in an unprecedented police attack on the Catholic Bogside district of the city. Barricades were built and the R.U.C. kept out of the area for a week. "Free Derry" was born. O'Neill predictably accused the P.D. of provocation and Fitt in his

recent interview with Fergus Pyle, also maintains that the legitimate Civil Rights campaign ended with the P.D. march.

The march was intended to show how rotten the Northern Ireland state was, but everyone knew how rotten it was ... That whole episode introduced sectarian thinking into the campaign. Burntollet was a sectarian offer and a Protestant take up. It was no way to demand Civil Rights.<sup>77</sup>

The march was also a watershed in other respects. After it, many Catholics believed that peaceful reform of the state was hopeless, since this march was, after all, completely legal. It also marked the point where Catholic areas rather than Civil Rights marches were the focus of attack. As violence escalated throughout the year, the leaders of the N.I.C.R.A. and conventional nationalist leaders like Fitt began to lose what control they had of the situation.

It seems as if Fitt's attitude to the march was somewhat more equivocal at the time. After the police attack in Londonderry, Eamonn McCann recalls Fitt declaring "it's time to get the guns out."<sup>78</sup> Fitt told the Irish News that he was prepared to lead a deputation of the P.D. to Harold Wilson.<sup>79</sup> On January 8, the same paper reported Fitt saying that he knew many of the young members of the Peoples Democracy, which included Catholics, Protestants, and people of no religion. He admired their idealism and sense of justice and believed they epitomised a new generation who were not prepared to live under the shackles which bound their forebears.<sup>80</sup>

He was also highly critical of the activities of the R.U.C. in the Bogside after the march calling it a "three hour reign of terror."<sup>81</sup> When it was announced that the inquiry was to be

undertaken within the R.U.C., Fitt was again highly critical, claiming it was a "charade and a white-washing exercise designed to protect those members of the R.U.C. who violently abused innocent people in Derry city."<sup>82</sup>

Any gains O'Neill had made from his television address were lost after his attack on the marchers and the mildness of his rebuke to the assailants. The demand for universal suffrage in local government elections gained renewed impetus.

On January 11, there was a another march, this time in the border town of Newry. Violence occurred after the government banned a section of the route through the largely Catholic town. Fitt claimed that the acts of violence in Newry were justified. The Irish Press reported his address to the Labour Party conference in Dublin:

Some people had criticised violence in the Civil Rights movement in the North, but the young people who had thrown stones and burned police tenders in Newry were justified in doing so because they had been walked on and oppressed for many years of frustration.<sup>83</sup>

This is a clear cut example of Fitt endorsing "unconstitutional methods" of political agitation. It is a further example of the wavering that characterized Fitt's political thinking and rhetoric.

Under increased pressure from within his party, O'Neill called an election for February 24. He was gambling on obtaining a mandate by mustering up moderate Protestant and Catholic support. Fitt again defended Dock. In his manifesto he alleged that there was collusion between extremists and the "so called Liberal unionists." He argued that the Dock Unionist Association was a Paisleyite cell:

Who selected my opponents? First, the Dock Unionist Association which everyone knows is now a Paisleyite cell. And who was Chairman at the selection meeting? None other than the very same Paisleyite who opposed me for the Aldermanship of Dock in 1967 and was overwhelmingly defeated by the combined votes of both the

Catholic and Protestant socially conscious working people in this area.

As was now normal, Fitt's manifesto steered well clear from overt republicanism. Instead it claimed that the unionists new tactic was a pretence of being progressive:

No matter what my unionist opponent may claim to be, electors of Dock knew that he is a unionist who therefore will be a Paisleyite if the company suits him, or an O'Neill man if he is looking for money from the "Moderate Ulster" businessmen. But he can be no friend of the people of Dock.<sup>84</sup>

As the election drew near, Fitt maintained that the people of Dock had not been fooled by the O'Neill euphoria, and would not be prepared to sell their heritage: "Let our answer ring out loud and clear so that the people of Northern Ireland will be in no doubt that whatever happens elsewhere, the working class of this area steadfastly cling to the Connolly idealism."<sup>85</sup>

The Belfast News Letter forecast a victory for Fitt, but with a reduced majority.<sup>86</sup> The prediction was reasonable since one might have expected that his Protestant support would have diminished owing to his activities at Westminster and his political rhetoric in Belfast. However, the reverse occurred. Fitt won the election with an increased margin - the largest in the history of the division. Fitt had built up a high degree of trust with the Protestant community.

The results of the Stormont election on the nationalist side were to have important repercussions. In Londonderry, Eddie McAteer was defeated by John Hume, one of the Civil Rights leaders. The Nationalist Party, which had by now given up its role as official opposition, was also defeated by opponents who stood on Civil Rights tickets in South Armagh and mid-Londonderry. It had been dilatory in

its response to the new militancy, and suffered the consequences; in the 1970s it would cease to be a political force. The P.D. won 9% of the vote.

Fitt's long term party colleague, Harry Diamond, was defeated by Paddy Devlin in the Falls. Devlin was Chairman of the N.I.L.P. and had been active in the Civil Rights movement. Devlin's triumph had grave consequences for the Republican Labour party and Diamond's defeat would be instrumental in influencing Fitt's later decisions.

On the same day as the Burntollet march, it was announced that Fitt and Roddy Connolly, James Connolly's son, were to undertake an extensive United States lecture tour, at the invitation of the American Irish Heritage Association. The lectures were designed to enlighten Americans about the situation in Northern Ireland and Civil Rights. Fitt claimed that it would not be his intention to disparage Northern Ireland. Although he intended to castigate the unionists for a lack of social justice, he maintained he was keen to clear up American misconceptions. "I will be telling them the truth. That there are many decent Protestant and Catholic people living in harmony."<sup>87</sup> The tour was to take in several U.S. cities including New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Boston and Los Angeles.

In March, Fitt travelled to Dublin to obtain an Irish Passport for his trip. "I'm a 32 county Irishman and this is the one way of proving it."<sup>88</sup> His symbolic gesture would later cause some controversy.

Just as the tone and content of the speeches delivered at Westminster contrasted with those made elsewhere, Fitt's U.S. tour proved somewhat different from what he had told the press it would be. Despite his insistence that he would not smear Northern Ireland,

Fitt made headlines in the Irish media for some unequivocal statements. The Belfast Telegraph reported him speaking at Los Angeles comparing the Unionist Party with governments in South Africa and the U.S. South. He told U.S. newsmen that Catholics in Northern Ireland are treated worse than negroes in America.<sup>89</sup> Fitt's scheming in the States provoked hostile reaction from unionists. Basil McIvor, Unionist Party member for Larkfield, classified Fitt as a "Pantomime Performer":

The world is his stage. He performs in Stormont, Westminster, America, or wherever he happens to be. He is in the nature of an entertainer whose act has recently been wearing very thin - so thin he had to think up something really startling for his American audience.<sup>90</sup>

It was only after the violence of the summer of 1969 that U.S. interest in Northern Ireland became really stimulated. Nevertheless, Fitt made some impression. He was met by three mayors, was given a standing ovation when he addressed the House of Representatives in Massachusetts, and was made an honorary citizen of Los Angeles. He attended a banquet in his honour where he was one of the principal speakers, together with Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic candidate in the 1968 American election. Fitt also met Edward Kennedy. In all, he made 47 major speeches and appeared on 17 radio programmes.

Fitt later denied that he had made the sweeping statement that Catholics were treated worse in Northern Ireland than Negroes in the U.S. He explained:

I said that many Catholics in Derry are living in worse conditions than many coloured people in the U.S. That cannot be contradicted. I was talking specifically about housing and the failure of the Unionist government to provide homes. I have told American people the truth about the Civil Rights struggle in Northern Ireland and I have said nothing in America that I have not said at Westminster and Stormont.<sup>91</sup>

On April 9, the Belfast News Letter reported Westminster

Unionist M.P. for Londonderry, Robin Chichester-Clark's attempts to raise questions relating to Fitt's use of an Irish Passport with James Callaghan. In his letter to the Home Secretary he asked whether this was "within the obligation imposed by the Oath of Allegiance and within the letter and spirit of that Oath". He told the News Letter that "It seems a little odd that someone who is constantly asking for British standards of behaviour at home should acquire an un-British Passport to travel abroad."<sup>92</sup>

Fitt, for his part, claimed to be delighted that his tour was receiving so much publicity "But I make no apology for having an Irish Passport."<sup>93</sup> Evidently Fitt's nationalism was more fervent than he recalls.

During a press conference in the U.S. Fitt was asked about his attitude to the P.D. He maintained that he was extremely pleased about the spirit of justice that motivated these young students and the most encouraging outlook for Northern Ireland politics was the community spirit that had been engendered between the Catholic and Protestant students at Queens.<sup>94</sup>

On April 17, there was a by-election for the Westminster mid-Ulster seat. Bernadette Devlin was then a young student member of the P.D. Her rhetoric was militant and anti-sectarian. On his return from the U.S. Fitt endorsed her: "Bernadette Devlin symbolises the young generation in Northern Ireland who are not prepared to tolerate the conditions under which their parents lived. I am absolutely delighted that we have found a single candidate to oppose the Unionist Party."<sup>95</sup>

Devlin won the crucial by-election. She defeated the Unionist Party candidate, Anna Forrest, with the largest majority, 4,211,

since the seat was created in 1950. The poll was 91.7% and showed that almost the entire minority community had mobilised behind the Civil Rights campaign. Devlin was a pan-Catholic candidate and her election marked the pinnacle of Catholic unity. Thereafter, this cohesion would fragment and eventually disintegrate.

Devlin's entry to Westminster as the youngest M.P. since Pitt also marked a watershed in Fitt's career. I asked Devlin if she felt she had somewhat eroded Fitt's authority and stature by her arrival in London. She answered:

I never had much to do with him at Westminster simply because I was too young to be sensitive to the fact that Gerry Fitt had ploughed that furrow and I had bounced in as some kind of new invention that had stolen his thunder ... It effected Gerry. His nose was knocked out of joint.<sup>96</sup>

Although Devlin stimulated the public imagination particularly in Britain, she was not the only new emerging politician. John Hume, Austin Currie, Ivan Cooper, Paddy Devlin and Paddy O'Hanlon had all seen their involvement in Civil Rights rewarded with electoral success in February 1969 and consequent media exposure.

Fitt, who had thrived in his role as the lone voice, was now if not obscured, somewhat less prominent. One indication of this is provided by an editorial in the Irish News which stated: "Westminster M.P's have learned a lot about Northern Ireland from Mr Gerry Fitt, they are going to learn a lot more and more vividly from Miss Devlin."<sup>97</sup>

Towards the end of April, the situation in Northern Ireland was becoming increasingly desperate, with serious riots in both Londonderry and Belfast. Members of the minority community who had been previously responsive to O'Neill's overtures, began to relinquish hopes of peaceful reform. In a further attempt to pacify

them, O'Neill finally accepted the principle of "One Man One Vote." The following day, April 23 James Chichester-Clark, Northern Ireland Minister for Agriculture resigned from the government, he complained about the timing of O'Neill's acceptance. It is more likely that the real reason for his departure was speculation that he might become prime minister if O'Neill was forced to resign.

On April 24 and 25, bombs destroyed Belfast waterpipe lines. The blasts were attributed to the I.R.A. and turned members of the Unionist Party against O'Neill and his policy of conciliation. Rather than attend a meeting of the Unionist Party's Standing Committee, which would have seen O'Neill lose a vote of confidence, he resigned (it was later argued that the U.V.F. was responsible for planting the explosives, a tactic designed both to incriminate the I.R.A. and bring about the fall of O'Neill).

After O'Neill's departure, Fitt issued the following warning: "The new prime minister must realise urgently that steps must be taken to introduce reforms, otherwise the same fate would befall him. Repression was not an answer."<sup>98</sup>

The selection of Chichester-Clark as the new prime minister changed nothing. He was essentially in the same mould as O'Neill, and was thus likewise susceptible to the more extreme elements in his party - a point not lost on Fitt, who claimed: "It is extremely obvious that Mr Chichester-Clark will be a prisoner within the ranks of his own party as was his predecessor and that his actions will be dictated by his reactionaries in the party."<sup>99</sup>

Despite the truth of Fitt's statement, Chichester-Clark did make some effort to reduce tension. He re-affirmed the government's newly acquired pledge to "One Man One Vote" and ordered an amnesty for

those convicted or charged with political offences. The timing of these directives was unfortunate, as they came immediately prior to the summer marching season.

In an attempt to reduce confrontation on the streets, Chichester-Clark's administration introduced a Public Order Bill to prevent inflammatory counter-demonstrations taking place. This move was construed as repressive legislation by the opposition. Fitt, who had recently left hospital after being admitted for exhaustion, was at Stormont to voice his disapproval and make a prophetic prediction. He argued that the new legislation "will make violent revolution inevitable."<sup>100</sup> Despite its intent, the Public Order Bill did nothing to prevent a series of riots and sectarian clashes throughout the month of July.

On July 25, Fitt gave evidence to the Cameron Commission in Belfast. This Commission was instructed to trace the causes of the violence of October 5, 1968 and to analyse the forces involved. In a two and a half hour interview, Fitt gave his version of why the people had taken to the streets.

The chaos of July was paltry compared with the incidents in August. On August 2, 1969, an Orange march past the Catholic Unity flats in Belfast and led to three days of rioting, and, as a result, families began to move from Protestant and Catholic areas where they were in a minority. Fitt urged the police to stem this tendency:

These evictions could snowball with disastrous results. The government and the police will have to take strong action to protect threatened families. The court should impose the severest penalties on people convicted of threatening families - Protestant or Roman Catholic.

Fitt also announced that in his Dock constituency, a Housing Action Committee was to be set up with the intention of protecting

families and their homes.<sup>101</sup> On the following day as Stormont seemed to be losing control, Chichester-Clark met with Callaghan.

Fitt predicted that the forthcoming week would be a testing time for Northern Ireland. He recommended that Britain should assert its authority and take full power under the Government of Ireland Act to maintain law and order.<sup>102</sup>

The critical instant proved to be August 12 - the date commemorated by the Apprentice Boys of Derry, who hold an annual celebration of the 1689 seige of the city. At the end of July, Fitt had drawn attention to what he had termed the "invasion" of Derry by the Apprentice Boys and he warned of a series of confrontations, yet again placing all responsibility for all eventualities on the British government. "We have now done all we can to make the British government fully aware of the present situation. The rest is up to them."<sup>103</sup> The government disregarded all pleas to ban the march, and stone throwing quickly escalated into a full scale riot in the Derry Bogside. The Derry Defence Association encouraged by Bernadette Devlin had constructed barricades which were manned with petrol bombers.<sup>104</sup>

The attack continued for twenty-four hours before the R.U.C. fell back after failing to penetrate the Catholic ghetto. In an effort to re-establish authority the unionists ordered the mobilisation of the 'B' Specials, and what became known as the "Battle of the Bogside" ensued. By August 14, the prospect of Civil War was a real possibility, and was given some brief stimulus by the swaggering rhetoric from Jack Lynch, premier of the Irish Republic. Lynch said:

It is also evident that the Stormont government is no longer in

control of the situation. Indeed the present situation is the inevitable outcome of the policies pursued for decades by successive Stormont governments. It is clear that the Irish government can no longer stand by and see innocent people injured and perhaps worse.<sup>105</sup>

The violence in Londonderry ended only with the intervention of British troops. In the late afternoon of August 14, the army entered the city center and undertook negotiations with the Derry Defence Association. The authorities agreed to withdraw both the R.U.C. and the 'B' Specials and not to infringe on the Bogside. Meanwhile, violence had erupted again in Belfast.

Much of the Falls Road was burnt out, as were parts of other Catholic streets. There were six fatalities - five Catholics and one Protestant. Barricades were erected in Catholic areas and arms were moved up from the Republic, Paddy Devlin being prominent in the negotiations for the arms. As in Londonderry, James Callaghan introduced troops which succeeded in defusing the situation. Callaghan confirms that Fitt was very instrumental in this decision. He recalls:

Gerry Fitt telephoned again and said that only British troops could restore calm in Belfast. There was no doubt that his apprehensions were genuine but I could not forebear to remind him that Lynch had said that British troops would be unwelcome. What was his opinion? Fitt was emphatic that the Catholic minority in Belfast would not take that view. Only British Troops could save them from the wrath of the Protestants and he urged that they should be brought in at once.<sup>106</sup>

On August 18, opposition politicians called a press conference to give their version of what was happening in Northern Ireland. Fitt alleged that the unionist version of what had occurred in Belfast was a "verbal avalanche of misrepresentation and downright lies." He went on to categorically deny that the I.R.A. had inspired the rioting in an attempt to subvert the constitution:

The I.R.A. had no part to play in the campaign, and any republicans evident in the course of the confrontation were armed only with sticks, stones and perhaps petrol bombs. They had to take a stand to defend their lives and the lives of their wives and children.

On the contrary, he maintained it was 'B' Specials who fired the first shot, supported by the U.V.F. and extreme unionists. He made a candid appeal for direct rule from Westminster "so that we may all have a chance of social justice for the rest of our lives."<sup>107</sup> Two days later, Wilson set up a commission under Lord Hunt to enquire into the structure of the R.U.C. and the 'B' Specials. Fitt welcomed the gesture feeling that this inquiry would "clear the air."<sup>108</sup>

A week later, Callaghan came to Belfast and outlined his plans for a prescription of social and government reform which he felt would normalise the situation. Fitt also accompanied him on a tour of the riot areas in Belfast where the Home Secretary received a genial welcome from the inhabitants.

It is uniformly acknowledged that in the summer of 1969, the I.R.A. as a military force was almost non-existent in Northern Ireland. The organization was rural rather than urban, and any activists they had were submerged into the Civil Rights movement.

Nevertheless, at the time the I.R.A. claimed that twenty of its men were involved in defending the Catholic enclaves.<sup>109</sup> This was resented by more moderate leaders as it added weight to the unionist myth that the riots had been sparked off by the I.R.A.

As events developed the I.R.A. was reborn, aided by insensitive British security measures and the rise of the U.V.F. In December the movement split, with the traditional republican "Provisional" I.R.A. breaking from the socialist "Officials". It was to be the "Provisionals" who would embark on the most sustained military

campaign in the history of Northern Ireland.

The events of August 1969 had some significant consequences. For example, the violent confrontation of that month instilled a greater political consciousness among the working class Catholics in urban areas. It had also proved conclusively that the unionist administration was unable to absorb or resist the new social forces which had emerged. The intervention of the army had opened up the constitutional position, and most importantly in connection with Fitt, the diminishing role of leading individuals was further reduced, particularly in Belfast.

Despite the efforts of Callaghan, the barricades remained intact. As Loyalists demanded an end to the no-go Catholic areas, Fitt issued a peace appeal: "I have no hesitation in supporting the prime minister's call for peace particularly over the weekend. I call on all those who support me politically to do nothing, by word or action, which could possibly inflame the already very dangerous situation." There was no indication now that Fitt wished to flirt with "unconstitutional methods."

Despite Fitt's plea, and those of others, rioting continued. On September 11, Fitt, Paddy Devlin and Paddy Kennedy, the Republican Labour Stormont M.P. for Belfast Central, together with members of the Belfast Citizens Defence Committee, went to London for talks with Callaghan and agreed to take the barricades down. In a joint statement Fitt said:

We have been given guarantees which we have accepted as strong enough to give adequate protection to all those behind the barricades. We recognise the dangerous situation which exists and we fully recognise the distress and tragedy, particularly to many innocent people over the last few weeks.<sup>111</sup>

On the same day as Fitt and other local politicians had

seemingly re-asserted their influence as elected representatives, the Cameron Commission reported its findings. It clearly indicated the injustices of the Northern Ireland governmental system, and, in so doing, endorsed the demands of the Civil Rights movement. The behaviour of the R.U.C. and the 'B' Specials also came under severe criticism, as did Fitt, although it was admitted that the police assault he suffered was without justification. The report concluded that:

Mr Fitt sought publicity for himself and his political views, and must clearly have envisaged the possibility of a violent clash with the police as providing the publicity he so ardently sought. His conduct in our judgement was reckless and wholly irresponsible in a person occupying his public position.<sup>112</sup>

Fitt's reaction was unrepentant:

I make no apology for my action on that day. On the contrary, I am glad I have lived to see the day when the oppressed people of Northern Ireland finally got off their knees to throw off the yoke of unionist oppression.<sup>113</sup>

The nationalist community could have felt little apprehension about the Cameron charge. Paul Rose felt it necessary to defend Fitt, however:

I have known Mr Fitt for five years and while like all politicians he may seek publicity, this can hardly be a criticism. There are times when his speeches may have been emotive, but I know of no occasion on which he has ever been inflammatory and it was not his fault that the police set upon him as a target in full view of millions of television viewers at the beginning of the current disturbances.<sup>114</sup>

Despite the irrelevancy of the charge for the nationalist community, and the remonstrations of Rose, the Cameron verdict certainly would have damaged Fitt's credibility at Westminster.

On October 10, the Hunt Report was published. It recommended that the R.U.C. should be disarmed and that the 'B' Specials should be replaced by a part-time military force under the control of the

General Officer Commanding in Northern Ireland. The keynote of the document was that policing in Northern Ireland became akin to policing in Great Britain. Fitt considered that the recommendations were acceptable to the whole community and a further vindication of the demands of the Civil Rights movement.<sup>115</sup>

However, his welcome of the new reforms altered when it was announced in November that the new force would be called the "Ulster Defence Regiment" (U.D.R.). He found the word "Ulster" in the title offensive. It presumably offended his nationalist sentiment:

I, in company with a large number of Labour supporters, take offence at the description of the new forces arrogating to itself (Ulster Defence). This is seen at Westminster as an attempt to give official recognition to the term "Ulster" as it is understood by the Unionist Party.<sup>116</sup>

Fitt was not the only politician who felt that this new title was unsuitable. Bernadette Devlin proposed an amendment that the name be changed to the "Local Territorial Forces (Northern Ireland)" but it was defeated by 163 votes to 36.

On December 3, opposition members at Stormont decided to form a parliamentary alliance in the hope that a united body would exercise a greater impact on the discussions and decisions taken at Stormont. A number of shadow appointments were designated. Fitt was allocated the role of shadow "Home Affairs", his contacts at the Home Office making him the obvious choice. This measure was the beginning of a long process which eventually saw the creation of a new opposition party.

## NOTES

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102. Belfast News Letter, 7 August 1969.
103. Irish News (Belfast), 30 July 1969.
104. The Derry Defence Association was a vigilante group set up in the Bogside area to protect the enclave.
105. M. Farrell, Northern Ireland: The Orange State (London: Pluto Press 1976), 261.
106. J. Callaghan, op. cit, 49.
107. Belfast Telegraph, 19 August 1969.
108. Ibid., 22 August 1969.
109. Belfast Telegraph, 26 August 1969.
110. Ibid., 5 September 1969.
111. Ibid., 12 September 1969.
112. Disturbances in Northern Ireland : Report of the Commission appointed by the Government of Northern Ireland (Cameron Report, H.M.S.O. Belfast, September 1969), paragraph 46.
113. Irish News (Belfast), 13 September 1969.
114. Belfast Telegraph, 15 September 1969.
115. Ibid., 10 October 1969.
116. Irish News (Belfast), 13 November 1969.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LABOUR PARTY

Although still essentially an old style street politician, the Gerry Fitt who emerged in the 1970s was somewhat different from that of the 1960s. In the earlier decade particularly outside Westminster, Fitt posed as and was perceived as a militant politician. His involvement in the Londonderry Civil Rights march and the conclusions drawn by the Cameron Commission, are the most overt examples - actions prompted by the lack of success through parliamentary manoeuvres. In the 1970s, however, he was a voice of moderation, the violence of the summer of 1969 having had its impact on his thinking. As the decade progressed, this change of position brought him into increased conflict with more radical nationalists. First, his own Republican Labour Party, then the P.D. and the re-emerged I.R.A. Nevertheless, this chapter will show that in the early 1970s, Fitt did not relinquish his aspiration for Irish unity. He was still essentially an anti-unionist and by implication a nationalist. However, any flirtation with non-constitutional rhetoric exhibited in the 1960s was not evident in the 1970s. Fitt consistently condemned all forms of violence from wherever it emanated. In the process, he became an implacable opponent of the P.I.R.A. and he showed tremendous courage in this action. As a result, his home on the Antrim Road in Belfast began to look increasingly like a fortress owing to the danger of paramilitary attack from both sides of the religious divide.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will also show that although the references to James Connolly are conspicuous by their near absence, Fitt never

stopped in his endeavour to prove himself a non sectarian socialist politician. He became leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (S.D.L.P.). The party was an amalgamation of disparate groups within the Catholic community, its unifying thread being its minority status. The S.D.L.P. terminated old style nationalist politics. Every constituency created modern political organizations. In the S.D.L.P. ideology and policy followed the recruitment of individual members. It was a party constructed from the top down. Despite Fitt's claims about the socialist credentials of the party, he was unable to convince Protestants to join it. He made attempts to bring about discussions with the representatives of the Protestant working class, but they proved futile.<sup>2</sup> In short, although he may have established himself as a socialist politician who represented Protestants as well as Catholics, he was unable as leader of the S.D.L.P. to attract the corporate Protestant community. As with all political parties in Northern Ireland, the S.D.L.P.'s policies and membership were a direct result of its position on the border.

Fitt viewed the prospects for 1970 with a high degree of pessimism. He expected confrontation unless reforms were quickly implemented.<sup>3</sup> On February 5, Chichester-Clark re-introduced the draconian Public Order Bill. Fitt was conciliatory in his reaction and argued that this was not the time for protest.<sup>4</sup> The street clashes since the summer of 1969 had clearly made an impression on Fitt. He maintained his conciliatory posture in the following month, when at Westminster he paid tribute to the role played by the army in Northern Ireland: "The whole community on both sides of the political fence, owes a debt of gratitude to the British army for its action over a number of months."<sup>5</sup>

Fitt's attitude was bound to lead him into conflict with the uncompromising P.D. At the end of March, P.D. held a meeting in Portadown, a mainly Protestant town, which led to a clash with Loyalists. Fitt condemned the former at Stormont for inciting trouble and the P.D. in turn issued a statement in response to his allegations:

Have you Mr Fitt, abandoned the position you held in October 1968 when you defied law and order in the name of social justice. Do your reported comments on the Portadown meeting mean that you must now believe that law and order must precede social justice? ... Do you uphold the moral right of Orange Fascists to stone any meeting they disagree with?

The Irish News asked Fitt to comment on the statement. He said:

After listening to the questions posed by the P.D., I am more than ever of the opinion that they are a group of infallible nincompoops intent on giving themselves an aura of importance which they do not deserve. The circumstances of the Portadown fracas as reported in the press would intimate to all and sundry that certain members of the P.D. are intent on creating the greatest possible frictions and then scurrying to their own habitats, which is normally at a safe distance from the trouble they have created.

Fitt's comments are ironic when we recall that previously he had been involved in demonstrations in which he hoped that police would attack protestors. There was a high degree of double standards in his new position.

Fitt's response to the Portadown incident provides another reason why he held P.D. in so low regard - resentment of people with a formal education encroaching upon his area of competence.

I don't have to take lessons from the P.D. on matters of social justice, a battle which I have been fighting before many of them had passed their 11 plus. The series of questions which they have posed on this occasion will be treated by me with the contempt they deserve.<sup>6</sup>

The beginning of April saw the first major clash between Catholics and the British army. In the Belfast district of

Ballymurphy there were several days of rioting sparked by an Orange parade that passed nearby. As in August 1969, there were forced evictions - this time Protestant families were uprooted. Fitt declared that he could not condone or forgive those responsible for intimidating people from their homes "Protestants had his sympathy and support as much as Catholics."<sup>7</sup>

Three days later he travelled to London to seek emergency talks on the situation with James Callaghan and the British Secretary of Defence, Denis Healey. He maintained: "Unless the situation is resolved many thousands of innocent people, both Protestant and Catholic, are faced with misery and despair."<sup>8</sup>

At Westminster, Fitt still clung to his belief that the Labour government would make the unionists toe the line. He feared the consequences of a Labour defeat at election time and thus pleaded for the immediate introduction of the post August reforms. "There is a fear in Northern Ireland that if, unfortunately this government were to be defeated at the next general election, and a Tory government were elected, the new government would not pressurise the Unionist Party."<sup>9</sup> At this point of his career Fitt was totally committed to the British Labour Party. He consequently became a virulent anti-Tory since he believed that they were intent on a policy of coercion in Northern Ireland.

Wilson called the general election of which Fitt feared for the following June. The Republican Labour Party unanimously chose Fitt to stand again in West Belfast, (his selection hardly coming as a surprise). Accepting his nomination, Fitt described his opponent, Brian McRoberts, as one of the most reactionary candidates to contest West Belfast. Fitt proclaimed "A tense atmosphere exists in which

right wing unionism is attempting to stultify the reforms which have been won at great cost."<sup>10</sup>

Further evidence of Fitt's commitment and faith in the Labour government can be seen in his taking time to support his socialist colleagues in Britain during the election. In Manchester, he spoke in support of Gerald Kaufmann. Referring to the reform programme again, Fitt expressed his belief that it needed the protection of a further electoral mandate for Labour and his fear that if one was not forthcoming, then a serious escalation of the "present tensions" would be the outcome.<sup>11</sup> Encouraged by opinion polls, Fitt was confident of a Labour victory which would enable those in the Connolly tradition of Labour supporters to undo the half century of unionist mis-rule and Tory neglect.<sup>12</sup> As the election drew closer, the nationalist/republican content of his rhetoric became increasingly strident. "Never was it more urgent for every nationalist of every shade, and every republican whatever his allegiance of the moment, and every true labour man to ensure that their voices and the peoples interests are heard at Westminster."<sup>13</sup> Fitt attacked his opponent for posing as a moderate, but in reality accepting the unqualified support of Mr Paisley and his "cohorts."<sup>14</sup>

As in previous campaigns, Fitt had to balance his republican and labour associations; McRoberts, on the other hand, predictably based his campaign on the benefits of Northern Ireland being an integral part of the United Kingdom. There was some debate as to how the population shifts caused by the August 1969 violence would effect the result. There was also speculation that voters would not cross the peace-line which divided the constituency for fear of intimidation in

a "hostile" area. The uncertainty of the election meant that Fitt would still have to woo the Protestant element to retain the support he had secured in 1966. His Civil Rights record would possibly work against him, with Protestants equating his headline-grabbing activities as synonymous with nationalism. On the other hand, his pro-Labour Party attitude at Westminster was to his advantage.

From one of his campaign platforms on election day, Fitt displayed the latest edition of the Protestant Telegraph which he described as the:

Most scurrilous anti-Catholic rag ever to be published in Ireland. But I am honoured to be named in this sheet as one of the rebels who Paisley says must not be returned to Westminster. This obscene publication comes out on the side of my unionist opponent, Mr McRoberts.<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of the support of the Protestant Telegraph Fitt successfully defended his Westminster seat. He polled 30,649 votes to McRoberts 27,451. Indeed it seemed as if he had managed to transform a marginal seat into a safe anti-unionist constituency.

Fitt was not the only "rebel" candidate to be returned to Westminster. Bernadette Devlin retained mid Ulster and Frank McManus a Unity candidate won the Fermanagh/South Tyrone seat. But the general election also saw the return of the Conservative Party to power in Britain, a development Fitt viewed with a great deal of apprehension.

After his victory, Fitt claimed that the result proved that Protestants had voted for him, still he reasserted his position on the national question:

To these people I say I accept your support as a working class representative and I will in the future, as in the past, endeavour to serve all my constituents. But there can be no doubt about where I stand on the national question and those who supported me at the polls must be under no doubt that I believe in the eventual

reunification of my country with the establishment of a socialist government for all the people of Ireland.<sup>16</sup>

On the weekend of July 3 and 5 the so-called "Rape of the Falls" occurred and the Northern Ireland problem began to take the form of a colonial conflict. After the army carried out an armed search in Balkan Street, they clashed with the I.R.A. The army then placed (illegally as it transpired) the inhabitants of the lower Falls Road under curfew. During the curfew five people were killed and sixty five, including fifteen members of the British army were injured. The result was a deterioration in army/Catholic community relations which benefited the Official and Provisional I.R.A. Fitt told the Belfast Telegraph that he found the situation "heart breaking."<sup>17</sup>

On July 6, Fitt and Paddy Devlin left for London to protest to the new British Home Secretary, Reginald Maudling, about the brutality of the British army, particularly Scottish troops, over the weekend. Accounts of the episode differ but Catholic politicians were very critical. Devlin suggested it was "the most savage and brutal attack ever made on citizens in any country in the world." Fitt called for a public inquiry and warned that "Unless steps are taken to have such an inquiry the whole place would go up in flames."<sup>18</sup> During that meeting Fitt argued that the weekend's events showed that the Conservative government was prepared to support the Unionist Party at all costs. Maudling refused to discuss the role of the army but assured Fitt that the Conservatives were committed to follow the reform policy of the Labour Party.<sup>19</sup>

On July 8, Fitt made it clear that Maudling's remonstrations on Tory commitment to the reform programme were not accepted. He argued

that there had been a decided change in policies and attitudes in Northern Ireland with the Conservatives supporting the Unionist Party in a very biased way.<sup>21</sup> Evidently Fitt felt that return of the Conservatives to power had changed the whole complexion of politics in Northern Ireland. His allegations containing much truth. The Conservative Party and the Unionist Party had strong and close links. Unionist demands for a military solution would have found sympathetic ears from certain Tory circles. Nevertheless, the violence continued.

On August 11, R.U.C. Constables Donaldson and Millar were killed by a booby-trap bomb in Crossmaglen, South Armagh. Nobody claimed responsibility, but the culprits were presumably one of the two I.R.A. organizations. Fitt was unequivocal in his condemnation:

I condemn with all my heart those responsible for the dastardly crime. I am filled with horror and contempt that there are still within this community such persons who have so little regard for human life. I appeal to all sections of the community to do everything possible to ensure that those guilty of this crime are brought to justice as speedily as possible.<sup>21</sup>

Ironically on the same day as those assassinations, both Fitt and Paddy Devlin were at the funeral of old I.R.A. leader Jimmy Steele, who had been jailed in the 1930s and 1940s for republican military activity, and was responsible for Provisional I.R.A. publicity up to his death.<sup>22</sup> This funeral incorporated the tradition of firing shots over the coffin. In a statement recalling the death of the two policemen, Brian Faulkner noted that both Devlin and Fitt had witnessed this event and charged: "No one outside the Security Forces is entitled to hold arms at this time. They have a responsibility to name the men."

Fitt candidly maintained that he did not see the incident: "I

was at the end of a cortege of nearly 4,000 people and I neither heard nor saw shots being fired." He considered Faulkner's statement as a "shabby attempt to focus attention away from the problems within his own party."<sup>23</sup> At this point Fitt still felt able to show some deference to the republican dead.

The combination of a desire to wrest the initiative away from the Provisionals, and a wish to facilitate the Conservative government's request for a single identifiable nationalist political party with which it could bargain, finally produced the "Social Democratic and Labour Party" (S.D.L.P.) on August 21.

This new group consisted of six opposition M.P's: John Hume, Paddy O'Hanlon and Ivan Cooper (previously Independents); Paddy Devlin (elected as a member of the N.I.L.P.); Austin Currie (a Nationalist) and Fitt. Rumpf and Hepburn explain the formation of the caucus thus:

People's Democracy never looked like taking the lead in Ulster Catholic politics, and of course never set out to do precisely that. The Nationalist Party, with its President no longer in Parliament after 1969, proved unable to reassert its leadership. Thus there developed in 1969-70 a growing demand for a "United Opposition" at Stormont under the leadership of those M.P's who had been active in Civil Rights. It sought to be a genuine left of centre Civil Rights and Trade Union opposition, but when the N.I.L.P. pulled in its horns at the end of 1969 it was left simply as a demand for unity among M.P's representing Catholic seats.<sup>24</sup>

Fitt's high profile at Westminster and during the Civil Rights era made him an obvious candidate for the new party. Both he and Devlin insisted on the inclusion of the term "Labour" in the party's title, as a condition for their participation and, as they saw it, that of the Belfast working class.<sup>25</sup>

S.D.L.P. leadership was also a crucial issue. Fitt was mentioned as a possible leader and said on August 18, 1970:

I have not sought any personal political advancement but I am fully convinced that real leadership must be given to the minority, and it is with this ideal in mind that I am prepared to engage in further discussions with my party colleagues in an effort to do all in our power to give expression to the real hopes, fears and aspirations of those opposed to unionism.<sup>26</sup>

On that same day, the Irish News reported Devlin, Hume and Currie endorsing Fitt as leader. Hume said: "I have worked for the creation of a left of centre democratically organised movement. If that can be created then Gerry Fitt is acceptable to me as leader." As for Currie, he said "I have no doubt that Gerry Fitt is the one person with the necessary experience, ability and general acceptability to lead such a grouping."<sup>27</sup> The Belfast Telegraph commented on the question of the leadership:

The choice of a leader has always been a source of potential disagreement. This time the name of Mr Gerry Fitt has been mentioned. There is no doubt that he is an able politician. But the opposition benches have accommodated individuals with strong characters and it is at least questionable if such individuality can be successfully moulded into a team with sufficient discipline to withstand all the pressures of old loyalties and ideological stands.<sup>28</sup>

The above editorial exhibited considerable foresight. Early optimistic S.D.L.P. statements contrast with comments of retrospective regret from the main protagonists.

