

# No Rent, No Rates: Civil Disobedience Against Internment in Northern Ireland, 1971-1974

*Rosa Gilbert*

European University Institute (<[rosa.gilbert@eui.eu](mailto:rosa.gilbert@eui.eu)>)

*Abstract:*

Recent scholarship on civil disobedience in Northern Ireland primarily focuses on the immediate period before the breakout of violence in 1969, and in some cases, on the mass protests of the late 1970s around the H-Block/Armagh prison protests. This paper attempts to fill the gap between these two periods in its analysis of the rent and rates strike of the early 1970s, which was initiated in response to the re-introduction of internment without trial. In doing so, it positions itself against simplistic approaches towards civil disobedience as either oppositional, or causally linked, to armed struggle. Instead, it probes the complexity of its relationship to armed struggle in relation to the Northern Irish and British state's security policies.

*Keywords:* Civil Disobedience, Housing, Internment, Northern Ireland Troubles, Rent Strike

## *1. Introduction*

Civil disobedience in Northern Ireland during the conflict, euphemistically described as the Troubles, has received attention from historians hoping to understand its success and failures in relation to the armed struggle, either as a proxy for Republicanism or a mechanism to sustain it, or as an underlying reason for a perceived descent into violence as the 1960s gave way to the bloodshed of the 1970s. Extra-parliamentary protest is often treated as an addendum to armed struggle and a means by which violence paved the way for electoral politics.

This paper addresses the rent and rates strike, which started in response to the re-introduction of internment without trial by the Northern Ireland Prime Minister Brian Faulkner in August 1971. The aim is to explain the

emergence of the rent strike, the measures taken by the governments in Belfast and Westminster to suppress the strike, and to frame it within the general trajectory of violent and non-violent political struggle during the decade. In doing so, it will be pertinent to touch on similarities and differences between the anti-internment rent strike and other forms of civil disobedience during this time both in Ireland and Britain. Northern Ireland has precariously remained within the United Kingdom since the southern 26 counties of Ireland gained independence following the 1919-1921 war of independence, and throughout the history of the province, acts of civil disobedience have been treated differently to those in Britain. This was partly as a result of the characteristics of the security forces in Northern Ireland, which were established to maintain the British unionist ascendancy and repress the minority Catholic population, who were viewed as dangerous to the political settlement.

The anti-internment rent and rates strike has received scant attention in accounts of the early 1970s. It is mentioned briefly in the memoirs of Derry-based civil rights protagonist Eamonn McCann and SDLP politician Austin Currie but, compared to the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the street movement around the prison protests later in the 1970s, the rent strike has drawn next to no interest (Currie 2004; McCann 1980). With many studies focused on political violence and the rise of the IRA in this period (Hennessey 2005; 2007), it is understandable how this event can be overlooked. However this relies on a somewhat false – or at least unhelpful – binary of violent and non-violent forms of action, and fails to appreciate the political aspect of armed struggle and the relationship between these various outlets for political grievances.

The re-introduction of internment in 1971 illustrates this well: many of those detained in the first internment sweep were political activists involved in the civil rights movement rather than the Republican armed struggle such as Michael Farrell of People's Democracy, and even Belfast city councillor James O'Kane<sup>1</sup>. A private memo from the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland Brian Faulkner on 18 February 1972 stated that "all internees are, on the evidence available, either members of the IRA or otherwise involved in terrorism"<sup>2</sup>. Those opposing internment were assumed to be sympathisers of the use of violence and therefore of concern to the security services. Quite unsurprisingly, a police spokesperson told the *Belfast Telegraph* that the names of marchers at a West Belfast anti-internment rally in January 1972 were noted

<sup>1</sup> Linen Hall Library (LHL), Northern Ireland Political Collection (NIPC), P1421, S. Ó Tuathail, *They Came in the Morning* (Official Sinn Féin, 1972), Belfast.

<sup>2</sup> Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), CAB/9/B/83/7, "Detention and Internment under the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Acts", 18 February 1972, Memorandum by the Prime Minister of Home Affairs on Internment, Belfast.

by police<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the way in which the state contended with the rent and rates strike itself had direct implications on security strategy – despite huge debts for gas and electricity payments, disconnection was said to only be an option in middle-class areas due to the potential destabilisation that it would provoke in working-class neighbourhoods, areas that were prone to police and army incursion and rioting<sup>4</sup>.

This long overdue study of the rent and rates strike is therefore useful for precisely this reason – namely, an understanding of the state's response to its concerns over the popularity of the Republican struggle. Firstly, the attempt to counter what it perceived as popular support; the figure of senior military theorist and Brigadier Frank Kitson was a *bête-noir* to the IRA, and his elucidation of Mao's theory of guerrilla warfare (Bennett and Cormac 2014, 106) and the subsequent need to starve the IRA of their public support has become a regularly referenced epithet. But it was not just the hearts and minds campaigns to cut off the lifeblood of the IRA by way of its civilian support that constituted British policy; as we see with the response to the rent strike, there was a concerted effort to re-shape the citizens of Northern Ireland by producing patterns of behaviour that would stymie the momentum for future civil disobedience. In addition to this, it was part of a fundamental change at a conjunctural moment in how social security apparatus was used and understood, which would irreversibly alter the provision of social housing and benefits in Britain and Northern Ireland. For this reason, the context of similar contentious action in the rest of the United Kingdom and the government's response is pertinent to this study.

More broadly, this study of the rent and rates strike is useful for those with a desire to understand the ebb and flow of the civil rights movement and the gap in knowledge of the time frame from the late 1960s demonstrations to the prisoner support group of the late 1970s and subsequent rise of Sinn Féin. As such, many of the sources used are from information sheets and newspapers produced by civil rights groups, republicans and radical left groups who supported the strike. Declassified files from the Stormont cabinet meetings are used to illustrate the perspective of the state as well as material from the National Archives in London – although formal power remained in Belfast until direct rule was implemented in March 1972, the Westminster cabinet's Joint Intelligence Committee's role in security matters following the deployment of troops in 1969, and particularly after disturbances in June 1970, are instructive to our understanding of the complex and sometimes contradictory approaches of senior politicians, heads of security forces and intelligence services. Beginning with an overview of the re-introduc-

<sup>3</sup> LHL, *Belfast Telegraph*, 3 January 1972, Belfast, Microfiche.

