

Voting for the IRA

Paul Kingsley

Unionists have always been disappointed that there have been small numbers of Irish Republican terrorists who have resorted to violence to try and impose their wishes on the majority of Northern Ireland's population. Even more problematical, however, has been the much larger number of citizens who have been prepared to vote for convicted IRA terrorists. This paper concentrates on this phenomenon in the 1950s, because it casts some light on how Unionists might have viewed people who were prepared to vote for the IRA, particularly in the West of Ulster, as Northern Ireland entered the turbulent decade of the 1960s.

A Loyal Opposition?

In relation to the British House of Commons, a rather quaint formal expression is sometimes used. Students of obscure parliamentary terminology have been known to refer to Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. It conveys the idea that, although the opposition may be "against the government", and wants to take over the reins of power, it is not dedicated to the overthrow of the state. It is still, in some unspecified sense, loyal to the Crown and Constitution.

This kind of loyal opposition has been notably lacking throughout the history of the Northern Ireland state. Except for a period when the Northern Ireland Labour Party was the main opposition in the Stormont Parliament, Irish Nationalists have formed an opposition made up of "disloyalists", as a Northern Ireland Attorney General once called them¹. They have wanted to bring an end to the Northern Ireland state and absorb it into the Irish Republic, against the wishes of the majority. The presence of politicians in positions of influence who did not want Northern Ireland to succeed as a political entity raised questions about their reliability. It also encouraged Unionists to consider whether they were a security risk. These questions are still relevant today.

However, an even more serious question faced by Unionists as they approached the "civil rights era" in the 1960s related to the presence of thousands of Catholics who were prepared to vote for convicted IRA terrorists in elections. In what sense could such voters take a meaningful oath of allegiance, or the alternative declaration, on taking up employment in local or national government? The various oaths in Northern Ireland had a very similar wording. The following is taken from the schedule of the Local Government Act (NI) 1922, updated each time a new monarch came to the throne:

"I.....swear by Almighty God that I will render true and faithful allegiance and service to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Her heirs and successors according to law and to Her Government of Northern Ireland." ²

Some 50 years after this legislation was passed, such declarations were deemed to be politically inconvenient in Northern Ireland and this eventually paved the way for those who wish to overthrow the state becoming acceptable members of government. An oath is still retained for the Westminster Parliament as follows:

“I.....swear by Almighty God that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, her heirs and successors, according to law. So help me God.”³

It is this oath (and the alternative declaration) which Sinn Fein MPs refuse to swear or affirm, and this is part of the reason why they will not take their seats in the British Parliament. Paradoxically, this inability to declare loyalty to the state does not debar them from the Northern Ireland Assembly or its Executive. Even the SDLP leader, Colum Eastwood, on entering the Westminster Parliament in December 2019, affirmed his allegiance “under protest. My true allegiance is to the people of Derry and the people of Ireland”⁴

The IRA in the Early 1950s

The early 1950s was a period in which the IRA sought to acquire weapons. Its favourite method was to try and steal these from armouries. Shortly after the more unsuccessful raids, a number of IRA men were apprehended and subsequently sent to jail. This paper will concentrate on three of these IRA terrorists who subsequently stood as candidates in Westminster elections while still serving jail sentences. Some conclusions will be drawn about the degree of support they obtained.

But first it may be useful to establish how they came to be behind bars in the first place.

Felsted was a public school in Essex which had a Combined Cadet Force. The school had its own armoury, and the weapons it contained were targeted by three IRA men on 26 July 1953. The van in which they were driving was stopped by the police and inside the authorities found over 100 rifles, Sten guns, Bren guns and mortars. The three men were Manus Canning from Londonderry’s Bogside, who will feature later in this paper, Cathal Goulding, and Sean (originally John) Stephenson⁵. The latter was to reinvent himself as Sean MacStiofain, and became Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA⁶.