On August 21, having accepted the leadership, Fitt presided over the party's first press conference and announced the intention to provide a socialist alternative to unionism.<sup>29</sup> He claimed that his party had support throughout Northern Ireland. Fitt clarified its position that the unity of Ireland could only be achieved through consent:

Violence will not unite the people in Ireland - will not do away with the border in Ireland. There is only one way in which this country can be united, and that is by a massive process of education, by a massive attempt by this new party to go out and instill confidence into those who were formerly our political

opponents or did not take any part in politics whatsoever.<sup>30</sup>

Fitt had now abandoned a tendency to use the threat of violent scenarios as a political weapon. In the 1970s, he rejected all forms of violence as being inimical to progress in Northern Ireland.

The optimism and professionalism that the S.D.L.P. exhibited at its inaugural press conference, hid personal and ideological differences that did not auger well for the future. In retrospect, Fitt claims that he was disinclined to join the party at all:

We were all together in our opposition to the unionists and lots of people began to talk about having one party. I was all too well aware of the differences between Belfast and rural politics. I was very reluctant to do it. I did not need a party but the others did because they could not go on being just Civil Righters.

Paddy Devlin was a key figure. If he had not won the election of 1969 and Harry Diamond had been re-elected we would have had our Republican Labour Party and there would not be an S.D.L.P.<sup>31</sup>

He also maintains that Austin Currie was instrumental in persuading him to join the party - a decision which in retrospect he considers "disastrous."<sup>32</sup> Currie commented:

He is right. I take some responsibility for him joining and being leader. I was determined the new party should come into existence. I recognised the differences between Belfast politics and the country politics and I felt that Gerry's participation in it was essential and there was only one way Gerry would participate and he certainly was not going to accept the leadership of John Hume. He effectively became leader on R.T.E. radio as a result of an interview.<sup>33</sup>

Fitt accepted the leadership on the air in response to an interviewer's questions when he heard that both Currie and Hume had nominated him, a further example of his political opportunism.

In reality, Fitt and Hume were the only realistic candidates for the leadership. When asked if he would have accepted Hume as leader, Fitt replied: "There was no way they could have had any other leader because I was the key figure. I was the M.P. for West Belfast.

There was no way I would have been in the party unless I was the leader."<sup>34</sup>

Paddy Devlin contends that Fitt's leadership was the product of an "anti-Hume move."<sup>35</sup> Hume, himself claims he was uncertain:

I don't know because I didn't care who was leader. I genuinely wanted a political party formed and I didn't care who led it as long as it was a democratic political party. I was approached and told that if I agreed to Fitt becoming leader he would join the party. I agreed. No problem.<sup>36</sup>

In the event, Hume became deputy leader. Considering the make up of the party, and the fact that it emerged as primarily a nationalist party rather than a socialist party, it was perhaps Hume rather than Fitt who was the natural leader. Hume himself thought so:

Gerry never made any contribution to debate within the party, to philosophy, to policy documents, to strategy. They were all written by me. Gerry was a figurehead. His strengths were his personality. He is very personable, a man of great humour. He gets on with everybody in that sense but he had no direction. No plan for solving the problem. He was a reactor. He was anti-unionist basically. He emerged from a situation where he was a street fighter, fighting against somebody. It was Rangers and Celtic. He was a Celtic man that won.<sup>37</sup>

Hume's contention has some validity. We have seen that Fitt was very much an individualist and as such would not have been easy with the yoke of a political party. He wanted to do his own thing and he trusted his own instinct. He was not an organizational man nor indeed a political theorist. Fitt was a political personality. This instinctive opposition of unionism contrasts sharply with the academic approach of Hume with his concern for policies and strategy. Indeed the quotations from Hume and Fitt capture perfectly the differences between Belfast politics and the rest of nationalist Ulster. Fitt for his part maintains that he suspected the life of the new party would not be long:

I never thought it would last. It has lasted nominally but it is still not a Belfast Party. Belfast has been swamped by the nationalists. It has not changed the issues. The S.D.L.P. in Belfast is irrelevant. They don't win elections and they will never win West Belfast. The differences that were there then, are there now.<sup>38</sup>

There is a clear disagreement between Fitt and Hume as regards the present political situation in West Belfast. Hume had assumed that Fitt was bringing all his Republican Labour councillors from West Belfast into the new party. He did not. He only brought one and according to Hume: "that division between the ones he left behind and the S.D.L.P. was a division that caused alienation between West Belfast and the rest of us, which led to the West Belfast of today."<sup>39</sup>

Hume's belief regarding Republican Labour councillors was totally unfounded. Fitt's parting from his former colleagues was far from amicable. On August 24, it was reported that both Fitt and Senator Paddy Wilson were expelled from the Republican Labour Party. The decision was taken by a vote of 52 to 1. A statement issued by the party was read by Patrick Kennedy (Republican Labour Stormont M.P. for Belfast Central), who had refused to join the S.D.L.P. This stressed that the two had effectively expelled themselves by joining another political organization, and also, that Fitt had been given no mandate from either the party or his constituents, to form a new organization. Referring to the S.D.L.P., the statement noted "that not once in the party's statement of aims had the words socialist or republican been used." The statement also rejected the S.D.L.P.'s stance on the constitutional position. "No one section of the Irish people has the right to take a decision for that one section only without the nation as a whole being consulted."<sup>40</sup> At the

inaugural press conference of the S.D.L.P., Fitt had given the impression that the Republican Labour Party supported him. He said "As I see it, the representatives here have a mandate from their constituencies, whether the Unionist Party or anyone else recognises the fact, we are the opposition ..."<sup>41</sup> The statement read by Kennedy undeniably indicated that he had not the support of his party. It seems on this occasion, that Fitt had failed to cajole his colleagues to come around to his way of thinking.

Therefore, only days after its formation the S.D.L.P. was in difficulties. A new party whose leader was rejected by his erstwhile political supporters suddenly looked much less credible. The new grouping may have met a need, but it was seen as a "green" Labour party and therefore sectarian.

For its part, the Republican Labour Party ceased to exist as a political force by 1973, its disintegration certainly in part, being a product of Fitt's absence. He now argues that his former constituency workers felt that the S.D.L.P. was too similar to the Nationalist Party and thus joined Official Sinn Fein the more socialist inclined republicans.<sup>42</sup>

By October 1970 there were some progressive developments for the S.D.L.P. In Belfast, its new party headquarters was opened. At the press conference Fitt declared that since the party had been launched, 1,300 applications for membership had been received, and branches set up in 14 of the Northern Ireland constituencies. The "head-without a tail" bearing of the S.D.L.P. was also remedied in October, when the N.D.P. disbanded and defected en masse to the new party.<sup>44</sup> Ian McAllister interprets the S.D.L.P.'s inheritance:

The most easily traceable legacy of the N.D.P. was in terms of political organisation. It is clear that the S.D.L.P. constitution was modelled closely on that of the N.D.P. As the S.D.L.P. was formed at the parliamentary level down, rather than vice versa, the experience of the old N.D.P. members in constituency organisation and co-ordination proved invaluable in giving the new party a residue of support and ability in the country while setting up their constituency organisation. The considerable contribution of the N.D.P. towards contemporary minority political opposition in Northern Ireland is an acknowledged if neglected fact.<sup>45</sup>

The N.D.P. clearly exercised a strong influence within the newly established S.D.L.P. The fact that Fitt and the N.D.P. had a history of acrimony made his position as leader somewhat incongruous. Nevertheless, Fitt led the S.D.L.P. in their first talks with a British Minister, Richard Sharples, Minister of State, at the Home Office in November, where he conveyed the party's view on the Northern Ireland situation.<sup>46</sup>

The year 1971 began with renewed rioting in the Catholic Ballymurphy area of Belfast. It seems that neither the army nor the I.R.A. controlled the district and youths were intent on stoning what they considered a foreign army of occupation. Fitt asked the Minister of State for Defence, Lord Balniel, to withdraw the troops for a period claiming that their presence in Ballymurphy was heightening tension in the area and could lead to increased violence.<sup>47</sup>

The riots led to renewed unionist calls for the re-introduction of internment, which had been effective during the I.R.A. campaign of the 1950s and 1960s. Fitt held a meeting with Maudling to argue against its re-implementation, telling the Belfast Telegraph that "the due processes of the law could be invoked to weed out any trouble makers in the community without recourse to this draconian law." It seems that he considered the unrest, at this point, to be

the work of a hooligan element. Maudling, for his part, undertook to give serious thought to Fitt's assessment of the possible reaction to internment.<sup>48</sup>

The unionist demand for internment gained increased momentum in February, when the I.R.A. moved from a defensive to a decidedly offensive strategy. Fitt told Stormont, "this city is sitting on the edge of a volcano."<sup>49</sup> Two days later the British army suffered its first fatality when Gunner Robert Curtis was shot by the I.R.A. The I.R.A. in turn also lost activists killed on that same day. Fitt appealed for calm:

The deaths of three Irishmen and a young British soldier in Belfast must surely testify to the futility of violence in the attainment of political or national objectives. To the death toll must be added the total sum of misery, fear and distress in every home in the city.<sup>50</sup>

On the British television programme "This Week" Fitt was asked if he was condemning the actions of the Provisionals, and he answered: "I condemn the actions of anyone in Northern Ireland who at any time, in any way, tries to escalate violence."<sup>51</sup> The violence did escalate, and at the end of the month two more members of the R.U.C. were assassinated in Belfast. Fitt told Callaghan that "The heart had been knocked out of me."<sup>52</sup> He was clearly becoming disillusioned and must have been aware that the situation was getting out of the control of elected representatives.

The prominent members of the S.D.L.P. also voiced their disapproval of the I.R.A. Hume appealed to members of the Catholic community not to join violent organizations. At Stormont he claimed:

They do not defend your homes. They are leading you to self-destruction. They cannot right your wrongs by creating greater wrongs ... If I feel that their methods will unite this island under their leadership then I want nothing to do with such an Ireland or with such people ...<sup>53</sup>

Despite these appeals, the violence intensified. On March 10, three young Scottish troops were lured to their death against the background of a bombing campaign that was gaining further momentum. Disorder resulted in increased pressure from right-wingers in the Unionist Party for the resignation of Chichester-Clark, who it was felt was not doing enough to improve security. On March 19, Fitt predicted civil war if Chichester-Clark was ousted by the hardliners.<sup>54</sup> The following day the prime minister was forced to resign.

The new prime minister of Northern Ireland, Brian Faulkner, was considered a hardliner. At Stormont, Fitt demanded that he implement the reform program: "To many thousands of people through the length and breadth of Northern Ireland these reforms at the time mean absolutely nothing. We have to see the legislation transformed into fact."<sup>55</sup>

Fitt emphasised his point and predicted with some accuracy that Faulkner might be the last prime minister of Northern Ireland when he told the Belfast Telegraph:

This victory of Mr Faulkner's could turn out to be a pyrrhic victory. Unless he makes it quite clear to this community in the early days of his administration that he is prepared to forge on with the reform programme announced in 1969 and furthermore to enlarge it with progress so that social justice will be freely available to everyone in Northern Ireland then Mr Faulkner will find that he will go down in history as the last prime minister of Northern Ireland.<sup>56</sup>

Faulkner was keen to incorporate the S.D.L.P. into the political system at a nominal level and proposed a committee system to work alongside the Stormont Cabinet. This overture was essentially hollow as the S.D.L.P. would have no executive or legislative power but it was greeted with a favourable response from Fitt and the S.D.L.P.

It was a start at least. On July 7, they took part in what was to have been a series of all-party discussions, but optimism soon perished. On July 8, two Catholics were killed (by the British army) in separate incidents in Londonderry. The result was a marked increase in S.D.L.P. militancy, and the first rift in the party.

The Catholics killed in Londonderry were Desmond Beattie and Seamus Cusack. The army claimed that they were gunmen and bombers but evidence refuted this. The S.D.L.P. issued an ultimatum to the British government demanding an independent inquiry within a week, or they would pull out of Stormont indefinitely. The statement also proposed an "Alternative Assembly" and the move was clearly inspired by Hume:

The Party heard a full and detailed report from Mr Hume on his investigations into the deaths. We are completely satisfied that Mr Hume's call for an inquiry into the circumstances of the deaths is fully justified and will reveal that the statements of the British army and the Stormont P.M. are untrue. We now reiterate our demand for an impartial inquiry ...

If our demand is not met by Thursday next - exactly a week after the deaths of the two young men we will withdraw immediately from parliament and will take the necessary steps to set up an Alternative Assembly ...<sup>57</sup>

Fitt was in London at the time of the incident and was not notified of Hume's action. He now says that he considered it a "Derry thing"<sup>58</sup> (further indicating the suspicion between Belfast politics and the rest of the province) and Austin Currie confirms that Fitt voiced opposition to this militant move.<sup>59</sup> At the time, he went along with the majority but not without having further talks with Maudling in an attempt to avert the boycott. Before Fitt met the Home Secretary he said:

I am not prepared to accept the army investigation. They should welcome a public, impartial inquiry because we are absolutely convinced that the evidence would prove conclusively that the two

men who lost their lives in Derry were in no way connected with the throwing of nail bombs or the use of firearms.<sup>60</sup>

The Home Secretary sided with the military and rejected Fitt's appeal, saying "It is an army matter."<sup>61</sup>

On July 15, Fitt led his colleagues out of Stormont and the rest of the opposition, with the exception of the lone N.I.L.P. member, followed suit. The S.D.L.P. claimed the break was total. Fitt told a Belfast news conference that by withdrawing from Stormont "we will bring home to the world the reality of the Northern Ireland situation which is that Stormont is and always has been the voice of unionism." He assured the conference that, contrary to rumour, there was complete unanimity in the party on its decision.

In reply to a suggestion that the S.D.L.P. was taking a revolutionary position, Fitt said "We do not support the gunmen or violence and our move is certainly not intended to lead to the position of the gunmen being strengthened."<sup>62</sup> The relationship between constitutional and revolutionary nationalists was often questioned by the media.

In August, Fitt was asked by a correspondent of the London Times if he and the S.D.L.P. were being coerced by the I.R.A.. He replied:

Since the day I entered politics I have never been prepared to let myself be subjected to pressure from any extremist organisation, be it the I.R.A., the Ulster Volunteer Force or anything else. I would rather resign both my seats than be the voice of, or accept the dictates of, any extremist organisation in Northern Ireland.

He was also asked if he was in any way personally afraid of the I.R.A.:

I am a married man and we have five daughters. I truly love each and every one of my family. I have talked the whole matter over with my wife and my daughters and we have frankly discussed the possibility of me losing my life under certain circumstances. I would have no regrets if I lost my life as a result of standing by the principles I believe in.<sup>63</sup>

As leader of the S.D.L.P., Fitt constantly made it clear that he was opposed to all types of violence, from whatever source. Meanwhile, the I.R.A. continued its bombing campaign. The pressure to apply internment became greater and on August 9, the raids began. By that evening, 342 men had been picked up, all but two from the Catholic community. One of the two non-Catholics belonged to P.D., the other was pro-republican. Rumour quickly circulated that the internees were being ill-treated. Coogan noted that "Internment did not crush the Provos but unleashed them."<sup>64</sup> There can be no doubt that it was an ill-advised policy decision and failed as an attempt to reassert the authority of the Stormont parliament. Nevertheless, internment continued. Fitt retrospectively explained his attitude to internment:

I always had a rather confused attitude about internment. Some of the people in the New Lodge Road (a Catholic area of Belfast) I would have interned them myself. They were a bunch of bad bastards. There were others that should not have been interned at all but there was no way you could differentiate or identify them. I was always qualifying my condemnation of internment. That was no good to the I.R.A. They wanted outright condemnation. The others in the S.D.L.P. were anti-internment. Particularly the rural areas. Paddy Devlin was on the Falls he had no choice. I stood up to the Provos, that is why I have a bodyguard now.<sup>65</sup>

There seems little evidence of Fitt qualifying his condemnation of internment. His recollection is perhaps an example of selective memory. What is certain, however, is that the mood of the Catholic community after internment was more belligerent. The S.D.L.P. had no alternative but to increase its militant position and again pledge itself not to return to Stormont, nor co-operate with the Westminster or Belfast governments until internment was terminated. Fitt reported his protest to Maudling: "I said it had been introduced as a short term solution with the intention of propping up the Faulkner

government but it had been an appalling failure up to the moment."

He also demanded the recall of the Westminster parliament from its summer recess because of the gravity of the situation in Northern Ireland.<sup>66</sup>

An example of how far removed Fitt had become from his former colleagues in the Republican Labour Party was indicated by the fact that at a widely publicised press conference, Paddy Kennedy shared a platform with the Northern Divisional Commander of the P.I.R.A.<sup>67</sup>

In an attempt to end internment, the S.D.L.P. and the Nationalist Party orchestrated a campaign of civil disobedience. They called for a complete refusal of all payments of rent and rates to public authorities until the last internee had been released. Fitt claimed that the strikes was "an attempt to bring down the system in a non-violent way."<sup>68</sup>

On August 24, Fitt left Dublin for the United States on a trip to include cities with large Irish-American communities - New York, Boston and Chicago. He told journalists the reason for the tour:

I want to tell the people what has really been going on in Northern Ireland since internment and about shocking brutality by the British army. We want to try and get America to exert some diplomatic influence on Britain and the wrong headed policies pursued by the obstinate pig-headed Mr Heath and the Tory government in Westminster.<sup>69</sup>

While in the States, Fitt had talks with U Thant, the Secretary General of the United Nations. He gave Thant copies of statements alleging acts of brutality by British troops committed under internment regulations in Belfast and other centres. After the meeting, Fitt told reporters that he did not think the U.N. could take any drastic action because Northern Ireland was a part of the

United Kingdom and high politics were involved.<sup>70</sup>

Fitt reverted to a more nationalist posture in Boston and urged Irish-Americans there to express their views on the situation in Northern Ireland to their representatives in Congress. "Congress could then make the feelings of the people known to prime minister Edward Heath." He went on:

I also have no doubt the American delegation to the United Nations could make their feelings known to the British delegation. The war in Northern Ireland must end now without the shedding of another drop of blood, but there can be no peace until there is only one government.

Fitt also proposed that parliament should be suspended and a Commission set up in its place to represent all the people of Ireland equally. He said the transition to the Commission might take years, but would result in a "united Ireland."<sup>71</sup> Fitt found it easy to be a nationalist in the United States.

Meanwhile back in Northern Ireland internment had produced a tremendous escalation of violence. At the end of August, a British armoured car was ambushed near the border and one soldier was killed. When he returned from the United States, Fitt said "This is just another unfortunate and tragic sequence of events since the British army became so involved in acting on behalf of and at the instruction of the Unionist Party."<sup>72</sup> August had seen 100 explosions and 35 deaths - one more than in the previous seven months. As Farrell said, "by any standards internment had been a disaster."<sup>73</sup>

In September, Fitt was admitted to a Dublin hospital for treatment of a slipped disc. While bedridden, he granted an exclusive interview to the Irish Independent that revealed his political thoughts at this juncture. He predicted an end to

the border by the mid 1980s and the reunification of Ireland within 15 years. His words seem to indicate that Catholic political agitation was designed to end partition. "In view of present events in Northern Ireland this might seem like a long time to wait, but when you consider that it has taken 400 years to create the present situation, I do not think it is too long."<sup>74</sup> This disclosure adds further fuel to the charge that despite some of his rhetoric Fitt's politics were essentially anti-partitionist. His prediction for a united Ireland within fifteen years was wildly optimistic.

London and Dublin, on the other hand, feared an all-out sectarian war, and were thus anxious to prompt the S.D.L.P. into political discussion. The Belfast Telegraph reported that members of Fine Gael and the Irish Labour Party visited Fitt in hospital to persuade him to adopt a less rigid attitude to possible talks since it was felt that he may have been more flexible than his S.D.L.P. colleagues.<sup>75</sup> Evidently some politicians in the Republic considered Fitt more pragmatic than his partners.

Fitt was well enough to return to Westminster for a two-day recall to discuss the continuing crisis in Northern Ireland. Maudling had proposed round table talks before the termination of internment but the S.D.L.P. demanded the release of internees before any discussion.

During the debate, James Callaghan took the unusual step of putting a question directly to Fitt. Callaghan asked that if there was a solution to internment would the S.D.L.P., without giving up its long term aspiration for a united Ireland, agree to participate in government with unionists. Fitt replied:

Without hesitation, I can tell the House that if there is a satisfactory solution of the problem of internment which at present besets Northern Ireland the S.D.L.P. being the largest opposition party, would in company with other members who have withdrawn from the Stormont government be willing and anxious indeed to enter into negotiations to bring about a satisfactory solution in Northern Ireland.<sup>76</sup>

Callaghan's question proved academic since the Conservatives were content to persist with internment, yet the discourse shows the dilemma of the S.D.L.P. at the time. If they had agreed to negotiate while internment existed, they would have represented no one, yet they were committed to constitutional government.

The P.I.R.A., for its part, maintained the bombing strategy and the death toll continued to rise. Fitt meanwhile continued his total condemnation of the bombers:

They had managed to eliminate from their thinking one million of their Protestant fellow-countrymen when they claimed that their struggle was solely against the British army. That they can ignore the political opposition to a united Ireland on the part of one million fellow Irishmen must be beyond the comprehension of all sane people. If I am to be true to my political principles, then when I condemn the political use of British bayonets in Northern Ireland, I must also condemn the political use of an I.R.A. bomb.<sup>77</sup>

The S.D.L.P. held its first annual conference in Dungiven, on the week-end of October 23 and 24. The party re-affirmed its commitment to the campaign of civil disobedience, passive resistance and abstention from Stormont in an effort to end internment and change the system of government. Fitt outlined the policy of "reform, re-conciliation and re-unification." He also urged Protestants to join the party and called for accommodating gestures from the government of the Republic. "I would say those sections of the Constitution which offend the Protestant conscience should immediately be taken out of the Constitution." He argued that if Protestants accepted his invitation to join the S.D.L.P., he had no

doubt that the gunmen and explosions would stop. He also maintained that there was no ambiguity about the S.D.L.P. "They were a socialist party."<sup>78</sup> Fitt may well have been sincere in his claims but there was no doubt that his party was founded on the Catholic vote and that Fitt and his colleagues represented themselves as the only people who could speak and negotiate for the minority. In short, a party which claims to speak for the minority is a Catholic party, just as a party which claims to speak for the majority is a Protestant party. In these circumstances Fitt's socialist rhetoric was futile. In any case it could be argued that protestations about socialism were likely to scare Protestant workers, who, it could be argued, are the most reactionary and deferential working class in the developed world. Even the basically unionist N.I.L.P. got nowhere with them. Fitt can be criticised for being incredibly naive.

The John Hume-inspired "Alternative Assembly" met on October 26, its formation being evidence of the total breakdown of political consensus. Hume set the tone of the gathering by quoting Edward Carson's words "we do not care twopence whether its treason or not."<sup>79</sup> It is significant that Fitt missed the opening of the opposition "Parliament," since he was arguably the least militant of the leading figures in the S.D.L.P., and possibly wished to distance himself from the proceedings. Hume apologised for his absence, saying that he was attending a funeral.<sup>80</sup> The Assembly held only one other meeting.

Paul Bew and Henry Patterson explain the condition of the S.D.L.P. at the turn of the year:

The continuation of internment and detention, the dense army presence and the incapacity of the state to control sectarian assassinations combined to produce rather conditional support for the S.D.L.P. amongst the Catholics. The effect of the post-68 mobilisations had been to create a whole range of local defence groups, community associations and smaller leftish and republican groups which, together with the Provisionals, increasingly criticised the S.D.L.P. and argued that it would shortly be absorbed and co-opted.<sup>81</sup>

The year ended on a particularly bad note for Fitt. On December 4, fifteen people died in an explosion at a Catholic pub on the New Lodge Road. He said "I am personally so shocked that I cannot think clearly what next week will hold. All I know is there will be 14 funerals from my constituency and that is all I can think of."<sup>82</sup>

There were 174 fatalities in 1971 - 115 civilians, 43 members of the British army, 19 I.R.A. activists, 11 members of the R.U.C. and 5 members of the U.D.R. 1972 proved to be an even bloodier year.

On January 30, 1972 thirteen men were shot dead by British paratroopers in Londonderry's "Bloody Sunday." The shootings occurred during an illegal march organized by the Civil Rights Association to protest against internment. The army claimed that they had been fired upon first, but nationalist and Catholic Ireland rejected this, and a wave of intense anger swept the country. Fitt fulminated:

It must now be evident to all that the British army in Northern Ireland has now taken on all the trappings of an army of occupation determined to use their superior military might to keep in power a corrupt and discredited government that has gained the odium of the world.<sup>83</sup>

At Westminster, Bernadette Devlin claimed "The government may well have lit a fire in Ireland, the flames of which may not die out until the last vestige of British rule has gone from that country."

Fitt spoke subsequently, endorsing Devlin's sentiments and demanding the suspension of Stormont and the withdrawal of the British army. His speech was charged with emotion:

Until last Sunday I regarded myself as a man of moderation. I have consistently condemned violence. I have condemned every life that was unnecessarily taken, every shot that was fired and every explosion that has taken place. But I am consistent with my own conscience, with the fact that I was born and reared, and will be until the day I die, an Irishman. If I condemn the violence of anyone in Northern Ireland I must condemn the violence of the British army that was meted out to the Irish people in the city of Derry last Sunday.<sup>84</sup>

Fitt's emotion was reflected in the Republic, where the British Embassy in Dublin was burned to the ground during a national day of mourning on February 2.

In the following week Fitt attended a Newry Civil Rights march along with thousands of other protesters. He addressed the crowd and claimed that the march represented a total rejection of Stormont. He also claimed the demonstration was an indication that the vast majority of those opposed to unionist government supported a non-violent movement:

Newry has indeed reason to be proud tonight. It will be remembered that the first violence of the Civil Rights movement unfortunately and tragically took place in Newry in January, 1969 (an action that was justified by Fitt) and it was only right that this historic town should have availed itself of this opportunity before the eyes of the world to prove its solidarity and support for non-violent action in its endeavour to rid itself forever of the injustices perpetrated under unionism and so ably by the Tory administration at Westminster.<sup>85</sup>

After 'Bloody Sunday' and the Newry march, the whole minority community was united in its opposition to Stormont.

Edward Heath appealed to the Northern minority representatives to re-think and agree to peace talks without pre-conditions but Fitt rejected this request: "I find the whole matter rather confusing. On the one hand Mr Heath is asking for talks while at the same time

we are being told in Newry from a helicopter that we are all going to jail for six months."<sup>86</sup>

Meanwhile, the violence continued. On February 22, the Official I.R.A. bombed Paratroopers Headquarters at Aldershot, England, killing six civilians and an army chaplain. Three days later, Northern Ireland Minister of State and Home Affairs, John Taylor, was seriously wounded in a Official I.R.A. assassination attempt.

On March 4, two women were killed and 136 people were injured by a bomb in the crowded Abercorn restaurant in Belfast. Fitt considered it the most serious tragedy since the outbreak of the 'Troubles': "This barbaric act will have repercussions on the Irish people through the world for generations to come, and will have sullied the name of the Irish race."<sup>87</sup>

As a consequence of the civil disobedience campaign, Fitt had not attended Belfast Corporation and was thus due to be expelled. However, the anti-unionist streak in Fitt was too entrenched to relinquish his hold in the Dock Ward without a fight. He therefore made a token appearance at the City Hall which enabled him to keep his seat. This displeased his S.D.L.P. colleagues and the Andersonstown P.D. severely criticised Fitt for his decision:

This action should come as no surprise to anyone who has watched Mr Fitt's cheap political manouvering throughout the present struggle. While the people have been demanding the unconditional release of all internees and political prisoners and a no to the Special Powers Act, Fitt has attempted to wriggle out of his "no talks" dilemma by demanding that the internees be released or charged. The peoples demand still stands we have no intention of watering them down to allow Fitt and co to crawl to Maudling's sell out table.

The people have withdrawn consent from Stormont and rejected the corrupt sectarian structures which are necessary to keep it standing. Fitt by continuing to hold on to his Council seat, and attending however briefly - a council meeting has shown that he has not withdrawn from the system he is merely hibernating until

Maudling can fix him up a seat in the Cabinet.<sup>88</sup>

Fitt's old colleagues in the Republican Labour Party also chastised him for his decision to appear at City Hall.<sup>89</sup>

When the other Dock seat fell vacant due to S.D.L.P. abstention, the prospect of a unionist taking over was again too much for Fitt. He announced that his wife, Ann would contest the seat, although if victorious she would, like her husband, boycott Council meetings. Redevelopment and slum clearance had changed the religious demography of the Dock Ward to such an extent so that by 1972 Catholics were a 2 to 1 majority. The only hope of the other candidate, David Robb of the Constitution Party depended on enough S.D.L.P. voters deciding to boycott the election. In her election address, Ann Fitt argued that her husband would fail in his duty to the Dock residents if he did not provide an opportunity for them to decide whether they were prepared to allow "sectarian bigots" to return to the area where they had been previously "totally and firmly rejected."<sup>90</sup> She had a comfortable victory. Robb lost his deposit.

The City Hall episodes are further evidence that Fitt's politics were based on personality. S.D.L.P. colleagues, Paddy Devlin, John Hume and Austin Currie all suggested to the author that Fitt had little organizational ability and indeed no interest in it. They also indicated that he provided little input into policy and strategy. We have already noted that Fitt himself readily admits that he was not the ideal party leader. Fitt was still content to rely on his own political instincts.

After Bloody Sunday, Edward Heath was coming under increasing pressure to adopt some sort of initiative in Northern Ireland as the Province proceeded to drift towards total anarchy. Fitt was one of

the more vocal complainers: "It is disgraceful, all their plans seem to be in the Sea of Tranquility."<sup>91</sup> In retrospect, it seems likely that Heath had already decided to close Stormont at this juncture.

On March 20, a no-warning bomb killed six in Belfast. This brought the total number of deaths in 1972 to 76; 282 people had thus far died since the 'Troubles' began, and 219 since the introduction of internment. On March 22, Faulkner met Heath in London and was told that Westminster was going to take all security powers away from Stormont. Right wing pressure within the Unionist Party would not allow Faulkner to relinquish control of security. It seemed that his position was untenable. Fitt commented that any announcement of the resignation of the Stormont government would cause no regret in the minority community: "This was the only possible step for the Conservative government to take and one hopes now that they will be prepared to use all their resources should any attempt be made to give a re-birth to unionism by a show of force by unionist extremists."<sup>91</sup>

On March 24, Heath announced that the Faulkner government was resigning, that Westminster was suspending the Stormont parliament, and that William Whitelaw was to be the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Two and a half years after the entrance of British troops, direct rule had arrived. Of the task ahead, Fitt said, "Our sole motivation in this endeavour will be what is good for the people of Northern Ireland."<sup>93</sup> Fitt recalls the fall of Stormont:

Some people said that we should have stayed in Stormont and reformed it. Others said, and I think I was one, that you could not reform Stormont because the unionists were so deeply entrenched in there. Looking back, in retrospect, it may have been better not to call for the abolition of Stormont but reform

it from within.<sup>94</sup>

Fitt's view has certainly changed. On the day the resignation was announced he told the Belfast Telegraph: "I have always regarded Stormont since its inception in 1930 throughout the long years of its history as being an absolute disaster for the communities in Northern Ireland and for the people of Ireland as a whole."<sup>95</sup>

Fitt's basic position after direct rule was still nationalist, although for the first time there is an indication that there is some dilution of the sentiment. He admitted that a united Ireland might take a long time to emerge. He spoke at Westminster on March 28:

We should be realistic and recognise that we are always going to have the Irish problem with us until the day when Ireland is reunited. No one can say when that will be, whether it will be 5, 10, 15, 20 or 30 years hence. Some day it will happen. Some day it must come. No one can say when or how it will be brought about ... Therefore, if we are to take steps now effectively to preclude the achievement of that ideal at any time in the future, we are only stirring up trouble for ourselves in the years to come.<sup>96</sup>

As Farrell points out, the advent of direct rule also had a profound impact on minority politics: "the suspension of Stormont had fragmented the almost total solidarity of the Catholic population produced by internment and reinforced by Bloody Sunday."<sup>97</sup> Fitt and the S.D.L.P. led the body committed to compromise - a point noted by the editorial of the Belfast Telegraph:

It may stick in many a Protestant throat to admit it, but the most effective instrument for peace in the Catholic community now is the S.D.L.P., and M.P's like Mr Hume and Mr Fitt are fully accepting their responsibilities. They are confident they have popular support for their plea to give peace a chance and the people must show it in every way they can.<sup>98</sup>

Fitt did indeed call for the cessation of violence, but without success. Sporadic outbursts of shootings and bombings occurred throughout the province, and on April 15, British paratroopers shot

dead Joe McCann. The somewhat ambivalent position of the S.D.L.P. was indicated by the fact that both Paddy Devlin and Paddy O'Hanlon attended his funeral.<sup>99</sup> However, by the end of May, Fitt and the S.D.L.P. had recognised that they were in direct competition with the I.R.A. Fitt said: "In this situation, the position is now clear. We are opposed to the men of violence and we will fight them at each and every opportunity that is given to us."<sup>100</sup>

On May 28, an I.R.A. bomb exploded prematurely in the Short Strand area of Belfast, killing 8 people. On the following day, the Official I.R.A. ordered an indefinite ceasefire after unfavourable reaction to its killing of Ranger William Best (a Catholic) while visiting his family in Londonderry. Fitt was pleased by the Officials' cessation of hostilities and hoped the Provisionals would follow suit.<sup>101</sup>

The Provisionals did indeed come under some considerable pressure to follow the example of the Officials. Consequently, they offered to meet Whitelaw - an offer which their Commander in Chief, Sean MacStiofan, said, was a "further expression of the republican movement's desire to secure a lasting peace."<sup>102</sup> Whitelaw quickly dismissed this overture, saying that he "could not respond to ultimatums from terrorists who are causing suffering to innocent civilians in Northern Ireland and shooting British troops."<sup>103</sup> The S.D.L.P. had considered the Provisional's offer to be a "sincere attempt to produce an atmosphere for a peaceful settlement of the North's problems and representative of their willingness to engage in peaceful and political activities."<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, Fitt had been the main sponsor of a motion at Westminster urging Whitelaw to review the case of prisoners claiming political status. Thirty

Labour M.P's, along with Bernadette Devlin and Frank McManus, had signed the motion.

At this juncture the republican movement had no effective political leadership. Provisional Sinn Fein was very much subordinate to the I.R.A. so John Hume and Paddy Devlin effectively filled the vacuum. Hume and Devlin orchestrated a week's secret diplomacy between Whitelaw and the leaders of the I.R.A.<sup>105</sup> The negotiations ended with Whitelaw conceding "special category status" to paramilitary prisoners. This meant that they would be housed separately from habitual prisoners, and ensured that they could wear their own clothes, have more frequent visits and an end to penal work. In short, the I.R.A. were granted a measure of political authenticity which implied that the organization were not merely gangsters and thugs. Fitt's machinations at Westminster show that he was in favour of the move. The talks ended a republican hunger strike which was reaching a critical stage, and prompted the Provisionals to announce a ceasefire for June 27, calling for a reciprocal response from the British.

This truce proved to be very fragile and ended on July 9, after a clash in the Lenadoon area of Belfast. Fitt, speaking from London, said that he had been saddened "almost to the brink of despair."<sup>106</sup> His gloom would have been accentuated by developments in the Protestant community.

In September, 1971 the Ulster Defence Association (U.D.A.) started operations. It began as a co-ordinating body for Loyalist vigilante groups and it quickly became the largest Protestant paramilitary organization. Fitt argued that it was not only republican forces which were determined to defeat Whitelaw's efforts,

that fear and frustration existed in the minority community because of intimidation by the U.D.A. He also acknowledged that Catholics as a result may be weaned back into at least giving passive support to the I.R.A. because they felt the need of some form of protection. Fitt continued to attack internment "while internees are still interned, it still will create a running sore throughout the minority community in Northern Ireland."<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, internment remained and the Provisional's campaign continued. On July 21, 9 people were killed when 22 bombs were set off in Belfast's "Bloody Friday."

Catholics continued to feel the Protestant backlash as the U.D.A. continued its campaign of sectarian assassination. The day after "Bloody Friday" saw the discovery of a Catholic couple's bodies in North Belfast, tortured and shot by the U.D.A. On July 27, the hooded body of Francis McStravik, a Catholic, was found in Belfast's Sandy Row. He had been shot through the head. Fitt launched a strong protest to Whitelaw against what he called the apparent inability and unwillingness of the security forces to track down the perpetrators of the series of foul murders in Belfast.<sup>108</sup>

Whitelaw responded on July 31, in "Operation Motorman" when the army moved into both Catholic and Protestant "No-Go" areas at 4.30am. He was determined to move against the Provisionals, who for their part, did not resist, being unwilling to engage the army in open combat. The Protestant community assisted the army in taking down their barricades, claiming that they were a response to republican "No-Go" areas. West Belfast saw the beginning of a period of military occupation.

On August 7, after dialogue with the Republic's government, Fitt

and the S.D.L.P. held their first meeting with Whitelaw. They demanded an end to internment, arms searches in Protestant areas and an easing of army pressure on the inhabitants of minority districts. Whitelaw responded by releasing 47 internees and promising to let Heath know the views of the party.<sup>109</sup>

The fact that the S.D.L.P. met Whitelaw while internment still operated drew criticism from militants. The P.D. weekly paper Free Citizen Unfree Citizen claimed, "They are out to channel the discontent of the Northern minority away from the dangerous revolutionaries and back into the Parliamentary system."<sup>110</sup> On August 22, nine people were killed in a Newry Customs Office bombing.

