

# **Londonderry Corporation Under Nationalist Rule 1920-23**

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## **Introduction**

In January 1920, Nationalists achieved a 21-19 majority on Londonderry Corporation under a system of proportional representation (PR) which had received minimal backing from Irish MPs at Westminster. It had been imposed by English politicians who found PR completely unacceptable in their own local authorities. It was a cynical attempt to limit Sinn Fein influence in the South and West of Ireland, without reference to Ulster's interests. More details can be found elsewhere <sup>1</sup>.

Examining the attitudes of Nationalists when they were in control of a local authority shaped Unionist views about the nature of the minority population. In particular, it highlighted the difficulties of dealing with political representatives who did not form a Loyal Opposition, but were focused on threatening the existence of the Northern Ireland state.

## **Jekyll and Hyde**

During the three years in which Nationalists were in control, much of the business which came before the Corporation was of a routine nature. These matters did not necessarily divide councillors on a Unionist-Nationalist basis. Even when an issue came up which provoked some controversy, voting could be on a cross-party basis.

For instance, prices and business incomes tended to fall during this period, and private employers responded by reducing wages. This was at a time when people did not fully appreciate the fact that falling employee wages might lead to reduced economic demand and a possible depression. It was perhaps inevitable that someone on the council would suggest that the Corporation should look at its own employees' wages.

It was the Nationalist Mayor, Hugh O'Doherty, who suggested that a reduction in manual workers' wages should be considered. The proposal was defeated by 11 votes to 10 at the Corporation meeting on 21 November 1921, when there was clearly a poor attendance. The most interesting point is that the motion was supported by four Nationalists and six Unionists, and opposed by ten Nationalists and one Unionist. That one Unionist was D.P. Thompson, who was closely associated with the Ulster Unionist Labour Association <sup>2</sup>.

This issue was revisited in February 1922, when the Corporation's Finance Committee submitted a report to the full council which included a recommendation that manual workers' wages be reduced. Nationalist Councillor Edward McCafferty moved an amendment which proposed that the matter be referred to a small committee, thus delaying the wage cuts. There was a better attendance this time and the vote on the amendment was tied 15-15. In favour of the amendment (and hence against immediate wage cuts) were twelve Nationalists and three Unionists. Against were four Nationalists and eleven Unionists). The Mayor used his casting vote to defeat the amendment and the Finance Committee's recommendation was accepted <sup>3</sup>.

In other areas there was a fair amount of unanimity. The Banagher Water Scheme (to provide Londonderry with a reliable water supply) saw the Corporation borrowing a large sum to fund this capital project <sup>4</sup>. Unemployment relief programmes, partly

government funded, were fairly non-controversial. Somewhat surprisingly, there was a significant consensus that a public sector housing programme was beyond the Corporation unless there was government assistance.

In September 1920, the Mayor, Hugh O'Doherty, said "They required money, and had not got it. The Act of Parliament which was passed to enable municipalities to erect houses did not commend itself to any municipality in Ireland. If houses were erected under it the burden that would fall on the rates would be very heavy". He would have liked to see some houses built but "not only was the money provided by the Treasury insufficient, but they had not water for the houses they had, and until they could deal with the finances of the water scheme they had in hand he was afraid it would not be possible to proceed with the erection of any large number of houses until they were in a position to supply them with water"<sup>5</sup>.

In the 1960s, civil rights activists did not take water and sewerage very seriously. The lack of these services was seen as a poor excuse for not building houses. It is interesting that the Nationalists, when they were in control, took more account of such things.

Housing came up again in February 1921 when the Corporation received a delegation from the Derry Trades Council. Hugh O'Doherty told them that the Corporation "could not in the present condition of the rates of the city begin to build houses without regard to expenses. If they did they would bring to a standstill industry and the working men depending on industry"<sup>6</sup>.

During debates on these topics there was little rancour, and the Mayor, in chairing meetings, often had more problems keeping his own group in order than the Unionists. Looking back on his three year reign as Mayor, the Unionist newspaper, the *Londonderry Sentinel*, wrote in an editorial that "He has been a good Mayor to this extent, that with great courage and independence he has kept in order the unruly team acknowledging his leadership, and has thus succeeded in mitigating in large degree the evils which would otherwise have followed the placing in power in the Corporation of a number of men and one woman without municipal experience"<sup>7</sup>.

