

The Growth of the Catholic Local Government Electorate in the Londonderry County Borough 1936-1967

Paul Kingsley

The Ratepayers Vote

Until 1945, the United Kingdom had a ratepayers vote in local government elections. This meant that the ratepayer (whether owner occupier or tenant) and the ratepayer's spouse could vote in council elections, but other adults in the household could not. It could probably be said to be based on a philosophy of "he who pays the piper calls the tune". The Representation of the People Act 1945 abolished the ratepayers vote in Great Britain, but it was retained in Northern Ireland.¹

This became a matter of controversy, particularly during the civil rights era in the 1960s, because it was argued that by denying people houses, they could be denied votes. Where different religious communities were allocated different numbers of houses, the local government electorate could be manipulated in favour of a particular community. This could be encapsulated in the slogan

1. No house = no vote.

The corollary of this could be expressed as follows

2. If you got a vote, you must have got a house.

Because of these principles, an increase in adult population would not necessarily translate into an increase in the size of the local government electorate. That would be more closely governed by the increase in the number of houses and apartments. In terms of political balance, if one community secured a greater proportion of houses, that would translate into a greater proportion of local government votes.

It was a key civil rights complaint in Northern Ireland that Unionists allocated public sector houses unfairly in Londonderry. It would also be clear to a Protestant landlord or owner occupier, of even modest political awareness, that renting or selling a house to a Catholic would normally lead to an increase in the Catholic electorate.

A number of allegations were made.² Conor Cruise O'Brien claimed that the Protestant Unionist majority held a "near monopoly" of housing in Londonderry.³ Max Hastings wrote that "Until 1969, housing in Ulster was largely in the hands of local councils, and there was the clearest evidence that in many areas Protestant-dominated councils had used their powers to discriminate against Catholics in the distribution of accommodation...With political power of such an invincible kind, the Unionists could leave the Catholic minority to beg in vain for crumbs from the Protestant table."⁴

1936 and 1967

Because the number of local government electors from a particular community will increase broadly in line with the number of houses occupied by that community, it is possible to study changes in the local government electorate to see who got the houses. It is fortunate that, at key points, Catholic representatives have publicised religious breakdowns of the electoral register. In 1989, attention was drawn to an important comparison between the situation in 1936, when the Londonderry

Corporation local government ward boundaries were last amended, and 1967, the date of the Cameron Report.⁵

Table 1 Increase in the Londonderry Corporation Local Government Electorate 1936-1967 (Derry Journal and Cameron Report figures)

	1936 ⁶	1967 ⁷	Change	% Increase	% of Total Net Increase
Catholics	9492	14429	+4937	52	80
Protestants	7531	8778	+1247	17	20

The Northern Ireland Census 1961 showed that Catholics made up 62% of the adult population in Londonderry (18,432)⁸. The fact that Catholics acquired 80% of the net increase in local government votes between 1936 and 1967 leads to the reasonable conclusion that their community acquired 80% of the net increase in houses between those dates (“If you got a vote, you must have got a house”). That does not support the conclusion that, in the allocation of housing, Catholics were left to beg in vain for crumbs from the Protestant table.

The Derry Catholic Registration Association

The role of the Derry Catholic Registration Association (DCRA) was to ensure that all Catholics who were entitled to be on the electoral register were included. It was particularly active when the electoral register was due to be revised every few years. On these occasions the DCRA produced estimates of the number of Catholics and Protestants in the Londonderry County Borough and, more infrequently, of some neighbouring areas in the Londonderry Rural District.

The records of the DCRA have been deposited in the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). The following tables show the religious analyses of the electoral register drawn up by the DCRA. The terminology used by the DCRA sometimes varies from year to year. On occasions the records classify voters as Catholics and Others. At other times they are Catholic and Unionists, or Catholics and Protestants. In 1958 they were Catholics, Unionists and Indians (the DCRA found 15 local government voters who were Indian). In this paper, the terms Catholic and Protestant have been used to avoid confusion.

It will be useful to start by corroborating the figures used in Table 1.