The S.D.L.P. continued undaunted. In September, they published a policy document which called for joint Irish sovereignty over Northern Ireland, and for a British declaration in favour of eventual unity. Whitelaw for his part, set out proposals for the creation of special tribunals to deal with internees. Fitt felt that they did not go far enough and refused to end the boycott on talks, or attend a Conference in Darlington to discuss political initiatives. He was adamant:

I am not prepared to sit at a Conference table when my constituents are held in internment without trial, when they are being held as political hostages. While people are interned without trial the S.D.L.P. feel unable to engage in any meaningful discussion with the government.<sup>111</sup>

The attitude of the S.D.L.P. was suddenly altered following government publication on October 30 of a Green Paper on the future of Northern Ireland. Although this document re-affirmed that there could be no change in constitutional terms without majority consent from within Northern Ireland, it did recognise an Irish dimension:

A settlement must also recognise Northern Ireland's position

within Ireland as a whole ... It is therefore clearly desirable that any new arrangements for Northern Ireland should, whilst meeting the wishes of Northern Ireland and Great Britain, be so far as possible, acceptable to and accepted by the Republic of Ireland.<sup>112</sup>

The prospect of Irish unification proved sufficient bait to lure the S.D.L.P. back to participation in Northern politics. At their annual party conference, a substantial policy change was adopted, and the decision taken to enter into discussions with Whitelaw. Thus the party brought to an end its policy of not negotiating while internment lasted. In his address Fitt said: "Now is the time for the S.D.L.P. to make its voice heard in any talks that are taking place. If the British government think they can issue a White Paper based on the charade that took place in Darlington then they can have another think."<sup>113</sup> Apparently the internees were no longer "political hostages."

In an attempt to dilute the implications of the Green Paper, the British government held a referendum on the border on March 8, 1973. All anti-unionist groups, including the S.D.L.P., called for a boycott. Fitt was blunt "Take no part in it." He claimed:

This is the only election in which the result was pre-determined over 50 years ago at the setting up of this state, when borders were deliberately drawn to give a permanent majority to a Protestant ascendancy in the North. ... In these circumstances we will not allow ourselves to be used by the forces of reaction, and we urge all those who have opposed and have been oppressed by unionism not to participate in this election.<sup>114</sup>

The boycott had been effective and Fitt was correct in his analysis, "It had merely shown that there were more Protestants than Catholics and more unionists than nationalists in Northern Ireland."<sup>115</sup> The survey had proven nothing that was not already known.

After reassuring the unionist population with this referendum,

the British government published a White Paper on March 20, outlining its new proposals for the governing of Northern Ireland. A new Executive was to be responsible to a new single Chamber Assembly. This Assembly was to be elected by Proportional Representation and the innovation of this new political initiative was compulsory coalition. The Irish dimension was also recognised. Periodic referendums were introduced to test opinion on Northern Ireland's constitutional status in relation to the U.K. and the Republic. There were also institutional arrangements for consultation and co-operation between Belfast and Dublin. The scheme was embodied in the Northern Ireland Constitution Act of August 1973.

Fitt and the S.D.L.P. were cautious in their response to the new proposals. Fitt told a press conference that they recognised that the Paper's proposals could represent an advance of position in some areas, while in others, "we must express both our reservation and our disappointments." The S.D.L.P. felt that the Irish dimension was not sufficiently meaningful. Fitt endorsed this:

We asked for a strong all Ireland institution with clearly defined powers. We did not get it. Instead what we got is something that we asked for one year ago - a formula for quadrupartite talks involving representatives from both sides in the North and South and Britain.

At such talks we will continue to press our views as to the nature of any all-Ireland institution, and we believe that these views will become increasingly more meaningful to those who have opposed us.

The S.D.L.P. did decide however, to contest elections to the new Assembly.<sup>116</sup> The White Paper was approved at Westminster by 329 to 5. Fitt abstained, a reflection of his party's reservations.<sup>117</sup> He and the S.D.L.P. evidently were not satisfied over the failure to clarify British attitudes to a Council

of Ireland, yet they were sufficiently happy with some of the proposals, hence their agreement to contest elections. The Provisionals, on the other hand, rejected the White Paper's proposals. There was no let up in the military campaign and on April 11, a British soldier was shot in the Bogside area of Londonderry, which brought the total number of deaths since August 1969 to 769.

The unionists also were unimpressed with the proposals. William Craig formed the Vanguard Unionist Progressive Party, (V.U.P.P.) and resolved to fight the Assembly elections in alliance with the Democratic Unionist Party (D.U.P.) in opposition to the document.<sup>118</sup> The Alliance Party a non sectarian unionist party formed in 1970, was the only group to fully endorse Westminster's plans.

Although Fitt was clearly an implacable opponent of the Provisionals, it should be noted that he thought its political wing, Provisional Sinn Fein, ought to be allowed to contest the election. He argued that every political party should be permitted to contest elections in order to ascertain the feelings of the electorate.<sup>119</sup>

A dress rehearsal for the Assembly elections was provided on May 30, by the first local government elections for six years. Fitt was characteristically positive. "I am superbly confident. I was never more confident entering into an electoral battle in all my years of experience."<sup>120</sup> He announced that he too would be seeking election as a Local Councillor for the newly designated area 'G'. Area 'G' included Dock, plus strongly republican areas and equally strong loyalist areas. The P.D. and Provisionals decided to boycott the elections. Fitt and the S.D.L.P. remained unrepentant. On the

day of the poll Fitt argued:

This is the first opportunity that the people of Northern Ireland have had of using one man one vote to undo the damage of the unionists in six county local government, and they are being asked to abstain and boycott the use of a reform which was won after so much suffering by the ordinary people. I believe it is completely irresponsible and if acted upon will only ensure that the Unionist Party will once again be in a position to establish their sectarian policies. We, the people of this area would be brought back again to the position we were in before 1969.<sup>121</sup>

The poll turned out to be high except in hardcore republican enclaves. The S.D.L.P. wiped out all other anti-unionist groups, and Fitt was elected on the first count. The N.I.L.P., the Alliance Party and the Republican Labour Party all polled badly. Fitt's success however, was soon tarnished.

On June 26, S.D.L.P. Senator Paddy Wilson and Irene Andrews were stabbed to death in Belfast by the Ulster Freedom Fighters (U.F.F.), a name used by the U.D.A. as a flag of convenience. These deaths brought the mortality total to 835 since the "Troubles" began.

Fitt and Wilson were close friends, Wilson having been Fitt's only colleague in the Republican Labour Party to join him in the S.D.L.P. Fitt showed admirable restraint and appealed for peace: "It is imperative that we should all try to be calm. I know that young, misguided people might be tempted into taking some form of retaliatory action. In God's name, don't. There has been enough, and more than enough of killing."<sup>122</sup>

Two days later the elections for the new Northern Ireland Assembly took place, with Fitt contesting North Belfast. The Provisionals and P.D again urged a boycott. Fitt on the other hand, called on electors of all religious persuasions to vote wisely in the interests of peace.<sup>123</sup>

His appeal was answered with another high poll and he topped the

North Belfast ballot being elected in in the first count with 8,264 first preference votes. His nearest challenge was Johnny McQuade of the Democratic Unionist Loyalist Coalition. He polled 5,148 first preference votes and was elected on the eleventh count.

The S.D.L.P. gained 19 seats. Paddy Devlin, Hume, Cooper, Currie and O'Hanlon were also elected on the first count. The party gained 22% of the total poll, and had established itself as the official representatives of the Northern minority. In short, the moderates had secured a victory over the militants.

On the unionist side, the reverse occurred. The moderates, led by Brian Faulkner, had accepted the White Paper with hesitancy. They received 29% of the poll, whereas the anti-White Paper unionists, the Vanguard Unionist Loyalist Coalition led by William Craig, and the Democratic Unionists led by Paisley, secured 31%. The middle ground gained only 12%, the Alliance Party doing worse than expected.<sup>124</sup>

Fitt had considered the Assembly as nothing more than a conference table, although he did believe that it represented an opportunity for spokesmen from both the Protestant and Catholic working classes to establish links:

It is the working class of both religions who have suffered so disastrously in the past four years of turmoil and tragedy and it will be the immediate task of the Social Democratic and Labour Party to have discussions with the Protestant representatives who can speak with an authentic voice on behalf of the community.<sup>125</sup>

His thoughts proved naive. The first meeting of the Assembly broke up in pandemonium, with the speaker forced to suspend the sitting due to Loyalist disruption.

Despite the Assembly setback, Whitelaw proceeded to have

separate talks with the parties who had voiced nominal approval of the White Paper - namely the Faulkner Unionists, the S.D.L.P. and the Alliance Party. At the end of the month, the S.D.L.P. issued an invitation to the other two to engage in power sharing talks. On October 5, it was agreed in principle to form an Executive. Whitelaw claimed: "Steady progress has been made. There has been certainly a determination on all sides to seek to resolve contentious matters in a spirit of good will."<sup>126</sup> The S.D.L.P. had made an important concession - there could be no change in the status of Northern Ireland until the next border poll in ten years time.

On November 22, Whitelaw announced the formation of an Executive Designate with eleven members - six unionists, four S.D.L.P. and one Alliance. Brian Faulkner was to be Chief Executive, with Fitt his deputy. It was also announced that there would be a tripartite conference involving London, Belfast and Dublin to negotiate details of a Council of Ireland. Fitt declared: "We are highly satisfied."<sup>127</sup> Fitt and the S.D.L.P. may well have been pleased with the outcome, but radical nationalists and republicans were not. The Provisionals considered Fitt and the S.D.L.P. as arch-collaborators and made it clear that they intended to pursue and intensify the armed struggle. A statement from Provisional Sinn Fein contained a threat to both Fitt and Hume - "We hope they understand the consequences of their treachery."<sup>128</sup>

At Westminster, Fitt and Bernadette Devlin were involved in a bitter exchange, with Fitt maintaining that Devlin was "a total and absolute irrelevancy in Northern Ireland."<sup>129</sup> Devlin countered in a statement to the Irish News:

Too many people have died in the past four years to allow the

fight to be left in the hands of their orphans. Ireland's history is full of Gerry Fitt's who, however well-intentioned, called a halt at the eleventh hour and were hailed as heroes by a people who realised their mistake too late. It cannot be allowed to happen again. There are those of us who are not prepared to see it again and that in the eyes of the S.D.L.P. is a crime.<sup>130</sup>

Although opposition and pessimism were not universal, opposition to power-sharing from militants in both communities did not auger well for the future. An editorial in the Belfast Telegraph expressed some hope:

Thanks to Gerry Fitt the tough-talking in-fighter has graduated to the big league. He and his party have not made the mistake of getting themselves cornered. They have left their options open and their sights on community peace. They have opted for politics rather than confrontation which is a new direction for Irish nationalism.<sup>131</sup>

The Telegraph was correct, the S.D.L.P. was committed to compromise. This policy of working within the Northern Ireland context left Fitt and the party hierarchy open to criticism of collaboration, with the issue of negotiations while internment still operated provoking the most disparagement. The S.D.L.P. had insisted that its co-operation with any Westminster initiative would not be forthcoming until internment was ended but was persuaded from that position by the prospect of power-sharing. The party argued that with the establishment of normal politics, the necessity for internment would disappear. This clearly did not satisfy some elements in the Catholic community who considered it an insult to see Gerry Fitt prepared to work alongside Brian Faulkner, the architect of internment.

The Catholic population in Fitt's West Belfast constituency had suffered a great deal under the Conservative government's "get tough" policy. House raids, internment and the Diplock courts had succeeded in alienating the population from the British.<sup>132</sup> Fitt voiced

opposition, but with constituents raised on an education of England's treachery to Ireland - plantations, oppression, gaols, Black and Tans, gallows, deportation - the damage had already been done.<sup>133</sup>

Although the Provisional I.R.A. with some justification, claimed that it was they who had finally forced the demise of Stormont and not the S.D.L.P. "middle class collaboration", events such as "Bloody Friday" and a general war-weariness lost the movement a lot of support except in the republican urban ghettos. The fact that the P.I.R.A. and P.D. boycott of the Assembly elections failed showed that the minority community had given Fitt a mandate to lead the S.D.L.P. in talks aimed at power-sharing within Northern Ireland.

## NOTES

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6. Irish News (Belfast), 4 February 1970.
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Col. 280.
10. Irish News (Belfast), 18 May 1970.
11. *Ibid.*, 29 May 1970.
12. *Ibid.*, 6 June 1970.
13. *Ibid.*, 12 June 1970.
14. *Ibid.*, 15 June 1970.
15. *Ibid.*, 18 June 1970.
16. *Ibid.*, 23 June 1970.
17. Belfast Telegraph, 4 July 1970.
18. Irish News (Belfast), 6 July 1970.
19. Belfast Telegraph, 6 July 1970.
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21. Belfast Telegraph, 12 August 1970.
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Corgi Books, 1988), 56 and 145.

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106. Belfast Telegraph, 10 July 1972.
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113. Irish News (Belfast), 27 November 1972.
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116. Irish News (Belfast), 23 March 1973.
117. Belfast Telegraph, 30 March 1973.
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by Ian Paisley in September 1971.
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125. Sunday Independent (Dublin), 6 May 1973.
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128. Belfast Telegraph, 23 November 1973.
129. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons) 1973, Vol. 864 Col. 1653.
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132. The Diplock Courts were non-jury trials introduced for a wide range of terrorist offences.
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## CHAPTER V

### POLITICAL INITIATIVES

Chapter V argues that Gerry Fitt's nationalist position underwent a discernable transition during the mid 1970s. This transition was influenced by the political processes initiated by the British government. Fitt felt it was desirable to subordinate southern political involvement in the administration of the North to an attempt at internal accommodation with Ulster unionists. In practice however, Fitt succumbed to party pressure insisting on a strong Irish dimension. The implication, therefore, is that Fitt himself was not a very forceful or even an important character in the political dialogue, he simply went along with policies decided on by other people and he just acted as a kind of party spokesman and figurehead.

Whilst expressing hope for the future at the third annual S.D.L.P. conference in December 1973, Fitt still evidently considered himself a nationalist politician:

I never believed that I would see a day as this when there is such hope, when unionists and republicans, Protestants and Catholics, representatives of Orange and Green are prepared to sit down and discuss their differences to find areas in which it may be even more difficult to find agreement.<sup>1</sup>

He stated that no one section of the community could claim victory over the other, "We are not claiming total victory. No, we have been kicked for far too long, for too many years, to want to inflict the same treatment on our fellow countrymen." Fitt again proclaimed that the S.D.L.P. was a socialist party with an equal claim to Protestant and Catholic support. He explained the party rationale in pursuing a policy of power sharing and asked:

What should we have done? Should we have waited and not talked until we had achieved total victory? And should Brian Faulkner not have talked until he had achieved total victory? If this had been done, the result would have been that the gunmen would have won and there would have been more death and destruction. There would have been no prospect of peace and reconciliation in this community.

The motion confirming the S.D.L.P.'s deal with the Faulkner unionists and the Alliance Party was carried by 235 votes to 22. On the rent strike, the party leadership got endorsement by 182 votes to 22 for a motion giving local leaders the freedom to call off the strike.<sup>2</sup>

The conference was the most successful in the party's brief existence. It also showed, according to Fortnight:

Why Gerry Fitt has remained firmly in control of the top job. His speech - and the much reported promise of an inexhaustible supply of new men to take over if the men of violence should strike him down - lifted the Conference on to a new level with a vision of a job to be done and no other way of doing it. This was the stuff of leadership.<sup>3</sup>

Events were to prove that this estimation of Fitt's leadership was a very superficial one.

At the Sunningdale conference, which began on December 6, the S.D.L.P., the Alliance Party, the Faulkner unionists and both the Dublin and London governments met to finalise an agreement on the Council of Ireland, without which the S.D.L.P. would not participate in the Executive. Ominously, on that same day in the Ulster Hall in Belfast, 600 delegates from Unionist Party constituency associations, Vanguard, the D.U.P. and the Orange Order, voted to form a new United Ulster Unionist Council (U.U.U.C.) to provide a common leadership.

On December 2, Whitelaw was transferred from his post as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to the Department of Employment, where Heath thought his talents would be better used

in dealing with the miners' strike in Britain. Fitt was disappointed with Whitelaw's move from the Northern Ireland scene only four days before such crucial talks: "One would have thought that he should have been allowed to remain throughout the course of the tripartite talks in an effort to bring that to a successful conclusion."<sup>4</sup> Francis Pym was Whitelaw's successor.

In retrospect, Fitt minimalises the importance of the conference: "I, myself don't think Sunningdale itself was necessary because Whitelaw got us together in Stormont with Brian Faulkner. We in fact, agreed on the Executive at Stormont. That was all agreed without ever going to Sunningdale."<sup>5</sup>

Fitt clearly plays down the importance of the Council of Ireland concept. In contrast, Paddy Devlin in his book, The Fall of the Northern Ireland Executive, clearly indicates the S.D.L.P. approach at Sunningdale:

The general approach of the S.D.L.P. to the talks was to get all-Ireland institutions established which, with adequate safeguards, would produce the dynamic that could lead ultimately to an agreed single state for Ireland.<sup>6</sup>

Devlin, Hume and Currie all maintain that Fitt did not play an important role at Sunningdale since it appears that negotiation was not one of his political strengths. He, himself admits to being largely a spectator; "I did not take part in any of the discussions because as far as I was concerned the discussion had been concluded at Stormont."<sup>7</sup> Although Fitt had little prowess at negotiating, it seems extraordinary that a party leader would not take part in discussions concerning such a crucial issue as the Council of Ireland. This was an abrogation of responsibility. His assertion that there was no necessity for Sunningdale is absurd when

one considers the importance of the institutionalized Irish dimension to his party and party supporters.

The Sunningdale conference lasted three days and a Council of Ireland was finally agreed upon. It was to have Executive Powers, in return for which the Republic would recognise the constitutional position of Northern Ireland. The Republic's government also agreed to take action against "fugitive offenders." The Council was to have two tiers. The Executive tier would comprise 14 Ministers, seven each from the Assembly and the Republic's government. This body would deal with tourism, agriculture, transport and electricity on an all-Ireland basis. The second tier, the Consultative Assembly, would comprise 30 members each from Dail Eireann and the Northern Ireland Assembly, its role being advisory. For its part, the British government agreed that if a majority of Northern Ireland citizens ever indicated a wish to become part of a united Ireland, that wish would be upheld. On security matters, a joint Law Commission was to be created to look at the issue of extradition and the possibility of an all-Ireland Court was to be investigated. The future of the police (the S.D.L.P. wanted a link between the Gardai and R.U.C. under the auspices of the Council) and internment were not resolved (This undermined S.D.L.P. participation in the Executive). The whole arrangement was to be ratified in the new year.

The leaders of the parties involved projected a united and optimistic front. Faulkner said, "The agreement heralds a new dawn not just for Northern Ireland but for the whole of Ireland."<sup>8</sup> Oliver Napier of the Alliance Party declared, "This is a very proud day", and Fitt maintained, "All our objectives have been achieved."<sup>9</sup> On the same day as these utterances were reported,

December 1, a new Ulster Army Council, composed of Loyalist paramilitary organisations, declared their intention to oppose any process towards a Council of Ireland.

The Sunningdale Agreement itself was dexterous - unionist and nationalist sentiment alike could claim victory.<sup>10</sup> Farrell concluded that it was "a masterpiece of balance and ambiguity."<sup>11</sup>

Fitt was confident that a new era had dawned and that the power sharing concept had sufficient support to be successful. He declared "I can see very clearly a hope that has never been seen before in Northern Ireland."<sup>12</sup> It was the political high point for Fitt and the S.D.L.P.

On January 1, 1974, the Northern Ireland Executive officially took up duty. Fitt was Deputy Chief Minister, Hume was Minister for Commerce, Currie, Minister for Housing and Paddy Devlin Minister for Health and Social Security. Each promised, "I will uphold the laws of Northern Ireland and conscientiously fulfil my duties under the Constitution Act in the interest of Northern Ireland and its people."<sup>13</sup> Fitt had no qualms about taking the oath:

I am happy with the oath which I have sworn before the Lord Chief Justice. It is one I can take in all conscience and all honesty because I have taken the oath to serve all the people of Northern Ireland. I know that I can speak for all my colleagues that they are activated by the same emotion. I believe we are entering into a new era, and it will not be easy. There will be many people who will spare no efforts to bring the administration to an end. But being born in Northern Ireland and living all my life in the city of Belfast, I am confident that the Executive speaks for the overwhelming majority of the people. They want this administration to succeed.<sup>14</sup>

Despite Fitt's optimism, within four days there were ominous signs for the future of the Executive.

On January 4, the Ulster Unionist Council rejected the Council

of Ireland. Before Sunningdale, Faulkner had survived with a ten vote victory for power sharing, a clear indication of vulnerability. On this occasion, he was defeated by eighty votes. While expressing no surprise at the result, Fitt remained positive, claiming that if the Executive were to function for six months and be seen to be governing in the interest of all, there would be massive support for it even in the Unionist Council.<sup>15</sup>

On January 7, Faulkner resigned as Unionist Party leader. He considered it the only honourable course in the face of what was essentially a vote of no confidence.<sup>16</sup> Fitt commented, "I believe Mr. Faulkner realised that he would find it extremely difficult to drive the more backwood sections of the Unionist Party into the twentieth century."<sup>17</sup> Faulkner's memoirs indicate that he was as confident as Fitt in the Executive's potential to convince both communities of the benefit of power sharing. His resignation, however, divorced him from the Unionist Party machine and which had important repercussions in the following month.

The Executive soon suffered a further set-back when a former Irish Minister, Kevin Boland, challenged the legality of the Republic's declaration of recognition of Northern Ireland's status written into the Sunningdale Agreement, thus putting that government in an awkward position. However, the Irish government argued successfully that it had not agreed that any part of Ireland belonged to the United Kingdom. It had been a 'de facto' rather than an 'de jure' arrangement. The legal proceedings were highly publicised and the judgement was a major blow to the Faulkner unionists, whose design in selling the Council of Ireland concept to the majority community depended on the Republic's recognition of the status of

Northern Ireland.

In early February, Fitt made the S.D.L.P. position clear. He was asked in the Assembly whether if the Southern government did not carry out its obligations and there was no Council of Ireland, would he and the S.D.L.P. still participate in the Executive. He replied:

No, as I see it that would be a betrayal of the whole Sunningdale Agreement. The Agreement was reached on the basis that there would be a Power-Sharing Executive, that there would be a Council of Ireland and that the Southern government would take up a certain stand in relation to them.<sup>18</sup>

Fitt was emphatic and unequivocal in his answer. At this point we must assume that he was, like his colleagues, in favour of a Council of Ireland.

Despite such problems, the Executive strove to counter the initial resistance. Faulkner noted:

Early in February a reception for industrialists was held in the Ulster Office in London. It struck me very forcibly how much more effective our sales story was made for the 250 or so powerful men who came along by the simple fact that Gerry Fitt and I were standing side by side at the door to welcome them, and showing the same concern for jobs and living standards in the province we now governed.<sup>19</sup>

Adverse developments for the Executive partners continued however. In Britain, the miners' strike crippled the economy. Heath remained steadfast against it and decided to seek the electorate's approval for his position. Pym, Whitelaw, Faulkner and Fitt all cautioned him on the detrimental effect of a general election upon the Executive. Paddy Devlin explains:

We knew that we would not be able to compound our position as a Power-Sharing entity unless we had an extended run: Two months in office could demonstrate potential but not practical results in our favour. Potential results would never be realised in the white heat engendered by a tribal election.<sup>20</sup>

The election was called for February 28. The U.U.U.C. were to fight the election as a single party, which was in sharp contrast to

the Executive parties, who made no electoral pact.

Fitt had to again defend his West Belfast seat. He was challenged by McQuade of the U.U.U.C., Brady of the Republican Clubs, Boyd of the N.I.L.P. and Price standing as an Independent.

Albert Price was the father of Dolores and Marian Price, two sisters who were members of the Provisionals and had been convicted of bombings in Britain. At the time, the two were on hunger strike in Brixton Prison in an attempt to be sent back to Ireland to serve their sentences. Paddy Kennedy, who was to have gone forward for the Republican Labour Party, announced that he had withdrawn: "I am now standing down and I now call on all anti-unionist candidates to do the same. The issue in West Belfast must be the plight of the Irish political prisoners."<sup>21</sup> The S.D.L.P. ignored such sentiment and confirmed that they intended to contest all 12 Westminster seats. Fitt declared, "Now we have created a system to end this conflict and through which people will learn to live together rather than die together."<sup>22</sup>

Fitt recalls this election battle as being particularly "vicious."<sup>23</sup> Republicans printed election handbills which showed a picture of Fitt superimposed on a Union Jack, with the words "Vote Fitt for the West and support your Republican-Unionist candidate."<sup>24</sup> This being evidence of how some people felt Fitt had betrayed his original political ideals.

Since the 1970 Westminster election which Fitt had won with a majority of 3,198, the West Belfast electorate had increased by 6,000 to 70,000 due to an extension of the boundary into South Antrim, taking in Catholic Andersonstown. McQuade's only chance lay in a decisive split in the nationalist vote. Fitt's weakness was the

internment issue, and both Brady and the P.I.R.A. - backed Price hoped to capitalise on this. The Irish News reported that political observers in the constituency were giving Fitt a 50/50 chance of retaining the seat.<sup>25</sup> On the eve of the poll he declared that he would be the "true voice of moderation" in the next Westminster Parliament.<sup>26</sup> Fitt was no longer inclined to be perceived as a radical.

Fitt retained his seat, but with a reduced majority. He polled 19,554 votes. McQuade polled 17,374, Price 5,612, Brady 3,088 and Boyd 1,989. Price's vote showed that there was a nucleus of support for the Provisionals.

Although Fitt was victorious in the election, as was the British Labour Party, the rest of the results were disastrous for the Executive parties. The U.U.U.C. took eleven of the twelve seats, with Fitt being the only anti-unionist candidate to survive. The U.U.U.C., with the control of the unionist election machine that Faulkner had relinquished on his resignation, had secured 51% of the vote. Thus having procured more than half the total votes cast, they correctly claimed that the result was a vote of "no confidence" in the new administration. The Faulkner unionists obtained only 13% of the vote, and no seats. The S.D.L.P. actually increased its vote from June 1973 by 24,000, but as a result of the U.U.U.C. decision to put up a single candidate against the divided Executive parties, three U.U.U.C. candidates were elected despite a pro-Executive majority in their constituencies. This resulted in Bernadette Devlin and Frank McManus being defeated in mid-Ulster and Fermanagh South Tyrone respectively.

The February 1974 election had put the Sunningdale package and

the concept of power-sharing to the test of public opinion before the Executive had time to prove itself. As a consequence, traditional communal polarization was reflected in the results. "Dublin is just a Sunningdale away" proved to be an influential slogan.

The Executive continued in the hope that its performance would improve its chances of survival. Merlyn Rees was the new Secretary of State, but his position was weakened by the fact that the Labour Party had formed a government on a minority vote. Fitt was reported to be happy about Pym's successor.<sup>27</sup> Rees stated categorically that Sunningdale was to be implemented as agreed.<sup>28</sup>

In the wake of the election results a "Senior Member" of the S.D.L.P. felt it necessary to state the party position:

The S.D.L.P. would be most unhappy if it was attempted to put new conditions into the Sunningdale package before final notification because of an unfortunate set of electoral statistics which were totally freak.... there is no question of allowing hysteria to blow us off course. To allow this could lead to the loss of a landbase. It would be fatal for any political party to allow themselves to be placed in that position.<sup>29</sup>

It is probable that the resolve expressed by this S.D.L.P. spokesman was not evident in Fitt, although his persistent faith in Westminster remained: "Many people in Northern Ireland may believe that the 11 voices of the U.U.U.C. coalition will cause great consternation at Westminster but I can assure them that all the major British political parties are well aware of what the true position is."<sup>30</sup> But did they? Fitt's belief in British government's and Northern Ireland Secretary's of State (especially Labour) is difficult to excuse. During his career he exhibited increasing willingness to be dictated to and even fobbed off, long after such a stance could be justified. The reasons for this could be weariness or lack of imagination on Fitt's part. It is also likely that Fitt

underwent a process of "embourgeoisement" within the comfortable confines of Westminster with all its attendant mutual back-slapping.

The unionists in the Executive felt it necessary to respond to the Protestant fears as reflected in the election results. They wanted to re-appraise the Council of Ireland, in view of the fact that the Republic's government had not delivered on its pledge regarding constitutional recognition and extradition.

The reaction within the S.D.L.P. was varied. In retrospect, Fitt claims that he tried to play down the importance of the Council in order to prevent the collapse of the Executive.<sup>31</sup> Faulkner's memoirs confirm this: "It always seemed to me that Gerry Fitt did not really care if there was a Council of Ireland or not, but had to go along with it because his party was insisting."<sup>32</sup>

Faulkner's notion confirms two points regarding Fitt. First, Fitt recognized that the Irish dimension represented an insuperable obstacle to power sharing in the north. Second, Faulkner shows that Fitt was merely a figurehead rather than a leader orchestrating party policy. Fitt was a commentator on the political scene rather than a key actor in it.

There were rifts in the S.D.L.P. in April, when Austin Currie, one of the instigators of the rent and rates strike against internment in 1971, but now in charge of housing, said that all arrears must be paid in full, and non-payers would be levied 25p a week and could have payments deducted from their social security benefits.<sup>33</sup> Paddy Devlin was the most ardent in his opposition to this measure. After fruitless discussions with Rees on internment, he handed in his resignation from the Executive. He was persuaded to remain, however, until the outcome of the Ulster Workers

Council (U.W.C.) strike, then three days old, was known.<sup>34</sup>

After the February election, opponents of the Executive became increasingly vocal. In March, the U.W.C. was formed. This organization had close connections with Loyalist paramilitary groups, particularly the U.D.A., and Loyalist politicians, most notably Vanguard leader, William Craig. Both were co-opted on to the Executive committee. The U.W.C. demanded the dissolution of the Assembly and new elections. In early May it announced that it would lead a full-scale constitutional stoppage throughout Northern Ireland in protest of the Executive, if a motion requesting the re-negotiation of the constitutional arrangements was not accepted. On May 14, the Northern Ireland Assembly endorsed the Sunningdale Agreement. The U.W.C. then announced that the strike was to proceed.

Few workers joined the strike on its first day. However, when the U.W.C. barricades went up, the numbers of striking workers greatly increased. On May 17, tension was heightened by three car bombs which killed 33 civilians in Dublin and Monaghan. The S.D.L.P. considered that support for the strike stemmed from Loyalist paramilitary intimidation and urged Rees to order the dismantling of the barricades. By May 19, the electricity supplies for the province began to dwindle. Rees responded by declaring a State of Emergency to protect all essential services.

The Executive was responsible for the government of Northern Ireland, but it had no power to enforce its authority on the streets. Thus, its members were keen on the use of the army to break the strike. Faulkner's position would have been more difficult than the S.D.L.P.'s on this issue, but his memoirs show that he was in favour of military action.<sup>35</sup> The U.W.C. began to gain the

upper hand in Northern Ireland and on May 21, Len Murray, the General Secretary of the British Trades Union Congress, led a group of 200 people on a "back to work" march. It was an unmitigated failure.

Pressure within the Executive became severe. The unionists pressed the S.D.L.P. for a watering-down of the Council of Ireland, and on May 22 S.D.L.P. members met to discuss the situation. The leadership accepted that the party would have to agree to Faulkner's proposals for the Council to be introduced in two phases. The Executive members voted with the leadership, but were defeated by 8 votes to 11. Brian Faulkner recalls the episode:

The S.D.L.P. Executive members had a meeting of their back benchers to secure final approval, but when they came back they were more disappointed than I had ever seen them. "I'm sorry" said Gerry Fitt. "We can't get them to agree". It seemed as if the Executive was about to break up on this issue, as neither Alliance nor ourselves were prepared to go back on what had been agreed. I got up from the Executive table and said "well, if that's the case I am afraid it means the end of the Executive. I am going into the Assembly to announce the resignation of the Executive because of the failure to agree on the re-negotiation of the Council of Ireland. I was at the door when Gerry Fitt stopped me. "Give us another half an hour and we will try again Brian", he said.<sup>36</sup>

Fitt contacted Orme and told him of the vote. Orme then addressed the S.D.L.P. Assembly group and told them that there would be strong action against the strike and an end to internment. In the second vote, the earlier decision was reversed and the compromise was carried by 12 votes to 5. Faulkner also recalls:

It was about an hour later that Fitt and his colleagues returned looking more cheerful. "We had another vote and a majority have agreed" he said. I went straight to the Assembly and announced the new proposals. It later transpired that Orme had been rushed up from Stormont Castle to address the S.D.L.P. back benchers, and had played a major part in changing their attitude.<sup>37</sup>

Despite Orme's promise no major initiative from the army materialised. In a televised broadcast, Prime Minister Wilson did

castigate the Loyalists for "sponging" on British democracy, but he did not promise any action. As disruption became more widespread, the Executive became increasingly desperate.

On May 23, Fitt, Faulkner and Napier travelled to London to plead with Wilson to use troops and on May 24, Fitt in an impassioned speech in the House of Commons, spoke of: "... A band of unelected people, people who have never had a single vote cast for them in the ballot box, people who misname themselves the Loyalist Ulster Workers, are holding the entire community to ransom." Fitt claimed that it was not an industrial strike, as it was not about wages and conditions of employment. Furthermore, he demanded the use of British troops to ensure that the essentials of life would be made available to everyone in Northern Ireland. His concluding words have a familiar ring:

I believe that the British government must accept their responsibilities. I regret that it has to be a socialist party that must face the position, but knowing the men who compose the government, and having known Labour backbenchers for some years, I feel that the government will show the courage that they undoubtedly have.<sup>38</sup>

On May 27, the army was finally used to take over selected petrol stations, but that measure was too late to halt the momentum of the strike. Faulkner urged Rees to negotiate with the U.W.C., but he refused. On May 28, Faulkner, fully aware that the consent needed for the perpetuation of the Executive had been lost, resigned and with the resignation of the unionist members, the Executive collapsed. On the thirteenth day of the strike the U.W.C. had achieved its immediate aim.<sup>39</sup> The S.D.L.P. and the Alliance Party did not resign, but were dismissed the next day. For a day, therefore, Gerry Fitt was acting Chief Minister for Northern Ireland.

Despite the important differences of outlook in the Executive, Fitt was very confident about this new institution's prospects. As late as March 18, after the disastrous election results of February, he claimed:

The new Executive was given a job to do. Its members have got their heads down and got on with it. It has plenty on its plate. Legislation under way or in the pipeline ranges over the whole spectrum of life in the Province. More and more, the Executive is being seen to speak and act for the real Northern Ireland. Its success is clearly causing dismay to the men of violence.<sup>40</sup>

Fitt's optimism proved wrong, and he was visibly upset at the fall of the Executive.<sup>41</sup> Many reasons can be put forward for the failure of the Sunningdale Agreement and power-sharing, though in retrospect Fitt is adamant that the Council of Ireland was the component responsible. He feels bitter about what he considers to be militant nationalism by certain members of the S.D.L.P., and argues:

I never believed that you would ever have a power-sharing Executive. As far as I was concerned I didn't want anything else. But the nationalists outside of Belfast insisted on a Council of Ireland. I disagreed, fearing it would antagonise the Protestants. There was nothing in the Council of Ireland proposals which was a danger to the unionists but it was symbolic. They said it is the thin edge of the wedge. It was the Council of Ireland proposal that killed power-sharing.<sup>42</sup>

Faulkner's memoirs do imply that Fitt's nationalism was less "green" than some of his colleagues - power-sharing was thus a watershed in Fitt's career. In the 1960s and early 1970s, his rhetoric had always retained a nationalist aspiration, but by 1974 he became more of a gradualist. The two are not incompatible and Fitt's reflections were indeed pragmatic. However, they remained private thoughts. If he really had any convictions he should surely have articulated them. If Faulkner's reminiscence is correct, Fitt's nationalism in 1974 was essentially a concession to party dictates. Privately his politics had changed. Publicly they had not.

In the period of the Executive, Fitt once more displayed his faith in Westminster and his socialist colleagues, but was again let down by them. Rees' promise that Sunningdale would be ratified did not materialise. Orme's promise to the S.D.L.P. that the Northern Ireland Office would act strongly against the strikers did not materialise. Wilson's speech to the Loyalists was ineffective. Paddy Devlin considered it as simply "useless" and "pathetic".<sup>43</sup> The Executive was dependent on Westminster for its survival but the Labour government did not show any signs of the courage that it "undoubtedly had." Fitt's confidence was unwarranted.

In sharp contrast to Fitt, two of the principal unionist leaders dismiss the idea that the Council of Ireland was the cause of the Executive's collapse. In a letter written on February 18, 1976, a few weeks before his death in a riding accident, Faulkner wrote, "certainly I was convinced all along that the outcry against a Council of Ireland was only a useful red-herring - the real opposition was to sharing of power."<sup>44</sup> Perhaps more surprising is the admission of William Craig. His objection was not, as was widely thought, to the Council but to power-sharing, which he considered a "denial of democracy." He adds, "I was always prepared to have a relationship with the Irish Republic provided that their relationship with us was correct. And those who say that the Council of Ireland was what tipped the strike off are talking nonsense."<sup>45</sup>

John Hume, likewise, does not agree with Fitt's assertion of the detrimental effect of the Council. He argued: "It was that people did not like to see the likes of us sitting in charge of government departments and they did not like to see Fitt as the virtual Deputy

prime Minister of Northern Ireland. That's what it was and that's what they said at the time."<sup>46</sup>

Republicans were as delighted with the fall of the Executive as were the U.W.C. They had constantly condemned both it and the Sunningdale Agreement and maintained that Fitt and the S.D.L.P. had "sold out" in the unification struggle. The fact that the experiment failed in the face of Loyalist intransigence and British inactivity, gave credibility to the republican sentiment that it was yet another example of the collaborators' faith in British politicians being rewarded with repercussions which trampled the aspirations of the minority community.