<sup>4</sup> PRONI, CENT/1/3/27, Northern Ireland Office Press Release, 15 May 1974.

tion of internment in 1971 and the response by the Catholic community in Northern Ireland, the following section will then focus on the mechanisms of the rent strike and the dynamics between the main protagonists. Section four will turn to the Northern Ireland administration's response to the rent strike, with a particular emphasis on the emergency legislation brought in to deal with non-payment, followed by a summary of the effects of the legislation. The concluding section will then look at the early 1970s within the trajectory of civil disobedience in Northern Ireland in relation to the conflict.

## *2. Internment and civil resistance*

The use of detention and internment without trial was enabled by regulations 11 and 12 respectively of the 1922 Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act (Northern Ireland), a controversial piece of legislation introduced by the Parliament of Northern Ireland at the inception of the state following the 1920 Government of Ireland Act and the 1922 Anglo-Irish Treaty. The first wave of internment took place in May 1922 when around 500 Sinn Féin members and sympathisers were interned, its use being inexorably connected to the origins of the province of Northern Ireland (Donohue 1998, 1092). This is not to say it was peculiar to Northern Ireland – following the 1916 Easter Rising, almost 2,000 Irish citizens were interned in Frongoch camp, Wales; during the IRA Border Campaign of 1956-1962, the Republic of Ireland introduced internment simultaneously with Northern Ireland. Irish history – particularly since the revolutionary period of 1916-1923, and specifically in the partitioned North – is haunted by the use of this exceptional measure.

As the civil rights movement of the late 1960s was increasingly repressed by police, and as violence escalated after British soldiers were sent first into Derry's Bogside then Belfast in August 1969, the Northern Ireland Parliament relied on draconian legislation to restore order, for example the 1970 Criminal Justice (Temporary Provisions) Act, which imposed mandatory sentences for certain offences during an 'emergency' period starting 30 June 1970. Internment was mooted by the Stormont administration in May 1970 and again in August, after rioting in Belfast that June, which had prompted the Criminal Justice Act and emergency period, as well as the use of curfews<sup>5</sup>.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s has been characterised in opposition to the Republican armed struggle of the 1970s, and in some cases as a cause of the descent into violence. Historian Thomas Hennessey places responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities on the civil rights movement, arguing that the 5

<sup>5</sup> The National Archives (TNA), CJ/4/462, "Internment without Trial in Northern Ireland: Possible Imposition. Policy on Home Office Authorisation and Involvement. Cuttings and Correspondence", 21 May 1970.

October 1968 march in Derry “altered everything”, making British intervention “inevitable” (2005, 145). Hennessey’s claim that British oversight by 1970 should have reassured Catholics who were distrustful, with reason, of the Stormont government is somewhat supported by the view from London that Catholics were primarily the victims, not perpetrators, of political violence (Hennessey 2005, 394; O’Halpin 2008, 669)<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, the Joint Intelligence Committee placed blame for the growth of political violence squarely on the shoulders of the failures of the Northern Ireland government (O’Halpin 2008, 668).

Despite the growing importance of the Joint Intelligence Committee in security decision-making by the end of 1970, it repeatedly expressed fears that the loyalty of the predominantly Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) Special Branch could be strained under direct rule, and particularly if the Westminster government “came into direct confrontation with the hard-line Protestants”. It could therefore rely on Special Branch on coverage of “all except Protestant targets”<sup>7</sup>. Although the Joint Intelligence Committee provides crucial insights into the antagonistic relationships between MI5 and RUC Special Branch and the different approaches of the varying authorities, Hennessey’s depiction of the Westminster government as a neutral arbiter, able to oversee action against discrimination with fairness, is confounded by this example of the hold which the RUC had over the British government, whether real or imagined. There was a clear apprehension regarding the RUC, which gave way to major criticisms of its Special Branch from 1969 to 1972, and plans were made in spring 1971 to build parallel intelligence structures to avoid reliance on the RUC<sup>8</sup>. In practice, the fear of a “protestant backlash” meant that intelligence on Protestant paramilitaries was not acted upon until February 1973, eighteen months after the introduction of internment (McCleery 2015, 170).

The special powers regulation for internment was finally put into action on the morning of 9 August 1971, under the guise of Operation Demetrius. On that day, 342 men, all of whom were Catholic, were arrested by British soldiers, detained, taken to regional holding centres (Ballykinler, Magilligan, Girdwood Park) where they were interrogated by RUC Special Branch, after which they were taken to the prison ship HMS Maidstone or Crumlin Road jail (Bennett 2010, 191). Derry’s Bogside and Creggan estate, Catholic enclaves on the west of the city’s Foyle river, defended themselves with

<sup>6</sup> TNA, CJ/4/462, O’Halpin quotes Joint Intelligence Committee records from 1970.

<sup>7</sup> TNA, CAB/190/8, “Northern Ireland Intelligence Working Party: Meetings and Memoranda”, 10 March 1971.

<sup>8</sup> TNA, CA/185/3, “Joint Intelligence Committee (A) (JIC(A)) Meetings”, 1 January 1970 – 25 June 1970; TNA, CAB/190/8, “Northern Ireland Intelligence Working Party: Meetings and Memoranda”, 8 October 1970 – 17 April 1972.

barricades, which remained up from the day of internment until the British Army's Operation Motorman tore them down in July 1972. Thousands of Catholics fled the North to the Republic of Ireland as refugees seeking asylum. The position of internees was dubious to say the least. Internees were detained based on Special Branch intelligence and initially not subject to any form of judicial decision, so in essence subject to at best a quasi-legal process which had been introduced upon the decision of the government.