Table 2 Increase in the Londonderry Corporation Local Government Electorate 1936-1967 (DCRA figures)

	1936 ⁹	1967 ¹⁰	Change	% Increase	% of Total Net Increase
Catholics	9543	14343	+4800	50	81
Protestants	7618	8751	+1133	15	19

Table 2 contains the DCRA estimates for 1936 and 1967. These are very close to those supplied by the *Derry Journal* and the Cameron Report. The figures in the right hand column confirm that Catholics accounted for around 80% of the increase in the local government electorate. This provides corroboration for the conclusion that

Catholics would have obtained an approximate 80% share of the net increase in housing between 1936 and 1967.

Details of Changes Over the Years

The following table contains snapshots of the local government electorate in Londonderry at intervals from 1936 to 1967. The data is compiled from a number of DCRA documents.

Table 3 DCRA Analyses of the Local Government Electoral Register in Londonderry 1936-1967

Year	Catholics	Protestants
1936 ¹¹	9543	7618
1940 ¹²	9565	7489
1947 ¹³	9221	7759
1949 ¹⁴	9782	8282
1955 ¹⁵	11931	8904
1958 ¹⁶	12416	9111
1961 ¹⁷	13185	9177
1964 ¹⁸	14325	9235
1967 ¹⁹	14343	8751

Between 1936 and 1947 it can be seen that there were minor ebbs in the number of Catholic local government voters, with no increase. From 1947 onwards there was substantial growth. This period coincided with a large scale public sector housebuilding programme promoted by the Londonderry County Borough Council (Londonderry Corporation) with the assistance of the Northern Ireland Housing Trust (NIHT). All of the NIHT houses were built at the request of the Londonderry Corporation, and were thus part of the public sector housing programme it wished to see implemented.

It is particularly instructive to look at the changes which took place between 1947 and 1961, which coincided with the most active period of the public sector housing programme. The following tables use the DCRA's estimates of the number of Catholic parliamentary voters (that is adults, who were at that time defined as those aged 21 or over) and the number entitled to a ratepayers vote in local government elections.

Table 4 Growth in the Adult Catholic Population in Londonderry 1947-1961

Adult Catholic Population in 1947 ²⁰	17284
Adult Catholic Population in 1961 ²¹	18818
Increase 1947-1961	1534
Percentage Increase in Adult Catholic Population	8.8

Table 5 Growth in the Catholic Local Government Electorate 1947-1961

Catholic Local Government Voters in 1947 ²²	9221
Catholic Local Government Voters in 1961 ²³	13185
Increase 1947-1961	3964
Percentage Increase in Catholic Voters	43.0

The 1961 Northern Ireland Census estimated the number of Londonderry County Borough Catholics who were 21 or over as 18,432²⁴. It operates as a cross-check and indicates that the DCRA figure of 18,818 is likely to be reasonably accurate.

Perhaps the main finding to be taken from Tables 4 and 5 is that whereas there was a modest growth of 8.8% in the Catholic adult population between 1947 and 1961, there was a massive increase of 43.0% in the Catholic local government electorate.

Conclusions

The Cameron Commission claimed to have asked several Unionist public representatives about the number of Catholics and Protestants on the Londonderry local government electoral register in 1967. One of the replies they got was “that population changes had upset arrangements which were originally fair”.²⁵

This is not quite right. As has been demonstrated, changes in population did not necessarily result in changes in the local government electorate, which was made up of ratepayers and their spouses. For population changes to increase the local government electorate, it was necessary for people to be given houses (“No house = no vote”).

What those representatives could usefully have said was that the Unionist controlled council (through its housing allocation policy), Protestant landlords, and Protestant homeowners had it in their power to deny Catholics houses, and therefore local government votes. Instead, the Protestant community’s collective choices allocated so many houses to Catholics that the Catholic local government vote increased by 50-52% between 1936 and 1967 (depending on whether the figures in Tables 1 or 2 are used). It follows that “If you got a vote, you must have got a house”, and hence if a community got a lot of extra votes it must have got a lot of houses. At the same time, the Protestant local government electorate increased by only 15-17%. During this period, Catholics accounted for 80% of the net increase in the local government electorate (and hence occupied around 80% of the additional dwellings which appeared).