The post-Executive period would be a difficult one for the S.D.L.P. Not only would it have to endure the gloating of militant Loyalists and republicans, but the party also need to perform effectively despite the apparent differences within it over the Council of Ireland concept. Picking up the pieces would be no easy task.

Although disappointed by the disintegration of the Executive, Fitt did not despair. On May 29, he claimed that the power-sharing process had begun in Northern Ireland and it could not be stopped - it had merely received a severe temporary set back.<sup>47</sup>

No immediate alternative policy existed other than a return to direct rule which all the parties agreed was no solution. Despite private reservations, Fitt made it clear that the S.D.L.P. would not relinquish its political 'raison d'etre' around the maintenance of a minority presence in government and a formalised link with the Republic: "The Catholic community must be allowed to aspire to the peaceful re-unification of Ireland by consent. If the Catholic

community was to be asked to become unionists as such then power-sharing wouldn't be possible."<sup>48</sup>

A political impasse had been reached, since the Protestant community had already rejected such proposals. The Official Unionists, now under the leadership of Harry West, presented a plan for majority-rule in a Stormont government with the offer of opposition participation in parliamentary committees. The proposals were strongly attacked by Faulkner and his new Unionist Party and by Fitt, who said:

It is in fact an attempt to resurrect the old Stormont and ascendancy government which existed before direct rule, and as such, would not be acceptable and would be completely rejected by the minority in Northern Ireland. In doing so they would have support from the democratic world.

If this is the final position of the Official Unionist Party, then one can only predict serious political difficulties in the future.<sup>49</sup>

Fitt was aware of a possible drift away from constitutional nationalism in the political vacuum that now existed. In an attempt to fill this vacuum, Rees declared that a new Northern Ireland Bill would make the Secretary of State responsible for government in the province. The Bill would provide for a Constitutional Convention to be elected "to consider what provisions for the government of Northern Ireland would be likely to command most widespread acceptance throughout the community."<sup>50</sup> The White Paper gave assurances on power-sharing but the S.D.L.P. were no longer convinced of British resolve. Although the Paper mentioned the Irish dimension, it did not suggest that it would have to be acceptable to the Republic's government. The document also failed to recognise the long-term aspiration of the minority for unity. As Barry White points out, "Without a strong commitment to power-sharing or an Irish

dimension, the Convention would be seen as a calculated insult to the S.D.L.P. and a surrender to Protestant intransigence."<sup>51</sup>

Fitt's reaction at Westminster to the new Bill reflected S.D.L.P. pessimism with the new proposal:

I believe that the introduction of the White Paper and the Bill today represent an abject and total surrender to those forces in Northern Ireland which set about using every endeavour to bring to an end the system of government that we had under the Sunningdale Agreement. That is the way in which this measure is being interpreted in Northern Ireland.<sup>52</sup>

Unimpressed with developments in Northern Ireland, many S.D.L.P. members adopted a tougher line. Eddie McGrady, Assembly member for South Down had already urged the British government to announce their intent to withdraw from the province,<sup>53</sup> and after the implications of the White Paper became known Paddy Devlin, Hugh Logue, Assembly representative for Londonderry, Paddy Duffy, party treasurer and John Duffy, the party's general secretary, all made scathing attacks on Rees and the British government.<sup>54</sup>

On July 20, the U.D.A. who had provided the muscle behind the U.W.C. strike, resigned from the Council. Its chairman, Andy Tyrie, invited representatives of the Catholic community to take part in talks. He said: "The S.D.L.P. are elected representatives and I think we would be quite prepared to speak to them. They can put across the views of ordinary Catholics. We think we will get a good response and our attitude is that we cannot go on fighting forever."<sup>55</sup>

Fitt was keen on talks, his socialist orientation always making him open to Protestant overtures. On August 1, discussions took place but the meeting proved unsuccessful. The U.D.A. spokesman declared that there would be no discussions until the S.D.L.P. gave

up its aspiration to a united Ireland. For his part Fitt claimed:

The tone and content of the U.D.A. statement certainly does not reflect in any way the meeting which had taken place. I can only presume that there are elements within the U.D.A. who are determined to pre-empt any useful discussions and to make certain that no useful dialogue can take place. I realise that there are many thousands of people throughout Northern Ireland who feel disappointed that nothing constructive has emerged from this meeting, and I can only reiterate that the S.D.L.P. while clinging tenaciously to its policies, will make every endeavour to unite both communities in Northern Ireland.<sup>56</sup>

We can now question how "tenaciously" Fitt clung to S.D.L.P. policy but the same cannot be said for Hume. On August 8, he joined some of his S.D.L.P. colleagues in attacking the British and taking a more militant line. He told a party meeting in Londonderry that the British faced a clear choice "confrontation with violence or withdrawal."<sup>57</sup>

At the end of the month a six-man delegation flew to London for talks with Labour, Conservative and Liberal Party leaders, to express their feelings about the lack of firm direction and the continuing internment issue. Fitt was among the group.<sup>58</sup>

The S.D.L.P. followed the trip with a conference to review party strategy. Taking part were the 19 Assembly members and the party Executive. The conference also intended to plan policy for the forthcoming elections to Westminster and the Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention. Fitt said:

We have said that the British government must spell out what it will accept from the political parties in Northern Ireland and what it will not accept. Otherwise people will be asked to vote at the Convention elections without being sure what they are voting for.<sup>59</sup>

Increasingly disillusioned S.D.L.P. members were not helped by the attitude of the government in the Republic. After the failure of power-sharing, the Dublin administration showed a distinct proclivity

to disengage from the Northern Ireland problem. On June 13, Premier Liam Cosgrave said: "They (citizens of the Republic) are expressing more and more the idea that unity or close association with a people so deeply imbued with violence and its effects is not what they want."<sup>60</sup> The S.D.L.P. was isolated and left to its fate.

In September, another S.D.L.P. delegation met Harold Wilson. Prior to this, Fitt remarked: "The situation in the North from the minority point of view, is showing daily deterioration mainly due to military bias against the Catholic population. There will have to be an end to this."<sup>61</sup> He was pleased with the outcome of the meeting:

It was a most satisfactory meeting - one of the frankest the S.D.L.P. has had with the British prime minister. Every aspect of the political situation in the North was discussed, including internment, the role of the British army, the role of the police and in particular what appeared to be unclear attitudes expressed by the British government.<sup>62</sup>

Without justification, the S.D.L.P. was now convinced of Britain's commitment to power-sharing and an Irish dimension. It entered the October election with this in mind. Fitt was asked by the Belfast News Letter what he felt was the most important issue in the election, and replied: "The acceptance by the whole community in Northern Ireland that there must be partnership in government and the recognition of the legitimate aspirations of this divided community, consequent upon this a complete rejection of violence."<sup>63</sup>

Fitt was opposed in West Belfast by Johnny McQuade (the nominee of Paisley's D.U.P., standing on the United Ulster Coalition ticket and who came second to Fitt in February), Kitty O'Kane, of the Republican Clubs, Sam Gibson, Chairman of the U.V.F's political wing, the Volunteer Political Party (V.P.P.) and a Communist, Patrick

Kerins.

In the previous April, Rees had removed both Provisional Sinn Fein and the U.V.F. from the list of proscribed organizations and although the U.V.F. decided to contest the election, Provisional Sinn Fein declined. Republican criticism of the S.D.L.P. came from O'Kane:

The S.D.L.P. talk about the power-sharing Executive as if it were a golden age and have made its restoration their main political aim. The power-sharing Executive was in essence a Tory government bribe to the middle class S.D.L.P. leadership, which helped them accept Brian Faulkner as their leader in return for whatever patronage and prestige they might get out of it.<sup>64</sup>

O'Kane's criticism did not prevent people voting for Fitt. He retained his seat despite a 5% drop in turn out as compared to February. He increased his majority to over 5,000 votes, aided by the split in the unionist camp. O'Kane unexpectedly lost her deposit. Fitt's victory was also enhanced by the fact that there was no Provisional-backed candidate.

In each of the 12 seats in Ulster the U.U.U.C. put up a single candidate and had 10 M.P.'s returned. By securing 58% of the vote they consolidated their post-Executive position. They lost the Fermanagh South Tyrone seat. Prior to the October poll, the S.D.L.P. and McManus (the former M.P. for that area) had reached agreement on a compromise nationalist candidate - Frank Maguire. Maguire had been active in the republican movement and was interned for two years in the late 1950s. The fact that the S.D.L.P. secured such an agreement indicated a shift of emphasis and a decidedly more nationalist posture. Maguire's victory showed that the anti-unionist population of the area preferred any nationalist to a unionist. In the 1980s, this reality would again be demonstrated but in a more

dramatic fashion.

The S.D.L.P. itself managed to retain the 22% share of the vote it had achieved in February, and its total vote only dropped by 4,000 despite the fact that it only contested 9 out of the 12 seats. In Britain, the Labour Party increased its majority.

In Northern Ireland the October election did little more than re-confirm what the February election had already proven. Although the U.U.U.C. had one less seat, they increased their vote by 40,000. Faulkner's Unionist Party only obtained 20,754 votes - a mere 3%. On the basis of the October result, the U.U.U.C. would win an outright majority in the Convention elections. The middle ground which had created power-sharing and Sunningdale had gone - Northern Ireland had reverted back to sectarian politics. After the election Fitt remarked:

I hope the Loyalists do not see the vote as a mandate to say there will be no partnership between the communities. I hope they will use their position to try to take whatever steps they can to recognise that there are two communities and that both must work together if there is to be any future for this province.<sup>65</sup>

There was little confidence within the S.D.L.P., however, that this hope would materialise.

October also saw an increase in sectarian attacks on Catholics from the Ulster Protestant Action Force, with 10 killed in a month. Fitt, speaking in advance of a meeting with Wilson in which he was to ask for emergency measures to halt the murders said, "People are being murdered going to and from their work ... We are now at the stage where members of the public are afraid to be on the streets of Belfast." He maintained that he would plead on behalf of all the decent people of Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant:

I am not being selective. All these killings have got to stop

otherwise there is no hope for Northern Ireland. There must be fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters who know the identify of these murderers and are harbouring them. Surely, they can see that only they, the community, can reject them and stop Northern Ireland bleeding to death.<sup>66</sup>

Rees appealed, "I am calling once again on all responsible leaders of every section of opinion to give practical support to the R.U.C. in their fight against criminal violence."<sup>67</sup> Although not specified, Rees' appeal would have been directed primarily at the S.D.L.P. Fitt and his colleagues did not respond.

As the P.I.R.A. campaign continued in tandem with Loyalist assassinations, the pressure increased for the S.D.L.P. to lend active support to the police. Hume had shaped a policy advocating that nationalists must have a role in government before the S.D.L.P. would fully endorse the R.U.C.<sup>68</sup> At the end of October he still insisted that the R.U.C. were not acceptable to his party, although he felt it necessary to tell the Irish News that there was no difference of opinion between himself and Fitt.<sup>69</sup> This suggests that there probably was some disagreement. Fitt may have been leader but Hume was pulling the strings. On the following day, the S.D.L.P. Assembly Party reaffirmed the party's stance.<sup>70</sup>

In November the S.D.L.P.'s Executive committee endorsed the stand taken on policing by the party's assemblymen. Fitt did not make his position known through public statements to the press. I would suggest he was again conforming to party dictates.

Despite the S.D.L.P. stance on the police issue, it had not endeared itself to republicans. For example, when it was announced that both party and public representatives were to visit the Maze prison, which had been the location of some severe rioting in mid-October, republican inmates told them to "stay away. You are not

welcome."

Fitt was singled out for particular criticism: "The party leader, Gerry Fitt has never visited the camp and therefore knows nothing of the conditions even though he claims to be the all-time expert, when speaking in parliament. This is pure hypocrisy and should be recognised as such."<sup>71</sup>

In parliament, however, Fitt was receiving plaudits from British politicians for a speech which was considered moderate and courageous. He actually accepted a watering down of the Irish dimension:

I concede that the Irish dimension that we envisage may not initially or in the short term have anything approaching what we had under the Sunningdale Agreement - a Council of Ireland. I shall continue to work for such an establishment. If people in Northern Ireland learn to live together, it will be essential for some means to be found to enable the Northern Ireland majority, both Catholic and Protestant, to communicate with the rest of the people in the small island of Ireland.

Fitt also made a claim which was contrary to fact, "I have never in this House or in Northern Ireland - nor has any member of my party - condemned the R.U.C. in total as being unacceptable."<sup>72</sup> Fitt was straying from S.D.L.P. policy. Such speeches would have caused considerable consternation amongst his colleagues. The responsibilities of leading a democratic party did not sit easily with Fitt. Individualism was fine and workable in the circumstances he found himself in the 1960s, but the 1970s had produced different, and in many ways more complex circumstances. A street politician was no longer required.

The P.I.R.A. had been far from idle since the end of the U.W.C. strike. It had witnessed the re-election of the Labour government, which the P.I.R.A. felt had surrendered to force during the strike.

In an attempt to compel the British to finally disengage from Ireland, the Provisionals embarked on a campaign of violence in England. In July, a woman was killed and 36 people were injured, many seriously, by a no-warning bomb in the Tower of London. In October, 5 people were killed and 54 injured when no-warning bombs exploded at two pubs in Guildford. In early November, a bomb in Woolwich, outside London, killed two more. Finally, on November 21, two bombs in Birmingham killed 21 and injured a further 182. Despite their denials, there was an upsurge of anti-Provisional feeling in nationalist areas in Northern Ireland due to this carnage.<sup>73</sup> As a result, the Provisional leadership was receptive to a peace initiative launched by a group of Protestant clergymen led by the Rev William Arlow, Secretary of the Irish Council of Churches.

A few leading republicans met the churchmen on December 10, 1974 at Smyth's village hotel in Feakle, County Clare. The republican group made it clear that they were prepared to discuss a cessation of violence and contacts were made immediately after this meeting with the Northern Ireland Office. On December 19, the Labour government signalled its willingness to proceed with talks and on the following day, the P.I.R.A. council announced that it would suspend operations over an 11 day period between December 22 and January 2. Fitt greeted the ceasefire:

I welcome this announcement. Under any circumstances it is to be welcomed if it means there will be even a temporary respite from the murders and the bombings in the terrorist campaign. I fervently hope and pray that it will be continued and that we will see an end to this campaign which we have witnessed for the past five years.<sup>74</sup>

1974 thus ended with some optimism.

On January 2, 1975 the Provisionals announced that they would

extend their Christmas ceasefire by 14 days. Fitt warned:

If after the period of ceasefire, ... anyone in the P.I.R.A. was insane enough to order the resumption of hostilities then thousands of lives would be lost in a period of violence much worse than anything experienced up to the present. In such a situation the I.R.A. would have no support.<sup>75</sup>

The Provisional's extension had been the result of indications from the Northern Ireland Office that they would consider their proposals - an end to internment in the near future and a withdrawal of British troops to barracks - if the ceasefire was extended for a further two weeks. The British innuendo, however, was not endorsed by any tangible gesture and the truce was allowed to lapse. Fitt had been correct in predicting a negative reaction in nationalist areas to the resumption of the campaign. This was reflected by peace marches in Belfast and Dublin on January 19 and further such gatherings in Londonderry and Newry at the end of the month. As a consequence, contact was re-established between the Provisionals and the British government.

Rees was intent on trying to draw the Provisionals into the political process and on February 5 in the House of Commons he said that if they ceased offensive operations, the army would be gradually reduced to peacetime levels and eventually withdrawn to barracks. He also suggested that internment could be phased out.<sup>76</sup> Rees considered it the most important speech he had made on Northern Ireland.<sup>77</sup> On February 10, the Provisional army council began an indefinite ceasefire. On February 11, Rees announced that "incident centres" were to be set up in various parts of the province, ostensibly to monitor the ceasefire. The centers, were set up in existing Provisional Sinn Fein Offices where possible, and were supplied with telex machines and telephones - compliments of the

Northern Ireland Office. The prestige of the republican movement, as expressed by the Provisionals, had been greatly enhanced.

While these developments evolved, the S.D.L.P. looked on, dismayed by the apparent preferential treatment offered to the Provisionals. In mid-January, Fitt had spoken out against direct peace negotiations between the Provisionals and the British government: "That would prove that people could bomb their way to the Conference Table."<sup>78</sup> It is ironic that in the previous August Fitt had talked with the U.D.A. whose association with the U.V.F. was well known. He made a distinction between republican paramilitaries and loyalist counterparts.

The establishment of the "incident centres" created further tension between the S.D.L.P. and Rees. At Westminster, Fitt asked:

Will he give, through me, to my constituents an understanding that in any talk about policing or law and order in the areas concerned, the elected representatives will be listened to before the Provisional Sinn Fein spokesman?<sup>79</sup>

He told a Belfast Telegraph reporter:

On the one hand, the government is saying that it is designed to prevent a breakdown of the ceasefire, but the I.R.A. on the other hand, are claiming that it gives them further recognition. This is something which will have to be clarified by the government. Elected representatives on either side - whether they be unionist or S.D.L.P. - would certainly object to any influence given to parliamentary organisations which have been rejected at the ballot box.<sup>80</sup>

Rees' apparent placation of the Provisionals stemmed from a desire to create a stable environment for the Convention elections.

Hume had re-affirmed the S.D.L.P. position at the party conference in January:

The central element in our philosophy is that the evils of our society derive from the divisions which can be resolved in one of two ways - by one side trying to dominate the other, or as we do, by abandoning the path of conflict and trying the road that has never really been tried, the way of partnership. It is simple,

clear, sensible and constructive and is the essential principle of our whole analysis. We would be abandoning our total approach if we abandoned the Irish dimension.

Fitt made his customary appeal to Protestants "who may have had fears and differences with the S.D.L.P.", to have the courage to take the possibly dangerous course of joining "this socialist party and helping to evolve its policy." He added, "If this was a Catholic party, I would not be its leader. It is a socialist party."<sup>81</sup> Fitt's grip of reality must be questioned. The only evidence to suggest the S.D.L.P. was not a Catholic party was the fact that it had one Protestant founding member, Ivan Cooper. The media referred to the "mainly Catholic S.D.L.P." but the party would have been hard pressed to produce substantial or any Protestant membership. In essence, the S.D.L.P. represented, in a practical sense, the majority in the Catholic community who disapproved of the Provisionals campaign. Fitt refused to acknowledge that Protestants would not vote or join the S.D.L.P. because they knew that if they did, this would not be interpreted as indicative of their socialist orientation, but of their support for a united Ireland. As a result, the Protestant community steered well clear of the S.D.L.P., ensuring that the party remained a Catholic sectarian party.

After the October 1974 parliamentary election results, the S.D.L.P. did not approach the Convention election with much hope of success. The conference had voted for a strong Irish dimension as a pre-requisite for the return of the S.D.L.P. to Executive government and this was reflected in the party manifesto "Speak with Strength" formulated for the Convention elections. It stated:

There is an Irish dimension to the problem. There is a British dimension to the problem. Any solution must take account of both. The principles on which our solution is based take account of both

dimensions, as well as the most important Northern Ireland dimension itself, and do in fact command the most widespread acceptance among the people of these islands.<sup>82</sup>

Fitt displayed some optimism, "If I thought the Convention was going to break down in a couple of weeks we would not be fighting this election."<sup>83</sup> Such optimism was misplaced for the U.U.U.C. manifesto was virtually the antithesis of the S.D.L.P.'s - calling for majority rule and no interference in Northern Ireland's affairs from Dublin. Provisional Sinn Fein called on nationalist voters to boycott the election arguing that the Convention experiment was futile.

Provisional Sinn Fein claimed that 53% of the people of Andersonstown would boycott the Convention election but Fitt dismissed this claim:

I think Sinn Fein are inclined to take themselves much too seriously; certainly more seriously than anyone else is prepared to take them in either the North or West Belfast constituencies. It is absolutely laughable that the poll which they allege they have conducted should have shown that 53 per cent of the people in Andersonstown were not prepared to vote. I would like to know who these people are as I understand from my colleagues that our own canvass returns indicate overwhelming support and that the S.D.L.P. can win four seats.<sup>84</sup>

At this juncture, Fitt was clearly confident of his position and that of the S.D.L.P. in Belfast. Ten days after this expression of assurance, the Irish News reported that Gerry Adams, a former Brigade commander in the P.I.R.A. who would eventually contest Fitt's West Belfast seat, was given a three year sentence for attempting to escape from Long Kesh in July, 1974.

As the election grew nearer, Fitt told the Belfast Telegraph:

There can be no running away from our obligations in this election - the whole future of this country depends on it. There is no such thing as a no vote for that will be a vote for Loyalist ascendancy and for domination politics to continue. That can only lead to a continuation of bitterness and dissension.<sup>85</sup>

Provisional Sinn Fein continued its attacks on the S.D.L.P., claiming:

Parties like the S.D.L.P. which crawl to this conference table will be indulging in masochistic ritual self-humiliation ... There is nothing for the Catholic people of the six counties in the proposed Convention and the S.D.L.P. knows it. They have gone one step too far, and have left the electorate behind.<sup>86</sup>

The election results showed that the boycott had failed to win many converts from the S.D.L.P. The party received 156,000 votes, only 4,000 less than the high in 1973. This drop, however, did result in the loss of two seats from the nineteen in the Assembly. But the S.D.L.P. could claim that it had maintained its political mandate and Fitt topped the poll in North Belfast.

The U.U.U.C. had 46 members elected to the Convention, thus having a substantial majority over the opposition. After the election Fitt remarked, "If we do not find the solution this time, we could find the world watching a lot of dead people here."<sup>87</sup>

On May 8, 1975 the Northern Ireland Convention members began the job of finding an acceptable political future for Northern Ireland. Rees' hope was that they could devise a system of government which would have the most widespread acceptance in the country. In his opening address, Fitt once more established the S.D.L.P.'s commitment to an Irish dimension:

... again I must say that however evocative, emotional or frustrating the term may be, there is an Irish dimension to Northern Ireland and its problems. We all live on this island and if we are ever to eradicate violence from these shores it must be done in co-operation with all those governments and authorities who have the power to do so. From that one viewpoint alone, I would suggest that there is a clearly defined Irish dimension. This is not the time to go into all the contentious issues that will be discussed later at the Convention but I think it is right to put on record my feeling at this time.<sup>88</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain to what extent these "feelings"

were his own, or those of his party. What is certain is that such a stance bode badly for the Convention's prospects of success. If as could be expected, Fitt was merely mouthing party dictates, he was guilty of lack of conviction in his own political theories. The U.U.U.C. candidates were pledged to reject power-sharing in any shape or form and they were emphatically against an Irish dimension. As the Convention approached its summer recess, there were few signs of progress and informal inter-party talks in August also proved fruitless.

Meanwhile, Fitt had been the lone voice at Westminster complaining about British co-operation with the Provisionals. He maintained that such relations would give the P.I.R.A. respectability in the urban ghettos.<sup>89</sup> He also kept up his incessant attacks on the "men of violence." Speaking at the inaugural meeting of the new S.D.L.P. branch in South Antrim he said:

Make no mistake about it but the murdering gangs who are now rampant have one ambition only - to wreck the Convention and thus keep the community in turmoil. The wild men must be rejected both by the politicians and by the people otherwise the future will be very dark indeed.<sup>90</sup>

Fitt was prompted to continue these criticisms because of ceasefire problems for the republicans. The ceasefire was only formally with the army and the R.U.C., and the P.I.R.A. reserved the right to protect the nationalist community. However, the organization could not always maintain complete discipline, and many Provisionals who were unhappy with the cessation of hostilities embarked on maverick missions, sectarian violence thus continued. On July 31, the U.V.F. members murdered three of the Miami Showband near the border. On August 15, 5 people were killed and 40 injured in a P.I.R.A. attack on a pub in the Shankill Road in Belfast. On

September 1, four Protestants were killed outside their Orange Hall in South Armagh.

It was in this atmosphere that the talks between the S.D.L.P. and U.U.U.C. were taking place. Such events were not at all conducive to any concessions on power-sharing however, and the talks collapsed. The unionist majority pushed its own report through and the S.D.L.P. effectively ceased to participate. The Convention wound up in early November with the unionist report of majority rule its main proposal but the British government refused to accept such a hardline recommendation. During the Convention's final debate Fitt said that the institution had at least identified "those members who were prepared to try and find a solution and those who were not."<sup>91</sup> Indefinite direct rule loomed large.

While the Convention was now in almost total disarray, the truce between the British and the Provisionals had become increasingly meaningless and it was clearly evident to all sides that the truce had effectively ended. Rees made it official on November 4, when he announced that "special category status" was to cease.<sup>92</sup> The British had decided to adopt the criminalisation approach to Northern Ireland and the Provisionals were to be presented as thugs and gangsters. The process was completed on November 12, when Rees announced that the Incident Centres were to be closed.<sup>93</sup>

At the end of November, the S.D.L.P. held its fifth annual conference. Fitt claimed that nine of the ten unionist M.P's were engaged in trying to bring about total integration of the North with Britain. It was a perturbed conference. At previous conferences political initiatives beckoned, the Assembly election, the formation of the power-sharing Executive and the Convention elections. All had

failed and there seemed no instrument available which the party could use to influence the British government. There was one bright spot however. On December 5, internment ended. Detention without trial had always been a thorn in the S.D.L.P.'s side, and consistently undermined its credibility. Internment's termination was understandably welcomed by Fitt:

I am thankful that the evil scourge of internment has been brought to an end. From the very second of its inception, we recognised the political disaster that it would be, antagonising as it did the entire Catholic community. Thousands and thousands of the minority were alienated by the imposition of this scourge of their fellow co-religionists. People who, in normal circumstances, would give no support whatsoever to any men of violence felt themselves alienated from every political institution in Northern Ireland. After four and a half years of personal tragedy to those who were interned, and particularly their wives and families, we have now come to the end of an era in our political development.<sup>95</sup>

At Westminster Fitt told Rees: "Now that we have got rid of the running sore of detention, I and my colleagues will do everything in our power to involve the minority community in your attempt to reject the gunmen there."<sup>96</sup>

1976 continued in violent fashion, January being a particularly turbulent month. On the 4th, Loyalists killed five Catholics in South Armagh while on the following day Republicans shot dead ten Protestants. These victims had been on a bus and the only Catholic present had been told to stand aside. Fitt condemned both deeds:

There are no words in any language which could adequately express the shock, revulsion and anger I feel at the barbaric crimes committed in Co. Armagh. I hope to God the people who know the identity of these murderers will take the necessary steps to rid them from our midst. I would also make an appeal to all those who would listen to my voice not to think for a second of revenge. This can only bring further tragedy.<sup>97</sup>

Rees, becoming increasingly desperate, again tried to get talks underway. In mid-January he announced at Westminster that the

Convention was to be reconvened from February 3. Fitt was asked by an Irish News reporter if he felt Rees' move had bolstered the S.D.L.P. position. He answered:

I would not want to say he has bolstered the S.D.L.P. position because that might create antagonism. The Secretary of State had however, reinforced the S.D.L.P. view that there would be no return to a devolved government on the lines of the old Stormont but that there would be a government which would embrace both communities.<sup>98</sup>

On the day planned for the U.U.U.C. - S.D.L.P. talks, Frank Stagg, an I.R.A. hunger-striker in a British prison died. He had gone on hunger-strike to demand special category status and a return to Ireland to serve his sentence. As a consequence, there was considerable violence in West Belfast and other Catholic areas, and just as in the previous August, the atmosphere was not conducive to compromise. On this same day, the S.D.L.P., perhaps fearing a loss of support to more extreme republicans, withdrew from the talks claiming that U.U.U.C. were not prepared to discuss power-sharing. On March 5, the failure of the Convention was officially acknowledged when Westminster formally dissolved it. Fitt was under no illusions as to who had scuppered progress: "The man personally responsible for the downfall of the Convention was none other than a Member of this House, the hon. Member for Antrim, North, Mr. Ian Paisley."<sup>99</sup>

A strong indication of a collapsed middle ground came with the March 5, 1976 dissolution of the Convention; for most people direct rule was the second best solution.

The post-Executive period would have been a difficult time for the S.D.L.P. Despite individual party members voicing more militant opinions and the S.D.L.P./McManus deal over participation in the

Fermanagh - South Tyrone constituency, the S.D.L.P. did not radically change its politics. The fact that the British government had failed made it tempting to revert to republican orthodoxy and adopt a line similar to the old Nationalist Party. However, the S.D.L.P. was committed to constitutionalism and thus compromise and agreed to participate in the Convention.

In its eight month existence the Constitutional Convention accomplished nothing. The S.D.L.P.'s twin aims of power-sharing and the Irish dimension had been rejected. The future of the party looked bleak and it was outside all forums, with the exception of their one M.P., Fitt, at Westminster.

Fitt's rhetoric had upheld the S.D.L.P.'s aspiration for an Irish dimension. If, as could be expected, he was not as committed to it as some of his colleagues, his reservations were veiled. It is probable that he tried to dampen down S.D.L.P. nationalism.

The period after the Executive again saw the Labour Party disappoint Fitt. Despite all his pleadings, Rees had belittled the importance of elected representatives by bargaining with the Provisionals. When "special category status" was eventually terminated, it was too late, since the P.I.R.A. had gained further credibility. The ending of internment also came too late for the S.D.L.P. to gain any benefit.

Fitt continued to urge Protestants to join the S.D.L.P., but his unstinting claim that his was a socialist not a Catholic Party fell on deaf ears. He was likewise unstinting in his attacks on the Provisionals. In November 1975, he claimed that the "Provos had sullied the name of republicanism and had dragged the Irish Tricolour and the Starry Plough into the gutter."<sup>100</sup> However, the

Provisionals were a reality, and, although in their political infancy, they were waiting in the wings ready to capitalise on S.D.L.P. failures. It was significant that the two seats lost by the S.D.L.P. in the Convention elections were in the republican strongholds of South Armagh and South Derry.

In May 1975, Fitt's leadership of the party was assured when he was re-elected.<sup>101</sup> Ciaren McKeown reported on the S.D.L.P.'s fifth annual conference in November 1975:

... Familiarity with their leaders has brought respect rather than contempt. And Gerry Fitt, with that unique blend of humanity, wit and native intelligence which is the secret of his political flair, has no serious rivals for the leadership. There is, of course, a residual faction of the more academic or formal, whose instincts are for a more controllable leader, but he can usually make them laugh too. Shortly after acknowledging an outstanding ovation for an address in which he had them laughing and cheering he was jokingly asked "so it looks as if you're going to stay in the party for another while, Gerry?" "Aye, as long as its going my way", he replied. There is more than a grain of truth in the observation that if the time ever comes when he is totally happy with the party, either he will be finished or the party will.<sup>102</sup>

McKeown's comment was prophetic. In the years to come, the S.D.L.P. was to change, and after six years, they had no tangible gains to boast of. The shift in direction would see Fitt increasingly isolated and eventually lead to his resignation.

## NOTES

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6. P. Devlin The Fall of the Northern Ireland Executive (Tralee, Co Kerry: Kerryman Ltd, 1975), 32.
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15. Belfast Telegraph, 5 January 1974.
16. See B. Faulkner, op. cit, 245 - 246.
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18. Northern Ireland, Assembly Debates, Vol. 2, (1974) Col. 704.
19. B. Faulkner, op. cit, 241.
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22. Belfast Telegraph, 18 February 1974.
23. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 27 July 1989, House of Lords, London.
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26. Ibid.
27. Belfast News Letter, 2 March 1974.
28. P. Devlin, op. cit, 11.
29. Irish News (Belfast), 5 March 1974.
30. Ibid., 6 March 1974.
31. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 27 July 1989, House of Lords, London.
32. B. Faulkner, op. cit, 253.
33. Three days before the Executive's installation, the S.D.L.P. had called on the strikers to withdraw from the rent and rates strike as an indication of its support for the new institution.
34. P. Devlin, interview by author, 25 March 1989, Belfast.
35. See B. Faulkner, op. cit, 263.
36. Ibid., 272.
37. Ibid.
38. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 874 (1974), Col. 631-638.
39. For an account of the strike see R. Fisk, The Point Of No Return. The Strike which broke the British in Ulster (London: Andre Deutsch, 1975).
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43. P. Devlin, op. cit, 24.

44. B. Faulkner, op. cit, 287.
45. Irish Times (Dublin), 3 October 1988.
46. J. Hume, interview by author, 17 April 1989, Londonderry.
47. Belfast Telegraph, 29 May 1974.
48. Ibid., 31 May 1974.
49. Ibid., 1 July 1974.
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Col. 66.
53. See Irish News (Belfast), 7 June 1974.
54. See Irish News (Belfast), 20 July 1974.
55. Ibid., 24 July 1974.
56. Ibid., 3 August 1974.
57. Ibid., 9 August 1974.
58. Ibid., 20 August 1974.
59. Belfast Telegraph, 23 August 1974.
60. Irish Times (Dublin), 14 June 1974.
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62. Ibid., 11 September 1974.
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65. Belfast Telegraph, 12 October 1974.
66. Irish News (Belfast), 15 October 1974.
67. Ibid.
68. See B. White, op. cit, 176.
69. Irish News (Belfast), 30 October 1974.
70. Ibid., 31 October 1974.

71. Ibid., 4 November 1974.
72. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 883 (1974), Cols. 2012-2020
73. On December 1, 1974, the I.R.A. denied that any of those arrested for the Birmingham blast were members of their organisation. On March 14 1991, the "Birmingham Six" were released because their convictions were found to be unsafe.
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84. Ibid., 16 April 1975.
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## CHAPTER VI

### ISOLATION AND RESIGNATION

On October 28, 1975, Fitt had told the Belfast Telegraph: "I have always identified myself with the Labour Party since I was elected ... I cannot foresee any situation in which I would lend my support to the defeat of the present government."<sup>1</sup>

By March 1979, he had radically altered his position and was prepared to allow a Conservative administration to gain power. He told the same newspaper, "I certainly will not support the Labour government in a vote of confidence. My constituents interests and those of Northern Ireland must be paramount ..."<sup>2</sup> Clearly, Fitt felt that circumstances had changed to such an extent that it was necessary to subordinate his socialist inclination to a nationalist posture. The irony of this is that Fitt was to resign from the S.D.L.P., in the same period, on the basis that it had become in his opinion, too nationalist. This chapter will account for this paradox.

Although the British Labour Party had improved its position in the October, 1974, general election by gaining eighteen seats, its overall majority in the House of Commons was only three. Therefore, Fitt and indeed Frank Maguire were considered important "Independents." It seemed that Fitt was intent on supporting the socialist policies of the Labour Party as he had done since 1966. A week after the failure of the Convention he claimed: "However harsh the present Labour government may have shown itself to be over the expenditure cuts, they are infinitely preferable to a government which might be led by Mrs. Thatcher<sup>3</sup> and her cohorts."<sup>4</sup>

When James Callaghan took over the premiership from Harold Wilson in April 1976, Fitt retained his belief that the administration would remain committed to finding an agreement between both communities within the context of Northern Ireland.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of April, however, he had changed his tune and told the Labour Party Whips that his support in the lobbies could not be taken for granted. He felt that the government was being lulled into the belief that direct rule was an acceptable short-term solution.<sup>6</sup>

Fitt was looking for some political assurances about Northern Ireland policy from the new prime minister before renewing his loyalty to Labour, and in the following week received them. On May 4, he met Callaghan to discuss his concern about government policy. During this meeting, he was apparently told that there was no change in Labour policy and afterwards said:

Beforehand I was concerned that the government might have been tempted to swallow the view put around by some unionist politicians - particularly Mr Enoch Powell<sup>7</sup> - that nothing should be done in Northern Ireland in the hope that total integration would be acceptable as a solution. I am convinced that it is not a solution and never will be.<sup>8</sup>

At this juncture an abstention by Fitt would not be crucial but the episode does show where his allegiance lay. On this occasion, his misgivings were mollified but, as we have seen, there was to be another occasion in the future when this was not so.

While Fitt was occupied at Westminster, his S.D.L.P. colleagues had ample time to dwell on their redundant political status and some of them began to question fundamental party principles.

In June, Paddy Devlin argued for an independent Northern Ireland, maintaining that the advantage would be to remove the

British presence and thus the cause for republican paramilitary violence. The "negotiated independence" idea would promote reconciliation and "allow Northern Ireland to develop and prosper as an independent entity."<sup>9</sup> Fitt totally rejected negotiated independence claiming only reconciliation between the majority and minority communities in the North offered the hope of real political progress.<sup>10</sup> He feared Catholic political domination by Protestants.