### **A Bridge Too Far**

Even when the question before the Corporation involved what most people would regard as fairly technical issues, constitutional politics could rear their head. At this time, the Carlisle Bridge over the River Foyle was the responsibility of the Londonderry Bridge Commission. The bridge was in poor condition and the commissioners did not have the money to maintain it. In 1921, the Corporation therefore promoted a piece of local legislation in the Westminster Parliament to take over responsibility for the bridge. The Bridge Commissioners were initially agreeable, and in the Corporation there was cross-party support<sup>8</sup>. There were, however, objections from the Londonderry County Council and the Bill was withdrawn<sup>9</sup>.

In November 1921, the Londonderry Bridge Commissioners felt that the way ahead was to promote a bill in the Northern Ireland Parliament, where it was likely to receive a sympathetic hearing. However the Commissioners, in their meeting with the Londonderry Corporation, had received a somewhat hostile reception, and it turned on the Nationalists' attitude to the new Parliament<sup>10</sup>.

In the following March, the Commissioners published an official notice outlining their intention to promote a bill in the Northern Ireland Parliament. This would empower them to borrow money to be spent on capital works, and would require the Londonderry Corporation and the County Councils of Londonderry and Tyrone to contribute sums towards the maintenance of the bridge <sup>11</sup>.

The bill was something in which the Corporation should normally have expressed an interest, but at its meeting in April 1922, the constitutional issue came up again. The Town Clerk suggested that the Corporation re-open negotiations with the Bridge Commissioners with a view to taking over responsibility for the bridge, as originally intended. Nationalist Councillor Con Doherty proposed this but could not find a seconder.

The Mayor said that “If a Government were legislating in Ireland in which the people of all sections had confidence undoubtedly it would be their duty to promote a Bill to take over the bridge”, but in referring to the Northern Ireland Parliament he said that “this Nationalist Corporation declines to recognise that body as properly established....Moreover, every interest of this city is opposed to the interests of the Belfast Parliament and the men who compose that Parliament, and they would be delighted, I have not the slightest doubt, to give effect to any Bill, no matter by whomsoever promoted, that would handicap this city and its administration....I suggest to you that we take no action until such time as there is a Parliament functioning in Ireland in which we have confidence” <sup>12</sup>.

The Bill therefore went forward without the Corporation having any say in the matter. It was probably a good example of cutting off your nose to spite your face. It may also seem puzzling that the British Parliament at Westminster was more acceptable than the Northern Ireland Parliament, but such are the vagaries of Irish politics.

O’Doherty often used his skills as a solicitor to maintain a civilised tone in the Corporation and for long periods mild mannered Dr Jekyll seem to be in control of the Londonderry Corporation, but there were more glimpses of the wild Mr Hyde from the very beginning. It would be unfair to attribute all these dual qualities to O’Doherty alone. Although he did do a lot of the speaking in meetings, he was simply representative of a tradition.

### **Mr Hyde Puts in an Appearance**

In his very first Corporation meeting as Mayor, Hugh O’Doherty set the tone by saying of the Union Jack, “The flying of insulting flags from this building [the Londonderry Guildhall] must be discontinued, and I now give in the name of the majority in this Chamber instructions to that effect”. That was certainly not designed to win friends and influence people.

He continued, “I will not attend any function where any speech is made or toast drunk which might seem, through my presence as Mayor, to give the assent of this Nationalist Corporation to the present Government of Ireland” <sup>13</sup>.

There were other petty snubs based on anti-British feeling. Alderman Charles Bradley successfully proposed a motion in a full council meeting removing Lord French from Londonderry’s list of freemen. French was from a Catholic family. He was Commander in Chief of the Home forces 1916-18, and then Lord Lieutenant of

Ireland 1918-22<sup>14</sup>. His name was later restored to the list of freemen when Unionists took back control of the Corporation<sup>15</sup>.

Alderman Terence MacSwiney was Lord Mayor of Cork, and an IRA man. He had been convicted of possessing a Royal Irish Constabulary cipher code and seditious material, and was serving his time in Brixton Prison in London. He went on hunger strike for 74 days and starved himself to death in spite of doctors' attempts to feed him and save his life<sup>16</sup>. At the Lighting Committee of the Corporation, the Mayor promoted a motion expressing sympathy at the death of "the heroic Lord Mayor of Cork"<sup>17</sup>.