In October 1953 the three men were each sentenced to eight years imprisonment. All were open about their IRA membership. Goulding said from the dock, “The only way to drive the British Army from our country is by force of arms. For that purpose we think it is no crime to capture arms from our enemies. We make no apologies for our action.” The *Derry Journal* reported that “The two other men said they associated themselves with what Goulding said.”⁷

Detective Superintendent Elwell said of Canning “He is believed to have acted as organiser for the IRA in Northern Ireland, and is reported having been concerned in the movement of arms into Northern Ireland”⁸.

The other two featured IRA members in this paper are Tom Mitchell and Philip Clarke, who attempted to steal weapons from the depot of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in Omagh during the early hours of 17 October 1954⁹. Eight IRA men from Dublin and Cork went on trial on a charge of treason felony. The person deemed to be the ringleader, Eamonn Boyce, received a twelve year sentence, and the rest got ten years each¹⁰.

It seems that around 19 IRA members travelled from Dublin to Belfast by train, and then from Belfast to Omagh on a railway line which was to close in the 1960s. The plan seemed to be for some of the party to climb over the wall of the Army barracks at

a weak spot and then let the rest of the party in via the front gate. However, the alarm was raised and an exchange of gunfire took place. Five soldiers sustained non-life threatening wounds in the raid¹¹. Some of the IRA party escaped over the border in a lorry, leaving eight of their number behind, and these were captured by the RUC and the 'B' Specials¹². No arms were stolen.

One of the accused, Liam Mulcahy, when arrested, said "I came from Belfast in the train this morning, and came here for a walk." Tom Mitchell seems to have told a Special Constable that he was on holiday, and an RUC sergeant that he had come to look for work¹³.

However, just before he was sentenced, Mitchell said "We soldiers of the IRA pray that our comrades will have the strength and courage to carry on until such time as the last British soldier is driven from the shores of Ireland"¹⁴.

The animosity of certain sections of the Irish Republic towards Northern Ireland was seen in expressions of solidarity with the IRA men who were charged and convicted. The General Council of County Councils, meeting in Dublin, passed a resolution unanimously which congratulated the eight men convicted for their part in the Omagh barracks raid¹⁵. Philip Clarke was elected as a vice president of the National Cycling Association of Ireland while he was in custody¹⁶.

Selecting IRA Candidates

An election for the Westminster Parliament was held on 26 May 1955. In the run up to these elections, Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, decided to fight all the Northern Ireland seats. In this paper the focus will be on three of those seats West of the River Bann, namely Mid Ulster, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and Londonderry.

Where possible, Sinn Fein selected convicted IRA terrorists who were then serving prison sentences. Manus Canning, convicted after the arms raid on Felsted School, was chosen to stand in the Londonderry constituency by the Sinn Fein organisation itself¹⁷. Local Irish Nationalists committed to constitutional methods seemed to have little interest in the seat, which would have been seen as not winnable. In the General Election on 23 February 1950, they stepped aside and allowed Hugh McAteer (standing as a "Republican", but representing Sinn Fein) to have a clear run against the Unionist candidate. He won 21,880 votes. In a by-election on 19 May 1951, and in another General Election on 25 October 1951, the Unionist MP was elected unopposed¹⁸.

In Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Philip Clarke was chosen by a more traditional Catholic community convention. Whereas Unionist Party candidates were selected by paid up members in the relevant constituency, Catholic-backed nominees were typically selected by a more unusual method.

Brendan Lynn, in his history of the Nationalist Party, wrote that "Across the province election conventions began to meet and select candidates. These were normally called by a parish priest who then sent out invitations to attend to the local clergy, public representatives and two delegates from every parish in the constituency, who were chosen at a local meeting"¹⁹. Candidates were essentially Catholic community representatives, and this informal approach to candidate selection worked as long as there was only one party in the field.