Fitt continued to clash with the Tory opposition at Westminster. The Conservative spokesman on Northern Ireland was Airey Neave, who was extremely critical of government policy in the province. Neave advocated a military solution. He criticised Labour policy towards guerilla warfare in Northern Ireland as "half-hearted", and demanded that "They should go on the offensive, and declare war on the terrorists now." Fitt argued that any military solution that would be sought in the event of a Tory government coming into power would bring nothing but tragedy and disaster to Northern Ireland.<sup>11</sup>

Although it had been the Conservatives who had abolished Stormont and formulated the Sunningdale experiment, while successive Labour administrations had frustrated Fitt, he was still, at this point, avidly anti-Tory. His naive faith in the Labour Party persisted and his allegiance to socialism clouded his judgement in relation to what Tory or Labour governments might or indeed did offer Northern Ireland.

Despite Fitt's vociferous campaigning at Westminster against any military solution, there were elements in the nationalist community who were increasingly turning against him. This was largely a result

of his criticism of the P.I.R.A. On August 9, the day of the fifth anniversary of internment, Fitt was forced to hold an angry mob at bay with a revolver after they had burst into his home. He, his wife, Ann, and daughter Geraldine were treated for shock. Fitt remained characteristically defiant. "I have taken a stand throughout my political life I am opposed to violence in all forms. I might die, my wife might die, but I am not going to be intimidated. I will go on saying what I believe to be right."<sup>12</sup>

He described the ordeal in the Irish News:

I picked up my gun and went to the bedroom door and there they were standing at the top of the stairs. I pointed the gun at them and said: Move, get down the stairs or you're dead. They began backing off and I followed them down the stairs until I was standing at the bottom holding them at bay in the hall ... If I hadn't had a gun, I'm sure I would be dead now. I don't think they would have shot me, but they would probably have kicked me to death.<sup>13</sup>

The following day he again attacked the Provisionals: "The only way the Provisional I.R.A. can be defeated is by the Catholic population standing together and rejecting them. The Catholic people must make their voices heard against violence and intimidation ...

The I.R.A. will not be driving me out."<sup>14</sup>

Reaction to the attack was predictably mixed. Protestants, though they were sympathetic with the Fitts', took issue with his stand on the R.U.C. Ulster, newspaper of the U.D.A. declared:

Yes, Mr Fitt we condemn this cowardly attack on your home by republican scum. But we also condemn the way you used the T.V. and newspapers to go police bashing. (Fitt had called for an inquiry into why calls for help to the R.U.C. and army went unheeded). You cannot expect law and order in either Catholic or Protestant areas if you do not fully support those who carry it out. The amount of Loyalists and Protestants behind the wire at present proves that the police are doing their duty impartially but as long as you advocate that the police will not be accepted in Catholic areas you only leave the Catholic supporters at the

mercy of republican scum who by force and intimidation regard themselves as the rightful heroes of Irish destiny.<sup>15</sup>

The Orange Standard, in a tone of patronising irony, deplored the publicity for the incident in which no fatalities occurred. In contrast to the recent death of an R.U.C. constable killed by the I.R.A. that elicited no flowers from Prime Minister Callaghan.<sup>16</sup>

These publications contrasted sharply with English newspapers which showered him with praise. The Daily Mirror served once again to reinforce unflattering stereotypes of the Irish by asking, quite fatuously in retrospect:

What were the mob remembering this time? It could have been the anniversary of the day King Billy's garter snapped. Or the day Daniel O'Connell had his wisdom teeth removed.

It's all the same to the gangs who rampaged through Belfast on Sunday night and the bully boys who forced their way into Mr Fitt's home.<sup>17</sup>

In a similar vein, The Sun suggested:

August is for holidays in the rest of Britain. In Ulster it is the month of the terrorist and the hooligan. If there is to be any hope for the battered province it can only come - in the words of the courageous Belfast M.P. Gerry Fitt - from standing up to intimidation.<sup>18</sup>

The tabloid press were not the only medium to express admiration of Fitt; The Guardian did likewise:

That Gerry Fitt lived to tell his story yesterday may well have been due to his courage and to the gun which - reluctantly - he has kept by his side, knowing how totally exposed he has been over the past few years to the retribution of those who seek solutions in Ireland wholly by terror and destruction.<sup>19</sup>

The Tory Daily Mail devoted a whole page article to the incident entitled "The defiant family Fitt declare: We will not be moved."<sup>20</sup>

The British media had always been sympathetic to Fitt after his

injury sustained in Londonderry in October 1968. Throughout the 1970s, he had been presented as a man of moderation faced with overwhelming odds. This latest incident served to endear him further with the journalists of Fleet Street. The right wing British press was quite prepared to exploit Fitt for propaganda purposes.

The day after the attack on Fitt's home, a member of the P.I.R.A. was shot dead by soldiers pursuing his car which went out of control and killed the three children of Mrs. Ann Maguire. The next day, the "Northern Ireland Peace People" movement was born. At their first rally on August 14, some 10,000 people marched while on August 28, this number doubled. Numbers grew as both Catholics and Protestants joined the movement. Fitt welcomed their appearance:

No politician worthy of the name can now show less courage than that seen in our streets within recent weeks by women and men. Politicians must now listen to the clear voice of their own constituents which has united with that of their political opponents in a demand for action along the lines indicated by them.<sup>21</sup>

War-weariness and the media ensured that the movement found a very receptive audience. Paddy Devlin had warned the Peace People not to "go political", but the movement became more and more identified with condemning Provisional but not Security Force violence. In short, the movement became anti-republican. Kevin Kelly describes the reason for the crusade's demise:

If nothing else, the Peace People proved that no public group can possibly be non-political. Even when an organization claims not to be interested in economic or social debates, it is necessarily taking a political position - one that favours the established order by default. It was this wilfully ignored factor that ultimately caused the movement to peter-out less than one year after that hot August afternoon in 1976.<sup>22</sup>

Fitt himself came to realise the political realities of the situation:

I repeat that the S.D.L.P. wants to see every success visited upon the Peace Movement in Northern Ireland, but at the end of the day political decisions will have to be taken, and I know that the people who are marching in support of peace will have to depend on their elected representatives. I only hope that I will be one.<sup>23</sup>

At the beginning of September, the British government changed officials in the Northern Ireland Office, and the man chosen by Callaghan to replace Rees, Roy Mason, personified the policy shift towards criminalisation of the Provisionals. Fitt considered it "disastrous." He told me: "Mason was arrogant and bumptious. The way he spoke on the T.V. was even driving me into the arms of the I.R.A. I was even beginning to think they were right. He drove the S.D.L.P. to become more green - more nationalist - because of his arrogant manner."<sup>24</sup> Fitt's remark suggests that he identified more readily with the "green wing" of the S.D.L.P. during Mason's tenure in Northern Ireland.

Mason is a very direct Yorkshireman, a coal miner at 14, and very much on the right wing of the Labour Party. Before his appointment he held a position in the Ministry of Defence. He was to implement a series of measures designed to crush the Provisionals, and he showed little interest in promoting political initiatives. Fitt's opinion has changed little. On the night of the assignation he commented: "He is an anti-Irish wee get",<sup>25</sup> and was so upset at the arrangement that he refused to even meet Mason.<sup>26</sup> This shows that there was a personal element in the political differences between the two men. For his part, Mason was not particularly enamoured of Fitt. In a recent television interview he described Fitt as being "like a tap, he can switch on and switch off and he can turn from hot to cold."<sup>27</sup> The relationship,

despite their similar backgrounds, was at best acrimonious, and such an unharmonious liaison was detrimental for Northern Irish politics. The unionists, conversely, were delighted with the new man, who it was thought would listen to the army and emphasise security.<sup>28</sup>

In response to Mason's appointment, the S.D.L.P. issued a statement declaring: "The first thing the British government must now do is state bluntly what are their intentions, both short-term and long-term, for the future of Northern Ireland." It also asked if the British were hiding behind the Loyalist veto:

When the British government repeatedly underline their guarantees to the unionist population of membership of the United Kingdom, are these guarantees unconditional? Are there any terms to be fulfilled in order to retain membership of the United Kingdom? If so, what are they? If not, is a section of the unionist population, a tiny percentage of the U.K. population, to have a permanent veto on how Northern Ireland is to be governed within the U.K.?<sup>29</sup>

Mason did not reply. The tone of the statement showed that the S.D.L.P. politicians felt that they were to be ditched. The party turned to Dublin. A four-man delegation comprising Fitt, Devlin, Hume and Currie urged the Irish government to impress upon Britain the necessity for a new initiative to end the political deadlock in the North.<sup>30</sup> This policy proved fruitless. Cosgrave's administration was still reluctant to involve itself again and Callaghan, like Mason, gave little priority to political advance apart from sporadic utterances that there would have to be partnership government. Fitt finally agreed to meet Mason in October after an escalation in sectarian violence.<sup>31</sup>

In Britain meanwhile, the Labour Party had been defeated in two by-elections and consequently Fitt and Maguire attained a greater importance in a period when the government hoped to push some

controversial Bills through the Commons. Maguire came close to practising the abstentionist policy favoured by republicans and had rarely attended at Westminster. On this occasion, however, he was believed to have told Labour Whips that he would turn up to vote with the government. Fitt explained his position:

As far as the two by-elections defeats are concerned, it will not affect my view about the necessity to support the government on this occasion. On such socialist measures as pay beds, aircraft and shipbuilding nationalisation and comprehensive education, I will certainly be supporting the government. However, on other matters - particularly those relating to Northern Ireland - I will have to review the situation as it comes along.<sup>32</sup>

On his election to Westminster in 1966, Fitt had simply demanded British rights for the citizens of Northern Ireland. By the mid 1970s, however, he had drawn a sharp distinction between British politics and Northern Irish politics.

In the event, the two Irishmen duly came through for the Labour Party - it won by a bare one majority vote on a motion to cut short discussion on the Shipbuilding and Aircraft Nationalisation Bill. The voting was 311 for the government, against 310 for the combined opposition parties. Afterwards Fitt reconfirmed his position:

I only hope to be able to continue my representations to a socialist government on behalf of my constituents, but if the time should ever arise when there appears to be a conflict between the interests of a British government and the welfare of my constituents, I will have no hesitation in placing that welfare in first priority.<sup>33</sup>

What did Fitt mean by the "welfare of his constituents"? We can assume that he wanted the benefits of British socialist measures but at the same time he made it clear that his socialism would be subordinated to nationalist principles. This posture is ironic when we consider that, privately at least, Fitt felt S.D.L.P. nationalism was too strident.

At the S.D.L.P. Party conference at the end of the year, the frustrations which existed became apparent and there was a clear desire from some members for a change of direction. An attempt to challenge the policy of partnership government within the United Kingdom was met by Fitt: "In the end we will be proved right. We believe that our policy of partnership and reconciliation is the correct one and that it is the only policy that will bring peace to Northern Ireland."<sup>34</sup> The motion was defeated but a significant one-third of the delegates present voted for a proposal to refer back a document on party policy drawn up by the Executive. The voting was 70 in support of existing party policy and 32 to refer it back.

Paddy Devlin again raised the question of negotiated independence and was supported by Seamus Mallon, S.D.L.P. representative for Armagh, who considered it a "viable half way house" towards unity.<sup>35</sup> Fitt was totally against this idea: "I cannot foresee the day when I would support the idea of independence for Northern Ireland. It would leave the Catholic community in a very vulnerable position."<sup>36</sup> By 147 votes to 51 the conference agreed that the party should make its own study of the prospects of negotiated independence, although it was emphasised that this did not mean that the party accepted the principle of independence. The Belfast Telegraph reported that Fitt would reconsider his position if the party adopted independence as a policy.<sup>37</sup> In the event, when it was seen that Mason had no intention of pulling out, the attraction of the idea lost its momentum.

The most serious challenge to party policy was a resolution put forward by Paddy Duffy, S.D.L.P. representative for mid Ulster,

calling for British withdrawal:

We have to realise that any settlement for the North will have to be put to the people of the South in a referendum. The fact that a British presence continues to be a referee between the two sections of our community prevents us from getting together to solve our problems.<sup>38</sup>

Mallon supported the motion: "We oppose the British presence. This party fundamentally wants to see the end of British rule in this part of Ireland."<sup>39</sup> Fitt, Hume and Currie argued against the motion.<sup>40</sup> In the event the motion was defeated by 158 votes to 111 but the result indicated a further swing to old-style nationalism.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, of the 17 S.D.L.P. convention members 10 voted for the motion, including Devlin and Cooper. Within the party, irreconcilable attitudes were developing. The maintenance of a cohesive political party would be a difficult task for Fitt and the leadership.

This confused political scenario extended into 1977 with Fitt continuing to urge Mason to adopt some form of initiative.<sup>42</sup> Mason was unmoved by such promptings: "I should not like to say emphatically and dogmatically that there will be no political initiatives from Her Majesty's Government, but I am not satisfied that the time is right or opportune."<sup>43</sup> Hume voiced opinion about the consequences of political inertia: "The terrible danger is that if constitutional political parties such as the S.D.L.P. are seen to be having no success, people will turn away in another direction and the only direction being offered is the gun."<sup>44</sup>

The erection of political structures which would involve both communities in the government of the province was still basic S.D.L.P. policy. At a debate in London organized by Young Conservatives in January, Fitt argued: "Then and only then will the

I.R.A., U.D.A., U.V.F., Red Hand Commandos<sup>45</sup> and all the other despicable organisations and their set of initials which mean so much to the tragedy of Northern Ireland, fade into insignificance."<sup>46</sup>

In March, Brian Faulkner was killed in a riding accident. Faulkner was the only unionist leader who could have perhaps gained enough public support to enable a power-sharing government to take root and become a permanent feature of Northern Ireland politics. Fitt was quick to pay tribute:

I was a political opponent of his for many years but I found him to be a man of absolute honour and integrity in his approach to trying to create a power-sharing community in Northern Ireland. Those who still believe in power-sharing will sadly miss his influence in this field because he was convinced this was the only way ahead for Northern Ireland.<sup>47</sup>

Even with Faulkner's considerable political skill, it is highly unlikely that the concept of power-sharing could have been resurrected. His death spelt its permanent demise.

Meanwhile, Mason continued to strive for a military solution to the problems of Northern Ireland. He told the House of Commons that the British government had the will to win the battle against the I.R.A.:

What is required ... is for us to point out that this is a battle not only of propaganda but of wills, and that we have the will to win. If the people will back the R.U.C. in its endeavours they will find out that it is beating the terrorists step by step. In 1976, 934 persons were convicted, on indictment of scheduled offences. It is by giving the R.U.C. encouragement, standing by law and order, and being able to process people through the Courts as common criminals that we shall beat the terrorists.<sup>48</sup>

Fitt was certainly no friend of the Provisionals, yet he was frustrated at Mason's lack of endeavour to establish devolved government in Northern Ireland, yet he still remained loyal to the Labour Party. Both he and Maguire voted with the government in a

Tory motion of no-confidence, on March 23. This result was 322 to 298 in favour of the government which was helped by a pact with the Liberal Party.<sup>49</sup>

Despite all Mason's efforts against the Provisionals, Paisley claimed that not enough was being done on the security front and called a strike, demanding tougher measures. Fitt declared in the Commons, "the gauntlet thrown down by the fascists in Northern Ireland should be picked up by this democratic parliament."<sup>50</sup>

The strike lacked the emotion of 1974. On April 29, shipyard workers voted not to support the stoppage; Official Unionist, Vanguard and Orange Order leaders had already expressed their opposition. Mason refused to be coerced and used the army and police to respond to allegations of intimidation. On May 3, the first day of the strike, many factories remained open. On May 6, power station workers refused to support the stoppage and it was finally called off on May 13, with the U.D.A. largely discredited. Only Paisley claimed that the strike had been a success. On the previous day Fitt had made his views on Paisley quite clear at Westminster when he stated that "the hon. Member for Antrim North is in urgent need of psychiatric treatment and that he is more to be pitied than blamed."<sup>51</sup> By contrast, Fitt praised Mason and told the Irish News, "His conduct during the strike leads me to withdraw anything I said when he was appointed. He showed himself to be a person who would not be bullied."<sup>52</sup> Fitt also went as far as to give guarded tribute to the R.U.C. He said that their action during the strike had done much to improve relations between themselves and the Catholic community. He claimed also that there could be no overnight transition in the way Catholics regarded the police but the R.U.C.

had done much to "engender a new trust."<sup>53</sup> Such sentiments caused some consternation among his "greener" colleagues in the S.D.L.P., but provoked outright hostility from Provisional Sinn Fein. A statement described Fitt's comment as "totally ridiculous" and claimed:

In the two weeks that he refers to, approximately 10 cases of torture at the R.U.C. Barracks at Castlereagh<sup>54</sup> have been reported to our offices. It is this performance that symbolises the true role of the Loyalist R.U.C. As the armed wing of Ulster unionism, their history has been to smash any opposition to English and Loyalist rule in the six occupied counties, a role seen very clearly in this past nine years. It is very obvious that Mr Fitt is merely doing the British government's work.<sup>55</sup>

The extent to which Fitt's comments may have been detrimental to the S.D.L.P. were tested in the local government elections held in the week following the strike. Fitt declared that the election was an opportunity for both communities to make their attitude to the men of violence patently clear.<sup>56</sup> He again contested Belfast area 'G', and topped the poll.

The S.D.L.P. did well in the election. It increased its vote from 13.8% in 1973 to 20.6% and gained an extra 30 seats moving from 83 to 113. The S.D.L.P. could now claim to be the sole representative of the minority community. Fitt was delighted with the result:

I have been in politics for many years, long before many of the major groups were on the scene and tonight I can say that I have derived greater pleasure and satisfaction from being at this time the leader of one of the most important parties in Northern Ireland.<sup>57</sup>

Such assertions suggested that Fitt was content within the S.D.L.P. and comfortable with its direction and policies. Nevertheless, the extent to which the "tail was wagging the head" is open to conjecture.

The Official Unionists performed badly in the election, and gained just under 30% of the vote. The Alliance Party gained 14%, and the D.U.P. 12%. Fitt maintained that the strong support for the S.D.L.P. and Alliance Parties should have encouraged the Unionist party to sever its links with Paisley and review its policies. He clearly desired an end to direct rule: "The only way forward is through reconciliation and a partnership government that can bring back to Northern Ireland most of the powers now held by Ministers seconded here from London."<sup>58</sup>

On August 10, the Queen began a two day visit to Northern Ireland as part of her Silver Jubilee celebrations. Since attendance at royal functions by members of the party would have stretched their credibility with many supporters to breaking-point, this visit put Fitt and the S.D.L.P. in an awkward position. The fact that the Queen's coming coincided with the anniversary of internment did not make things any easier. Consequently, Fitt and other leading S.D.L.P. members declined invitations to attend receptions connected with the visit. Fitt was flippant: "I have a hazy recollection of getting such a letter, but I have not yet decided what I should do about it. However, I would say that it is not the highest on my list of priorities."<sup>59</sup>

The Queen's presence provoked some rioting in West Belfast. Afterwards Fitt acknowledged that the Queen was likely to be a "decent human person" but suggested that the violence was a result of "British royalty and the Union Jack always being identified with one section of the community in Northern Ireland."<sup>60</sup> This comment is interesting when we consider Fitt's later elevation to the peerage.

The S.D.L.P. had managed to tread a fine line between de facto and de jure recognition of the state. On most issues, with the exception of the police, they had avoided controversy but the royal visit posed a special problem. The party had to take some stand and decided to cling to its nationalist principles. Fitt did not stray from this policy. He insisted that the Loyalist community had adopted an attitude of intransigence and arrogance. He added: "All our appeals have been rejected and some minority representatives are beginning to feel a little tired when they are being lectured to make further concessions to unionism. We have given so much. We are not prepared to give any more."<sup>61</sup>

The S.D.L.P. had managed to remain united when it had some prospect of power. After the Jubilee celebrations no political initiative was formulated and party members became disillusioned. Many of them increased the nationalist content of their political rhetoric. Fitt's militant posturing is an example of his attempt to keep up with this drift.

As a consequence of rising S.D.L.P. nationalism, Paddy Devlin resigned the Chairmanship of the S.D.L.P.'s Constituency Representatives Council. This move was in response to an S.D.L.P. Policy Committee document called "Facing Reality", which urged greater emphasis upon the Irish dimension.<sup>62</sup> Devlin castigated the party leadership for relinquishing the "left-of-centre principles" advocated at its formation:

With one or two notable exceptions, none of the leading members has done anything to promote these policies since 1974, and little enough before that. In spite of the fact that we are confronted with the worst figures of unemployment, poverty, housing and general income levels in Western Europe we have rarely heard a cheep of protest from men who a short time ago had ministerial responsibility for those very departments.<sup>63</sup>

Devlin's dissatisfaction with S.D.L.P. policy was widely known for some time. His strong criticism thus led to his expulsion from the party. As both Devlin and Fitt were founder members of the S.D.L.P., sharing an urban and labour background, one would have expected them to be natural allies, but this was not the case. Hume claimed, "They did not get on well at all."<sup>64</sup> Currie confirmed this viewpoint:

It was an up and down relationship and depended upon how one of them reacted to particular things and to particular personalities at particular times. It was never an easy relationship. Gerry, to large extent, felt that he had to be careful about Devlin because after all, Devlin was in West Belfast and could have created difficulties there.<sup>65</sup>

Fitt himself admits that their relationship was not satisfactory, and felt that Devlin resented his success in West Belfast:

Paddy was from the Falls Road. I was not. I was an import from the other side of the city, coming in. I was like Jesus Christ on the Falls Road and Paddy was bound to resent this. A quite natural feeling. He always had a bit of a chip on his shoulder. My natural ally in the S.D.L.P. was Austin Currie. It should have been Paddy. We were together on most things but there was always the personal thing.<sup>66</sup>

Devlin on the other hand maintains that Fitt should have supported him in his stance.<sup>67</sup> As Devlin provided most of the socialist input into S.D.L.P. policy, and Fitt always professed that he was a socialist above anything else, he should logically have backed Devlin. He did not do so. Fitt followed the nationalist swing of the party and a week after Devlin resigned said:

If the Unionist majority in the North are determined to become more Orange than ever before in pursuit of their own culture, then it is only to be expected that the minority who are part of the majority in this island will want to assert their culture. And that, in short, means the Irish dimension will always be S.D.L.P. policy.<sup>68</sup>

Fitt was quite unequivocal. There was no doubt that on this occasion he subordinated his socialism to nationalism.

With the resignation of Devlin, Fitt became the only socialist-orientated member of the leadership, and was thus further isolated. Rather than being a left of centre party committed to integrating the Catholic community into a constitutional framework the S.D.L.P. became increasingly like a crypto - Republican Party. By not backing Devlin (even though he probably agreed with him) Fitt indicated that he was prepared to submit to this direction. If his nationalist rhetoric was articulated for party purposes more than personal conviction (as evidence has suggested) he may have felt to relinquish the leadership would end any chance he had of dampening S.D.L.P. nationalism.

The Irish Independence Party (I.I.P.), was formed in October 1977.<sup>69</sup> This new party was a direct challenge to the S.D.L.P., its leading figures being former Unity M.P. for Fermanagh/South Tyrone, Frank McManus, and Fergus McAteer, son of the Nationalist Party leader and a Londonderry Councillor. The new party sought British withdrawal and attacked the S.D.L.P. for continual "sell outs." It was felt that it could be a threat to the S.D.L.P. in republican-inclined areas owing to their more militant profile.

When the S.D.L.P. held their seventh annual conference in November, Fitt was surprisingly optimistic - "For the first time since 1974 and the fall of the Executive there is hope that political progress can be made in governing Northern Ireland through consensus."<sup>70</sup> He argued that he and his party were eager to reach an accommodation with the unionists but he again stressed the Irish dimension. He claimed that the unionists "must not ask us to wave Union Jacks or to pay homage to every member of the British royal family who visits these shores. We also have our culture and

our cherished ideals."<sup>71</sup>

Fitt's speech may well have been designed to placate the "greener" members of the S.D.L.P., as well as being a counter-attack against the I.I.P. The conference by-passed, however, a full demand for British withdrawal. Three motions in favour of such a move were dropped in the interests of party unity, although Mallon, Cooper and Duffy all spoke positively on their behalf.<sup>72</sup> The "green wing" of the party had been defeated. Nevertheless, the increased nationalist arguments within the party weakened Fitt's position as leader.

Fitt's optimism at the conference was due to knowledge of Mason's plan to re-open political dialogue. At the end of November, Mason held talks with the major parties, on the basis of setting up an Assembly with no legislative powers. Fitt led the S.D.L.P. delegation in the discussions: "There are no guarantees of success, but at least we must explore the situation."<sup>73</sup>

The portents for success were not good. Mason's approach was half-hearted and both the S.D.L.P. and the unionists had adopted more intransigent positions. The unionists were aided by the new Premier of the Republic, Jack Lynch, who stressed his commitment to eventual unification after being relatively quiet on the Northern problem since his re-election in June. The talks failed.

Fitt had to end the year by contenting himself with the Labour Party's assurance that they were still committed to power-sharing. He reported his meeting with Callaghan and Mason to the Irish News:

Jim Callaghan told me that in no circumstances would a Labour government enter into a pact with unionists from Northern Ireland which would lead to the exclusion of the Catholic minority in future government.

These talks confirm the confidence the S.D.L.P. has always held in the Labour government, and we now look forward to a series of talks to further cement the relationship which our party has with the Labour Party as members of the socialist movement.<sup>74</sup>

Fitt's optimism was unjustified. He still retained a blind faith in the Labour Party's capacity and willingness to rectify the problems of Northern Ireland. All too often, high ministerial dialogue and soothing words placated Fitt. The year 1977 had been an extremely difficult and frustrating time for him and the S.D.L.P.; 1978 would be no better.

The S.D.L.P. were then pushed into a further nationalist stance by the Conservative Party, keen to woo the unionists. Airey Neave told the Commons that "power-sharing was no longer practical," Fitt quickly responded to the suggestion. "Airey Neave is electioneering and is seeking the support of the unionist M.P's at Westminster. He could get their support at the cost of further bloodshed."<sup>75</sup>

Eddie McGrady, S.D.L.P. constituency representative for South Down, warned that the S.D.L.P. "in the face of new expressions of intolerance, intransigence and insincerity, must immediately re-appraise its approach to constitutional problems."<sup>76</sup> Fitt supported his colleague:

This is a natural reaction to what Airey Neave has said. Mr Neave is coming out four-square for a return to majority rule in Northern Ireland, which is fully backing the unionist line on integration. Under no circumstances would we be prepared to accept that, and, by taking up that kind of position, it is naturally going to put us into a situation where we will have to reassess our attitudes. If that is what the Conservatives are doing - and it appears to be a firm lurch to the right, with Mr Neave playing the orange card - then it goes without saying what our reaction would be.<sup>77</sup>

Fitt presumably meant that the S.D.L.P. would play the "green" card. In May, Neave said that if the Conservatives came to power they would carry out major government reforms in Northern Ireland,

and if he was made Secretary of State for the province, that he would introduce measures to restore more power to the local electorate.

Fitt was alarmed:

If Maggie Thatcher is ever prime minister - and this is something I doubt very much will ever happen - she would do well to think of someone else to head the representatives of the British government here. We have had our share of trouble and sorrow here but I can't help thinking that it would be a lot worse with Mr Neave in his naivety at the helm.<sup>78</sup>

In the following month, Fitt made it quite clear why he had supported the Labour government despite its apathy towards finding a political solution. Interviewed on British television, he said that the minority in Northern Ireland would view with suspicion anything which emanated from a Thatcher government:

It was different when it was led by Ted Heath because the minority in Northern Ireland felt the Conservatives under Heath were trying to resolve the problems of Northern Ireland. But certainly the Conservatives as we see them now from Belfast, are extreme right wing.<sup>79</sup>

Fitt believed that if there were a general election, it might create a hung parliament. If this happened, he feared the Tories would restore power to the unionist ascendancy. Fitt's dread of the Tories therefore primarily stemmed from nationalist principles rather than socialist nomenclature.

The antagonistic relationship between the S.D.L.P. and the Conservative Party did not mean that its association with the Labour Party was good. Indeed, the opposite was true. Fitt was anxious to reaffirm that Callaghan was committed to power-sharing, but this was not enough for some of his colleagues. Mallon was predictably one of the more vocal critics. After an S.D.L.P. meeting with the Labour Party in February, he said: "We left the prime minister and members of the Labour National Executive in no doubt about our attitude

towards them. It is one of quite considerable anger and disgust over their negative position."<sup>80</sup>

Fitt had also forgotten his new found admiration for Mason after the May 1977 strike, when Mason had accused the Republic of allowing their territory to be used by Provisionals. Fitt resented this and argued that Mason was looking for a scapegoat because he had not achieved military victory against the I.R.A. He fulminated:

His arrogance and hostile attitude ensured that all the major political parties in Ireland, excluding the Loyalists and unionists, stood together as never before in opposition to the Secretary of State.

Whitelaw, Pym and Rees never united the anti-unionist political parties in this island, but Mason by his arrogance and bombast has achieved this ... The days of this type of imperial arrogance have gone even if it does come from a former Yorkshire miner.<sup>81</sup>

Mason's machinations had clearly exasperated Fitt, and he had reverted to his initial opinion of the Secretary of State. Fitt may have had reservations about S.D.L.P. nationalism but Mason made him question such feelings and prompted some stinging attacks.

Although Mason had not secured military victory against the Provisionals, he had come close - a point to which the Provisionals themselves admitted.<sup>82</sup> His measures had forced them to reorganize and by early 1978, they had changed militarily into the classic cell-structure of three or four activists. On February 17, 12 people were killed when they bombed the La Mon Restaurant outside Belfast. This bomb exploded prematurely and the Provisionals apologized to the relatives of the victims. This, of course, was not enough to prevent condemnation and Fitt, as was his habit, was one of the first to denounce the action.<sup>83</sup>

The tragedy of La Mon was a further setback for the

provisionals, but proved only temporary. The republican movement had opened up another front which would ultimately lead to a sequence of events that would transform nationalist politics and have a great impact on the political career of Fitt.

When Rees had withdrawn Special Category Status in March 1976, all new convicted prisoners were to be treated the same - in other words, they would have to do penal work and wear prison clothes. The first convicted prisoner under the new policy was Kieran Nugent and he set a precedent which others would follow by refusing to be treated as an ordinary criminal, claiming political motivation for his actions. Consequently, he refused to wear prison clothes and was eventually issued a prison blanket. Nugent was the first to go on "The Blanket."<sup>84</sup>

In February 1978, Provisional Sinn Fein joined the P.D., Bernadette McAliskey (formerly Devlin), and others in the Relatives Action Committees, to spotlight the condition of the prisoners. In March, the inmates intensified their protest for political status, by beginning what became known as the "dirty protest." They refused to wash or use toilet facilities, instead smeared their own excreta on their cell walls and by the summer the protest involved 250 republican prisoners.

In August, Archbishop Tomas O Fiaich, the Catholic Church's most prominent figure in Ireland, visited the H-Blocks. O Fiaich described the conditions as "inhuman and degrading" and suggested that the authorities recognise that republican prisoners were different from common criminals.<sup>85</sup>

The republicans were pleased by such utterances from a leading member of the establishment - Fitt was not. He now claims that

because of what he considered a pro-Provisional stance by O'Fiaich he seriously contemplated resigning his Westminster seat. It was only the intervention of his eldest daughter, Joan, which persuaded him not to resign.<sup>86</sup> Fitt's opinion that the Provisionals were simply murderers did not alter in the years ahead. August 24 saw the tenth anniversary of the first Civil Rights march from Coalisland to Dungannon and another was planned to mark the occasion. Fitt claimed that demonstration had nothing to do with the ideal behind the Civil Rights Movement in 1968 and explained why he would not attend:

The march that took place on August 24, 1968 was a march which demanded Civil Rights for everyone in Northern Ireland who had been denied them. They were those who thought they would be denied jobs, homes and votes because of their religion or politics. Tomorrow's march is under completely different auspices and I certainly will not be there. Had the people who are running this march listened to what we had to say in 1968 and took heed of our position on violence, there would not have been 10 tragic years in between and there would be no prisoners.<sup>87</sup>

Currie also declared that he would not attend. Bernadette McAiskey was candid in her assessment of why the two S.D.L.P. men would not participate:

The frontline in the August '68 march were people who came in from the outside to make their points and be seen. They all went on to do different things. But the people who organised the march and who took part in the rank and file will be there tomorrow, and they won't miss the big wigs from the city.<sup>88</sup>

In November, at its annual conference, the S.D.L.P. adopted an important shift in party policy. In the previous April, Paddy Duffy had argued that Loyalist intransigence had made it pointless for the S.D.L.P. to continue to strive for power-sharing. From now on, he claimed, the all Ireland context should be pursued.<sup>89</sup> By the time the conference was held, this attitude was shared by the vast majority of rank and file S.D.L.P. delegates. Austin Currie had proposed a motion that declared "disengagement to be both inevitable

and desirable." Even before the conference began, Fitt felt it necessary to deny that it was a return to old-style nationalism; "This doesn't mean the S.D.L.P. is a green party in the sense that people are trying to project it."

Currie's motion was passed overwhelmingly by the 400 delegates, with only two votes against and one abstention. Speaking at the end of the conference, Fitt adamantly restated the party's commitment to the reunification of Ireland:

Let me state it in quite blunt terms ... the S.D.L.P. does not believe that the partition of this country was ever justified. The S.D.L.P. wants to unite people of all religions and outlooks, not only in Northern Ireland, but the whole of Ireland, so that we can eventually bring about the reunification of this country by consent, not coercion.

Fitt argued that it was inevitable that the British would have to withdraw and it was the task of his party to create the conditions that could make British departure "come all the more soon" and without the bloodshed that marked colonial disengagements in other parts of the world. If Fitt was less nationalist than his colleagues, he disguised it very well. His speech contained only one reference to party disunity which he described as "a very slight splintering" of the unanimity which had brought all those political parties together to oppose unionism.<sup>89</sup>

In 1976, the S.D.L.P. leadership had successfully, but narrowly, fought off a British withdrawal motion. In 1977, it had done so again, with greater ease. By the end of 1978, the political situation had reached such a level of stalemate, that the vast majority of the S.D.L.P. wanted the party to change its political approach. It was thus decided to concentrate on the Anglo-Irish dimension and seek support from the British and Irish governments,

especially the latter, to create political movement and end the deadlock. The fact that Fitt remained leader of the party and considering his rhetoric at the conference, one must conclude that he was again prepared to go along with the majority despite any personal reservations he may have had.

The open enmity between Mason and Fitt continued into 1979. In February, the Secretary of State had given an interview to Independent Radio in which he suggested that the Official Unionists were the party of moderation and that the S.D.L.P. and D.U.P. were extremists.<sup>90</sup> Fitt launched a blistering attack in the Commons.<sup>91</sup> Soon afterwards he made it clear that he would now not support the Labour government in a vote of confidence: "I can't vote for a government whose Northern Ireland Secretary has antagonised most of the population of Northern Ireland and put himself in the pocket of the unionists."<sup>92</sup> There was no ambiguity in this statement. Fitt was prepared to suspend his socialist principles and operate on nationalist tenets. In short, he was inviting the scenario he most detested, a Tory government with Neave as a possible Secretary of State.

Early in the following month he re-affirmed his position:

They (the Labour Government) had given into unionist blackmail ... As a matter of pure political expediency it has done deals with the unionist M.P's, the most notorious being the promise of more seats for Northern Ireland at Westminster in return for unionist votes to keep the Labour government in power.<sup>93</sup>

Fitt had been against greater representation for Ulster at Westminster since May 1977, when Callaghan had given the go-ahead for a special conference to examine the case,<sup>94</sup> and for the rest of the year, opposed any such move.<sup>95</sup> Fitt's resistance was understandable. Since the S.D.L.P. was formed the whole basis of its

policy was that the solution to the Northern Ireland problem could not be confined to the British context. That is why it insisted on the Irish dimension. An increase in Northern Ireland's representation at Westminster would therefore be a negation of a fundamental S.D.L.P. policy.

Despite S.D.L.P. objections in April, Callaghan did bring in a Bill to increase the number of Northern Irish M.P's to a minimum of 16 and a maximum of 18. In November, Fitt told the Commons that any increase in the number of seats for Northern Ireland at Westminster would consolidate the British dimension and make it less likely that unionist representatives would seek any accommodation with the minority in creating political structures.<sup>96</sup> Despite Fitt's protestations, Callaghan persisted, and the second reading of the Re-distribution of Seats (N.I.) Bill, proposing to increase Northern Ireland representatives to 17, was passed in the Commons and welcomed by the Conservative Party. Fitt commented on the result: "I do not accept that this Bill was brought before the House with the intention of giving fairness and justice to the electorate and the M.P's of Northern Ireland."<sup>97</sup> The Bill became law and was implemented for the 1983 Westminster election. An editorial in the Irish News interpreted the new legislation:

There is a simple explanation for the Callaghan government's show of generosity towards the North by the decision to increase the number of seats at Westminster - survival. Those extra seats could provide the necessary votes to secure victory in vital and close debates.<sup>98</sup>

Fitt had made the same deduction and it was little wonder that he had become so disgruntled. In March 1979, his dismay with the government was given renewed impetus by the allegations of Dr Robert Irwin, a police surgeon, who claimed on television that he knew of at

least 150 people who had been seriously injured by the R.U.C. while in custody.<sup>99</sup> This testimony confirmed the findings of an Amnesty International report in June 1978, which expressed concern about R.U.C. interrogation methods. Fitt attacked both Mason and the Chief Constable of the R.U.C.:

If Mr. Mason or the Chief Constable, Sir Kenneth Newman, claim they are unaware of these practices then they prove themselves guilty of incompetence. If they were aware these practices were taking place then they prove themselves to be liars. In either case there is no longer any room for them in Northern Ireland.<sup>100</sup>

The British government issued the Bennett Report which accepted that there was prima facie evidence of ill-treatment having occurred. Mason belittled the findings by promising to act on only 2 of its 34 recommendations to counter R.U.C. "indiscretions."