In October 1971, the International Red Cross visited the internment camp at Long Kesh near Lisburn, just outside of Belfast, and reported on the differences between sentenced prisoners and internees, stating: "The internee is a man without a future"<sup>9</sup>. This strikes precisely on the position of internees as simultaneously subject to, yet outside of, the legal system, and thus in a position of ambiguity. Such a position is underlined by the point raised in the local Republican newspaper the *Andersonstown News* in 1974 that technically, under the 1973 Emergency Powers Act, those detained were not guilty of an offence, but it would be illegal for them to escape their detention inside the Long Kesh internment camp<sup>10</sup>. Although the Detention of Terrorists Order introduced in November 1972 formalised a quasi-judicial process of reviewing internment cases independent of the executive, the character of the legal powers themselves magnified the tenuous legal position of internees<sup>11</sup>. The special powers provided for a permanent-exception and were presented as a reality rather than an option which, ideally, would be phased out, if only the situation allowed – the Northern Ireland government announced in September 1971 that their objective was "to bring about as soon as possible a situation in which all emergency measures – not only internment – but also such measures as minimum mandatory sentences – can be phased out without risk"<sup>12</sup>. Contrary to this presentation of internment as purely a security necessity, its political nature is clear as indicated by the demographics of the men interned, aimed at Catholics and conflating the Catholic community with armed Republicanism. Additionally, a legal review written in 1986 underlined the political use of internment and in particular the detention of innocent men to taint them as Provisional IRA members, and the cynical increase in internee numbers to placate unionists at opportune moments and also the increase in internee releases to conciliate the broadly anti-internment mainstream nationalist Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) (Spjut 1986, 731).

<sup>9</sup> PRONI, CAB/9/B/83/7, "Detention and Internment under the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Acts", 18 February 1972.

<sup>10</sup> LHL, NIPC, *Andersonstown News* 5, 5, 8 June 1974, Microfiche.

<sup>11</sup> For details of internment legislation see Boyle, Hadden, Hillyard (1975).

<sup>12</sup> LHL, NIPC, "Statement by Northern Ireland Government", 21 September 1971.

Before moving on to look more closely at the rent strike, it is worth paying attention to the colonial dimension of internment. This is a crucial element to the imposition and implementation of emergency regulations in Northern Ireland, but also it helps scholars to distinguish between forms of civil disobedience in Ireland and those in Britain. Internment was a common feature of British colonialism: internment camps were in place right across the empire to deal with anti-colonial dissidents. Hola Camp in Kenya was one striking example that provides a useful comparison for Northern Ireland (McCleery 2015, 14). Ian Cobain's *Cruel Britannia* traces the use of torture throughout post-war British colonial history, providing documentary evidence of the use of the five techniques of torture in Cyprus, Aden and Kenya – particularly in Hola Camp – that were then used on internees in August and October 1971 and became the subject of the 1978 European Court case (Cobain 2012).

Indeed, whilst denying the use of torture, British Home Secretary Reginald Maudling admitted that the “principles applied in the interrogation of suspects in Northern Ireland and the methods employed are the same as those which have been used in other struggles against armed terrorists in which Britain has been involved in recent years”. The Parker Report of March 1972 admitted that the five techniques had “played an important part in counter insurgency operations in Palestine, Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus” and also the British Cameroons, Brunei, British Guiana, Aden, Borneo/Malaysia, the Persian Gulf and Northern Ireland<sup>13</sup>. Although Northern Ireland was at the time served by its own government, its position within the United Kingdom remained one of clientelist neo-colony, and the use of “experience in other emergency situations” – the British euphemism for anti-colonial wars – by government advisers attests to this<sup>14</sup>.

The colonial features of internment in Northern Ireland were apparent in the demographics of internees. As ministerial documents from late 1972 indicate, following the Detention of Terrorists Order, discussions were held over whether or not to include Protestant terrorists in arrest lists for detention. They state that the current arrest policy did not provide for the arrest of Protestant terrorists except with the object of bringing a criminal charge. It goes on to say that “this is not the moment to start arresting Protestants for detention; there has been something of a decrease in large-scale organised Protestant terrorism”<sup>15</sup>. There was indeed loyalist violence – the 1969 bombings of electricity substations resulted in troops being drafted in to guard key

<sup>13</sup> House of Commons, Lord Parker of Waddington, *Report of the Committee of Privy Counsellors Appointed to Consider Authorised Procedures for the Interrogation of Persons Suspected of Terrorism, Parliamentary Papers, 1971-1972*, series XVIII, 53, Cmnd. 4901, 3.

<sup>14</sup> TNA, CAB/190/8, “Northern Ireland Intelligence Working Party: Meetings and Memoranda”, 8 October 1970.

<sup>15</sup> TNA, DEFE/24/824, “Northern Ireland: Arrest Policy”, 1972.

public utilities, and the Ulster Volunteer Force had been active since the mid-1960s bombing Catholic-owned businesses, significantly the McGurk's Bar in December 1971, which was the deadliest attack throughout the conflict, and carrying out gun attacks on Catholic civilians (MacAirt 2012). On the 9 July 1971 officials recorded 36 IRA prisoners and 33 "extreme protestants"<sup>16</sup>. It was therefore clear that Protestants were involved in terrorist activity, for which they were being imprisoned; and yet, internment was a strategy used almost solely against the Catholic population. This is confirmed by the custody records: Boyle, Hadden and Hillyard gave the figures in May 1974 of loyalists constituting almost one-third of those held under court sentences but only one-tenth of those detained<sup>17</sup>.

This final feature of internment is important in attempting to understand why it was that a rent and rates strike was used as protest. Given that internment was clearly aimed at the Catholic community, it is unsurprising that the response shared traits, organisational and institutional, with the civil rights movement that organised in the late 1960s around discrimination against Catholics on housing, employment and suffrage. Even previous rent strikes that were organised over housing conditions rather than discrimination were fraught with sectarian rivalries between tenants associations from Catholic and Protestant estates (Ó Dochartaigh 2005, 84). Considering that the Special Powers Act was such a point of resentment for the civil rights movement, it is understandable that the rent and rates strike was as much targeted at the emergency legislation and Stormont government as a whole rather than the specific policy of internment, though it helped that it was a tangible symbol of the legislation and general discriminatory politics of the so-called Orange state. The issue of housing and specifically the lack of decent housing available to Catholic families was a central plank to the civil rights movement, particularly in Derry<sup>18</sup>. Though there is not space for a detailed overview of the civil rights movement in this paper, the pioneering work of, amongst others, Niall Ó Dochartaigh, Simon Prince, Lorenzo Bosi, and Geoffrey Warner has provided thorough elucidation of this phenomenon, including nuanced explanations of the heterogeneity of the civil rights movement and the various political traditions within (Ó Dochartaigh 2005; Prince 2007; Bosi and Prince 2009; Prince and Warner 2012).