During the peak period of Londonderry Corporation housebuilding (1947-1961), when there would have been many opportunities to deny Catholics houses and hence local government votes, the Catholic electorate increased by 43%, even though the Catholic adult population grew by just under 9% in that period.

None of this provides evidence of unfairness towards Catholics in the allocation of housing.

References

- ¹ The Times 14 December 1944
- ² Kingsley, P. (1989) *Londonderry Revisited*, Belfast Publications. p.59
- ³ O'Brien, C.C. (1972) *States of Ireland* (Hutchinson & Co). p.157
- ⁴ Hastings, M. (1970) *Ulster 1969 – The Fight for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland* (Gollancz). p.28
- ⁵ Kingsley, P. (1989) *Londonderry Revisited*, Belfast Publications. p.74
- ⁶ *Derry Journal* 16 December 1936
- ⁷ Government of Northern Ireland (1969) *Disturbances on Northern Ireland*. HMSO Cmd 532 (the Cameron Report) par.134
- ⁸ Northern Ireland Census of Population 1961 – County and County Borough of Londonderry - Table 19 (Religions) and the author's calculations
- ⁹ Derry Catholic Registration Association. *Annual Report from the Executive 1936*. PRONI D2953/3/1A
- ¹⁰ Derry Catholic Registration Association. Document headed *Relative number of Catholic and other electors on the United Kingdom and Stormont Registers for the year commencing 16 February 1969 for the three wards*. Subsection on local government figures with the note "Position at February 1967, last time local government register was revised". PRONI D2953/5/1
- ¹¹ Derry Catholic Registration Association. *Annual Report from the Executive 1936*. PRONI D2953/3/1A
- ¹² Derry Catholic Registration Association. *Derry City Register 1939-40*. D2953/5/1
- ¹³ Derry Catholic Registration Association. *Annual Report of the Executive Council for the Year Ending December 1947*. PRONI D2953/3/1A
- ¹⁴ Derry Catholic Registration Association. *Annual Report of the Executive Council for the Year Ending December 1949*. PRONI D2953/3/1A
- ¹⁵ Derry Catholic Registration Association. Document from 1958 headed *The Following Figures show the Catholic Position as compared with Corresponding Revision 1955*. PRONI D2953/5/1
- ¹⁶ Derry Catholic Registration Association. Document from 1958 headed *The Following Figures show the Catholic Position as compared with Corresponding Revision 1955*. PRONI D2953/5/1
- ¹⁷ Derry Catholic Registration Association. Document handwritten in red ink showing Catholic and Unionist analysis of the electorate for 1961. PRONI D2953/5/1
- ¹⁸ Derry Catholic Registration Association. Document headed *Relative numbers of Catholic and other Electors on the annual Westminster Parliamentary and triennial Local Government Registers for periods commencing 16th February 1964*. PRONI D2953/5/1
- ¹⁹ Derry Catholic Registration Association. Document headed *Relative number of Catholic and other electors on the United Kingdom and Stormont Registers for the year commencing 16 February 1969 for the three wards*. Subsection on local

government figures with the note “Position at February 1967, last time local government register was revised”. PRONI D2953/5/1

²⁰ Derry Catholic Registration Association. *Annual Report of the Executive Council for the Year Ending December 1947*. PRONI D2953/3/1A

²¹ Derry Catholic Registration Association. Document handwritten in red ink showing Catholic and Unionist analysis of the electorate for 1961. PRONI D2953/5/1

²² Derry Catholic Registration Association. *Annual Report of the Executive Council for the Year Ending December 1947*. PRONI D2953/3/1A

²³ Derry Catholic Registration Association. Document handwritten in red ink showing Catholic and Unionist analysis of the electorate for 1961. PRONI D2953/5/1

²⁴ Northern Ireland Census of Population 1961 – County and County Borough of Londonderry - Table 19 (Religions) and the author’s calculations

²⁵ Cameron Report (1969) par.135



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