While the controversy (over police brutality) continued, Fitt again made it clear that he would not support the government and indeed would possibly go as far as to aid the Conservatives.

I have made it clear to all these M.P.'s that under no circumstance will I support the Labour government in a vote of confidence because of the attitude of the Secretary of State and the policies of the government in Northern Ireland. I intend to abstain, but I may even vote for the Tories, if I see Enoch Powell<sup>101</sup> going into the lobbies to support the government.<sup>102</sup>

The minority Labour government was clearly in difficulties. Despite agreeing, under unionist pressure, to increase the number of seats for Northern Ireland to 17, and despite having an informal pact with the Liberal party, when a vote of no-confidence was tabled it was certain to be a very close one. Fitt, in an emotional speech to the House of Commons, reiterated why he would no longer support the Labour Party. He told the House that this would be the "unhappiest" speech he had ever articulated. He maintained that throughout his time at Westminster he had never voted in the Conservative Lobby even when it

was "courageously trying to grapple" with the Northern Ireland problem between 1970 and 1974. He lamented the fall of the power-sharing Executive and blamed the U.W.C. strike on the negligent Labour government:

That strike terrified the Labour government. Since then, the Labour government has been running away. They have not stood up to unionists and loyalists extremists as they should have done ... In all conscience I would be a liar and a traitor to the people who sent me here if I were to go into the Lobby tonight with the Labour government to express confidence in their handling of the affairs of Northern Ireland ...

He made it clear on what basis he intended to cast his vote:

I have a loyalty to this government, to my own working class movement in the United Kingdom and further afield. But I have a greater loyalty to the people of Northern Ireland ... It is their voice saying that because of what the government has done in the past five years - disregarded the minority and appeased the blackmailers of the Northern Ireland unionist majority - I cannot go into the Lobby with them tonight.<sup>103</sup>

Fitt duly abstained and the government was defeated by one vote - 311 to 310. Callaghan was forced to call a general election for May. In that election the Labour Party was defeated and so began eleven and a half years of uninterrupted anti-working class policies under Margaret Thatcher and her Tory government.

There is substance to the charge that Fitt had supported successive Labour governments, who had, in the past, displayed a lack of interest in Northern Ireland and indeed a lack of political and moral courage in defence of British Acts of parliament. By 1979, however, Fitt finally had enough. Two reasons influenced his change of heart - the decision of the government to go ahead with legislation for extra parliamentary seats for Ulster (ostensibly to keep the province in line with the rest of the United Kingdom); and his disgust over the attitude of Roy Mason.

In his memoirs, James Callaghan talks of Fitt's abstention:

Gerry Fitt ... who had consistently supported the government in previous vital votes, spoke and voted against us despite desperate efforts by a number of Labour members to persuade him otherwise ... Gerry was a brave man and a warm hearted impulsive character but he took the wrong turning that night.<sup>104</sup>

Fitt remains unrepentant: "The unionists were dictating policy to the Labour government so it was no longer a Labour government. Any allegiance I had to the Labour Party evaporated. I was keeping the unionists in, and so I decided to abstain. I wanted to bring down that government." I asked him if, as a socialist and with the years of Thatcherism, he regretted his action. He replied, "No, at that time there was nothing else I could do. Given the circumstances that prevailed, I don't regret it."<sup>105</sup> Fitt's assertion that he is primarily a socialist hardly stands examination. Furthermore, if Fitt was particularly perturbed about greater Ulster representation at Westminster (and there is considerable evidence that he was), it thus marks a distinct reversal of the sentiment and content of his maiden speech at the House of Commons in 1966. Then he demanded the same rights and privileges for the people of Northern Ireland which were enjoyed in the rest of the United Kingdom. In 1979, however, he opposed a bill to increase the number of Northern Ireland seats at Westminster. This adds fuel to the charge that his machinations at parliament in the late 1960s were merely an attempt to disrupt the unionist regime in a way which would be advantageous to the ending of partition.

The 1979 general election saw Fitt exhibit supreme confidence: "There are some people saying this constituency is going to change hands, but the people know what I have done for them and I'm going to walk it."<sup>106</sup> He played on his role in bringing about the election, claiming that intransigent unionists had sufficient votes

to blackmail the Labour government, "but on March 20 this year I brought that blackmail to an end." Ironically, he urged the electorate to return a strong Labour government who would be "able to tell the unionist parties where to go in their demands for a return to the old Stormont ascendancy rule - then something positive might be achieved towards partnership rule in Northern Ireland." None of his opponents could possibly win, he claimed, as "A vote for them is a vote for unionism."<sup>107</sup> His optimism was justified, he won the election and was the only S.D.L.P. candidate returned to Westminster.

In the following month, campaigns began for the European election. Northern Ireland was to be a three-seater single constituency, with election by proportional representation, in contrast to Britain, where the first-past-the-post-system remained. The P.R. scheme benefited the minority community, since the usual practice might have seen the unionists carry off all three seats. Fitt can take some credit for the continuation of P.R. in Ulster.

In February 1978, Enoch Powell had proposed an amendment, calling for the first-past-the-post system to elect Northern Ireland's first European M.P.'s. Political commentators suggested that it would be a close vote.<sup>108</sup> Many left wing Labour members feared that P.R. in Northern Ireland would eventually lead to a similar procedure in Britain, to the detriment of Labour's electoral performance. It was expected that the Conservatives would probably support the unionists to a large extent. Fitt encouraged his Labour colleagues to support him and delivered an impassioned speech in the Commons which argued that the first-past-the-post system should not be used in Ulster because politics in the province

was sectarian and the majority was "artificially created" when Northern Ireland was established.<sup>109</sup>

Fitt succeeded in his task. British M.P's rejected Powell's proposal to bring Northern Ireland back into line with the rest of the United Kingdom by 241 votes to 150. Fitt was delighted with the outcome: "This result is very good for Northern Ireland. We will take that third seat."<sup>110</sup>

John Hume was selected by the S.D.L.P. to represent them in the election and he conducted a vigorous pro-European campaign, in contrast to the anti-European stance of the unionist politicians - Paisley, West and Taylor. Hume, as expected, was elected, polling 140,622 votes, 24.6% of the total vote. He won more votes than the combined total of the two Official Unionists, but was marginally short of the quota, being elected on the third count.<sup>111</sup> Barry White argues that the "European election confirmed that Hume was popularly regarded as the real leader of nationalist opinion in the North."<sup>112</sup> This assertion is valid since Hume had, after all, pushed the share of the S.D.L.P. poll to a record high. If anybody threatened Fitt's leadership it was indeed Hume, a point noted by

#### Fortnight:

The S.D.L.P. are also having to face up to some changes in the power balance. In the good old days you could point to the Social Democatic and Labour parts of the Party without too much difficulty. The Labour men were based in Belfast, and the rest in the country. Now with Paddy Devlin long since gone, Gerry Fitt is the only Labour man left. And who could blame him for feeling a bit uneasy at the phenomenal performance of John Hume in the European election.

The article also suggested that the orientation of the party was changing: "The word is that most of the votes came from country areas, and that priests and schoolmasters were working hard at

it."<sup>113</sup> If this speculation was true, Fitt's position as leader was being further weakened.

Meanwhile Fitt continued his incessant attacks on the Provisionals. Commenting on an upsurge in sectarian violence after the European election, he called them the most "desperate cowards in Irish history."<sup>114</sup> The Provisionals remained undeterred. August saw one of their most ruthless and dramatic operations, when late in the month, they detonated three bombs in two separate incidents on either side of the border. One killed Lord Mountbatten, members of his family and a 15-year-old Enniskillen boy on a boat off the County Sligo coast, and the others killed 18 British soldiers outside Warrenpoint in County Down. Fitt was appalled.<sup>115</sup> The killings prevented a planned visit by Pope John Paul II into the North during his visit to Ireland. Fitt claimed, "where the Paisleyites failed the P.I.R.A. had succeeded."<sup>116</sup>

At Drogheda in the Republic, the Pope addressed a crowd estimated at around 250,000 in October 1979 and begged all those engaged in violence to desist. The Provisionals rejected the Pope's plea in a statement claiming that only force could remove the British presence.<sup>117</sup> Fitt now maintains that the deaths in Sligo and Warrenpoint, combined with the Provisionals repudiation of the Papal request, made him severely disillusioned with politics in Northern Ireland.<sup>118</sup> It is not unreasonable to suggest that a wavering in Fitt's allegiance to the concept of nationalism could be attributed to Provisional violence.

At the S.D.L.P. party conference that year a new policy document entitled "Towards a new Ireland" was overwhelmingly passed after a

debate on the motion that:

Conference deplores the failure by successive British governments to recognise the real nature of the Northern Irish problem and calls on the British and Irish governments to agree to and promote a joint Anglo-Irish process of political, social and economic development within which the representatives of the two traditions in Northern Ireland would work in partnership towards the creation of peace, stability and lasting unity within Ireland.

The S.D.L.P. had decided to no longer seek an internal solution with the unionists. They initiated the Anglo-Irish process. Fitt had been very hopeful about the prospects of power-sharing and had frequently lamented its failure. He was distressed at the party's decision to abandon that aspiration.

The most controversial motion at the conference was proposed from the mid-Ulster branches which suggested that the S.D.L.P. open contacts with the leadership of "all political and paramilitary organizations who belong to the Irish tradition with a view to establishing a common ground for reconciliation with those of the British tradition." The motion was rejected, but the fact that it was proposed at all would have alarmed Fitt, who had established himself as a most implacable opponent of the Provisionals and was opposed to any form of dialogue with them. The writing was on the wall for the party leader.<sup>119</sup>

Following the S.D.L.P. conference, Humphrey Atkins the new Minister of State for Northern Ireland, launched a political initiative. At the end of November 1979, the government published a document on a proposed conference between the constitutional parties. This stated that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland was not a topic for discussion and there was no mention of an Irish dimension. This did not placate the S.D.L.P. Fitt however, on November 20, gave the document a guarded welcome. He remarked:

At a quick reading I find some of the proposals are very interesting so far as they go out of their way to give protection to the minority in Northern Ireland ... I believe the proposals are worthy of the deepest consideration and that is certainly what my party will be doing at the earliest opportunity.<sup>120</sup>

Fitt's comments were another example of his impulsive individualism since he was not representing the party by them. The next evening the party executive and constituency representatives met and unanimously decided not to enter into talks unless they included discussions on the Irish dimension. Fitt was present but on the following day resigned from the S.D.L.P., blaming the party's decision not to participate in talks as the main reason for quitting. He described the ruling as "completely misguided and disastrous" and in an emotional statement added: "I can only say that I have a feeling of inutterable sadness to see at this time the party which I helped to create with others, turning so violently on the concepts on which it was founded."

He claimed that republicans had gained greater influence in the party, "I have noticed that in the absence of a political initiative being taken, there is a strong republican element emerging in the ranks of the S.D.L.P. ...", and went on to repudiate nationalism:

Nationalism has been a political concept in Ireland over many, many years but I suggest that it has never brought peace to the people of the six counties. I for one have never been a nationalist to the total exclusion of my socialist ideals.<sup>121</sup>

Fitt's declaration is remarkable. Eight months previously he had made a crucial abstention in a vote of confidence in the Labour government. He knew full well that his decision could bring down a socialist government and replace it with an anti-working class Conservative administration. This is indeed what happened. He subordinated his socialism to nationalism. Now, however, he

repudiated nationalism after declaring in the May 1979 general election that the vote for his opponents was "a vote for unionism." This all suggested that Fitt's political thinking had either become confused (reinforcing the suggestion that he had never formulated a coherent political ideology), or had come to contain some dualism, or both.

The duality can be explained - the fact that Fitt had come to a decision to renounce nationalism indicates that he had changed his political opinion. Chapters II, III and IV showed that despite non-sectarian socialist rhetoric, and some cross community support, Fitt was a nationalist. What changed his mind? The answer lies with the power-sharing experiment. Fitt's nationalism became less important than an internal Northern Ireland solution. Despite its failure, Fitt clung tenaciously to the belief that amity between politicians could be established, leading to the formation of a devolved form of government with power-sharing. Conversely, an important element in the S.D.L.P. drew different conclusions from the failure of the Executive and this "green" element would become increasingly influential. It likewise became embittered by the manner in which power-sharing collapsed but became convinced that a more forceful approach by the British government would have ensured the new institution's survival. This element lost confidence in the British government, (something that Fitt inexplicably did not) especially in the light of Mason's attitude, whose disregard for political initiatives drove the S.D.L.P. to embark upon a policy giving greater significance both to the Irish dimension and the withdrawal of British troops. In short, the S.D.L.P. reverted to a more nationalist position. The seeds of conflict between the leader

and his colleagues were there for all to see. The duality or confusion in Fitt's politics can be explained simply by the fact that he remained leader. In order to maintain party unity, he endorsed S.D.L.P. policy regarding the Irish dimension at party conferences and at crucial points (e.g. Devlin's resignation), yet paradoxically when he resigned no one seemed surprised. It can only be concluded that by November 1979, Fitt's nationalist sentiment had become so negligible that his position in the S.D.L.P. was no longer tenable.

The reaction to Fitt's resignation not only re-confirmed (not that it needed it) the polarized nature of Northern Irish politics, but also showed how his profile had changed within the respective communities.

The nationalist community, as represented by Sinn Fein, were predictably critical. A spokesman claimed that the resignation was the "tantrum of a defeated bullyboy who for so long had enjoyed total domination over those he purported to lead and represent."<sup>122</sup>

There were not too many tears in the S.D.L.P. either at Fitt's departure. There was a general feeling that Fitt spent too much time at Westminster and had lost touch with grass-roots sentiment. Mallon maintained that he was "not surprised", and Duffy claimed, "Gerry is totally and absolutely on his own."<sup>123</sup> Fitt had become isolated and no longer represented the nationalist aspirations that the S.D.L.P. had come to express.

Although the Irish News editorial did not deviate from orthodoxy in being supportive of Fitt, it did make the following crucial point: "Mr. Fitt says there has been a strong republican element in the ranks of the party. His strong repudiation of nationalism will surprise many who will recall that Mr. Fitt was once known as a

Socialist Republican."<sup>124</sup>

The main organ of the unionist community the Belfast News Letter, suggested in its editorial:

While the resignation of Mr. Fitt from the leadership of the S.D.L.P. comes as no surprise, its significance cannot be ignored, not only is it a reflection of internal dissension within the party but clear confirmation that the S.D.L.P. is essentially a republican organisation dedicated first and above all to a policy of Irish unity.<sup>125</sup>

The more moderate Belfast Telegraph editorial contained a similar sentiment:

Mr. Gerry Fitt's resignation from membership, as well as leadership, of the S.D.L.P. should come as no real surprise to those who have been aware of his increasing disillusion with its nationalist grass-roots. A point had been reached when the West Belfast pragmatist had to part company with a rural-based party which put nationalist principle before practical politics.<sup>126</sup>

William Craig, who had done more than most to bring down the power-sharing Executive, commented:

I'm sorry that it has happened but Mr Fitt is unquestionably right in this matter. He would not be a leader worth his salt if he did not back up his convictions in this way. It's a sad day for the S.D.L.P. but for politics it is very good to see a man who has the qualities of leadership.<sup>127</sup>

In the Republic, the Irish Press editorial commented:

Mr Fitt, a brave, articulate and diligent representative of his people now goes into the wilderness, possibly to be a lone representative in West Belfast. Whether justly or unjustly his eclipse will be seen as that of yet another of the long line of Irish representatives at Westminster who succumbed to the fatal "tone of the House" and became isolated from their followers in Northern Ireland.<sup>128</sup>

This opinion was merely a watered-down version of republican sentiment. The headline of the November 25, 1978, edition of Republican News simply read, "Fitt - British Apologist."<sup>129</sup> Supporters of this view attacked Fitt's home, the worst incident being the one aforementioned, which occurred in August 1976. There

were others, however, which were sufficiently violent to be recorded by the press.<sup>130</sup>

West Belfast's chronic social deprivation would have been a strong inducement to violence and indeed to the romantic idealism of the I.R.A. In December 1976, Belfast housing was declared to be the worst in Europe.<sup>131</sup> In January 1978, there was the highest jobless total in the city since 1940.<sup>132</sup> In August of that same year, the 'Child Poverty Action Group' published a document asserting that nearly one third of Northern Irish families were living below the poverty line.<sup>133</sup> This is not to say that Fitt remained inactive on such issues. He often spoke vigorously at Westminster in an attempt to highlight and endeavour to improve the situation.<sup>134</sup> The forum at Westminster had however, become increasingly immaterial to large sections of his constituency. The continued army harassment, the events at Castlereagh, the Diplock Courts, combined with the social deprivation, was bound to alienate many working-class nationalists. Thatcher's monetaristic and anti-working class policies were to make the situation even worse.

While Fitt remained a committed parliamentarian, Provisional Sinn Fein began to develop into a radical political party, involving itself in the community, Trade Unions, housing and employment issues, as well as demanding British withdrawal, and the abolition of the border. Aided by some dramatic events, the political wing of the I.R.A. would come to threaten Gerry Fitt's seat.

## NOTES

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5. Ibid., 31 March 1976.
6. Ibid., 30 April 1976.
7. Enoch Powell, Unionist M.P. for South Down.
8. Belfast Telegraph, 5 May 1976.
9. Sunday News (Belfast), 6 June 1976.
10. Belfast Telegraph, 14 June 1976.
11. See British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 913 (1976), Cols. 37 - 100.
12. Irish News (Belfast), 10 August 1976.
13. Ibid.
14. Belfast Telegraph, 10 August 1976.
15. The Ulster (Belfast), August 1976.
16. Orange Standard (Belfast), September 1976.
17. Daily Mirror (London), 10 August 1976.
18. The Sun (London), 10 August 1976.
19. The Guardian (London), 10 August 1976.
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22. K. Kelley, The Longest War, Northern Ireland and the I.R.A. (Dingle: Co Kerry, Brandon Book Publishers Ltd, 1982), 257.

23. Irish News (Belfast), 11 November 1976.
24. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 27 July 1989, House of Lords, London.
25. Lord Longford and A. McHardy, Ulster (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1981), 181.
26. See Belfast Telegraph, 20 September 1976.
27. The View from the Castle, A Bridge Television Production for B.B.C. Northern Ireland, October 1988.
28. Belfast Telegraph, 11 September 1976.
29. Irish News (Belfast), 17 September 1976.
30. Ibid., 23 September 1976.
31. See Belfast Telegraph, 6 October 1976.
32. Ibid., 5 November 1976.
33. Irish News (Belfast), 9 November 1976.
34. Belfast Telegraph, 4 December 1976.
35. B. White, John Hume, Statesman of the Troubles (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1984), 197.
36. Irish News (Belfast), 6 December 1976.
37. See Belfast Telegraph, 6 December 1976.
38. Irish News (Belfast), 6 December 1976.
39. Belfast Telegraph, 6 December 1976.
40. Belfast Telegraph, 6 December 1976.
41. B. White, op. cit, 197.
42. Belfast Telegraph, 6 December 1976.
43. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 923 (1977), Cols. 1623 - 1624.
44. Irish News (Belfast), 1 February 1977.
45. Loyalist Paramilitary Group launched in 1972.
46. Irish News (Belfast), 18 January 1977.
47. Ibid., 4 March 1977.

48. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 927 (1977), Col. 1623.
49. See Irish News (Belfast), 24 March 1977.
50. Belfast Telegraph, 27 April 1977.
51. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 931 (1977), Col. 1528.
52. Irish News (Belfast), 16 May 1977.
53. Ibid.
54. Castleragh Barracks is the main interrogation centre in Belfast.
55. Irish News (Belfast), 17 May 1977.
56. Ibid., 18 May 1977.
57. Irish News (Belfast), 21 May 1977.
58. Ibid., 23 May 1977.
59. Belfast Telegraph, 8 August 1977.
60. Irish News (Belfast), 12 August 1977.
61. Belfast Telegraph, 22 August 1977.
62. See Irish Times (Dublin), 12-15 August 1977.
63. Irish News (Belfast), 26 August 1977.
64. J. Hume, interview by author, 17 April 1989, Londonderry.
65. A. Currie, interview by author, 6 April 1989, Dungannon.
66. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 27 July 1989, House of Lords, London.
67. P. Devlin, interview by author, 25 March 1989, Belfast.
68. Irish News (Belfast), 3 September 1977.
69. See Irish Times (Dublin) and Irish News (Belfast), 8 October 1977.
70. Belfast Telegraph, 4 November 1977.
71. Ibid., 5 November 1977.
72. Ibid., 7 November 1977.

73. Belfast Telegraph, 21 November 1977.
74. Irish News (Belfast), 21 December 1977.
75. Ibid., 2 February 1978.
76. Belfast Telegraph, 3 February 1978.
77. Ibid.
78. Irish News (Belfast), 31 May 1978.
79. Ibid., 21 June 1978.
80. Belfast Telegraph, 9 February 1978.
81. Irish News (Belfast), 20 March 1978.
82. See K. Kelley, op. cit, 259.
83. Belfast Telegraph, 18 February 1978.
84. See P. Bishop and E. Mallie, The Provisional I.R.A. (London: Corgi books, 1988) 349 -350.
85. Irish News (Belfast), 2 August 1978.
86. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 27 July 1989, House of Lords, London.
87. Belfast Telegraph, 26 August 1978.
88. Ibid.
89. Irish News (Belfast), 6 April 1978.
90. Irish Times (Dublin), 6 November 1978.
91. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 962 (1979), Cols. 397 - 398.
92. Irish News (Belfast), 8 February 1979.
93. Ibid., 5 March 1979.
94. See Belfast Telegraph, 25 May 1977.
95. See Belfast Telegraph 28 June 1977, 29 June 1977, 20 July 1977 and Irish News (Belfast), 1 December 1977.
96. See British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 957 (1978), Cols. 107 - 115.
97. Irish News (Belfast), 29 November 1978.

98. Ibid., 30 November 1978.
99. See Irish News (Belfast), 10 March 1979.
100. Ibid., 12 March 1979.
101. Enoch Powell had employed tactics of extracting as much advantage as possible from the narrowly-balanced parliament hence his support for the Labour government.
102. Belfast Telegraph, 23 March 1979.
103. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 965 (1979), Cols. 515 -522.
104. J. Callaghan, Time and Chance (London : Collins 1987), 562.
105. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 27 July 1989, House of Lords, London.
106. Belfast Telegraph, 28 April 1979.
107. Irish News (Belfast), 30 April 1979.
108. See Belfast Telegraph, 2 February 1978.
109. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 943 (1978), Col. 726.
110. Belfast Telegraph, 3 February 1978.
111. See W.D. Flackes, op. cit, 282 - 283.
112. B. White, op. cit, 204.
113. Fortnight, October 1979.
114. Belfast Telegraph, 25 June 1979.
115. Irish News (Belfast), 28 August 1979.
116. Belfast Telegraph, 1 September 1979.
117. See Irish News (Belfast), 3 October 1979.
118. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 27 July 1989, House of Lords, London.
119. For a full report of the ninth Annual S.D.L.P. Conference see Irish Times (Dublin), 5 November 1979.
120. Belfast Telegraph, 20 November 1979.
121. Ibid., 22 November 1979.

122. An Phoblacht/Republican News (Belfast), 24 November 1979.
123. Belfast Telegraph, 22 November 1979.
124. Irish News (Belfast), 23 November 1979.
125. Belfast Newsletter, 23 November 1979.
126. Belfast Telegraph, 22 November 1979.
127. *Ibid.*, 22 November 1979.
128. Irish Press (Dublin), 23 November 1979.
129. Republican News (Belfast), 25 November 1978.
130. See Irish News (Belfast), 8 March 1977, 2 May 1977, 13 May 1978 and Belfast Telegraph, 9 August 1978, 12 May 1979 and 17 September 1979.
131. See Belfast Telegraph, 3 December 1976.
132. See Irish News (Belfast), 25 January 1978.
133. See Irish News (Belfast), 17 August 1978.
134. See, for example, British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 947 (1978), Col. 214. Vol. 949 (1978), Col. 1392-3. Written questions Vol. 949 (1978), Cols. 95, 280, 281, 285, 286, 287, 288, 297-8. Vol. 950 (1978), Cols. 1954-1969. For other examples of Fitt's work to help jobless see Irish News (Belfast), 12 May 1978, 23 August 1978, 4 April 1979, 26 June 1979, 9 July 1979.

## CHAPTER VII

### FROM GERRY FITT TO GERRY ADAMS

As its title suggests, Chapter VII traces the events which led to the loss of Fitt's Westminster seat to Gerry Adams, head of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (P.I.R.A.). It also includes an account of Fitt's elevation to the House of Lords.

Whereas the previous chapters have tended to focus exclusively on Fitt, Chapter VII examines Fitt's career in relation to the evolution of the republican movement. It shows that the two developments are inextricably related. Fitt's politics became increasingly unacceptable to a large percentage of nationalist voters who consequently discarded him for a politicized Sinn Fein.

At the end of the 1970s Fitt was very much an isolated figure. The Conservative victory in the May election had imperilled his relationship with the Labour Party and his resignation from the S.D.L.P. left him without political colleagues. He added to this by distancing himself from important politicians in the Republic.

Towards the end of 1979, pressure had built up on the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, from within his own party. Many Fianna Fail people argued that he was too acquiescent towards the British. In December, Lynch resigned and gave way to Charles Haughey as party leader and Taoiseach. In 1970, Haughey had been acquitted of supplying guns to the newly formed Provisionals, but many politicians and media commentators, as well as citizens of the Republic, felt that he might be a hardline republican. Fitt was unhappy about these developments. He argued that the forces that were opposing Lynch in Fianna Fail were the same that opposed him in the S.D.L.P. Lynch had adopted a

moderate stance on the problems of Northern Ireland and Fitt identified with this attitude.<sup>1</sup> This declaration showed that Fitt had further shifted ground. In the past he had argued that the Republic's government could have made more effort to end partition. In 1979 he had little to fear; Haughey proved no more militant than his predecessor.

Fitt continued in politics under the label "Independent Socialist" and would cling to this classification as steadfastly as he had done to the power-sharing concept. His socialist arguments at Westminster retained their familiar characteristics. Ideology was replaced with concrete examples of injustice. In March 1980, he attacked Thatcherite policy in Northern Ireland:

I am sure that Ministers will accept that not only in this part of the United Kingdom but in Northern Ireland every facet of life has been affected by the new Tory government's doctrinaire and monetaristic - if there is such a word ... policies.

There is no doubt that the effects of the doctrinaire approach of this government have been an absolute disaster for Northern Ireland. Children's school meals, the cost of housing, the deterioration in the number of jobs and the diminution of the number of home helps - all the things that made life bearable for the people of Northern Ireland have been disastrously affected by the approach of this government.

Needless to say, Fitt did not publicize the fact that it was he who had helped the Conservatives into office. Although he had reverted to socialism at Westminster he was no theorist. When asked by a Tory M.P. how increased expenditure was to be funded, he simplistically replied, "The way of solving the problem is the issue that divides the two sides of this House."<sup>2</sup> While Fitt was somewhat rootless, Provisional Sinn Fein was in the process of internal re-organization and re-assessment, leading to eventual rejuvenation.

In June 1979, a major shift in republican policy was articulated and consequently implemented. At the annual Wolfe Tone commemoration ceremony at Bodenstown in County Kildare, Gerry Adams, now Vice President of Provisional Sinn Fein, made an important speech on party progress and future policy. He praised the "blanket men" for their resistance to the criminalization process and also predictably criticised the governments of both Britain and the Irish Republic. The innovative aspect of Adams' statement was the denial that the severance of the British connection was the organization's only goal. Adams was keen for the movement to abandon the simplistic notion of how to solve the Irish question. He rejected the idea that British withdrawal was the panacea to the problem and promoted a socialist programme:

As republicans we stand with the have-nots against the haves. We stand with the under privileged, the young, the unemployed, the workers - the people of no property. We are for the ownership of Ireland by the people of Ireland and we believe that national freedom entails economic and cultural independence and that one without the other is useless.

Adams was directing an appeal to the disadvantaged. In West Belfast he was ploughing fertile ground. He was anxious not to alienate conservative republicans, his socialist rhetoric being fused with traditional republican sentiment to widen the appeal:

We are opposed to big business, to multi-nationalism, to gombeenism, to sectarianism and to the maintenance of a privileged class. We stand opposed to all forms and all manifestations of imperialism and capitalism. We stand for an Ireland, free, united, socialist and gaelic.

Adams then voiced what he felt was the inadequacy of republican strategy: "Our most glaring weakness to date lies in our failure to develop revolutionary politics and to build a strong political alternative to so-called constitutional politics."<sup>3</sup> The

importance of Adams' oration lies in the fact that Provisional Sinn Fein had decided that a "Brits Out" policy was no longer enough. Ultimate victory would be achieved only if the muscle of the I.R.A. was reinforced with a political alternative to the "so-called constitutionalists." To facilitate this development, the party adopted a left-wing political programme. Fitt and his former colleagues in the S.D.L.P. were threatened by this tactic.

While republicans re-appraised their strategy Fitt became increasingly popular with elements in the British establishment, a consequence of his continued refusal to be intimidated by the I.R.A. However, some of this admiration was unwelcome. In February 1980, he turned down an award from the Ross McWhirter Foundation (McWhirter was an active right-winger and vigorous opponent of the I.R.A. who was shot by the Provisionals on his doorstep in 1974). Fitt explained that he declined to accept the award not because he had any opposition to commemorating the memory of McWhirther, but because he was a socialist. He added: "I have also refused it because the foundation appears to have associations with right wing organizations which take a different political view from myself."<sup>4</sup>

However, the fact that the award was offered at all was in itself significant. The British right wing press had sought to use Fitt's abhorrence of the I.R.A. for propaganda purposes for a long time. Right wing elements in the McWhirter Foundation were keen to reward an Irish politician who had disowned his nationalist past and continually attacked the Provisionals.

John Hume had succeeded Fitt as leader of the S.D.L.P. and Seamus Mallon was installed as his deputy. Fitt now speaks with bitterness about Hume; "John Hume does not like Protestants. John

is an anti-Prod. He is a Derry Catholic. He cannot understand them. That is not to say he is malicious. He just cannot understand them."<sup>5</sup> Austin Currie maintains that the relationship between the two leaders of the S.D.L.P. "was always a difficult one" although for long periods they co-operated closely. He suggests that Hume increasingly came to articulate S.D.L.P. policy and Fitt consequently could not find his own niche.<sup>6</sup> Personal antagonism may well have aggravated their political disagreements. Both men are certainly different. Fitt has a tendency to think that education negates a working-class background. Hume was likely to be frustrated that for many years Fitt held the only political forum available. In any case it was a demanding relationship. It is surprising that a public break did not occur earlier.

Fitt took no one with him when he left the S.D.L.P. His distaste for organization had mitigated against the party evolving a strong political network in West Belfast. This lack of structure was critical in ensuing years and was in contrast to Provisional Sinn Fein's new-found commitment to establish a challenging political presence in the area.

Fitt had thus reverted to his role as "lone operator," content to rely on personal charisma and Westminster contacts. In the years ahead he not only attacked the Provisionals, but also the S.D.L.P., placing himself outside nationalist politics as expressed by its two major proponents. He had become something of a political aberration.

Ironically, the S.D.L.P. reversed its position on the Atkins' talks and agreed to attend after some political manoeuvring by the Northern Ireland Secretary. Atkins stated that all parties would be allowed to submit papers on any topic of their choosing. Hume was

not against the idea of talks, but was adamant that the Irish dimension should be discussed. The conference was doomed to failure. The Official Unionists kept to their decision not to attend. Atkins had ruled out both Sunningdale-type and Stormont-type arrangements. The S.D.L.P. wanted the former, Paisley and the D.U.P. wanted the latter. At Westminster Fitt correctly described the talks as a "charade."<sup>7</sup> Fitt followed his assessment with an attack on the S.D.L.P. He told the Belfast Telegraph that his former party had planned to wreck the talks:

I know with absolute certainty that if the S.D.L.P. had been offered a power-sharing arrangement as before - under the Sunningdale Executive - they would have said thank you very much but we want an institutionalised Irish dimension - a Council of Ireland.<sup>8</sup>

He argued that such a disposition effectively precluded any unionist from finding an agreement.

Eddie McGrady, now Chief Whip of the S.D.L.P. countered with a valid point:

The policies of the S.D.L.P. were determined at our last annual conference in November, up to which time Gerry was leader and presumably was in full support of the party. He certainly didn't indicate any contrary opinions at the time. In fact he was the main speaker before the constitutional debate at the party conference.<sup>9</sup>

McGrady had cleverly ridiculed Fitt's political statements.

In May, Fitt publicly announced that he would concede the Irish dimension for power-sharing:

What we must do is to go out and find a solution within Northern Ireland on the power-sharing issue. After you have done that and allowed time to build up trust between the communities, then you can begin to think about Irish dimensions. To try to institutionalize them both at the same time is self defeating.<sup>10</sup>

He had finally revealed (six years after the Sunningdale experiment) that he considered power-sharing and the Irish dimension

as mutually exclusive.

The Irish Times reported Fitt saying:

There are no more Brian Faulkner's around. There's no unionists that I can see in Northern Ireland who would be prepared to talk to anyone about an Irish dimension, much less Irish unity ... I would not let a demand for an Irish dimension prevent me, or prevent the minority, from participating in governmental structures created at Stormont.<sup>11</sup>

He was now prepared to say almost anything to assuage Protestant fears on the Irish dimension. If there had been any doubts about Fitt's political inclination at this juncture, these emphatic disclosures ended any hint of ambiguity. The aspiration of a united Ireland had been an important component of Fitt's political success. Now, however, as a short-term objective, he had unequivocally relinquished the goal of a united Ireland. Instead, he continued to lament the failure of the Sunningdale experiment<sup>12</sup> and accused the S.D.L.P. of being merely the Northern wing of the Fianna Fail Party.<sup>13</sup>

It could be argued that Fitt had not abandoned his commitment to a united Ireland as an ultimate goal but had merely made power-sharing his main political aspiration as a sort of "stepping stone." In other words his tactics rather than his principles were flexible. There is little evidence to substantiate this. Unlike previous years, he never indulged in nationalist rhetoric and if he had considered power-sharing a "stepping stone" he would have been guilty of trying to dupe the Protestant community.

Meanwhile the prison protest, which had begun with Kieran Nugent's refusal to wear prison clothes, had gradually escalated. As a gesture of solidarity with their male colleagues, the women in Armagh gaol began their own dirty protest in February 1980. British

efforts to break the deadlock had no success.

In May, Provisional Sinn Fein held a seminar on prisons. Danny Morrison, now editor of An Phoblacht/Republican News, articulated the party's position in the protest:

Republican strategy and the way forward on the P.O.W. issue must be based on two basic principles. Firstly, to secure political status for P.O.Ws in Ireland and comparable conditions and repatriation for those seeking it in English prisons. Secondly, to articulate, exploit and propagandise on the prison struggle, to show how it constitutes an important part of the overall struggle, and to show that the prison struggle is not merely a manifestation of republican resistance to British policy but also a manifestation of the British government's attitude to Ireland.<sup>14</sup>

The prison protest had given Provisional Sinn Fein its best propaganda vehicles since internment and Bloody Sunday. Morrison was aware that the issue could and should be used to build up anti-British feeling. This, it was hoped, would be converted into support for Provisional Sinn Fein itself, and by extension, the Provisional I.R.A.

On October 10, in a move designed to increase the impetus of the protest, republican prisoners announced that they were commencing a hunger strike on October 27. On October 23, Atkins had offered civilian-type clothing to the prisoners. After some deliberation the offer was rejected because it failed to meet their central demand - i.e. being given political status. Therefore, on October 27, seven republican prisoners refused food, vowing that they would fast either until their demands were met or until they died of starvation. The stakes had been raised considerably. The repercussions of the hunger strikes would transform nationalist politics. They were also to have a profound impact on the career of Gerry Fitt.

On November 10, Fitt made his most controversial speech in the

House of Commons. Jim Molyneux, leader of the Official Unionists, set the tone of the debate:

It is important for the world to know and for distinguished churchmen to remember that I.R.A. hunger strikers are not misguided petty thieves or pick pockets in need of correction or spiritual guidance. They are not even men who have been convicted of murder in a fit of rage. They are evil men who have planned and plotted in cold blood to take innocent lives. They are beasts who have gunned down their fellow men and pumped hot lead into their twitching bodies.<sup>15</sup>

Fitt then spoke and recalled having successfully pleaded for political status in 1972, saying:

I have to tell the House that I bitterly regret having made those representations. At that time there were 80 republican prisoners and 40 Loyalist prisoners. I believed that, because of the special circumstances at that time, the granting of political special category status would end the strife. I was terribly wrong.

He then catalogued numerous incidents when both I.R.A. and Loyalist violence had caused death throughout the decade. He did not, however, mention any deaths caused by the security forces.

Fitt pledged himself to support the introduction of humane prison reforms, but urged the British government to stand firm against the granting of political status:

The government should make it clear to those engaged in the hunger strike that they will not obtain political status. By telling the truth, and telling it in such a way that it cannot be misunderstood ... it is possible that the men on hunger strike will realise the error of their ways and bring the strike to an end. I do not want to see those men dying. I do not want to see anyone dying. The government must show their resolution and not allow themselves to be blackmailed by people giving support to the hunger strike ...