It had been the Corporation's practice to present an address of welcome to each new Lord Lieutenant, the monarch's personal representative in Ireland. The new appointee was Lord Fitzalan, another Roman Catholic. Before the Nationalists voted this down on party lines, the Mayor made his customary speech. "I do not believe that the citizens of Derry acquit the British Government for the atrocities which are daily being perpetrated in Ireland...I do believe that the citizens of Derry will approve of the Corporation's action in refusing an address of welcome to the representative of the British Government in Ireland"<sup>18</sup>.

Sir Henry Wilson was Westminster MP for North Down (elected unopposed in a by-election in February 1922) and former Chief of the Imperial General Staff. He was gunned down outside his London home by Reginald Dunne and Joseph O'Sullivan. Unionists on the Londonderry Corporation asked that standing orders be suspended so that they could pass a motion expressing condolences to his widow. The Mayor, Hugh O'Doherty, dismissed the request, saying "That gentleman was shot by two Englishmen". In fact, Dunne and O'Sullivan were IRA members, born in London of Irish parents. They very much self-identified as Irish. Unionists would have interpreted O'Doherty's ruling as a calculated insult<sup>19</sup>.

### **The Northern Ireland Parliament – Degrees of Opposition**

As the Corporation entered 1922 it was to see more politically contentious issues discussed by the full council, often at special meetings to consider particular questions. This reflected to some extent the constitutional changes which were taking place at the time. The Government of Ireland Act had provided for two parliaments in Ireland, although only the Northern version operated as originally intended. The majority of people in the South and West of Ireland had expressed a wish to leave the United Kingdom, and they were subsequently to be granted their wish. A clear majority of those who lived in the six Ulster counties which were to make up Northern Ireland indicated that they wished to remain part of the United Kingdom.

The Northern Ireland Parliament had met for the first time in June 1921 and the handover of responsibilities from the old administration based in Dublin was proceeding at a steady pace. The situation in the South was more complicated. The IRA had waged what was later described as the War of Independence between 1919 and 1921 in an attempt to force the whole of Ireland out of the United Kingdom. This attempt failed, but the question arose as to what alternative settlement would be reached.

At the end of 1921, supporters of Michael Collins accepted an offer of dominion status within the commonwealth, similar to the position of Canada, for the 26 southern counties which were to be known as the Irish Free State. The terms of this

agreement were enshrined in a Treaty. Eamon de Valera would not accept this and wanted to fight on to coerce Ulster into a 32 county republic. Collins won the support of a narrow majority of Sinn Fein MPs and an election in June 1922 saw him gain a larger margin of victory over de Valera from the voting public. This did not settle the matter, and the split led to a civil war between the opposing factions which extended into 1923. These turbulent events could not fail to have an impact on politics in Londonderry.

Hugh O'Doherty did a lot of the talking on the Nationalist side of the fence, and far more than a Mayor would normally be expected to. The Mayor usually chairs a council meeting and lets others do the talking, but this was not O'Doherty's style. He loved making speeches. However, as 1922 opened, he used his power to block a motion proposed by other members of his own Nationalist group.

With local divisions appearing between those who supported Collins and de Valera, five Sinn Fein members of the majority group put forward a resolution which asserted the right of Londonderry to be included in the Irish Free State's Parliament. But it also said "We the Corporation of Derry City, thoroughly representative of the citizens, and acting in their best interests, hereby pledge our allegiance to Dail Eireann, and our best endeavours to ensure that our city will take its rightful place in the Parliament of the majority of the Irish people."

Councillors Shiel and Hegarty were allowed to make their speeches proposing and seconding the motion, before the Mayor asked, "Just let me understand. Is it Dail Eireann or the Irish Free State you support?", to which Hegarty replied "The Government of the Irish nation". O'Doherty asked him the same question again, and Shiel advised Hegarty "Don't answer that"<sup>20</sup>.

This involves an obscure point of Nationalist and Republican ideology which requires some explanation. In the 1918 Westminster elections, Sinn Fein swept the board in the South and West of Ireland. Those Sinn Fein MPs formed themselves into an unofficial body which they referred to as Dail Eireann, and declared themselves to be the true Government of an Irish Republic. For many decades afterwards, the IRA recognised this 1918 Dail as the Government, rejecting the elected parliaments sitting in Dublin and Belfast as illegitimate bodies. The fact that the present day parliament in Dublin calls itself Dail Eireann only tends to muddy the water.