From a longer historical perspective, the Irish nationalist struggle had dealt with the unfair rents, rates and tenancy agreements forced upon the peasantry by the British colonialists; the Land League was formed in the late

<sup>16</sup> PRONI, CAB/9R/238/6, "Report by Working Party on Membership of Unlawful Organisations", 2 August 1971.

<sup>17</sup> LHL, NIPC, K. Boyle, T. Hadden, P. Hillyard, "The Facts on Internment", *Fortnight* 94, 29 November 1974, 9-12, Internment Ephemera Box.

<sup>18</sup> For information on the Derry Housing Action Committee see Ó Dochartaigh 1994; 2005.



nineteenth century to counter rent increases and evictions. After the partition of Ireland, housing for Catholics in the North continued to be unsatisfactory, and the lack of housing for Catholics was made worse by the onset of the conflict as entire neighbourhoods were burned down during attacks on Catholic areas. Figures produced by the Minister of Development indicate that in August 1971, 300 houses were destroyed and 2,000 families registered on the emergency housing list<sup>19</sup>. Further investigation of this use of a rent strike against the policy of internment rather than against housing issues or rent increases is pertinent to the longer historical understanding of repressive colonial policies against Irish Catholics and resistance to such repression.

### 3. *The Rent Strike*

On the first day of internment, a Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) emergency bulletin from the Belfast branch called for “total withdrawal by non-Unionists from every governmental structure, rent and rate strikes by the people, barricades for defence where necessary and total non-co-operation with a regime which has been stigmatised by the British establishment itself”<sup>20</sup>. This was decided during a meeting that day in Duggan’s – which had been a hotspot for anti-Catholic housing discrimination – between the SDLP, Nationalist Party, Republican Labour Party and NICRA, groups that tended towards reformism rather than revolution<sup>21</sup>. According to ministerial papers, the rent strike called by Belfast Civil Rights Association was backed officially by the SDLP and Nationalist MPs on 15 August, with 16 August proposed as the starting date<sup>22</sup>. By 10 September, 25,000 tenants were on strike out of 135,000 public authority tenancies, providing a weekly loss of £50,000 to the exchequer, with 32 out of 60 local authorities affected by civil disobedience as well as the Housing Trust<sup>23</sup>. This had risen to 26,000 on strike on 29 September, a loss of £60,000 a week and support ranging from 3-4% to 80% in areas<sup>24</sup>. These are all official internal government statistics. NICRA estimated that by October 5 over £500,000 had been withheld in rent and rates.

<sup>19</sup> PRONI, CAB/4/1615, “Cabinet Meeting”, 14 September 1971.

<sup>20</sup> LHL, NIPC, NICRA, *Emergency Bulletin*, 9 August 1971, Microfiche.

<sup>21</sup> LHL, NIPC, NICRA, “The Rent & Rates Strike - Some Questions Answered”, n.d., Internment Ephemera Box.

<sup>22</sup> PRONI, COM/58/3/9, “Ministry of Commerce: Effects of Civil Disobedience on Gas and Electricity, 1971-1973”, 3 May 1972.

<sup>23</sup> PRONI, CAB/4/1615, “Cabinet Meeting”, 14 September 1971.

<sup>24</sup> PRONI, CAB/9/B/312/19, “Note of a meeting between UK and NI Government officials”, *Civil Disobedience Campaign: Counter-Measures to Civil Disobedience Proposed by Ministry of Health and Social Services*, 21 October 1971.

According to a Northern Ireland Cabinet meeting on 21 October 1971, the main support for the rent strike was from the big estates in Belfast such as Divis, and also in the following areas: Strabane (87% uptake among local authority tenants), Newry (76%), Warrenpoint (66%), Derry (52%). Overall 21% of Housing Trust/Housing Executive tenants across the country were on rent strike<sup>25</sup>. Statistics from the 1971 census indicate that the percentage of Catholics who were public renters (40.9%) was higher than the total percentage of public renters (34.6%), but less than the total in both private rental and home ownership (Melaugh 1994). This amounted to 45,436 Catholic households out of a total of 147,854 publicly-rented households. The reliability on public housing amongst the Catholic community goes some way to providing an explanation of how the rent strike became widespread so quickly, when juxtaposed with the fact that internment targeted the Catholic/nationalist community. At the same time, given the precarious housing situation many found themselves in following the housing struggles of the previous decade as well as the burning of Catholic neighbourhoods in 1969, it shows an impressive determination that so many took up and continued the rent strike despite government sanctions and threats which could quite easily have displaced them and ruined them financially. As Stormont civil servants privately admitted in May 1972:

no doubt of the great mass of sincere and immediate support from the rank and file for this opposition to internment. Indeed the relative success of the campaign from the beginning is probably due less to any organisation behind it, which can only have been minimal, than to the conviction of individual participants that their cause was just.<sup>26</sup>

Whilst this report admits – contrary to contemporary public assertions by the state, and to Eamonn McCann’s insinuation of arm-twisting (McCann 1980, 94) – that the unpopularity of internment was more of a motivating factor in the success of the rent strike than pressure from the groups behind it, it is worth examining here the dynamics between the various groups behind the rent strike. Whilst Austin Currie describes the start of the strike with the joint call out by NICRA and the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) published in the *Irish News* on 27 August (Currie 2004, 177), the two groups in no way could claim ownership or responsibility for the strike. The initial interest was sparked by local campaign groups, forming civil resistance committees in housing estates to co-ordinate strike action and other protests; indeed, People’s Democracy claimed that the call by groups for a rent and rates strike was simply “ratifying a fait ac-

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> PRONI, COM/58/3/9, “Ministry of Commerce: Effects of Civil Disobedience on Gas and Electricity, 1971-1973”, 3 May 1972.

compli” as it had already begun in earnest<sup>27</sup>. This is supported by a rent and rates strike leaflet circulated just before Christmas 1971, which instructed tenants to proceed with the rates strike as advised by their local Disobedience Committee and obey their instructions<sup>28</sup>. One example was the Andersonstown Tenants Association and Civil Resistance Committee, which were based in the Republican stronghold of Andersonstown, West Belfast. The latter group was elected at a public meeting at Holy Child School on Sunday 15 August to organise the campaign after the decision was made to embark on a rent and rates strike. This group was also behind the production of the P. J. McGuigan song *The Men Behind the Wire*, which sold over 90,000 copies and was banned by the BBC<sup>29</sup>. One of the key figures in Andersonstown Civil Resistance Committee was Des O’Donnell, a local teacher, who claimed in late October that 5,000 households in Andersonstown were on strike – 90% of the total<sup>30</sup>.