In Fermanagh and South Tyrone, there was a convention on 3 May 1955 in Enniskillen. It was chaired by the Right Reverend Monsignor P.Gannon, a parish priest. This constituency was quite different from Londonderry. The sitting MP was the veteran Anti-Partition League and Nationalist Party politician, Cahir Healy. He had previously stated that he would be standing down at the next election, and felt he could not go back on that pledge. The Nationalist candidate put forward as his replacement was Frank Traynor from Co.Fermanagh.

However others nominated Philip Clarke, the convicted IRA terrorist from Dublin, who would stand as a Sinn Fein candidate. Clarke won the convention vote by 114 to 71. The Very Reverend John Nolan, the parish priest at Fivemiletown, had seconded Traynor's nomination. He said that "if they selected the Sinn Fein candidate it would be claimed that they sanctioned a policy of physical force. He felt that would be morally wrong." However, after the initial vote, "Mr.Clarke's name was put to the Convention and agreed to unanimously"²⁰. That second motion was proposed by the Very Reverend John Nolan²¹.

This oddity can be explained by the fact that although people at the meeting disagreed about means, they agreed that they were all working towards a united Ireland. At the end of the day, tactics, whether morally wrong or not, were just matters of detail. Philip Clarke was regarded as "one of ours" whose heart was in the right place, and he would have a chance of keeping out "one of theirs".

Tom Mitchell was adopted by Sinn Fein as its candidate for Mid Ulster back in October 1954²². However, Catholic community endorsement later came at a convention similar to that held in Enniskillen. It met on 8 May 1955 in Omagh and was chaired by the Very Reverend Dr.P.McDowell, the local parish priest. The convention was attended by 167 delegates, said to be representing 32 of the 35 Roman Catholic parishes²³. This was another constituency where there was a sitting Nationalist MP, Michael O'Neill.

The convention listened to letters from Sinn Fein being read out, outlining their intention to fight all twelve Northern Ireland seats and expressing its appreciation for the decision of the Fermanagh and South Tyrone convention. Tom Mitchell, imprisoned with Philip Clarke after the Omagh raid, was proposed as the Sinn Fein candidate. A delegate, Edward McCullagh, interpreted the letters as meaning not that Tom Mitchell should be proposed at the meeting, but simply that he should not be opposed.

"Mr.McCullagh said he did not think most of the delegates would wish Mr.Mitchell's name put formerly [sic] to the Convention, as, if it were put forward, another name would be proposed and there would be a vote that would reveal the existence of disunity on this issue."

"Mr.McIntyre and Mr.Crilly agreed to the withdrawal of the name of Mr.Mitchell. Mr.McIntyre then proposed that no candidate be put forward and this was passed unanimously"²⁴.

This unusual manoeuvre arose from the fact that those who did not favour a Sinn Fein candidate were not confident they could win a majority if the convention had allowed a vote for rival candidates. The "no candidate" decision was something of a face saver. Michael O'Neill had effectively been deselected.

The May 1955 General Election

In the Londonderry constituency, Irish Nationalists and Republicans had little chance of success. Manus Canning polled 19,640 votes compared with the Unionist candidate's 35,673. This was a little down on the Republican candidate's 21,880 votes in 1950, but still represented strong support for a convicted IRA terrorist.

More significant conclusions can be drawn about the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency ²⁵

Fermanagh and South Tyrone Westminster Election 26 May 1955

Philip Christopher Clarke (Sinn Fein) 30,529

Colonel Robert George Grosvenor (Unionist) 30,268

Sinn Fein majority 261

In the General Election in 1951, Cahir Healy, standing on a platform opposed to the use of violence, had received 32,717 votes. In the previous General Election a year earlier, Healy's vote was 32,188. At that time this would have been the maximum vote that any Irish Nationalist or Republican candidate could reasonably expect.