Returning to the situation in 1922, the controversy between Collins and de Valera meant that, at that time, the latter repudiated the concept of the Irish Free State, although he later became its Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and President. He maintained that the 1918 Dail was still the legitimate parliament. Thus, it did seem that simultaneously pledging allegiance to Dail Eireann and the Irish Free State involved a certain amount of ambiguity as to the proposers' position.

We may suppose that, from a legal point of view, it was none of the Mayor's business whether the motion was clear or not. If political motions in local councils deemed not clear were all ruled out of order, there could be very few resolutions. Another Nationalist, Alderman Bonner, got closer to the group's central concern. Other councils had pledged allegiance to a government outside Northern Ireland and had refused to acknowledge the authorities in the newly formed state. This had resulted in them having a commissioner imposed on them so that the business of those councils could continue.

Having this in mind, Bonner said that “if the Corporation passed the resolution it would only cause confusion, strife, misunderstanding, and hardship. The whole administration would be disorganised and the workers would probably suffer. And the administration would be run by the Northern Parliament whilst they would be powerless to stop it”. For the Unionists, Councillor Magee said of the motion “If it was passed the Council would lose approximately £10,000 in grants. They would also be deprived of money for the relief of unemployment, which would be a cruel hardship on the unemployed”. Another Nationalist, Alderman Meenan, appealed to the proposers of the motion to withdraw it.

Having let everyone have their say, the Mayor reserved for himself the final speech. “I am told by the gentlemen who brought forward this resolution that the passing away of this council into the hands of the military or the police will help our case. Such folly! Such folly!...my opinion is that the Catholics and Nationalists of Derry will have committed a fatuous act, an act which would entitle them to be sent to Gransha [a hospital specialising in mental health problems], if they gave up control of Derry and the Council”.

The Nationalist controlled Tyrone County Council was one of those authorities which had the threat of a commissioner being imposed upon it when it refused to co-operate with the Northern Ireland authorities. Hugh O’Doherty referred to it in his speech. “Tyrone has been cited. Tyrone has thought better of it. It has gone back. Fermanagh has been cited. Fermanagh is in the possession of the representatives of the Orange Lodges of Belfast...There is no room for disunion amongst the Catholic Nationalists of Derry. Our friends on the other side [the Unionists] keep united. We will be united to a man”<sup>21</sup>.

With the Nationalist coalition obviously split, that seemed to be a very difficult objective to achieve. Councillors did not mind expressing support for developments in the South and their opposition to being in Northern Ireland. In August 1921 the council had resolved that the majority of Londonderry’s citizens would refuse to recognise the Northern Ireland Parliament’s authority. “We refuse to consent to any such separation from the rest of Ireland, and pledge ourselves to oppose it steadfastly and to make the fullest use of our right to nullifying it”<sup>22</sup>. That did not commit the Corporation to doing anything in particular, but the Mayor saw this latest motion as having more serious consequences. How was he to escape from a situation which might possibly see a Nationalist motion defeated?

True to the example of his contemporary, Harry Houdini, Hugh O’Doherty came up with a solution. He said that “in dealing with this motion which is before me, I rule it out on the specific ground that my friend, Councillor Shiel, cannot have the benefit of both worlds. He cannot have the benefit of the Dail which is a Republican form of Government, and the Free State, which is Monarchist....I rule this motion out of order and declare the meeting closed”<sup>23</sup>.

### **Nationalists Reunited**

The legality of what O’Doherty had done was highly doubtful, but it was a political masterstroke. By the time the dust settled, a measure of unity had been restored to the Nationalist group. The reconciliation was complete by the end of January 1922 when the Mayor himself proposed a motion on partition at a meeting of the Corporation.

“That we hereby renew our protest at the partition of Ireland, which is injurious to the best interests of Ireland, and our city in particular. Until the question is finally settled we hereby direct the Town Clerk to have communication with the Governments of the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland in respect of any matters affecting our interests, and also that copies of the minutes of the proceedings of this Council be forwarded to both”. The motion also appointed a delegation to visit Michael Collins to “impress on him the determination of this Council and the citizens to resist the cutting off of the city from the Free State”<sup>24</sup>. A number of Unionists were named as suggested members of the delegation, but not surprisingly none of them were interested in telling Michael Collins how much they hated being British.