Areas of Belfast like Andersonstown were key points of the rent strike, along with Ardoyne to its north east, where people’s assemblies were set up to co-ordinate civil disobedience – not just the rent strike, but the civilian warnings of army incurrence into the area. In the Lower Falls part of the city, take up in the Divis estate was almost 100%. In conjunction with the rent strike, local councillors refused to serve in certain local authorities, withdrawing from Strabane & Warrenpoint Urban councils, which both ceased to function in September 1971, and around half a dozen other local authorities were affected by individual councillors’ boycott<sup>31</sup>. In February 1972, Keady council joined Strabane and Warrenpoint after the Northern Resistance Movement – a broad but politically radical group supported by People’s Democracy and republicans, set up on October 17 – and Armagh Resistance Council forced a resignation in order to tip the balance in favour of the boycott<sup>32</sup>. As F. Stuart Ross indicates in his book on the H-Block/Armagh campaign, there was an attempt later in the decade to repeat this tactic in order to force government policy change on the issue of special category status for prisoners, but the lobbying of councillors at that stage was largely unsuccessful (2011, 99). It is likely that the changes in legislation to deal with withdrawal of councillors – the Local Bodies Bill, detailed later – had a role its failure later that decade.

<sup>27</sup> Queen’s University Belfast (QUB), Special Collections, People’s Democracy, “Internment ’71 H-Block ’81: The Same Struggle”, Belfast 1981, 11-13.

<sup>28</sup> LHL, NIPC, “Civil Disobedience Rededication”, December 1971, Internment Ephemera Box.

<sup>29</sup> LHL, NIPC, *Andersonstown News* 1, 1, 22 November 1972, Microfiche.

<sup>30</sup> British Library (BL), Newspaper Archive (NA), P. Hildew, “Drive to Escalate the Rent Strike War”, *The Guardian*, 30 October 1971, 2.

<sup>31</sup> PRONI, CAB/4/1615, “Cabinet Meeting”, 14 September 1971.

<sup>32</sup> LHL, NIPC, People’s Democracy, *Unfree Citizen*, 4 February 1972, Microfiche.

Although the SDLP had been one of the groups involved with the original call for the rent and rates strike, by June 1972 they were already receiving criticism from NICRA for advising councillors and members of public bodies to return to their positions<sup>33</sup>. It is unsurprising they garnered opprobrium from NICRA and People's Democracy. The latter group, who had changed the name of their publication from *Free Citizen* to *Unfree Citizen* after the introduction of internment, had encouraged strikers not to save the unpaid rent and rates to be paid off at a later date, but to spend the money, so that there would be no question of paying back arrears<sup>34</sup>. By contrast, the SDLP later advocated stringent terms for the recuperation of non-payment, whilst NICRA eventually attempted negotiations between those still in arrears and the Northern Ireland Office in Westminster in order to come to "humane arrangements"<sup>35</sup>.

There were other forms of civil disobedience against internment that kept attention and pressure on the government both before and after the removal of Stormont's powers and imposition of direct rule from Westminster in March 1972. There were of course street demonstrations in the tradition of the 1960s civil rights movement, the march in Derry on 30 January 1972 that became known as Bloody Sunday being the most prominent in retrospect. Many demonstrations defied the parades ban including a 15,000-strong rally in Casement Park on 12 September 1971 (with the slogan "Smash Heath in the teeth!")<sup>36</sup> and a Christmas Day march to Long Kesh organised by the Northern Resistance Movement, which was stopped en route and dispersed. People's Democracy's *Unfree Citizen* reported doctors resigning in protest and ex-servicemen returning their medals<sup>37</sup>. Workers also took strike action: 8,000 workers carried out a one-day strike in Derry on 16 August and 1,000 deep sea dockers in Belfast went on strike on 7 September<sup>38</sup>. In addition, the trade unions collided with the government over the proposed reclamation of rent and rates money from wages, according to NICRA<sup>39</sup>. Though, as we shall see later, ministerial papers indicate that their stance against the government legislation was not particularly strong.

<sup>33</sup> PRONI, D/3072/2/3/5, "Civil Rights", 3 June 1972.

<sup>34</sup> LHL, NIPC, People's Democracy, *Unfree Citizen*, 21 August 1971, Microfiche.

<sup>35</sup> PRONI, CENT/1/3/27, "Letter from NICRA to Merlyn Rees, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland", 31 January 1976.

<sup>36</sup> LHL, NIPC, NICRA, *Emergency Bulletin*, 26 August 1971, Microfiche.

<sup>37</sup> LHL, NIPC, People's Democracy, *Unfree Citizen*, 25 August 1971, Microfiche.

<sup>38</sup> QUB, Special Collections, People's Democracy, "Internment '71 H-Block '81: The Same Struggle", Belfast 1981, 12.

<sup>39</sup> LHL, NIPC, NICRA, "The Rent & Rates Strike - Some Questions Answered", n.d., Internment Ephemera Box.

#### 4. *Payment for Debt: The political use of social security*

Not long after the rent and rates strike had acquired some momentum, it became clear that it was widespread enough and had enough staying power to create serious financial damage to the treasury. As I will show, it was not just financial imperative that led the government to introduce draconian legislation to undermine the rent and rates strike, but an attempt to contain and condition the Catholic citizenry whose relationship to the state was still semi-colonial. This latter point is supported by the use of internment without trial, aimed primarily at the Catholic community, as well as more generally the regulations in the Special Powers Act against Republicanism, and the sectarian behaviour of the RUC, the predominantly protestant police force of Northern Ireland.