If Healy's and Clarke's votes are compared, and in the absence of any third party challenge, it is fair to conclude that the convicted IRA terrorist, Philip Clarke, was able to command the support of around 93% of Catholics who were ever likely to come out to vote. The turnout was 92%,

Over in Mid Ulster, the result was as follows ²⁶:

Mid Ulster Westminster Election 26 May 1955

Thomas James Mitchell (Sinn Fein) 29,737

Charles Beattie (Unionist) 29,477

Sinn Fein Majority 260

In the 1951 General Election, the Nationalist candidate, Michael O'Neill had received 33,094 votes, and a year earlier, another Nationalist won 33,023 votes. If these are taken to represent the maximum Irish Nationalist-Republican vote that could reasonably be expected, then Tom Mitchell got support from around 90% of Catholics who were ever likely to vote. There was an 89% turnout. For ease of comparison, all the Mid Ulster election results can be found in Appendix A.

These results were deeply troubling to Unionists as they entered the 1960s. The evidence of so many ordinary Catholics West of the Bann (79,906) prepared to vote for convicted IRA terrorists undoubtedly influenced their perception of such voters as security risks.

Felons Disqualified

The Forfeiture Act 1870 specified that someone receiving a custodial sentence of more than 12 months, and still in prison, was incapable of being elected as a Member of Parliament. It was under this act that supporters of the defeated Unionist candidate

in Fermanagh and South Tyrone petitioned the courts. It was quickly established that Philip Clarke had received such a sentence and that he was in Crumlin Road jail at the time of the election. The court found that Clarke's election was invalid and declared the Unionist candidate, Colonel Grosvenor, elected ²⁷.

In Mid Ulster, Unionists were not so proactive in petitioning the courts. It was left to the British Parliament to take action. The Attorney General moved in the House of Commons that Tom Mitchell was incapable of being elected as an MP, on the same grounds as in the Philip Clarke case. The best available remedy here, however, was for a new writ to be issued, In other words, there would be a by-election ²⁸.

Mitchell could not be elected, but the law at that time could not prevent him from standing again. Sinn Fein promptly nominated him as their candidate ²⁹. Cahir Healy complained that "Sinn Fein used the Nationalist machinery to the full at the last election, and without it they would have been helpless, because they had no organisation of their own" ³⁰. To some extent, Healy resented a bunch of interlopers from Dublin pushing local Nationalist politicians to one side, but such was the popular support for the terrorists that it was politically impossible to put up a candidate against Mitchell. For Unionists, the fact that constitutional Nationalists had placed their election machine at the disposal of the IRA's political representatives was problematical.

The Mid Ulster by-election produced a very similar result ³¹.

Mid Ulster Westminster By-Election 11 August 1955

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--------|
| Thomas James Mitchell (Sinn Fein) | 30,392 |
| Charles Beattie (Unionist) | 29,586 |
| Sinn Fein Majority | 806 |

More Drama

Mid Ulster Unionists now did what they perhaps should have done in the first place. They petitioned the courts and got a judgement that Tom Mitchell was not elected and that Charles Beattie was elected in his place. It mirrored proceedings in the Philip Clarke case ³².

At that point the situation should have been settled for a while, but there was more drama to come. The rules at that time stated that someone could not be elected as an MP if they held an "office of profit under the Crown". It emerged that Charles Beattie had been appointed to some panels of appeals tribunals under the National Insurance and National Assistance Acts, and he was therefore deemed to be holding an office of profit.

It seems that the positions were voluntary and unpaid, and Mr Beattie was only able to claim the reimbursement of expenses, but they still met the definition of offices of profit under the Crown. A Westminster House of Commons Select Committee on Elections ruled that Beattie's election was therefore invalid ³³. There would have to be another election, and it was possibly the most interesting of them all.

There was still time for another twist to this tale. In January 1956, the Mid Ulster Unionist Association decided not to put up a candidate in the forthcoming by-election.

An Orange lodge and an Apprentice Boys branch objected, but it was not for moving³⁴.

An Independent Unionist entered the contest, apparently with considerable grass roots support. He was George Forrest, a 33 year old auctioneer and publican from Stewartstown, Co.Tyrone³⁵.