O’Doherty explained that “there is no fundamental difference between my friend Councillor Shiel and myself on the partition of Ireland. It is a difference of ways and means”. The Mayor reported on a previous meeting he had with Arthur Griffith who, at the time of this council meeting, had just taken over as President of Dail Eireann following the resignation of Eamon de Valera. Griffith is said to have stated “Mr Mayor, I approve of the manner in which you are administering Derry”. When the vote was taken, all the Nationalist group was behind the resolution<sup>25</sup>.

The Corporation meeting was followed quickly by an anti-partition rally in the Guildhall on 2 February 1922. A letter of support was read from the Catholic Bishop of Derry. Hugh O’Doherty was unsurprisingly the main speaker and was in more militant mood than usual. He had been at a meeting of Nationalist representatives in Dublin’s Mansion House. “The Treaty had that day appeared, and he seized upon the opportunity then given him of denouncing it in so far as it gave it into the power of any Irishmen to cut themselves off from the country of their birth”. He continued, “I tell you and I tell them [the Protestant merchants of Londonderry] that this fight is going to be no child’s play. We, Nationalists, who have been born into these six counties are not going to allow our birthright to be sold for a mess of pottage. If this abortion of a Parliament continues to assert its claims in Belfast to flout Ireland and the will of the Irish people, then the fight will go on with the gloves off”. O’Doherty hinted darkly that the Catholic boycott of Belfast businesses could in future be directed against Londonderry merchants with the wrong kind of views<sup>26</sup>.

A Corporation delegation, consisting of nine Nationalists, did go to see Michael Collins in Dublin a few days later. “Mr Collins in reply said he had understood the case they had put before him, and he appreciated the arguments the Mayor had submitted. He referred to the statement he had issued, in which he outlined his views on the question of the Boundary Commission, and explained that it was the intention of the Government to set up an Advisory Committee to advise them on matters concerning the North-East. There was, he added, one common platform on which all Nationalists in the North-East could unite – viz., that of anti-partition”<sup>27</sup>.

The Irish Boundary Commission was a very odd concession made by the British Government to Michael Collins. It held out the prospect that the boundary between Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State might be changed. The Boundary Commission did not conclude its deliberations until 1925 and recommended only small areas of land to be transferred between the two countries. Near Londonderry the suggestion was that Northern Ireland take in part of East Donegal, where there was a Protestant majority. The report was, by agreement, officially suppressed because it pleased neither side, and the boundary was left alone<sup>28</sup>. Its recommendations only came to light when they were leaked by the *Morning Post*, and republished in the

Northern Ireland newspapers <sup>29</sup>. The Irish Boundary Commission could well be viewed as an error of judgement on the part of the British Government. It was a destabilising influence around the border with different groups hoping and fearing that they were to be transferred to a different jurisdiction.

### **Burning Londonderry to the Ground**

In May 1922, IRA members for and against the Treaty concluded by Michael Collins teetered towards civil war in the South and West of Ireland. Responsibility for law and order was nominally passing into the hands of the Irish Free State, but as the British authorities withdrew, there was widespread lawlessness. Those IRA members opposed to the Treaty became known as irregulars. They engaged in increasingly sectarian behaviour, attacking the homes of Southern Protestants and people of any religion who had previously been members of the Royal Irish Constabulary.

The *Londonderry Sentinel* reported that “The persecution of Loyalists in County Donegal and other parts of Southern Ireland is becoming so terrible that Protestant families are finding it absolutely necessary to forsake their homes and seek refuge in Londonderry and elsewhere in Northern Ireland” <sup>30</sup>. Around 1000 IRA irregulars were said to be massing in East Donegal, and as was their custom, many were forcibly billeted with Protestant families around Raphoe and St. Johnston <sup>31</sup>. Donegal Protestants from the Castlefin area were reported fleeing to Castlederg in Northern Ireland <sup>32</sup>.

When forces loyal to the Irish Free State began to get a grip on the situation in Donegal, the irregulars seem to have fallen back from Raphoe and Skeog House to Glenveagh Castle and Inch Fort <sup>33</sup>. By August 1922, the *Derry Journal* reported that the “Game is up” in Donegal for the demoralised irregulars after their defeat at Glenveagh <sup>34</sup>. Elsewhere in the Irish Free State the irregulars fought on, and they were successful in burning down a significant part of Ireland’s architectural heritage in their campaign against prominent Protestant families. “From 1920 until 11 July 1921, when the truce was declared, 76 big houses were burned. Between January 1922 and April 1923, 192 more were burned” <sup>35</sup>.