The Payment for Debt Act of 1971 was a piece of emergency legislation aimed to deal with civil disobedience. The government were concerned by the rent strike campaign, not so much by the revenue loss but by what was essentially a mass opt-out of the social contract – the Minister of Development regarded it as a “most serious threat” and stated that “neither our laws nor our administration are suited to countering these difficulties”<sup>40</sup>. At the same time as directly countering the withholding of rent payments, it transformed the relationship between the state and citizens in a much more pervasive way than juridical acts that sought to punish certain behaviours with imprisonment, given the sheer numbers that it targeted. The Act allowed ministerial departments, mainly the Ministry for Health and Social Services, which set up a Benefits Allocations Branch, to redirect welfare payments to the local authorities – and later, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive – in order to settle rent arrears. This necessitated the collaboration of local authorities, a number of which, like Newry, refused to participate<sup>41</sup>. In turn, the government brought in Local Bodies (Northern Ireland) Bill to bypass local authorities that were resisting.

The implementation of the Payment for Debt Act required cross-departmental co-ordination. In discussions, ministers stated that “the whole payment for debt machinery is part of the Government service and ought to be treated as such”<sup>42</sup>. The government consulted with the Confederation of British Industry and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, who gave their tacit approval of the recovery of debts through salaries as well as welfare pay-

<sup>40</sup> PRONI, CAB/4/1615, “Cabinet Meeting”, 14 September 1971.

<sup>41</sup> PRONI, CAB/9/B/312/20A, “Memorandum by the Minister of Health and Social Services”, *Civil Disobedience Campaign: Recovery of Rents and Rates Withheld under Civil Disobedience Campaign*, 5 November 1971.

<sup>42</sup> PRONI, COM/58/3/9, “Effects of Civil Disobedience on Gas and Electricity”, Meeting of Interdepartmental Committee on Payments for Debt Act 1971, 3 January 1972.

ments<sup>43</sup>. There was a 1969 bill called the Judgements Enforcement Act, which was seen as insufficient; it would be too slow and cumbersome in reclaiming the debts and therefore frustrate the purpose of the campaign. Furthermore, it did not include the possibility of reclaiming debts through social security payments or other public fund payments; the Payment for Debt Act did, and would “place the Department responsible for making such payments in the position of an ‘employer’ for the purposes of the Act”<sup>44</sup>. As far as civil rights activists were concerned, civil servants and benefits clerks became as much a part of the security industry as the RUC and British army. Indeed, the broad-based and comparatively moderate NICRA stated that the civil servants implementing the legislation were “lin[ing] up with the repressive R.U.C. and British Army in their attack on the lives, livelihoods [*sic*] and liberties of a section of the Irish people”<sup>45</sup>.

The Payment for Debt Act was rationalised by the government through the implication that ringleaders were intimidating tenants, forcing them to withhold their rent and rates. It launched a publicity campaign stating “Do not be intimidated”, offering a service by which tenants could secretly pay off their debts in October of 1971, with the press reporting that the responsible department, the Ministry of Development “does not claim that intimidation can be proved, but only that it is known to be going on”<sup>46</sup>. Along with the more blatant implications of intimidation against the IRA, and accusations that the IRA were in control of civil disobedience in Northern Ireland, it allowed the government to smear those partaking as not just lawbreakers or criminals but as security threats. This was broadly in line with the attitude of the Westminster-based Joint Intelligence Committee, who by February 1972 recorded that “[p]erhaps the most threatening feature of the present situation in Northern Ireland is the civil disobedience campaign”<sup>47</sup>. Tellingly, they warned of the dual effects of the civil rights campaign and Republican armed struggle, the former being able to “undermine the fabric of society slowly and by attrition” (*ibidem*).

The potential for the rent strike to work, in conjunction with the general unrest on the streets, to unseat the government and heighten disorder was a fear that mobilised the government into action. On 2 September 1971, before the legislation was put forward but after the decision for action had

<sup>43</sup> PRONI, CAB/9/B/312/19, “Civil Disobedience Campaign - Recovery Action Extract from Cabinet Conclusion”, 1 October 1971.

<sup>44</sup> PRONI, CAB/4/1615, “Cabinet Meeting”, 14 September 1971.

<sup>45</sup> LHL, NIPC, “NICRA Emergency Bulletin”, 9 November 1971, Microfiche.

<sup>46</sup> BL, NA, P. Hildew, “Drive to Escalate the Rent Strike War”, *The Guardian*, 30 October 1971, 2.

<sup>47</sup> TNA, CJ/4/237, “Northern Ireland: The Year Ahead”, *Drafts for Proposed Joint Intelligence Committee Assessment of Northern Ireland in 1972*, 2 February 1972.

been agreed, the Northern Ireland administration wrote to the UK Home Secretary Reginald Maudling stating:

The situation has all the seeds of anarchy. It could rapidly degenerate to the point at which orderly administration could no longer be maintained in many parts of Northern Ireland. The consequences of such civil anarchy, super-imposed upon the continuing campaign of violence, are not difficult to predict, and the damage to the social and economic fabric of Northern Ireland could be irreparable.<sup>48</sup>

It was not just the idea that the strike would directly impinge on the ability for the administration to function, but also that it would result in a loss of authority and credibility of the government<sup>49</sup>. This is particularly striking given that just a month beforehand, the government had been slightly less concerned about its integrity as it introduced internment without trial despite trepidations around potential legal issues, expressed during a meeting just three days before the first internment sweep: “We would look foolish if these detentions were tested and found to be illegal”<sup>50</sup>. This sense of precarity on behalf of the Northern Ireland government was not unfounded – just over six months later in March 1972, the UK government suspended Stormont and imposed direct rule.