I ask the Secretary of State to be as humane as possible to every prisoner in Northern Ireland, of whatever political or religious belief - but not to make the mistake of granting political status. That mistake was made in 1972. I believe that it led to the taking of many innocent lives in Northern Ireland.<sup>16</sup>

Fitt's views on republican political prisoners had certainly changed since 1962 when he considered them "men of principle." He

saw the hunger strikes in simplistic terms and while many Catholics admired his stand against violence many more felt it quite gratuitous to call upon the Thatcher government not to give in. Gerry Adams commented on what he perceived was the mood of the nationalist community after Fitt's speech:

I think Fitt's stance was seen precisely for what it was, that here was a man who had come from what he alleged was a socialist republican position and was now siding with the British government against men who were in prison and who were quite clearly in the eyes of a large section of the community not criminals and who were left with nothing but to go on hunger strike. To oppose those demands may have been legitimate enough but to give Thatcher succour was seen by many people as perhaps the last straw.<sup>17</sup>

Fitt's rationale for the stance he took as regards the hunger strike has changed little:

When the hunger strike started it was a very emotional thing. It was totally tribal. No reason or intellect went into it. When it started I was in the position of recalling all the coffins that I had carried through graveyards and a lot of them were victims of the I.R.A. Some of them were women and children and I was in the position of being expected to lend my support to the men who actually carried out these murders. There was no way I could do that.<sup>18</sup>

Reaction to Fitt's speech at the time was predictably varied and further revealed how his profile had altered. The S.D.L.P. had stayed aloof from the controversy, intent to await the outcome of a Thatcher-Haughey summit in December. Provisional Sinn Fein however, were quick to respond, a spokesman claiming, "We believe that Fitt has lost touch with the nationalist working class and are confident that provided with an alternative choice, our people will positively reject Gerry Fitt's unionism."<sup>19</sup> Bernadette Devlin McAliskey described the speech as "murderous" and called Fitt, "a shadow of a man."<sup>20</sup>

Moderate unionism, as expressed by the editorial of the Belfast Telegraph was, on the other hand, impressed, claiming that Fitt had

shown "considerable political and moral courage" by disregarding "tribal loyalties."<sup>21</sup>

This contrasted sharply with the views of newspapers in the Republic. The Irish Press was particularly vicious. An editorial reprimanded Fitt for "attacking his own people" and claimed he was nothing but a "stage Irishman" duped by the British.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, whilst the pro-Fianna Fail Irish Press castigated Fitt; leading members of the Orange Order praised him. The Reverend Martin Smyth, Grand Master of the Orange Order in Ireland, described Fitt's speech as "courageous."<sup>23</sup>

There were calls from nationalist quarters for Fitt to resign his Westminster seat and contest a by-election on the hunger strike issue. Fitt retorted that he had received over 200 letters from all over the country supporting his position and only four dissenting. He claimed that most of them came from deprived areas of Belfast, as well as from all sections of the community. He also reported having received a telegram from 33 employees of the Irish Press applauding his stand: "This is the authentic voice of the people, and shows that I am on the right path."<sup>24</sup> The future would tell if Fitt's views were representative of the views of his constituents.

The Conservative government was unmoved by the strike. Throughout November, the administration insisted that political status was a concession that would never be met. Consequently, the prisoners decided to intensify their protest still further and on December 15, twenty three prisoners joined the original seven. Four days later the protest was suddenly called off.

On December 17, the Northern Ireland office had made a tentative bid to resolve the dispute. The prisoners were told that a paper

which contained some sort of trade off was being prepared. As it turned out, the hunger strike was called off before the details of what appeared to be an offer were known. One of the original seven fasters had deteriorated more rapidly than the rest. By December 17, Sean McKenna, was almost totally blind and lapsing into a coma. The other six strikers, and Bobby Sands (leader of the Provisional prisoners), were now in a dilemma. They had to decide whether to await the British proposal, and thereby allow McKenna to die, or to end the strike in the hope that the British proposals would meet their demands. They chose the latter.

The hunger strike ended in confusion, but there was naturally a general feeling of relief. Initially, Provisional Sinn Fein claimed victory, whereas the British claimed that they had granted nothing and had not changed their position since the start of the protest. In the event, the prisoners were far from satisfied with what had been offered.<sup>25</sup> The termination of the strike did restore some calm over the Christmas period, but this was to be shortlived.

Early in the new year, Fitt argued that 1981 could be as significant a turning point as the Battle of the Boyne or the Easter rising, if the British and Irish governments acted quickly and decisively. His reasoning was prompted by the Thatcher-Haughey summit which had taken place ten days prior to the ending of the hunger strike. (The post-summit communique pledged that special consideration would be given to "the totality of relationships" within the islands). Fitt optimistically thought there was some hope that the "terrible agony" of Northern Ireland may finally be drawing to a close. He thought that the Provisionals were a spent force: "The Provisional I.R.A. staked everything on their trump card, the

recent failed hunger strike for political status. By its failure they have shown they have nothing else to offer but mindless violence."<sup>26</sup>

Fitt was wrong on both counts. Despite all the media hype, the communique after the summit represented little more than empty jargon. Thatcher and Haughey placed different emphasis on the statement, and the Provisionals were far from finished. Mallon appealed to them to lay down their arms and go political - Provisional Sinn Fein responded:

If Mr Mallon and his colleagues wish to see the creation of a society free from the spectre of death and suffering, then it is about time they climbed off the fence and set themselves the task of unequivocally demanding the withdrawal of that destructive and divisive influence.

Playing politics and cowering to the British is what has us in the present situation.

It is time the S.D.L.P. learned that lesson.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, the Provisionals were not yet ready to enter the political arena, but their capacity for violence remained undiminished. In January alone, seven people were killed and thirteen injured due to I.R.A. operations.

On January 27, there was violence in the H-blocks over the prisoners' refusal to conform to prison regulations and it was announced the following day that a second hunger strike would begin on March 1. For the second protest, the prisoners changed their tactics. Instead of simply demanding "political status," they centered their effort on five specific demands: the right to wear their own clothing instead of prison uniforms; exemption from all forms of penal labour; free association with one another at all times; the right to organize their own recreational and educational

programmes and full restoration of the time off their sentences to which they would be entitled if they conformed with prison rules.<sup>28</sup> Bobby Sands went on strike first, later to be followed by the others at two-weekly intervals.

Soon after the strike began, Frank Maguire, the Independent M.P. for Fermanagh/South Tyrone, died. His death and the resulting by-election it caused were to have important ramifications for minority politics in Northern Ireland.

Meanwhile, Fitt continued to criticise the S.D.L.P., again arguing that his former colleagues were too close to the Fianna Fail Party:

On leaving the party, I stated that I thought it was becoming too closely aligned with Fianna Fail and more particularly with a certain militant wing within that party.

My priorities have always been the safety and welfare, not only of my own constituents, but everyone in Northern Ireland and the fortunes of political parties in the South are not of the same importance to me.<sup>29</sup>

Hume replied that Fitt sounded very much like a "cracked record" and the rift between the two former colleagues would widen still further.<sup>30</sup>

There was some speculation as regards who would be the anti-unionist candidate to contest the Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election. The first to put his name forward was Noel Maguire, brother of the dead M.P. It was also suggested that Bernadette McAliskey contest the seat, in the belief that she would obtain a strong personal vote, having recently been the victim of an unsuccessful murder attempt by Loyalist gunmen. In the event she stood down, after reaching an agreement with Provisional Sinn Fein that Bobby Sands be put forward to highlight the hunger strike and

British intransigence. The S.D.L.P. forwarded Austin Currie as a candidate.<sup>31</sup>

In a constituency with a small nationalist majority, there were thus three proposed anti-unionist candidates - Sands, Maguire and Currie and one unionist candidate, Harry West. If all stood, the unionists would win easily. The decision now facing the S.D.L.P. was whether to participate or withdraw, and in the end it was the arguments of those against contesting the election which carried the day. This again can be construed as a furthering of the nationalist sentiment in the party. This decision had far-reaching consequences when Maguire withdrew on the day of nominations after a personal appeal by the Sands family.

Fitt predictably criticised the S.D.L.P. resolution. He said the party could no longer claim to be a Labour Party, or one of reconciliation: "It is a shame, an outrage and a gross betrayal of non-unionist voters in this constituency who have been put into a position where they have no candidate for which they can vote in conformity with their opposition to violence."<sup>32</sup> In the 1960s Fitt's politics were largely based on denigration with the Unionist Party being the prey. In the 1980s disparagement was also Fitt's main political weapon. However, the S.D.L.P. was now the party that was rebuked. There was an element of spite in Fitt's slighting language. Nevertheless, his attack in this instance was justified. The S.D.L.P. had posed as constitutional nationalists but they had bowed to tribal considerations and allowed an I.R.A. man a free run. Adams understandably welcomed the two-horse race outcome and was confident of the result: "The election of Bobby Sands will serve as an acid test for those who reject British attempts to criminalise

opposition to their presence in this country."<sup>33</sup>

As the election drew closer, Fitt claimed that there was serious dissension in the ranks of the S.D.L.P. because of its failure to contest the seat.<sup>34</sup> His advice to S.D.L.P. voters was to "abstain."<sup>35</sup> Fitt was correct; there was a degree of conflict within the party, but this was patched up when it was agreed to contest all elections at the next general election, which included West Belfast. Fitt was defiant: "I was representing West Belfast before the S.D.L.P. was in existence and I will be representing the area long after the S.D.L.P. has ceased to be a force in Belfast."<sup>36</sup>

Sands' election campaign was aided by Provisional Sinn Fein's political organization, with Adams and Morrison campaigning throughout the area. Sands did not stand as a Sinn Fein representative, instead his platform was based on an anti-H-Block/Political Prisoner stand. This attracted a broad spectrum of nationalist support. Frank McManus (former Unity M.P. for the area), Bernadette Devlin McAliskey and Noel Maguire all lent their support to the campaign. The nationalist population was asked to vote in support of the prisoners' five demands, not for the fact that Sands was a republican and believed in the armed struggle.

Election day was April 9, with a predictably high turnout of 86.8%. Sands was victorious, polling 30,492 votes to West's 29,046.<sup>37</sup> The result indicated that all strains of nationalism had merged in support of the prisoners. After 41 days on hunger strike and after reportedly losing 28 pounds in weight, Bobby Sands became a Member of Parliament.

Danny Morrison commented on the outcome:

This result has finally proved through the ballot box, how deep the support is for republican prisoners. The people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone have spoken on behalf of the Irish nation. He (Sands) will not resign the seat. The hunger strike will take its course.<sup>38</sup>

Fitt was alarmed, saying that the result was a "mandate for the Provisional I.R.A.," and feared the consequences:

There will certainly be untold repercussions for a long time to come, and it will lead to greater polarisation and alienation between the two communities, especially in Fermanagh and South Tyrone where the Protestant population will believe that their Catholic neighbours are giving overt support to the I.R.A.<sup>39</sup>

Fitt overestimated the extent to which vote for Sands was a vote for the I.R.A. Many Catholics voted for Sands to highlight the H-block campaign and to prevent him from losing his life. Fitt's hatred for the Provisionals had induced an obdurate attitude. Adams used the result as an opportunity to attack Fitt:

The result of the by-election had proved many things - not least that Mr Gerry Fitt's call to the electorate was totally ignored by the nationalist people of the area. Fitt placed his political reputation against the lives of the hunger-strikers and suffered the consequences of his despicable treachery.

He challenged Fitt to resign his seat and claimed the people of West Belfast would give him the same answer as did the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone.<sup>40</sup>

Sands could no longer simply be regarded as a terrorist - he was now a democratically elected M.P. However, the election victory had no effect on the British government and Thatcher remained steadfast in her refusal to meet the concessions demanded. On May 5, Sands died. Two days later, 100,000 people attended his funeral. A week after Sands' death, Francis Hughes, the second hunger striker, died, and was followed within two weeks by Raymond McCreech and Patsy O'Hara. In Dublin, there was severe rioting outside the British Embassy.

On May 20, the day before McCreech and O'Hara died, polling took place for the local government election. In an extremely tense atmosphere, Provisional Sinn Fein persisted with its abstention policy. Fitt again contested the election for Belfast area 'G'. He did not prepare a manifesto or an election address, but preferred to rely on his past record as a public representative. He defined what he considered to be the issues involved:

So far as I am concerned those who are opposed to me in this election have made it quite clear that their opposition is based on my stand in relation to terrorism and its supporters.

I therefore fully accept that a vote for me is a vote against the gunman, and I leave this decision to the electorate of Belfast.<sup>41</sup>

If Fitt was correct, that a vote for him was a vote against the gunmen, the ramifications of the results were grave indeed for constitutionalism. Fitt polled only 541 first-preference votes, which was only 5.4% of the votes cast and 900 below the quota required for election.

The result showed how polarised the community had become. Sam Ashby of the D.U.P. and Fergus O'Hare of the P.D. were both elected on the first count. Sammy Millar, a member of the U.D.A, was also elected. The Alliance candidate fared badly and for Fitt, the result was a disaster, as the S.D.L.P. candidate gained more first-preference votes. After twenty three years Fitt's career as a Belfast City Councillor was over. After his elimination he claimed, "I put in my nomination papers in the full knowledge that I was going to be defeated", adding "I hope the electors haven't made as big a mistake as I think they have."<sup>42</sup>

Sean MacStiofain, who was Chief of Staff of the P.I.R.A. from 1970 to 1972, made an observation that can be applied to this

election. He claimed: "It has always been a feature of Irish attitudes that while backing for the revolutionary movement may ebb and flow at different times, people's sympathy for republican prisoners and their families is constant."<sup>43</sup> Fitt refused to believe that despite their deeds the militant members of the republican movement remain an integral part of their community.<sup>44</sup> This helps explain why the "nationally minded" people had abandoned Fitt. O'Hare interpreted his triumph:

It shows that the people in the area support the prisoners five demands, not the programme put forward by any other anti-unionist candidate. My vote trebled that of other anti-unionist candidates and quadrupled that of Gerry Fitt's. It was a total rejection of Mr Fitt's stance in the election and his attacks on the prisoners. We call on him to step down from his Westminster seat and put his present views to the electorate.<sup>45</sup>

There can be no doubt that Fitt's stance on the hunger strike had been rejected by nationalists. A week after the results had been declared he spoke with some bitterness:

I have no intention of leaving my home. However, I certainly do not feel as committed to this area as I once did. After last week's election in which I lost my City Council seat, it would be more than human for me to open my door to people with the same enthusiasm I once did. I expect that within two or three weeks people who did not vote for me will come back to my advice centre at home with their giro, electricity bill, housing executive and other problems.<sup>46</sup>

With all four of the initial hunger strikers now dead and their replacements in the early stages of their protest, there was a chance that interest in the prison issue might diminish. This was not the case. On June 11, the Irish Republic went to the polls with nine prisoners - four of whom were on hunger strike - nominated as candidates for the Dail. The Southern election was markedly affected by the strike. Two prisoners were elected - Kieran Docherty in Cavan/Monaghan and Patrick Agnew, a blanket man, in Louth. The

impetus of the protest was thus retained. Haughey was ousted and Fine Gael and the Labour Party formed a Coalition government. Dr Garret Fitzgerald took office at the beginning of July.

In the North, after four deaths, both the prisoners and the British government took up entrenched positions. On July 8, Joe McDonnell died and on July 13, Martin Hurson became the sixth hunger striker to perish.

Throughout July, further efforts were made to break the deadlock. Fitzgerald's government formally appealed to the United States to intervene, but President Reagan was disinclined to become embroiled in the Irish problem. The deaths continued; at the beginning of August both Kevin Lynch of the I.N.L.A. and Kieran Docherty T.D. had died.

Despite the continuing deaths, attention again became focused on the political arena. Welsh Nationalist M.P. Daifydd Elis Thomas had managed to get the writ for the by-election (caused by Sands' death) passed through the House of Commons. Fitt was totally opposed to the motion and asked the speaker:

Have you taken into account, Mr Speaker, that the emaciated dead or dying body of an I.R.A. hunger striker is a more lethal weapon than an armalite rifle in the arms of the men of violence?

By accepting the motion now, the House may be condemning hunger strikers and others to death.<sup>47</sup>

Despite Fitt's arguments, the date for the Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election was set for August 20.

After the death of Sands, the House of Commons passed a Bill which prevented convicted felons from running for a seat at Westminster. This measure was intended to prevent a second hunger striker contesting Fermanagh/South Tyrone. As a result, Owen Carron,

who had acted as Sands' election agent, was selected as a proxy political prisoner.

The by-election again placed the S.D.L.P. in a difficult predicament. They were well aware that Carron was a member of Sinn Fein, although he was not standing on that platform. Although there was division in the party, the decision not to contest was again taken. The idea of a split in the nationalist vote that would enable a unionist to win, had been the deciding factor. Fitt quickly condemned the ruling and accused the party of "political cowardice."<sup>48</sup>

During Carron's election campaign, the ninth hunger striker, Tom McElwee died. On the actual day of the poll the tenth and as it turned out, final hunger striker, Michael Devine, of the I.N.L.A. also died. In a return of 88.2% Carron actually managed to increase Sands' vote by 786, polling 31,278. The Official Unionist candidate and former U.D.R. Major Ken Maginnis, polled 29,048 votes - almost exactly the same as West had managed against Sands.<sup>49</sup> The vote showed two things. First, it illustrated the nationalist community's concern for the plight of the prisoners and their displeasure with Britain's stance. Second, it demonstrated yet again the deep sectarian division in the constituency.

The hunger strike finally came to an end in October. Ten prisoners had died and the families of those still fasting pledged to intervene to prevent further deaths. On October 3, 1981, the six remaining hunger strikers ended the protest.

The election victories of Sands and Carron and of the two T.D's in June convinced many in the republican movement of the validity of the political approach. They would soon decide to give the

electorate a further alternative.

During the hunger strikes, Fitt's home was repeatedly attacked with petrol bombs by nationalists angered with his attitude. Crowds often gathered and chanted "Fitt the Brit." He was clearly becoming identified as an agent of British governmental policy in Northern Ireland. This notion was reinforced by the recurrent veneration expressed by the British media. For example, the London Times ran an article entitled "Fitt - an M.P. under siege," praising him for his bravery.<sup>50</sup> To be fair to Fitt, there is no doubt that he displayed courage that won admiration from all kinds of people. He was a shrewd politician and could have chosen to bend with the wind in order to survive. He, however, never modified his view:

I have done nothing wrong that would have brought harm or injury to anyone. I've condemned bloodshed and violence. I condemned the hunger strike. It was a tragic loss of life. Since then very nasty things have happened but I've learned to live with it.<sup>51</sup>

Fitt was now permanently guarded by detectives wherever he went.

At the Provisional Sinn Fein Ard Fheis in November, 1981, republicans officially decided to contest elections in the North. Danny Morrison explained the strategy: "Who here really believes we can win the war through the ballot box? But will anyone here object if, with a ballot paper in this hand, and an armalite in this hand, we take power in Ireland?"<sup>52</sup>

In December the party issued the following statement:

The deaths of our comrades on hunger strike must mark a watershed in this struggle. People looking back on this era in 10 years time must say, yes, it was the selfless idealism of ten young men in 1981 which turned the course of Irish history and led to the reunification of this country.

But events do not just happen. They are made to happen. It is up to us to make them happen.<sup>53</sup>

Fitt was unimpressed with Provisional Sinn Fein's decision to contest elections. He claimed that the I.R.A. were intent to create "anarchy" and maintained that the situation at the close of 1981 was as tense as the period of the U.W.C. strike in 1974.<sup>54</sup>

The 1980s had thus far been extremely difficult for Fitt. Furthermore, prospects for the future looked no brighter. He now had a formidable and resurgent republican movement to contend with whose ballot box - armalite strategy would threaten his Westminster seat.

In comparison to 1981, 1982 was less fraught with tension. In their New Year message, Provisional Sinn Fein repeated that it would be contesting local and Westminster elections in the coming years. A statement from Richard McAuley, Vice Chairman of the Ulster Executive of the party, suggested that 1982 held many challenges for republicanism:

I have no doubt that, with the experiences gained in 1981 and given our political development, we can rise to the occasion and provide the nationalist population with the positive leadership they demand. The indomitable spirit of Irish resistance to British aggression was courageously demonstrated in the principle stand taken by our imprisoned comrades and the deaths of our 10 H-Block martyrs. 1981 saw Sinn Fein commit itself to challenge the electoral monopoly of the bankrupt and collaborationist S.D.L.P. and if, in the coming year, such an opportunity arises, the republican movement will not be found wanting.<sup>55</sup>

While Provisional Sinn Fein advanced into 1982 with some aplomb, Fitt's position was somewhat precarious. He was no longer leader, or even a member of the S.D.L.P., and had been heavily defeated in local government. Many, particularly in nationalist circles, felt that Fitt now spoke for no one except himself. This circumstance was reflected in newspaper coverage in Northern Ireland - the Irish News being the clearest example. In the 1960s and 1970s and indeed up to his local government defeat in 1981, the Irish News quoted Fitt's

views extensively. However, after the hunger strike period, much less attention was devoted to him. Two reasons explain this situation. First, Fitt was perceived as becoming increasingly irrelevant, despite still being the M.P. for West Belfast and second, it reflected the fact that he no longer expressed a traditional nationalist/Catholic attitude. In other words, he did not represent the views of his constituents.

In September 1981, James Prior had replaced Atkins as Northern Ireland Secretary of State. In his first statement he said that he was prepared to lay his political reputation "on the line" in an effort to secure a political settlement. His "rolling devolution" plan envisaged a 78 member elected assembly which would initially have a consultative role only. However, its powers could later be extended to include the devolution of local government departments, on the condition that it achieved sufficient cross-community support.<sup>56</sup>

The S.D.L.P. and Taoiseach Haughey dismissed the plan as unworkable.<sup>57</sup> They still wished to see more progress in the Anglo-Irish context, not in an internal solution. Furthermore, even the Official Unionist Party was against the plan, considering it no more than a revival of power-sharing. At Westminster in April, Fitt pointed out that three main elements had expressed opposition and if they maintained their attitude and received a mandate, there would be no hope in forming an executive.<sup>58</sup> By the end of the month, Fitt's realism had been converted to hope: "I believe we have to take this chance. We should tell the people of Northern Ireland we are now giving you the opportunity to take into your own hands the success or failure of your destiny."<sup>59</sup> Essentially, Fitt had

been reduced to being a mere commentator on political matters rather than an influential figure. Previously he had at least had the appearance of importance but now his self imposed isolation resulted in the loss of even that.

Paisley's view of the prior plan laid bare the stark realities of the situation; "The White Paper must have some good since it has raised the hackles of Mr Haughey and the S.D.L.P."<sup>60</sup> He was well aware that a lack of emphasis on the Irish dimension would not have pleased the constitutional nationalists.

While the arguments continued over Prior's proposals, Britain and Argentina had gone to war over the Falkland Islands. This conflict again indicated a difference of opinion between Fitt and nationalist elements. It also showed Fitt further identifying with British policy rather than Irish sentiment.

Haughey was opposed to Britain's Falklands operation, which was reflected in his refusal to back British sanctions against the Argentinians. Public statements also made it quite apparent where his sympathies lay. The cordial relationship between the Taoiseach and Thatcher thus cooled considerably. This was a blow to the S.D.L.P., as it seemed to end any hope for future Anglo-Irish developments.

Fitt took a very much different view from the Irish Premier. His declaration to the Defence Secretary at Westminster in May shows how pro-British he had become: "Will he ... accept that the bellicose and belligerent statements emanating from the extremely anti-British government in Dublin are not representative of the Irish people, who do not see Britain as the aggressor in this conflict?"<sup>61</sup>

Fitt's assertion can only really have been made on the basis of intuition. This does seem to suggest that he was increasingly looking at Ireland from the distant Westminster perspective. Irish people living in England may well have been influenced by the jargon of the British press, but it is highly improbable and unlikely that Catholic Ireland would have endorsed British action.

Sinn Fein for its part, castigated the British attitude to the Falklands in An Phoblacht/Republican News.<sup>62</sup> The paper quoted Thatcher: "You have to be prepared to defend the things in which you believe and be prepared to use force if that is the only way to secure the future of liberty and self-determination" before criticising what they considered outright hypocrisy:

It has been said before and we repeat: it is no crime and there is no moral wrong in lifting a stone, raising the muzzle of a rifle or planting a bomb against those who oppress our country, against those who terrorise our people. And that is one lesson well learnt from the hypocrisy of British guns in the South Atlantic.<sup>63</sup>

Ironically, both Fitt and Sinn Fein called for the proposed election to Prior's Assembly to be contested. Sinn Fein were ready to seek support at the polls for the first time in the North in the present round of the troubles, albeit on an abstentionist ticket. Fitt recommended that the S.D.L.P. also contest the election:

I advise the S.D.L.P. to fight the election. I know that it will fight, because, if it does not, it will hand the seats over to abstainers and to Provisional Sinn Fein. A conglomerate of loonies and head cases will win seats in those circumstances.<sup>64</sup>

As the prospect of an autumn poll became increasingly likely, there were signs of internal dissent within the S.D.L.P. over its attitude to such an election. Fitt was well aware of this. At the end of July he asked Prior at Westminster:

Will he take it from me, as a founder member and former leader of the S.D.L.P., that not all its members are opposed to fighting elections, that a small contingent is taking orders from the Taoiseach, whose advice is not to take part in the elections, and that the S.D.L.P. as a party will, unless the moon or the sun falls from the sky, be fighting the elections?<sup>65</sup>

Adams also argued against a boycott:

We call for all republican supporters to mobilise behind Sinn Fein's campaign to smash the new Stormont and British rule in Ireland.

The S.D.L.P. are intent once again on masquerading as the sole representatives of the nationalist people, and on the earliest pretext will give Prior the respectability which he needs. We have their past record on this. The time has come to confront them, to break their monopoly and offer the nationalist people a new leadership.<sup>66</sup>

Fitt proved to be correct. The S.D.L.P. did decide to contest the election, but like Sinn Fein, on an abstentionist ticket. The Official Unionist Party, despite its continued opposition to Prior's plan, also decided to contest.

Despite urging the S.D.L.P. to fight the election, Fitt himself did not take part. His reason was that he saw no hope or future for the Assembly, as the "desperate" needs of the people had been pushed aside by "protagonists in pursuit of total nationalism and unionism." He was again critical of the S.D.L.P: "They are all about domination, not reconciliation." Fitt must have been fearful of losing votes to the S.D.L.P. and Sinn Fein. This must also have influenced his decision not to contest. He denied, however, that his political career was over: "I believe that I have proved consistent in my political ideals on which I fought in my first and my last election campaigns. It may be that these policies may no longer be acceptable. If so, it can only be shown in the next Westminster elections."<sup>67</sup> He accused Sinn Fein of seeking a "mandate for murder."<sup>68</sup> The Sinn Fein manifesto countered: "For far too

long the British government has been able to rely upon politicians from the nationalist community going to Stormont Castle, queuing for talks and picking up cheques."<sup>69</sup>

The result of the general election, held in the republic in February 1982 had been a disappointment to Sinn Fein. They had hoped that the anti-British feeling, manifested during the hunger strikes, would be retained and converted into political support. But their seven candidates only managed to hold half the H-Block vote of June 1981 and they did not gain any seats. Despite this, they entered the Assembly elections with a high degree of confidence. The electorate contained a new generation of disillusioned Catholics who had endured a decade of social deprivation, violence and political deadlock. The hunger strikes had politicized many.

The results of the election justified Sinn Fein optimism. They took five of the 78 seats with more than 10% of the first preference votes and showed an advance of 2.5% over the aggregate pro-H-Block vote in the 1981 local government elections. This performance was even more impressive due to the fact that they only put up candidates in seven of the twelve constituencies and managed to top the poll in two. Carron in Fermanagh/South Tyrone and ominously for Fitt, Adams in West Belfast.<sup>70</sup> Adams called on Fitt to "resign or donate his salary to the people living in atrocious conditions in Divis flats and Moyard."<sup>71</sup> Joe Hendron, the defeated S.D.L.P. candidate, explained why he felt Adams had won: "I think Sinn Fein benefited from the votes of young people in the 18 - 25 age group who used the party to register a vote against the harassment they have suffered from the security forces over the past ten years."<sup>72</sup> Whatever, a clear result of the Assembly elections was quite simply

the fact that Sinn Fein's electoral strategy had been totally vindicated.

In their 1983 New Year's message, Sinn Fein vowed to follow up its success at the Assembly elections and renewed its pledge to overthrow British rule by promising to expose "weak-kneed nationalist parties."<sup>73</sup> An editorial in the Irish News suggested that Sinn Fein's claim had some validity: "If the S.D.L.P. are to arrest the slide to Sinn Fein they must re-organise and redouble their efforts in places like West Belfast where the Sinn Fein star is rising."<sup>74</sup>

1983 was also to be a Westminster election year. In February, the first clashes took place between the likely candidates, namely Fitt, Adams and S.D.L.P. Assemblyman Hendron. During a debate at Oxford University, Fitt launched a scathing attack on Sinn Fein and the P.I.R.A.: "A vote for Sinn Fein is a vote for the gun in politics. All Sinn Fein candidates had been told at their Ard Fheis that they had to unanimously support the armed struggle, which means the shooting of defenceless people."<sup>75</sup>

Reacting to Fitt's attack, Adams said that it was significant it had been issued from England: "Where he feels more at home than in the ghettos of Moyard or Divis flats, where Sinn Fein is attempting to represent the people in their everyday social and economic problems." He accused Fitt of "supporting the British presence in Ireland with the inevitable violence which emanates from the barrels of British army and R.U.C. guns."<sup>76</sup> Hendron also attacked Fitt and described him as "the absentee M.P." He claimed: "This is an S.D.L.P. seat. Stand aside and let the seat be won by the S.D.L.P., which is opposed to all forms of violence, and is prepared to

represent the people of West Belfast."<sup>77</sup>

While Fitt was receiving this criticism from politicians representing the nationalist community, the British press continued to praise him. The Daily Telegraph, in a leader article said the I.R.A. hated Fitt with a unique passion as the man from their community who "sees them for what they are."<sup>78</sup>

Other British newspapers devoted considerable space regarding the continued attacks on Fitt's home. The Daily Express carried a full page headlined, "Fitt's Fortress"<sup>79</sup> and the Daily Mail an article entitled "We shall not be moved."<sup>80</sup> It is little wonder that Fitt was increasingly being discredited as a creature of the British.

As the election, set for June 9, drew closer, Fitt renewed his attacks on Sinn Fein: "Sinn Fein have said they will take control in Ireland with a ballot in one hand and an armalite in the other. Ah yes, the ballot for those who are with them - the bullet for those who aren't."<sup>81</sup>

He also continued to castigate the S.D.L.P.:

Some people may have been mesmerised by the Assembly Election results last year. Let me remind them that Sinn Fein owes such success as it had last time to the decisions of a cowardly S.D.L.P. policy, which twice gave the Provisionals a free run in Fermanagh/South Tyrone.<sup>82</sup>

The Sinn Fein manifesto insisted that they would campaign vigorously for a united Ireland, a democratic socialist republic, free from foreign occupation and sectarian rule. The manifesto entitled "The Voice of Principled Leadership" stated that Sinn Fein welcomed the opportunity to again demonstrate the: "Growing support for our principled stand against the British government and Loyalism, and our unapologetic stand in support of national reunification and

in defence of the right of Irish people to resist British occupation."<sup>83</sup>

Fitt argued that the electorate had a stark choice: "They must choose between the fascist tactics of the Provisionals and the democratic standards I have sought to cherish and uphold for decades."<sup>84</sup> By May 30, he demonstrated some confidence: "A week ago I would have said that Adams was going to win. I'd be second and Joe Hendron third. Now I'm saying that Adams and I are going to fight like hells gates and Hendron will still come third."

When further pressed about his chances, he replied:

If I lost this election I wouldn't feel bitter with myself, but I'd feel the people of West Belfast were voting for violence, and I wouldn't want to live in a constituency or a country where people were deliberately casting their votes for a continuation of the tragedy we have had down all those years.<sup>85</sup>

To Hendron, Fitt was "only splitting the moderate vote."<sup>86</sup>

Fitt, Adams and Hendron were not the only Catholic candidates contesting West Belfast. The Workers Party put forward Mary McMahon, whose only realistic goal was to increase her party's share of the vote.

The Irish News claimed that in 1983 there were approximately 16,000 unionist voters in the West Belfast constituency.<sup>87</sup> The impact of that vote was reduced by the failure of the Official Unionists and the D.U.P. to agree on a "unity" candidate. As a result, Tommy Passmore represented the Official Unionists and George Haffey the D.U.P. There was considerable speculation that unionists would cast their vote for Fitt in an attempt to defeat Adams. The Orange Standard, in an article entitled "Fitt The Brit's Great Grit," gives this suggestion validity:

Today West Belfast is a very different place, politically. With the very extensive movement of population in the past 12 years, the Official Unionist position has been seriously undermined, and the battle is no longer between unionism and nationalism, but between Gerry Fitt's independent stance and republicanism of the most extreme form, and, of course, the S.D.L.P.

It may well be that if the Unionist Parties discover that the balance of probability is that the West Belfast seat is not winnable by them, then they will be faced with the option of making a choice between Mr Fitt and those who oppose him.

Should this prove to be the case, then wouldn't it be a magnanimous gesture for the anti-republican, anti-nationalist and anti-S.D.L.P. sectors of the electorate in that constituency to throw their weight behind the present occupant, who, one is given to understand, already receives the support of individual unionists.<sup>88</sup>

Fitt's politics had been so transformed that he was now deemed to be sufficiently anti-nationalist to allow unionists to vote for him.

Hendron considered himself to be the main threat to Adams: "Gerry Fitt is a total rank outsider, he just does not count. Any vote for him is ensuring a victory for Sinn Fein. I am the only one who can beat Gerry Adams."<sup>89</sup>

On June 7, Fitt took out a full page advertisement in the Irish News listing his achievements during the previous sixteen years.<sup>90</sup> In a conversation with a journalist just prior to the election, he talked of what he considered were the trials of being "outside a tribe": "There is a great deal of comfort and security to belong to one tribe or another in Northern Ireland. If you don't belong to one of those tribes you are regarded as something of an eccentric, a bit of a looney or a traitor." He pictured the scenario if Sinn Fein polled a substantial vote:

If any significant section of the Northern Irish Catholic people votes for Sinn Fein candidates, whether they win seats or not, it points a very dark scenario. Because it will be seen then by the Protestants that the Catholics are voting for violence.

My seat is nothing compared to what the outcome of that could be. It would be bad, very bad, it would be frightening. All the Catholic population would be maligned. Maybe it is fortuitous that the Catholic population is being given this choice at this time, before the situation gets really out of hand. It may be hopeful that they are being given this chance to reject violent men and their violent gospels. If this rejection of violence comes from the ballot box - people will start to breathe.<sup>91</sup>

Fitt's hopes were dashed - Sinn Fein achieved a 13.4% poll, which was 3% up on the Assembly election. Furthermore, Adams was elected M.P. for West Belfast, with Fitt coming third behind Hendron.

Fitt's defeat on June 9, 1983 marked an end of an era, about which he commented:

It is a victory which will appear, and which will certainly be interpreted by the outside world, that the Catholic population are endorsing candidates who are openly associated with, and political apologists for the men of violence. I think that holds a very dark future for Northern Ireland and the whole of Ireland.<sup>92</sup>

Adams' victory was on a minority vote, while Fitt's vote represented a considerable improvement from the 1981 Local government election when he only managed to poll 541 as against 3,006 in 1977. Passmore and Haffey only achieved a combined total of 4,834, so Fitt claimed that he had secured Protestant support:

Half my votes come from Protestant working class in the Shankill Road and half came from working class in the Falls Road. I have striven all my political life to unite the Catholic and Protestant working classes in this tragically divided city, and that is what I did yesterday.<sup>93</sup>

He told the Belfast News Letter, "It made me feel like a nigger in Alabama who had been voted in by the Ku Klux Klan."<sup>94</sup> Republicans did not deny that Protestants had voted for Fitt but they forwarded a different reason:

In view of his unpopularity amongst nationalists, it is clear that a large section of Fitt's 10,326 votes came from Loyalists. Contrary to his claim that he had succeeded in uniting the Protestant and Catholic working class, the vote merely demonstrates that even a Catholic can win Loyalist support if he is sufficiently pro-British.<sup>95</sup>

The 1981 Local government election showed that many voters had come to see Fitt as something of a political parasite. However, Fitt did make a considerable comeback in the 1983 Westminster election. Evidence does indeed suggest that there was some tactical voting against Sinn Fein by Protestant voters. The Ulster acknowledged that "in the absence of a candidate of stature who would swing the vote away from the I.R.A's Sinn Fein, Gerry Fitt secured a big percentage of their votes."<sup>96</sup> This tactical voting theory is given further substance by the 1987 Westminster election. On the basis of the combined Hendron/Fitt vote in 1983, Adams should not have won in 1987. However, he did. Although unionists may have felt they could have cast their vote in favour of Fitt in 1983 (who after all had now renounced the concept of nationalism) they perhaps could not bring themselves to vote for Hendron and the S.D.L.P. who had endorsed the Anglo Irish Agreement, an agreement so repugnant to the vast majority of Protestants.