Forrest seems to have reached out to the constituency Unionist Association, not to be adopted as an official candidate, but to get its blessing. The Association played with a very straight bat. A report in the *Belfast Telegraph* said that “He was informed in Omagh, however, that the decision of the Mid-Ulster Association not to contest the seat still stood and all the officers of the Association remained bound by that decision. No further meeting of the Association was contemplated and no authority given for any”³⁶.

There was a change of mood on the Irish Nationalist side of the fence. At a convention in January 1956, Michael O’Neill, the former MP for the constituency was selected unanimously to fight the by-election against Tom Mitchell of Sinn Fein. There were some complaints that the meeting of 200 people was not representative, and it was unusual in that Eddie McAteer, the Chairman of the Anti-Partition League and Nationalist Stormont MP for Foyle, chaired the meeting rather than a Catholic priest³⁷.

The splitting of the Catholic vote generated a certain amount of rancour during the election campaign. Eddie McAteer, speaking in support of O’Neill in the Strabane area, said he had been threatened and told not to speak or he would be forcibly prevented from doing so³⁸. O’Neill had to cancel his eve of poll outdoor rallies “In view of the outbreaks of personal violence, organised and otherwise, by Sinn Fein supporters...I am fighting this election on the issue of unlawful violence. I am not prepared to subject my supporters to outrageous attacks which are being imported into our Irish and peace-loving community”³⁹.

It was reported of O’Neill that “The entire burden of his campaign has been the condemnation of force (‘We must choose between the bomb and the ballot’) and a pledge of co-operation with the Eire Government as ‘sovereign authority’ in pursuit of the party’s aims. He relies on the January pronouncements of the [Roman Catholic Church] Hierarchy concerning the use of arms and statements on the same subject by Mr. Costello and Mr. De Valera”⁴⁰.

In explaining why he was fighting the election, Michael O’Neill said, “The issue is a very simple one. Sinn Fein, a small, largely anonymous splinter group located in Dublin, having failed ignominiously to get any support for their policy in the 26 counties put forward candidates in the Six-County elections, selected and endorsed by nobody but themselves, and relying on Nationalist solidarity in the face of ‘the common enemy’”⁴¹. A *Belfast Telegraph* editorial was not so sure. “‘The small splinter party located in Dublin’, which is how Sinn Fein has been described, has a hard core of strength in Mid-Ulster, which the Church has not deterred, and it is said to be better organised and more active”⁴².

This is how the election turned out: ⁴³

Mid Ulster Westminster By-Election 8 May 1956

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--------|
| George Forrest (Independent Unionist) | 28,605 |
| Thomas James Mitchell (Sinn Fein) | 24,124 |
| Michael O'Neill (Nationalist) | 6,421 |
| Independent Unionist Majority | 4,481 |

George Forrest, in the face of indifference from the constituency Unionist Association, seems to have gathered in the lion's share of the official Unionist votes. One of his supporters reckoned in advance of polling day that Unionists were down about 1,500 postal votes, because after the constituency party announcement, their voters did not think there would be a contest, and people did not register in time for postal votes ⁴⁴.

Michael O'Neill had been mistaken. Sinn Fein was not a small group from Dublin with no real local support. Almost four out of five Catholics who could be expected to complete a ballot paper preferred to vote for the IRA terrorist, on an 88% turnout. It was a slap in the face for the Roman Catholic Hierarchy and the Irish Government.

Buoyed by these results, the IRA commenced a new terrorist campaign on 12 December 1956 ⁴⁵, which was not to be officially ended until 26 February 1962 ⁴⁶. There is little evidence that those who voted for IRA men in the elections felt any responsibility for the subsequent terrorist campaign.

Changing Fortunes

Christopher Hewitt traced the changes in the Irish Nationalist-Republican vote in Westminster elections to detect if there was any waning of interest in a united Ireland as Northern Ireland progressed through what became known as the civil rights era in the 1960s.