Against this background, there was a special meeting of the Londonderry Corporation on 29 May 1922. The Mayor complained that he had twice been searched by the security forces when entering the city. In a rather improbable characterisation of local IRA supporters, he said “Hundreds of men have been driven away from this city within the last week, men who were attending to their business, conducting themselves in a peaceable and orderly manner, and living as good citizens. They have been searched for and hunted for throughout the city for no other reason than I can know than that they loved Ireland above their own liberty, that they wish to see their country a great and independent nation, figuring as one solid unit before the world. They are driven out of this city to become a menace to this city, driven out where neither Specials [members of the Ulster Special Constabulary] nor Northern Government have any control over them, driven out with aggravated feelings, with rage in their hearts to harass, it may be, and annoy our respected and respectable fellow-Protestants across the border”.

He continued “They have warned me, and I now repeat it to the British authorities, not the authorities of Northern Ireland, for they are mere agents of London – I repeat the warning that has been given me that if Sir James Craig [the Northern Ireland



Prime Minister] maintains his present attitude of driving out men of National politics from Northern Ireland and from this city they will burn it to the ground...if the policy of harassing the Catholics and Nationalists of this city is continued they will burn down this city and leave Sir James Craig without a city to hold”<sup>36</sup>.

O’Doherty appealed to this mysterious group of people, who had apparently gone, within the space of a week, from being those who were “attending to their business, conducting themselves in a peaceable and orderly manner, and living as good citizens” to those who wanted to burn the city down. He asked them to be patient and proceed by peaceful means. “Trust this Corporation, with a Nationalist Mayor at its head, to hold this city for Ireland”<sup>37</sup>.

### **The Strange Case of Patrick Hegarty**

Councillor Patrick Hegarty was one the group of Sinn Fein councillors who favoured a more militant line in repudiating the Northern Ireland government. By profession he was a tobacconist<sup>38</sup>. On 12 September 1922 he was missing from a meeting of the Corporation’s Omnibus Committee, which he usually chaired.

The Nationalist Councillor, Margaret Morris, reported that he had been arrested and wished to protest. The Mayor advised her to raise the matter in the full council, which sat on 18 September 1922. Mrs.Morris had been to see Councillor Hegarty in gaol and it is her account of proceedings on which we must rely. She recounted that Hegarty was away on business when he heard that “a certain element in authority were searching houses and the people”. He therefore decided to stay in Buncrana, over the border in Co.Donegal<sup>39</sup>. Subsequently “the so-called Free Staters had handed him over to the Specials”. One of the conditions of his release was apparently that he sign the declaration of allegiance to the King and Northern Ireland<sup>40</sup>. This would become standard practice for councillors and public employees in the near future.

If Hegarty was handed over by the “Free Staters”, it would appear that he was probably associating with persons opposed to the Treaty. The irregulars had been causing mayhem throughout Ireland, and the authorities in the Irish Free State possibly felt that shipping Hegarty back across the border gave them one less headache. Back in Londonderry, the police may have thought it was suspicious that Hegarty had gone missing when searches were being carried out, and wanted to reassure themselves that he was not being tempted to actively support the people who threatened to burn the city to the ground.

A motion calling for Hegarty’s immediate release was passed by the Corporation with members voting on party lines. On 25 September 1922 the *Derry Journal* published a tiny piece saying that Patrick Hegarty had been released. The lack of subsequent discussion on the issue suggested that everyone just wanted to draw a line under the matter<sup>41</sup>.

### **Goodbye Proportional Representation**

Ulster Unionists had always opposed proportional representation (PR) in local government elections. At the first opportunity, the Northern Ireland Parliament passed the Local Government Act 1922 to get rid of it<sup>42</sup>. The Corporation met on 16 October 1922 to consider a letter from the Ministry of Home Affairs. It simply announced that

PR was abolished and the Corporation would revert to the five ward system which had operated since 1896<sup>43</sup>.

It was clear that control was likely to return to the Unionists, and the Nationalist group objected to the changes and demanded an inquiry. As the Ministry decision meant reversion to a ward scheme previously approved by the Westminster Parliament, an inquiry was not likely, particularly as the next local government elections were due in January 1923.

Nationalist Alderman Richard Doherty criticised the abolition of PR, and rather improbably argued that “I have not the slightest doubt in my mind if the P.R. system of voting had got a fair chance, in time, after a few elections had passed over, we should have seen the end of political or religious parties in the administration of civic affairs”.