Although there are grounds then to suggest that Protestant voting in West Belfast in 1983 was influenced by tactical considerations, it would be misleading not to acknowledge that many Catholics and indeed some Protestants voted for Fitt because of sentiment and a sense of loyalty. In terms of traditional constituency clientalist effort Fitt worked extremely hard over the years. Few could argue that in the limited avenues that were open to him he helped or at least tried to help people who sought his assistance. Yet over the years the plight of Fitt's constituents had become increasingly desperate and Fitt's brand of welfare politics no longer sufficed.<sup>97</sup> Many young disgruntled nationalist voters demanded radical change and felt Sinn Fein could provide it.

Reaction in Britain was summed up by James Prior, who considered Fitt's defeat "disastrous" and the British authorities were understandably alarmed by Sinn Fein's success.<sup>98</sup>

In the Republic, there was a general lamentation expressed by the media over Fitt's defeat. The Cork Examiner typified the prevailing sentiment:

Gerry Adams gained their (Sinn Fein) sole seat and this was at the expense of the 17 year old career of the former S.D.L.P. leader and parliamentarian of great moral courage, Gerry Fitt. This outcome, in a constituency in which Mr Fitt could not conduct a normal canvass because of violent conditions, will sadden many admirers of his steadfastness over the lengthy years of Northern strife.<sup>99</sup>

Even the Irish Press, which had been so critical of Fitt during the hunger strikes, bemoaned his plight:

Perhaps the most impressive result of the day - and in some ways the saddest - was that of Gerry Fitt whose long parliamentary career ended with his defeat in West Belfast. But Mr Fitt, whose political courage and social commitment were always beyond question, said farewell in the most impressive manner possible notching up a very creditable 10,000 votes when his opponents had been predicting that he would be lucky to get even a third of that vote. West Belfast Protestant and Catholic, ignored the pundits and remembered the hard work Mr Fitt had put in on their behalf for almost 20 years.<sup>100</sup>

There had been some predictions that Fitt would be elevated to the House of Lords and after his election defeat, his wife commented: "If Mrs Thatcher knows what this man has done for the people of West Belfast, she'll promote him to the House of Lords - but I doubt if he would accept it."<sup>101</sup>

On June 19, the London Sunday Times reported "Many M.P.'s of all parties also hope to see Gerry Fitt, defeated Independent Socialist M.P. for West Belfast, continue his parliamentary service in the Upper House."<sup>102</sup> On July 22, 1983 it was announced that Fitt had been offered and had accepted a life peerage. He remarked:

I do not think I have done anything to be honoured about. What I have done in politics I have felt to be right. I took decisions which were not supported by everyone

I have over the past 11 years been under serious attack by Provisional I.R.A. supporters and other republican elements.

Prior to that, I was viciously attacked by Loyalist supporters. I have always and always will, make my feelings known against I.R.A. violence and Loyalist violence.<sup>103</sup>

The announcement was predictably criticised by Adams:

This peerage exposes absolutely the anti-democratic nature of the British system of government when a failed politician who has been rejected by the people of North Belfast in a Council election and by the people of West Belfast in a Westminster election, is then installed in a position of making and influencing foreign law for use against these people.<sup>104</sup>

Ironically, an Official Unionist spokesman said, "I don't think unionists are greatly excited about it. We are not going to celebrate the elevation of a republican to the House of Lords."<sup>105</sup> The spokesman was presumably aware of the ironic content of his statement.

Just over two weeks prior to the peerage declaration, on July 3, Fitt's home had been badly damaged in an arson attack. The perpetrators had broken into the house, removed the furniture and burned it in the back yard before setting fire to the house itself. Fitt was adamant that the Provisionals had carried out the raid and admitted defeat, "They have succeeded after 11 years to drive me out of this house."<sup>106</sup>

Sinn Fein, for their part, condemned the burning of "Fortress Fitt." Joe Austin, Chairman of North Belfast Sinn Fein, declared the burning "a wanton and mindless act of destruction."<sup>107</sup>

Fitt now claims that it was that latest attack on his home and in particular, the destruction of his wedding photos, which made him accept the peerage as a form of retaliation.<sup>108</sup> The adulation

by the British media, the continuing favour of the British establishment and indeed the violence his family were subjected to perhaps made Fitt's decision inevitable. Nevertheless, Fitt's political integrity must be questioned. A disciple of James Connolly would not become a Peer of the Realm. The two positions are diametrically opposed.

Predictably, in Britain, his undertaking to join the Lords was welcomed by politicians (both Michael Foot, then leader of the Labour Party, and Thatcher had forwarded his name) and the media alike. In the Republic there was little, if any, condemnation from the press.<sup>109</sup> The Irish Independent editorial claimed: "Fitt was selected and rightly so."<sup>110</sup> This sentiment differed greatly from the editorial of the Irish News (which for so many years had an almost sycophantic relationship with Fitt):

Gerry Fitt's acceptance of a peerage from Britain can only be regarded by the nationalist population of the North as a sort of betrayal. In spite of the carefully orchestrated publicity of the past weeks, it had been hoped even to the last moment, that this brave, but misguided former idol of the nationalist community, would stop short of giving total credibility to institutions that are so directly opposed to every principle he once represented.<sup>111</sup>

On October 26, Gerry Fitt was ennobled as Baron Fitt of Bells Hill, after taking the Oath of Allegiance to the Queen.<sup>112</sup> As the Irish News interpreted: "It was a strange day for the one time socialist docker."<sup>113</sup>

## NOTES

1. Belfast Telegraph, 5 December 1979.
2. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 980 (1980),  
Cols. 1703 - 1704.
3. An Phoblacht/Republican News (Belfast), 23 June 1979.
4. Belfast Telegraph, 28 February 1980.
5. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 27 July 1989, House of  
Lords, London.
6. A. Currie, interview by author, 6 April 1989, Dungannon.
7. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 980 (1980),  
Col. 637.
8. Belfast Telegraph, 21 March 1980.
9. Ibid.
10. Fortnight, July/August 1980.
11. Irish Times (Dublin), 12 August 1980.
12. See British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 988  
(1980), Cols. 591 - 603.
13. See Belfast Telegraph, 6 October 1980.
14. An Phoblacht/Republican News (Belfast), 3 May 1980.
15. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 992 (1980),  
Col. 134.
16. For the full text of Fitt's speech, see British  
Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 992 (1980), Cols. 135 - 145.
17. G. Adams, interview by author, 20 February 1990, Belfast.
18. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 27 July 1989, House of  
Lords, London.
19. Irish News (Belfast), 12 November 1980.
20. Ibid.

21. Belfast Telegraph, 11 November 1980.
22. Irish Press (Dublin), 12 November 1980.
23. Belfast Telegraph, 13 November 1980.
24. Irish News (Belfast), 14 November 1980. See also Irish Times (Dublin), 14 November 1980.
25. The British proposal sent to the prisoners was never made public. It seems that the document was largely ambiguous and came nowhere near recognition of political status.
26. Irish Independent (Dublin), 12 January 1981.
27. Irish News (Belfast), 15 January 1981.
28. K. Kelley, The Longest War: Northern Ireland and the I.R.A. (Dingle, Co Kerry: Brandon Book Publishers Ltd, 1982), 332.
29. Irish News (Belfast), 16 March 1981.
30. Ibid.
31. See Irish News (Belfast), 27 March 1981.
32. Belfast Telegraph, 31 March 1981.
33. Ibid.
34. Irish News (Belfast), 4 April 1981.
35. Ibid., 6 April 1981.
36. Irish Press (Dublin), 6 April 1981.
37. W.D. Flackes, Northern Ireland: A Political Directory 1968 - 1983, (London, British Broadcasting Corporation, 1983), 285.
38. Irish News (Belfast), 11 April 1981.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Irish Times (Dublin), 23 May 1981.
43. S. MacStiofain, Memoirs of a Revolutionary (Edinburgh: Cremonesi, 1975), 86.
44. See F. Burton, The Politics of Legitimacy: Struggles in a Belfast Community (London: R.K.P., 1978).

45. Irish News (Belfast), 23 May 1981.
46. Belfast Telegraph, 26 May 1981.
47. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol 9 (1981),  
Col. 966.
48. Belfast Telegraph, 5 August 1981.
49. W.D. Flackes, op. cit, 285.
50. The Times (London), 22 September 1981.
51. Belfast Telegraph, 23 October 1981.
52. An Phoblacht/Republican News, 5 November 1981.
53. Irish News (Belfast), 8 December 1981.
54. Irish Independent (Dublin), 20 November 1981.
55. Irish News (Belfast), 2 January 1982.
56. This was to be measured as 70% of those elected.
57. In February 1982 Haughey was re-elected Taoiseach after Fitzgerald had called a snap election in a failed attempt to increase support for his seven month old administration.
58. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 21 (1982),  
Col. 698.
59. Irish News (Belfast), 29 April 1982.
60. Ibid.
61. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol 24 (1982),  
Col. 651.
62. In April 1982 the Workers Party became the official name of what had previously been Republican Clubs in Northern Ireland and Official Sinn Fein in the Republic. From this point on in the dissertation, therefore, Provisional Sinn Fein will simply be referred to as Sinn Fein.
63. An Phoblacht/Republican News (Belfast), 29 April 1982.
64. British Parliamentary Debates (Commons) Vol 22 (1982),  
Col. 913.
65. Ibid., Vol 28 (1982), Col. 1215.
66. Irish News (Belfast), 28 September 1982.
67. Ibid., 29 September 1982.

68. Ibid., 29 September 1982.
69. Ibid., 2 October 1982.
70. See W.D. Flackes, *op. cit*, 287.
71. Irish News (Belfast), 22 October 1982.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid., 3 January 1983.
74. Ibid., 29 January 1983.
75. Ibid., 25 February 1983.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. Daily Telegraph (London), 21 April 1983.
79. Daily Express (London), 21 April 1983.
80. Daily Mail (London), 21 April 1983.
81. Irish News (Belfast), 20 May 1983.
82. Belfast Telegraph, 21 May 1983.
83. Irish News (Belfast), 21 May 1983.
84. Ibid., 28 May 1983.
85. Ibid., 30 May 1983.
86. Ibid.
87. Ibid.
88. Orange Standard (Belfast), May 1983.
89. Irish News (Belfast), 1 June 1983.
90. Ibid., 7 June 1983.
91. Ibid.
92. Belfast Telegraph, 10 June 1983.
93. Irish News (Belfast), 11 June 1983.
94. Belfast News Letter, 11 June 1983.
95. An Phoblacht/Republican News (Belfast), 10 June 1983.

96. Ulster (Belfast), August 1983.
97. By 25 February 1981, unemployment had reached a record level.
98. Times (London), 11 June 1983.
99. Cork Examiner, 11 June 1983.
100. Irish Press (Dublin), 11 June 1983.
101. Belfast News Letter, 11 June 1983.
102. Sunday Times (London), 19 June 1983.
103. Irish News (Belfast), 22 July 1983.
104. Ibid.
105. Ibid.
106. Ibid., 5 July 1983.
107. Ibid.
108. Lord Fitt, interview by author, 27 July 1989, House of Lords, London.
109. The Irish Press which would have perhaps been the most critical was out of print due to strike action.
110. Irish Independent (Dublin), 22 July 1983.
111. Irish News (Belfast), 22 July 1983.
112. British Parliamentary Debates (Lords), Vol. 444 (1983), Col. 245.
113. Irish News (Belfast), 27 October 1983.

## CONCLUSION

I believe that political opportunists although they may win short term successes, generally fail in the long run, because in due course people find them out. One cannot forever be a republican in Belfast and a socialist in London, a nationalist at Stormont and a British subject at Westminster. Nor can one build an enduring political career upon a great heap of irresponsible criticism and denigration. (Terence O'Neill, Irish News, May 25, 1968).

The above quotation has already appeared in the main body of this dissertation, but a second adduction is justified as O'Neill's statements neatly encapsulate Gerry Fitt's tactical ploys. Fitt endeavoured to defy Aesop's dictum that you cannot please all of the people all of the time. Particularly in the 1960s, Fitt strove to be all things to all men. Therefore, the remarkable volte-face, from Republican Socialist to Peer of the Realm is in reality not so remarkable as Fitt was neither a republican nor a socialist in the true sense. He was, however, a nationalist who became so disillusioned with the ideology that he felt able to join the British House of Lords. By considering each of Fitt's political labels in turn, I shall attempt to show how perceptive O'Neill was.

In contemporary Irish terms, a republican is someone who believes in uniting Ireland by physical force. Fitt was sympathetic to this tradition. In 1962 Fitt demanded the release of republican political prisoners considering them "men of principle" and "political opponents" of unionism. In 1972 he called for the granting of political status for republican prisoners. By 1980, however, he denounced republicans on hunger strike and asked the British government to deny their political demands. His stance would suggest that Fitt radically altered his views on republicans and came to betray his original ideals. This appraisal, however, is much too

simplistic. It does not appreciate that Fitt's republicanism, when exhibited, was tactical and furthermore it fails to recognise that he operated in shifting historical circumstances.

Chapter I established that the I.R.A. campaign of 1956 - 1962 was nothing more than a series of border incidents impinging little on the life of the citizens in either the north or south. It demonstrated that the republican movement did not reflect the aspirations of nationalists and that the policy of physical force was no longer viable. Fitt's apparent republicanism in the 1960s must be placed in this context. He was cunning enough to discern that republican laurels would be helpful, if not absolutely necessary, to a budding Catholic politician. Fitt was nothing if not versatile in this period. He was supportive of the republican prisoners and made sure he was seen at the annual Easter parades designed to show deference to the republican dead. In essence, in the early 1960s, Fitt's republicanism was tactical and opportunistic.

Likewise, when Fitt and Harry Diamond joined forces in 1964, the "Republican Labour Party" was a mere label based on tactical considerations. In time, Fitt was able to jettison this republican tag with no difficulty. Furthermore, in his maiden speech at Westminster, he freely acknowledged that he was not a republican in the true sense and posed as a working-class British subject with working class grievances. Although he appeared to have republican sympathies in Belfast, he showed no such inclination in London.

Although Fitt, occasionally flirted with rhetoric that suggested "unconstitutional" methods of political agitation, he was, like all politicians, totally unprepared for the re-emergence of the I.R.A. In the 1970s his previous republican posturing was totally

inappropriate and he consistently condemned the I.R.A. Although Fitt was never a true republican, he had played the role sufficiently well to convince many in Belfast of his sincerity, thus his condemnation of the I.R.A. seemed strangely inconsistent in the light of previous posturing. This apparent transfiguration left Fitt open to charges of gross betrayal with the elevation to the House of Lords the belated final insult. Yet, when one considers the nature of Fitt's republicanism, his peerage is not so paradoxical.

Like his republicanism, Fitt's socialism was largely tactical. It was also extremely vague and based on intuition rather than on political theory as the paucity of his writings illustrate. His socialism was based on bread and butter issues, or if you like, politics of the welfare state. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that Fitt was extremely conscientious in his endeavours for the working class, albeit on a clientelist basis. Indeed, it would be more appropriate to label Fitt as a "fixer" rather than a socialist, his socialism being more akin to populism.

Early in his career, Fitt had the ability to articulate the socialist arguments of James Connolly and bring them into play when necessary. This strategy was instrumental in winning election after election in the 1960s. Yet Fitt was not in the same tradition as Connolly. Fitt sought change through parliamentary means whereas Connolly sought it through the militancy of the working class. Despite some of his rhetoric Fitt was a moderate reformer; Connolly was a Revolutionary Socialist. This was no more evident than when the Northern State's existence was threatened and Fitt decided to distance himself from elements intent on realizing Connolly's ideals. Fitt's present argument that Connolly made a mistake by his

involvement in the 1916 Easter rebellion is an admission that his allegiance to Connolly became qualified. In short, Fitt's politics had nothing to do with the Connolly tradition of socialism. Indeed, if there is an Irish historical figure that can be likened to Fitt, it is John Redmond. Like Fitt, Redmond exhibited a tremendous faith that the British parliament could right Ireland's wrongs. F.S.L. Lyons said of Redmond: "He seems to have found it difficult to hate Englishmen and things English."<sup>1</sup> The same could be said of Fitt.

By the 1970s, Fitt's references to Connolly had virtually stopped. He was the leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (S.D.L.P.) which, despite Fitt's early protestations to the contrary, was not a socialist party. It became the voice of Catholics opposed to the Provisionals' campaign and was mildly reformist in social policy. Fitt was adamant that he was a socialist in a socialist party but on two crucial issues he demonstrated that this was not the case. First, when Paddy Devlin resigned from the S.D.L.P. on socialist principles, Fitt did not support him. Second, Fitt was instrumental in bringing down the Labour government in Britain in 1979, an action he does not regret, despite eleven years of anti-working class policies orchestrated by Margaret Thatcher. Furthermore, Fitt's peerage undoubtedly allows his critics to mock his socialist principles. An Irish socialist should not end up in the House of Lords.

In retrospect it is also clear that Fitt did not or could not differentiate between revolutionary socialism and the social democracy of the Labour Party. A feature of Fitt's career was his belief that the social democracy of the Labour Party would solve the

problems of Northern Ireland. He was confident that it could deliver an end to sectarian injustice and discrimination. However, it became obvious that the Labour Party lacked the will to put the necessary pressure on the unionist majority. Fitt never grasped the fact that British politicians tended to fear Ireland as a political graveyard.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1960s the Labour government did not help Fitt address the iniquities of unionism. Despite this, in the 1970s he clung to the belief that his "socialist colleagues" would make the unionists toe the line. They did not. They failed to endorse power-sharing. Rees' promise that Sunningdale would be ratified did not materialise. Orme's promise to the S.D.L.P. that the Northern Ireland Office would act strongly against U.W.C. strikers did not happen. Wilson's speech to the Loyalist strikers was counter-productive. Rees went on to placate the Provisionals, belittling the importance and political credibility of the S.D.L.P. When he ended internment it was too late. As for Mason, in Fitt's own words, he was "an anti Irish wee get." When Fitt brought down the Labour government in 1979 it was as much to do with pique as anything else. In short, it can be said that Fitt's socialism did not run very deep and his faith in the social democracy of the Labour Party was unrewarded.

Although Fitt's socialist credentials do not stand close examination, it cannot be denied that he had a deep affinity with the working class. He had a "them and us" type of attitude. Furthermore, Fitt secured some Protestant support at elections which stemmed, particularly in the 1960s, from his stance as a champion of the working class. Considering the sectarian nature of Northern

Irish society, this was a worthy achievement. In the 1960s Protestants as well as Catholics brought their problems to his clinic. A growing reputation for hard work as a public representative for the working class enabled him to partially cross the religious divide in Northern Irish politics. This was reflected in his ability to retain the Dock seat which no one had managed to do before and was instrumental in his winning the West Belfast seat in 1966. However, although Fitt may have had some Protestant admirers when in the S.D.L.P., the party itself was unable to attract the corporate Protestant community.

In 1983 the question of cross-community support for Fitt was re-opened. It would not be unreasonable to conclude that although many Protestants voted for Fitt as an anti-I.R.A. move, some cast their vote out of a sense of loyalty for past favours. Indeed, some Catholics also did so.

Although it can be argued that the political labels republican and socialist cannot be applied to Fitt with total accuracy, there is no doubt that in his early career he was a nationalist.

Chapters II, III and IV established that Fitt was a nationalist politician with very strong views on the unification of Ireland. His retrospective assertion that he was not interested in nationalism is simply an attempt to rewrite history. One only has to look at his maiden speech at Stormont in 1962 (when he strongly articulated his desire to see a united Ireland) and his public speech after the West Belfast triumph of 1966 (when he declared that he would never renounce the ideal of national unity) to establish that Fitt was indeed a nationalist.

Of course, Fitt's nationalism was much more pronounced outside

Westminster. In the United States, for example, he was openly nationalist. Furthermore, he was not adverse to criticising the government of the Irish Republic for not doing enough to end partition. Clearly, Fitt was a nationalist and there is a contradiction between his current anti-nationalist position as a Peer of the Realm and the political position on which he built his support and which helped him win numerous electoral contests.

It is clear that Fitt's political antenna shifted at some point. The watershed was power-sharing. This local emphasis was far removed from the traditional nationalist emphasis on the whole Irish nation. Fitt became convinced of the merit of power-sharing.<sup>3</sup> Fitt's retrospective assertion that he wanted nothing from Sunningdale as a cross community Executive had already been agreed, negates years of his nationalist rhetoric. After the fall of the Executive Fitt spoke of power-sharing as a golden age and made its restoration his main political aim. Fitt's position, therefore, had changed from wanting to initiate the demise of the Northern state to reform of it and then collaboration in its continued existence. It would be naive in the extreme to suggest that politicians do not change their policies when circumstances suit. Fitt, however, feels unable to acknowledge that his politics changed, thus leaving himself open to charges of political opportunism.

The idea that power-sharing was a watershed in Fitt's career is not a neat concept. Although he became convinced of power-sharing's benefits, he led a party that was not. In contrast, the S.D.L.P. became increasingly nationalist orientated. Fitt supported this position in public but evidence suggests that in private he did not. He played a very duplicitous game that was reflected in two political

manoeuvres that were completely contradictory.

In 1979 he brought down the Labour government on principles of nationalism arguing against greater Ulster representation at Westminster. This was a complete reversal of his position as articulated in his maiden Westminster speech which demanded parity of democracy. Eight months later he resigned his leadership of the S.D.L.P. because the party had become, in his opinion, too stridently nationalist. He had now crossed the political divide and repudiated nationalism. His joining of the House of Lords was tantamount to giving unconditional support to British policy on Northern Ireland and endorsing the continuation of partition. In effect, Fitt had become a unionist.

The question that begs answering is what kind of political animal was Fitt that he could entertain various political labels and traverse such a strange political course? The answer lies in his individuality and his instinct to survive politically. Although the political labels of republican, socialist and nationalist had a non-adhesive quality, Fitt was always a "survivor." The political transference from Dock Irish Labour to Republican Labour to S.D.L.P. to Independent to House of Lords were all made with the minimum of fuss. It was not really that a one time Republican Socialist entered the Upper House but rather a political chameleon who refused to be denied a political forum even though he knew it would stretch if not ruin his political credibility. To Fitt the political limelight was more important than political ideology. Of course, Fitt's stance on the hunger strikes does not fit into this pattern of survival. It can only be assumed that Fitt took his position on this life and death issue on moral grounds.

Fitt's survival instincts were complemented by his individuality. He never doubted his own political intuition. Chapter II demonstrated that Fitt's 1966 election victory was not symptomatic of the metamorphosis in Catholic politics that was outlined in Chapter I. Although he may have been aided by the increased desire for representation and attendance at Westminster he was essentially a "lone operator" uninterested in large parties. He clung to his individualism and would not accept the Labour whip. Nevertheless, although Fitt was not a member of the Northern Irish Catholic middle class that emerged in the late 1950s, he became their political leader. The incongruity of this is shown by Fitt's severe clashes with the middle class National Democratic Party and his acceptance of the leadership of the S.D.L.P. which incorporated and was greatly influenced by the N.D.P.

Fitt was correct to hold on to his independence for he was never cut out to be a party politician, as his spell with the S.D.L.P. proved. No doubt there was considerable pressure on him to join the S.D.L.P. yet he was aware that if he failed to join he would lose the political limelight. In reality he was only the titular head. The publishing magnate, Cecil King, in his diary of January 18, 1974, noted Ian Paisley "has no opinion of Fitt, but regards Hume as the effective leader of the S.D.L.P."<sup>4</sup>

Fitt's figurehead position in the S.D.L.P. should not detract from the fact that he has made a mark in both British and Irish history. His maiden speech at Westminster in 1966 stands as a landmark in Irish history as does his direct and dramatic involvement in the Derry civil rights march in 1968. Both actions ensured that he played a major role in destabilizing the Stormont government and,

in consequence the Northern state. In addition, he was instrumental in bringing British troops to Belfast, with a resultant quagmire of political and armed struggle which created a political dilemma for him that he could never resolve. It should also be remembered that for a day he was acting Chief Minister for Northern Ireland in the period of power-sharing. Furthermore, many on the British left will also remember him for his part in bringing Margaret Thatcher to power.

How Fitt will be viewed historically can not be so well defined. In truth, insufficient years have passed to make a balanced assessment. He is perceived differently by different people. Republicans simply see him as an Irish Quisling. On the other hand, the tabloid press in Britain praise him as "Lord Courage."<sup>5</sup> Even the Irish News has put him on the road to rehabilitation only a few years after castigating him for his elevation to the peerage. In an editorial marking twenty years of the "troubles" the paper states:

The historical record for every objective observer and researcher will show that Fitt was one of the outstanding public figures of the Northern Ireland scene who, from the outset, did not compromise with violence. He revealed a political and moral courage that was truly remarkable.<sup>6</sup>

One thing is certain about Gerry Fitt, he was one of the most colourful figures in Irish politics. When defeated by Adams in June 1983 admirers and critics alike would have agreed that it was the end of an era.

## NOTES

1. F.S.L. Lyons, Ireland since the Famine (London: Fontanna, 1985), 261.

2. An example of British politicians fear of involvement in Northern Irish affairs was provided by Tony Benn, who as Minister of Technology recorded in his diary on August 19, 1969 a cabinet meeting held to discuss the situation in Ulster. He noted:

Denis (Healey, Minister of Defence) said he thought it was better to get Chichester-Clark, or another Ulsterman to carry the can ... Jim (Callaghan) said he thought Chichester-Clark was anxious to help because he was a frightened man.

Jim then considered the possibility of a broadly based government, although it was agreed that this should not be done unless it was acceptable. But if all else fails what do we do? Denis stressed again. Let's keep Chichester-Clark carrying the can. Jim agreed. Yes I too want to avoid responsibility.

Independent (London), 14 December 1987.

3. Peter McLachlan who was one of Brian Faulkner's closest advisers, particularly during the Sunningdale Conference, recalls the aftermath of the first meeting of the Assembly after the Power-Sharing Executive took office:

There was Fitt, myself and three or four others. Fitt's coat was across on a stand just on the other side of the corridor and Faulkner fetched the coat and he held it for Fitt to put on and Fitt's eyes filled with tears and he said "this is a moment in history with the Unionist Chief Executive holding the coat for an S.D.L.P. Deputy Chief Executive, this is a great moment." And he was very moved, you could see that he was very moved by that symbolic gesture.

Peter McLachlan, interview by author, 14 February 1991, Belfast.

4. C. King, Diary 1970 - 1974 (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1975), 341.

5. Sunday Mirror Magazine (London), 6 May 1990.

6. Irish News (Belfast), 14 August 1989.

TABLE ONE1958 STORMONT GENERAL ELECTIONBELFAST - DOCK

---

Oliver, W	(Unionist)	3,156
Fitt, G	(Dock Irish Labour)	2,900

---

Unionist gain : Majority 256

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE TWO1958 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONBELFAST - DOCK


---

* Elected:	* Fitt, G	(Dock Irish Labour)	1,862
	* Atcheson, W	(Unionist)	1,838
	* O'Kane, J	(Dock Irish Labour)	1,828
	Cardwell, J	(Unionist)	1,806
	Williamson, D	(Unionist)	1,681
	Hawkes, H	(Independent Unionist)	403

---

Two Dock Irish Labour gains from Unionists

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE THREE1961 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONBELFAST - DOCK


---

* Elected	* Fitt, G	(Dock Irish Labour)	1,984
	* Gallagher, J	(Dock Irish Labour)	1,947
	* Atcheson, W	(Unionist)	1,593
	McNeil, J.A	(Unionist)	1,494
	Williamson, D	(Unionist)	1,332

---

No change

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE FOUR1962 STORMONT GENERAL ELECTIONBELFAST - DOCK

---

Fitt, G	(Dock Irish Labour)	3,288
Oliver, W	(Unionist)	2,781

---

Dock Irish Labour gain Majority 507

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE FIVE1964 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONBELFAST - DOCK


---

* Elected:	* Fitt, G	(Republican Labour)	2,140
	* Fitzpatrick, T	(Republican Labour)	2,002
	* McMenamin, J	(Republican Labour)	1,916
	McMaster, S	(Unionist)	1,401
	McDowell, W	(Unionist)	1,337
	Maginnis, C	(Unionist)	1,291
	Wilson, P	(Labour)	731

---

One Republican Labour gain from Unionists

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE SIX1964 WESTMINSTER ELECTIONBELFAST - WEST

---

Kilfedder, J	(Unionist)	21,337
Diamond, H	(Republican Labour)	14,678
Boyd, W	(Northern Ireland Labour Party)	12,571
McMillan, L	(Republican)	3,256

---

No change Unionist Majority 6,659

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE SEVEN1965 STORMONT GENERAL ELECTIONBELFAST - DOCK

---

Fitt, G	(Republican Labour)	3,326
Oliver, W	(Unionist)	2,016

---

No change Republican Labour majority 1,310

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE EIGHT1966 WESTMINSTER GENERAL ELECTIONBELFAST - WEST

---

Fitt, G	(Republican Labour)	26,292
Kilfedder, J	(Unionist)	24,281

---

Unionist loss to Republican Labour: Republican Labour majority 2,011

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE NINE1967 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONBELFAST - DOCKALDERMAN


---

Fitt, G	(Republican Labour)	2,499
Millar, F	(Unionist)	1,426

COUNCILLORS


---

Fitzpatrick, T	(Republican Labour)	2,405
Kelley, P	(Republican Labour)	2,274
Kennedy, P	(Republican Labour)	2,231
Fenton, R	(Unionist)	1,407
Duff, S	(Unionist)	1,319

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE TEN1969 STORMONT ELECTIONBELFAST - DOCK

---

Fitt, G	(Republican Labour)	3,274
Smith, H	(Unionist)	1,936

---

Republican Labour majority 1,338

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

**TABLE ELEVEN****1970 WESTMINSTER GENERAL ELECTION****BELFAST - WEST**

---

Fitt, G	(Republican Labour)	30,649
McRoberts, B	(Unionist)	27,451

---

No change Republican Labour majority 3,198

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE TWELVE1972 LOCAL GOVERNMENT BY-ELECTIONBELFAST - DOCK

---

Fitt, A	(Independent)	2,536
Robb, D	(Constitution Party)	288

---

Majority 2,248

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE THIRTEEN1973 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONBELFAST AREA 'G'Count

---

**\* Elected**

* Laird, M	(Unionist)	3,632	1
* Ditty, H	(Unionist)	3,556	1
* Fitt, G	(Social Democratic & Labour Party)	2,876	1
* Kidd, H	(Unionist)	2,651	1
* Millar, S	(Independent Unionist)	2,291	2
* McKeown, M	(Independent Unionist)	572	15
McAlea, J	(Republican Club)	376	
Boyle, J	(Northern Ireland Labour Party)	368	
McGlade, F	(Republican Club)	291	
O'Kane, J	(Republican Labour)	193	
Pakenham, T	(Northern Ireland Labour Party)	182	
O'Hara, D	(Republican Club)	174	
Sharkley, J	(Northern Ireland Labour Party)	132	
Saunders, M	(Independent)	52	
Scullion, H	(Republican Labour)	19	
Rigby, J	(Independent)	13	

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Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE FOURTEEN1973 ASSEMBLY ELECTIONBELFAST NORTH


---

		<u>1st Pref</u>	<u>Count</u>
(The Six Elected)			
Fitt, G	(Social Democratic & Labour Party)	8,264	1
McQuade, J	(Democratic Unionist Loyalist Coalition)	5,148	11
Hall Thompson, L	(Official Unionist)	5,694	14
Morgan W.J	(Official Unionist)	5,190	15
Millar, F	(Unionist)	4,187	15
Ferguson, J	(Alliance)	1,958	15

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Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE FIFTEENFebruary 1974 Westminster General ElectionBELFAST - WEST


---

Fitt, G	(Social Democratic & Labour Party)	19,554
McQuade, J	(Democratic Unionist Party - United Ulster Unionist Council)	17,374
Price, A	(Independent)	5,612
Brady, J	(Republican Club)	3,088
Boyd, W.R.	(Northern Ireland Labour Party)	1,989
No change Social Democratic & Labour Party majority		2,180

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Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE SIXTEENOCTOBER 1974 WESTMINSTER GENERAL ELECTIONBELFAST - WEST


---

Fitt, G	(Social Democratic & Labour Party)	21,821
McQuade, J	(Democratic Unionist Party - United Ulster Unionist Council)	16,265
O'Kane, K	(Republican Club)	3,547
Gibson, S	(Volunteer Political Party)	2,690
Kerins, P	(Communist)	203
No change Social Democratic & Labour Party majority		5,556

---

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE SEVENTEEN1975 CONVENTION ELECTIONBELFAST - NORTH


---

		<u>1st Pref</u>	<u>Count</u>
Fitt, G	(Social Democratic & Labour Party)	6,454	1
Bell, W	(Unionist - United Ulster Unionist Council)	6,268	1
Millar, F	(Independent - United Ulster Unionist Council)	5,687	7
Morgan, W	(Unionist - United Ulster Unionist Council)	5,558	8
Hall-Thompson, L	(Unionist Party of Northern Ireland)	3,577	10
Annon, W.T.	(Democratic Unionist Party - United Ulster Unionist Council)	4,132	10

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6 Elected (Quota 6,230)

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE EIGHTEEN1977 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONBELFAST 'G'First Preference


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* Fitt, G	(Social Democratic & Labour Party)	3,006
* Ashby, F.E.	(Democratic Unionist Party)	1,377
* Ditty, H.	(Official Unionist)	1,043
* Lynch, S.	(Republican Club)	1,323
* Walker, C.	(Official Unionist)	779
Haffney, G.A.	(Democratic Unionist Party)	742
Laird, M.	(Official Unionist)	592
Millar, S.	(Official Unionist)	515
Kidd, H.	(Independent Unionist)	387
* McKeown, M.	(Alliance)	320

\* Elected

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Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE NINETEEN1979 WESTMINSTER GENERAL ELECTIONBELFAST - WEST


---

Fitt, G	(Social Democratic & Labour Party)	16,480
Passmore, T	(Official Unionist)	8,245
Dickson, W	(Democratic Unionist Party)	3,716
Brennan, B	(Republican Club)	2,284
Cousins, J	(Alliance)	2,024
Peters, D	(Northern Ireland Labour Party)	540

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(Spoiled votes 2,283)

No change Social Democratic & Labour Party majority 8,235

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE TWENTY1981 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONBELFAST - AREA G - 1st PREFERENCE


---

Ashby, F E	(Democratic Unionist Party)	2,076
O'Hare, F	(Peoples Democracy)	1,953
Walker, C	(Official Unionist)	1,173
Millar, S	(New Ulster Political Research Group)	1,420
Lynch, S	(Workers Party Republican Club)	750
Feeney, B	(Social Democratic & Labour Party)	749
Ditty, H	(Official Unionist)	596
Fitt, G	(Socialist)	541
Coggle, J A	(Democratic Unionist Party)	392
McGarry, P J	(Alliance)	313

**NB:** The New Ulster Research Group were the Political Wing of the U.D.A.

Result supplied by the Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE TWENTY ONE1982 ASSEMBLY ELECTIONBELFAST - WEST

---

4 Elected (Quota 6,852)		Count	1st Pref
Adams, G	(Provisional Sinn Fein)	1	8,740
Hendron, J	(Social Democratic & Labour Party)	5	5,207
Passmore, T	(Official Unionist)	8	4,505
Glendenning, W	(Alliance)	8	2,733

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Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE TWENTY TWO1983 WESTMINSTER GENERAL ELECTIONBELFAST - WEST

---

Adams, G	(Provisional Sinn Fein)	16,379
Hendron, J	(Social Democratic & Labour Party)	10,934
Fitt, G	(Independent)	10,326
Passmore, T	(Official Unionist)	2,435
Haffey, G A	(Democratic Unionist Party)	2,399
McMahon, Ms M	(Workers Party)	1,893

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Provisional Sinn Fein majority 5,445

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

TABLE TWENTY THREE1987 WESTMINSTER ELECTIONBELFAST - WEST

---

Adams, G	(Sinn Fein)	16,862
Hendron, Dr J	(Social Democratic & Labour Party)	14,641
Millar, F	(Democratic Unionist Party)	7,646
McMahon, Ms M	(Workers Party)	1,819

---

Sinn Fein majority 2,221

No change

Result supplied by Belfast Public Records Office

## GLOSSARY

C.D.U.	Campaign for Democracy in Ulster.
C.S.J.	Campaign for Social Justice.
D.U.P.	Democratic Unionist Party.
E.E.C.	European Economic Community.
I.I.P.	Irish Independence Party.
I.N.L.A.	Irish National Liberation Army.
I.R.A.	Irish Republican Party.
I.T.G.W.U.	Irish Transport and General Workers Union.
M.P.	Member of Parliament.
N.D.P.	National Democratic Party.
N.I.	Northern Ireland.
N.I.C.R.A.	Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association.
N.I.L.P.	Northern Ireland Labour Party.
N.P.F.	National Political Front.
O.I.R.A.	Official Irish Republican Army.
P.D.	Peoples Democracy.
P.I.R.A.	Provisional Irish Republican Army.
P.R.	Proportional Representation.
R.T.E.	Radio Telefis Eireann.
R.U.C.	Royal Ulster Constabulary.
S.D.L.P.	Social Democratic and Labour Party.
T.D.	Member of the Dail.
U.D.A.	Ulster Defence Association.

U.D.R.	Ulster Defence Regiment.
U.F.F.	Ulster Freedom Fighters.
U.K.	United Kingdom.
U.N.	United Nations.
U.P.A.	Ulster Protestant Action.
U.U.U.C.	United Ulster Unionist Coalition.
U.V.F.	Ulster Volunteer Force.
U.W.C.	Ulster Workers Council.
V.P.P.	Volunteer Political Party.

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