"In the 1955, 1959, 1964 and 1966 elections, candidates standing for a united Ireland contested every constituency, which does allow us to examine the alleged trend away from nationalism. In the 1955 election, a few months before the 1956 IRA campaign began, the total vote for united Ireland parties was 168,360. This was the highest it had ever reached since partition and, expressed as a proportion of the voting-age Catholic population, was almost 51 per cent. As a percentage of the total Northern Ireland vote it was 26 per cent. The IRA campaign was effectively suppressed by the time of the 1959 election and the nationalist vote fell dramatically to 83,497 or 14.5 per cent of the total Northern Ireland vote. In the 1960s the nationalist vote increased at both the 1964 and 1966 elections. As a proportion of the total vote it was 18.2 per cent in 1964 and 21.1 per cent in 1966" ⁴⁷.

By rolling the film forward in Mid Ulster, it can be seen how Tom Mitchell, representing the physical force tradition of the IRA, fared in subsequent elections. Hewitt has pointed out that the IRA campaign of the 1950s was effectively over by 1959, suffering from a lack of Catholic community support for actual violence, although the whole community seemed to feel the loss. The election in that year was

characterised by the demoralisation of those who supported a united Ireland. The defeat of the IRA terrorist campaign made that goal feel farther away than ever⁴⁸.

Mid Ulster Westminster Election 8 October 1959

George Forrest (Unionist) 33,093

Thomas James Mitchell (Sinn Fein) 14,170

Unionist Majority 18,923

Tom Mitchell was given a clear run against George Forrest (now an official Unionist candidate), but the Sinn Fein vote collapsed. The turnout dropped to 71%, reflecting the fact that less than half of the Catholics who voted in 1955 visited the polling station in 1959.

There was a similar collapse of the anti-Unionist vote in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Philip Clarke had renounced the IRA while in prison and was released early in December 1958 together with his fellow former IRA man, Patrick Kearney. “In January 1956, following the condemnation of violence by the Roman Catholic Hierarchy, both men severed their connections with the IRA. I understand that in prison both men expressed their firm intention not to have any further dealings with any illegal organisation or to be associated in any way with any person or body seeking to subvert the established lawful Government of Northern Ireland”⁴⁹.

His replacement as Sinn Fein candidate in the 1959 Fermanagh and South Tyrone election was James Henry Martin. The new man had been sentenced to five years imprisonment in April of that year on charges of making a bomb, possessing a bomb, and placing it at an electric transformer with intent to destroy it. Martin, in a straight fight with the Unionist candidate, received just 7,348 votes, compared with 32,080 for the winner⁵⁰. When hope of forcing Northern Ireland to combine with the Irish Republic was at its lowest, Catholic voters lost heart.

Mitchell was released from jail in 1961, having served seven years of his ten year sentence. He was welcomed home at a rally in O’Connell Street in Dublin, along with other released IRA prisoners. “During his speech, Mr. Mitchell said there would always be members in the Republic prepared to take action ‘in the fight to free Ireland’”⁵¹. By October 1962, he was being described as the Secretary of Sinn Fein⁵².

Tom Mitchell was still around in October 1964, when he stood again in Mid Ulster as a Republican candidate. His vote increased to 22,810, even with the intervention a third candidate from the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP). By the time the next General Election came around in March 1966, Mitchell accumulated 27,168 votes in a straight fight with the Unionist candidate⁵³. By 1969, when there was a by-election on the death of George Forrest, the Republican solicitor, Kevin Agnew, had taken over from Tom Mitchell as the candidate closest to the IRA. He did, however, withdraw from the contest at the last minute in favour of a Unity candidate in the shape of Bernadette Devlin. She could probably best be described as a Socialist Republican, associated with the People’s Democracy organisation (for election result, see Appendix A).