Unionist Councillor Henry Robinson pointed out that Nationalists, who paid a little more than one third of the rates in Londonderry, were happy to spend the contributions of the other two-thirds. “If Aldermen Doherty and Bonner thought that P.R. should have been maintained why did they not insist on their representatives returned to the Northern Parliament going there and saying so! This is not the time to make the protest....The five wards were established by Act of Parliament, after the fullest and freest inquiry, at which your witnesses attended, and evidence was gone into in the fullest manner. We say that these five wards are fair, and are anxious that they should be resorted to”<sup>44</sup>.

It was problematical that some members of the Corporation continued their support for armed resistance after the Treaty was supposed to have brought peace between the British Government and the Irish Free State authorities. Nationalist Councillor Margaret Morris said “We are sneered at for taking our guns and going into the hills of Ireland while England is able to put in a wedge of dissension, and pay the men who should be on our side and supply the guns for murdering us and chasing the bravest men that ever were in the country around the hills and mountains of Leitrim, and the beautiful hill of Belbulbin, which towers over the little town of Sligo, had been the scene of their latest stand and had been disgraced by the murder of three of those brave lads....Small weight would be all the merchants of Derry if Donegal was true to the flag and the principle they should be true to, but they have betrayed it, and the Twenty-Six County Parliament has betrayed it, too. I don't blame Carson or Craig, or the Unionist party here. Blame those men who organised the Treaty”<sup>45</sup>.

She is speaking here of the irregulars who were opposed to the Treaty which was concluded by Michael Collins. The phrase about the English who “pay the men who should be on our side and supply the guns for murdering us” refers to the fact that the British Government supplied weapons to the pro-Treaty forces in the Irish Free State so that they could subdue the lawless campaign of the irregulars.

Unionist Councillor Henry Greenway claimed that “the most wonderful thing about the present campaign against the abolition of P.R is that those who are clamouring most vehemently for its retention are the very ones who know the least about it....I think the other side in this chamber are the last to cry out about the abolition of P.R., for the simple reason that it has forced them into a coalition that has clearly proved very irksome to every one of them, from the Mayor down”.

He perhaps touched on some uncomfortable home truths for the Nationalist group when he continued, “The Mayor, indeed, has clearly found this coalition, with its

different views on many questions, including such questions as the Free State, the Republic, and the recognition of the Northern Government, a very troublesome team to work. No doubt he has managed very well, but the majority here have been undergoing the solemn farce, which deceives nobody, of pretending not to recognise the Northern Government and yet recognising it every day, of swearing allegiance to Dail Eireann while the members of Dail Eireann, whether Free Staters or Republicans, care nothing about Derry City or the Six Counties. Like the Nationalist Corporation of Derry, they have recognised the Northern Parliament, the area under whose jurisdiction dare not be altered by any Boundary Commission without the consent of that Parliament”<sup>46</sup>.

The Mayor gave one of his famous closing speeches about how fairly the Nationalists had run the Corporation. When the vote was taken, it was 18-18. The Mayor exercised his casting vote in favour of the motion critical of the new electoral arrangements.

The five ward scheme that was being restored was a fair approximation to one which would have been produced by applying the modern English boundary commission principles of community of interest and a near equal number of voters per representative. It had some imperfections which operated to the Unionists’ slight disadvantage, such as the North Ward being too large and not sufficiently taking into account the community of interest principle. These deficiencies were corrected in the 1936 ward scheme proposed by the Corporation. Although this became a three ward scheme, the proposed transfers of voters between wards, which brought the boundaries into line with modern British standards, could have been applied to a five ward scheme which would have left Unionists in comfortable control of three of the five wards<sup>47</sup>.

### **The Loyalty of Margaret O’Doherty**

On 27 October 1922, a special meeting of the Corporation was held to discuss the case of Dr Margaret O’Doherty, Medical Superintendent Officer of Health for Londonderry. She was the wife of an anti-Treaty member for Donegal of the Provisional Parliament of the Irish Free State.

She had written to Alderman James Bonner in his capacity as the Chairman of the Public Health Committee. “I am in receipt of a communication from the Town Clerk, demanding under penalty of dismissal on 11<sup>th</sup>. Inst., a declaration of allegiance and service to King George V of England and the Government of Northern Ireland. On principle I refused to sign such declaration. Apart from this, there was no suggestion at the time of my appointment that any declaration should be required of me as medical superintendent officer of health for Derry”.