Whilst the rent and rate strike undoubtedly displayed a popular and widespread opposition to internment and the Stormont administration, the withdrawal of local councillors from administrations perhaps brought about more of a crisis in government, particularly when Newry council refused to co-operate with the Department of Health in advance of the Payment for Debt bill to help recover social security payments<sup>51</sup>. The Joint Intelligence Committee confirmed this fear, stating that “the fabric of local government at large in the province is in peril”<sup>52</sup>. Local authorities in places provided pockets of resistance to the otherwise hegemonic power of the unionist-dominated Stormont government, ruled by the Ulster Unionist Party since the inception of the state in 1922. One example of this was the refusal of local authorities to implement rent increases. Strabane Council had attracted the ire of the government in July of 1971 when it refused to implement public housing rent increases

<sup>48</sup> PRONI, CAB/9/B/312/19, “Letter to Reginald Maudling (UK Home Secretary)”, 2 September 1971.

<sup>49</sup> PRONI, CAB/4/1615, “Cabinet Meeting”, 14 September 1971.

<sup>50</sup> PRONI, NIO/25/3/16, “Stormont meeting on Internment”, 6 August 1971.

<sup>51</sup> PRONI, CAB/9/B/312/20A, “Memorandum by the Minister of Health and Social Services”, *Civil Disobedience Campaign: Recovery of Rents and Rates Withheld under Civil Disobedience Campaign*, 5 November 1971.

<sup>52</sup> TNA, CJ/4/237, “Northern Ireland: The Year Ahead”, *Drafts for Proposed Joint Intelligence Committee Assessment of Northern Ireland in 1972*, 2 February 1972.

mandated by central government<sup>53</sup>. The year before in January 1970, the Strabane Civil Rights Association backed Strabane Town Tenants Association in their decision not to pay a rent increase of 7.5% imposed by the council<sup>54</sup>. The rent and rates strike gave the Stormont government the opportunity at last to discipline rebellious councils; Strabane was the first to be censured for running an overdraft and refusing to raise house rents, and was dissolved in October 1971 under the new Local Bodies (Emergency Powers) Bill<sup>55</sup>.

The Local Bodies Bill was proposed on 2 September 1971 via Reginald Maudling, the UK Home Secretary, and allowed the Governor of Northern Ireland to remove members of a local authority, which failed to carry out its functions. It authorised the Minister of Development to appoint a commissioner to take over the functions of that authority<sup>56</sup>. This prevented communities from bringing pressure on their local authorities in order to strengthen their opposition to the Stormont government, and removed local government as a site of contention, replacing it with managerial and bureaucratic implementation of the increasingly securitised welfare policies, in conjunction with the movement of housing responsibilities from (often sectarian and discriminatory) local authorities towards the newly-formed Housing Executive. A similar process was to occur over a decade later in Britain, when Margaret Thatcher introduced a series of rate-capping policies and break-up of metropolitan councils, which aimed to undermine large seats of counter-power in local government controlled by those undertaking protest and disobedience in opposition to the Thatcher government.

The Local Bodies Bill in any case allowed Stormont to bypass the disruption of council procedures that the protests caused. As the rent and rates strike continued unabated, the government broadened its action against strikers. In March 1972, the Payment for Debt Act was extended to salaries paid by the state; whilst this was subsequently clarified to mean salaries only and not wages, in October 1972 this was extended too to wage earners<sup>57</sup>. Before the Act had even been introduced, NICRA accused the government of threatening, and then attempting to “starve people into submission” by targeting the most vulnerable and impoverished, those on social security benefits<sup>58</sup>. People’s Democracy recorded rent strikers having social security payments

<sup>53</sup> PRONI, CAB/4/1605/9, “Memorandum to the Cabinet by the Minister of Development (R H Bradford)”, 2 July 1971.

<sup>54</sup> LHL, NIPC, People’s Democracy, *Citizen Press*, 24 January 1970, Microfiche.

<sup>55</sup> PRONI, CAB/9/N/46/1, “Local Bodies (Emergency Powers) Bill (Northern Ireland)”, 1971.

<sup>56</sup> PRONI, CAB/9/B/312/19, “Letter to Reginald Maudling (UK Home Secretary)”, 2 September 1971.

<sup>57</sup> PRONI, COM/58/3/9, “Civil Disobedience: Letter from R H Kidd, Ministry of Finance to Secretary of State”, 20 October 1972.

<sup>58</sup> LHL, NIPC, NICRA, *Emergency Bulletin*, 26 August 1971, Microfiche.



cut off as early as 3 September, before the act was brought in<sup>59</sup>. Clearly this was a form of punishment taken against the most vulnerable, but the extension to those salaried by the state drew in an additional demographic, and in doing so entrenched the conditionality of state benefits, the position of the recipients as employees who, like those with state salaries, could have their pay docked or withdrawn based on political decision.

The extension of the Payment for Debt Act was gradual. It received royal assent on 14 October, and the Benefits Allocation Branch was set up by the Ministry of Health and Social Services in order to redirect benefit payments towards offsetting withheld rent and rates. This led to an escalation of the strike to include as many bill payments as possible, the civil rights conference in Dungannon on October 24 advising withholding of radio and television licenses, land annuities, ground rent, income tax, gas, electricity and water bills<sup>60</sup>. This was accompanied by demonstrations and riots including one in Newry following the killing of a young man that led to a no-go zone being established, and a riot also in Long Kesh internment camp which was at that time holding hundreds of detainees<sup>61</sup>. The government reported that bills and rates were being withheld in February 1972 in preparation for the extension of the legislation from benefit recipients to include those in receipt of state salaries. At this stage they acknowledged that only a third of the 20,000+ rent defaulters could be dealt with by the re-allocation of benefits<sup>62</sup>.

However, as the strike wore on, more and more defaulters dropped out. In February 1973, though the skeleton Stormont regime that existed after direct rule backed out of the inclusion of wage earners in the Payment for Debt mechanism, and the *Andersonstown News* claimed 26,000 still on strike in Belfast, Derry and Newry, by October this had halved to 13,000 according to the Northern Ireland Secretary as quoted in the People's Democracy paper *Unfree Citizen*<sup>63</sup>. By the time the SDLP's Austin Currie – newly appointed housing minister in the new executive – made a statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 3 April 1974 urging for an end to the rent strike, there were still 11,000 tenants on strike, although just 1,500 of these were *not* subject to the Payment for Debt Act and therefore having deductions made from benefits or salaries<sup>64</sup>. In 1986, long after the official phas-

<sup>59</sup> LHL, NIPC, People's Democracy, *Unfree Citizen*, 3 September 1971, Microfiche.