This increase in the Irish Republican vote in Westminster elections in Mid Ulster throughout the 1960s mirrors the findings of Christopher Hewitt. The emergence of

“civil rights” agitation was accompanied by an increased interest in voting for candidates who favoured a united Ireland. The Mid Ulster voting trend also indicated a revival of support in some constituencies for candidates allied to the IRA. For instance, in Fermanagh and South Tyrone in 1964, the Republican vote doubled to 16,138 from its low point in 1959, even with competition from a Liberal candidate and the NILP⁵⁴.

As a footnote, Manus Canning left Wormwood Scrubs Prison in February 1959, but in the following October he was sentenced to a further six months imprisonment by a Special Criminal Court in the Irish Republic for possession of a revolver and ammunition without a firearms certificate⁵⁵. He stood again as a Sinn Fein candidate in the Londonderry constituency on 8 October 1959 and received just 13,872 votes. It was Canning’s last election. The Republican vote increased to 21,123 in 1964, and two years later, the combined votes of the Nationalist and Republican candidates was 25,027⁵⁶. This followed a similar pattern to the other constituencies West of The Bann.

Conclusions

1. As Unionists West of the Bann entered what became known as the civil rights era in the 1960s, they had fresh in their memories the support which their Catholic neighbours had given to election candidates who were convicted IRA terrorists
2. They would have particularly noted the occasions on which Catholic community candidate selection meetings were presented with an option to select a Nationalist committed to peaceful methods of achieving their objectives. Unionist would have been disappointed to see those meetings choosing the terrorist option.
3. The Mid Ulster by-election of 8 May 1956 would have made a particular impression on Unionists because almost four times as many Catholic voters preferred Tom Mitchell, IRA resident of Crumlin Road jail, to their former Nationalist MP, Michael O’Neill. The fact that O’Neill had run a “We must choose between the bomb and the ballot” campaign, backed by the Roman Catholic Hierarchy and the Irish Government, brought home to Unionists the depths of the ambiguity towards violence exhibited by a large proportion of the Catholic population.
4. Although there was significant latent support for the IRA among Catholics, the 1950s terrorist campaign was seen as having no real chance of achieving its objectives of a united Ireland. Thus the Republican vote dropped in 1959 as hopes of overthrowing the Northern Ireland state faded. With a sympathetic Labour Government in power at Westminster from 1964, and a world press ready to listen to tall stories about civil rights, there was increased electoral interest throughout the 1960s in parties promoting a change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland.
5. The inappropriately named civil rights movement in Northern Ireland promoted the view that people had lost interest in the constitutional question and were content to get fair treatment within the United Kingdom. This was incorrect. The growing electoral support for Nationalist parties as the 1960s progressed, plus the stated views of the leaders of all the main organisations making up the civil rights movement contradicted this view. Key figures such

as John Hume, Eddie McAteer, Betty Sinclair, Austin Currie, Kevin Agnew, Sean Keenan, Frank Gogarty, Bernadette Devlin, Michel Farrell, and Eamonn McCann all made no secret of the fact that their objective was a united Ireland.

Appendix A – Mid Ulster Westminster Election Results

Mid Ulster Westminster Election 26 May 1955

Thomas James Mitchell (Sinn Fein) 29,737

Charles Beattie (Unionist) 29,477

Sinn Fein Majority 260

Mid Ulster Westminster By-Election 11 August 1955

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Mid Ulster Westminster Election 8 October 1959

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Thomas James Mitchell (Sinn Fein) 14,170

Unionist Majority 18,923

Mid Ulster Westminster Election 15 October 1964

George Forrest (Unionist) 29,715

Thomas James Mitchell (Republican) 22,810

Patrick Joseph McGarvey (NILP) 5,053

Unionist Majority 6,905

Mid Ulster Westminster Election 31 March 1966

George Forrest (Unionist) 29,728

Thomas James Mitchell (Republican) 27,168

Unionist Majority 2,560

Mid Ulster Westminster By-Election 17 April 1969

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--------|
| Josephine Bernadette Devlin (Unity) | 33,648 |
| Anna Forrest (Unionist) | 29,437 |
| Unity Majority | 4,211 |

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