The council was informed that the declaration was required under the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1922 section 5 (2). It decided to appoint Dr O’Doherty on a temporary contract until the Corporation could get the opinion of legal counsel. The legal opinion was that she needed to make the declaration, but the status of her employment was unclear<sup>48</sup>.

In the present day, many public employees are the subject of security checks. Given the association of Margaret O’Doherty’s husband with an organisation then in a state of war with the Irish Free State authorities, and committed to the unification of Ireland by force, it is unlikely that she could have passed such a check. The Northern Ireland Government approached this issue in a different way in asking people to sign

a declaration of allegiance. In many ways this was a classic example of the kind of case which the declaration was intended to highlight. If an individual or their spouse has so little support for the constitutional arrangements that they wish to overthrow them, by force if necessary, then that person would be too much of a security risk to be relied upon in a public office.

### **Hugh O’Doherty’s Farewell**

The Mayor delivered his farewell speech at the Corporation meeting on 18 December 1922. It was the last meeting before the January local elections. There was a motion railing against the partition of Ireland, the return of the old ward boundaries, the declaration of allegiance, and the fact that Londonderry was not yet included in the Irish Free State. The Unionists had probably heard it all before, so they walked out and left the Nationalists to repeat the same old complaints.

The Mayor said that “the Treaty, even as a grant of large Dominion powers, was defective, inasmuch as it recognised the right of a small ascendancy party in the North-East to vote out”. Perhaps more inconvenient for him was the fact that this party represented the majority of citizens in Northern Ireland. O’Doherty continued “I stand today as determined to work for a united Ireland as the day I took this chair”. He forecast the collapse of the Northern Ireland Parliament <sup>49</sup>.

Shortly afterwards, O’Doherty boarded the train from Belfast to Kingstown (the present day Dun Laoghaire). Seven miles south of Dundalk a party of irregulars hijacked the train, ordered everyone off and set it on fire. It was completely destroyed <sup>50</sup>. The *Londonderry Sentinel* said that when O’Doherty was making his farewell speech at the Corporation “he had not had the personal experience which has since come to him of the violent methods by which the Republicans hope to secure independence”. The editorial added that “A Belfast contemporary, in commenting on the Mayor’s recent speech, said it was hard to gather whether he is a Republican or a Free Stater. That is a question which has puzzled a good many of late” <sup>51</sup>.

By subtly shifting his position, Hugh O’Doherty kept together a Nationalist group consisting of Socialists and different shades of pro and anti-Treaty opinion. Showing some similarities with a latter-day SDLP, he combined seeming moderation and reasonableness (Dr Jekyll) with the ability to threaten Unionists and sympathise with those who wanted to burn Londonderry to the ground (Mr Hyde). They were just people who were driven to it by a majority in Northern Ireland who did not want to be forced into a 32 county state. The men of violence were “our boys”, but flirting with them just left O’Doherty with luggage burned to a crisp and a long walk home.

### **What Did Unionists Learn?**

1. Nationalists were opposed to the very existence of Northern Ireland and would be reluctant to contribute to anything which would make it successful.
2. Although there were differences about “ways and means”, as the Nationalist Mayor put it, there was a unity of purpose between those who favoured the use of violence against Ulster’s majority population, and those who did not. Attitudes towards terrorism were ambivalent. For instance, Alderman Patrick Meenan, who was by no means the most militant of the Nationalists, suggested that a vandal who smashed some windows deserved a custodial sentence. He observed that

“Other men whose only crime was the love of their country were put in prison”

<sup>52</sup>. He had a blindspot about gunmen and the supporters of gunmen.

3. Even at this stage there was evidence of Nationalist support for a hard cop-soft cop strategy. The sweet, reasonable, moderate face would be presented alongside the threats to burn Londonderry to the ground.
4. The wilder excesses of Nationalism were probably only kept in check by Hugh O’Doherty’s pragmatism in holding together a loose coalition. Unionists could not rely on such an individual being present in the future.
5. Local Nationalist politicians’ concerns for the interests of their area were always likely to be moderated and negated by an excessive concern for radical constitutional change, against the wishes of a majority of Northern Ireland’s population.
6. From a Unionist point of view, there was much to fear from a Nationalist controlled council. A fractured relationship with the Northern Ireland Government threatened to cut communities off from the full financial benefits available to them. Non-co-operation with the state of varying degrees, and calculated insults to the Unionist community were likely to be features of Nationalist rule.

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