<sup>60</sup> LHL, NIPC, NICRA, *Emergency Bulletin*, 9 November 1971, Microfiche.

<sup>61</sup> LHL, NIPC, People's Democracy, *Unfree Citizen*, 29 October 1971, Microfiche.

<sup>62</sup> PRONI, CAB/9/B/312/20A, "Letter to Cabinet Ministers", *Civil Disobedience Campaign: Recovery of Rents and Rates Withheld under Civil Disobedience Campaign*, 17 February 1972.

<sup>63</sup> LHL, NIPC, *Andersonstown News* 1, 13, 16 February 1973, Microfiche; LHL, NIPC, People's Democracy, *Unfree Citizen*, 15 October 1973, Microfiche.

<sup>64</sup> PRONI, CENT/1/3/27, "Northern Ireland Office: Press Release of Currie's Statement to the Assembly", 3 April 1974.

ing out of internment, the *Belfast Telegraph* reported the “legacy of debt” left in Divis flats, West Belfast, still being paid either voluntary or, more often, through the Payment for Debt Act<sup>65</sup>.

### 5. *Effects of the Act*

The Payment for Debt Act must be understood as part of the extensive legal mechanisms, to a large extent consisting of emergency law, aimed largely at the Catholic community. As such it had the effect of reinforcing the perception of the Northern Ireland state as unionist-dominated and its mechanisms as entirely sectarian. This perception is illustrated in the first edition of the *Andersonstown News* in November 1972 – the local paper of the area of West Belfast where the rent strike was perhaps strongest – which claimed that the Act meant that “the terror apparatus for suppressing the Catholic population seemed complete”<sup>66</sup>. This may seem hyperbolic compared to the regulations in the Special Powers Act but what underlined this legislation was its attempt to condition the behaviour of those involved in civil disobedience – predominantly Catholics and Irish nationalists – by making social security contingent on obedience at a time when the nationalist community was taking unprecedented steps towards humiliating the discrimination in Northern Ireland through these methods.

This was made clear in a government statement in November 1971. Their three-pronged strategy was defeating terrorism and restoring the rule of law, creating the conditions in which “responsible elements of the community” can ensure enjoyment of equal rights, and, as a corollary to equal rights, “the proper fulfilment of the obligations of good citizenship, under the law and otherwise”. Specifically in dealing with rent and rates defaulting, the government stated it would reclaim the money because it would be intolerable if “part of the community refuses to bear its fair share of public burdens”<sup>67</sup>. Thus the universal nature of social security and the welfare state was made clearly conditional on not partaking in dissident behaviour. That same month, the Minister of Community Relations – whose predecessor, the only Catholic in the cabinet, had resigned at the introduction of internment – decided to delay and discourage grants to projects in deprived areas of West Belfast where civil disobedience was strong<sup>68</sup>.

<sup>65</sup> LHL, NIPC, L. White, “What Went Wrong”, *Belfast Telegraph*, 27 November 1986, Homelessness/Housing Ephemera Box.

<sup>66</sup> LHL, NIPC, *Andersonstown News* 1, 1, 22 November 1972, Microfiche.

<sup>67</sup> Linen Hall Library, NIPC, P4308, “Statement by Northern Ireland Government”, 21 September 1971.

<sup>68</sup> PRONI, CAB/9/B/312/20A, “Memorandum by Minister of Community Relations”, *Civil Disobedience Campaign: Recovery of Rents and Rates Withheld under Civil Disobedience Campaign*, 23 November 1971.

The Payment for Debt Act was further extended beyond its specific use to deal with those withholding rent for reasons of civil disobedience. A 1984 information sheet provided by a West Belfast housing action group advised tenants that, under the 1971 legislation, statutory bodies such as the Housing Executive (which was created in 1971 to take over the management of publicly-owned housing) were “covered by legislation to recover money owed to them by deducting it from your Social Security benefits”, as well as deducting from wages and claims and compensation such as redundancy pay. There was no mention of rent strike or civil disobedience – legislation introduced to deal with the rent strike had simply been extended to recover all housing debt, including on houses since vacated, through social security benefits, regardless of the original reason<sup>69</sup>. This is backed up by ministerial papers that show that in April 1976 – months after the ending of internment, and the phasing out of special category status for political prisoners – the Payment for Debt Act was extended to include *all* debts to the Housing Executive, not just non-payment because of the rent strike<sup>70</sup>. A year later, a government press release confirmed that the Act was extended so that the Benefits Allocation scheme involved those unable to pay gas and electricity bills too, allowing for the inclusion of utility companies as well as the Housing Executive in the re-allocation of benefit payments<sup>71</sup>. This went directly against the decision at the beginning of the Payment for Debt implementation whereby, when proffering the idea of recovering unpaid rent from all those in debt, not just those involved with the civil disobedience campaign, it was rejected because “the emergency legislation was presented to Parliament and recommended as a measure to cope with supporters of the civil disobedience campaign”, and therefore it would be “wrong” to use it for ordinary debts<sup>72</sup>. The final totalisation of the Payment for Debt Act beyond the issue of civil disobedience was therefore completed in 1977.

## 6. Conclusion: From '68 to H-Blocks

The rent strike that started in 1971 as a response to the re-introduction of internment certainly benefited from the civil rights movement of the 1960s in terms of the organisational elements and infrastructure – NICRA

<sup>69</sup> LHL, NIPC, Falls Community Council, *Guide to Housing Executive Policies*, 1984, Homeless/Housing Ephemera Box 2.

<sup>70</sup> PRONI, CENT/1/3/27, “Northern Ireland Office: Rent and Rates Strike”, 29 January 1976.

<sup>71</sup> PRONI, CENT/1/3/27, “Northern Ireland Office: Press Release”, 13 April 1977.

<sup>72</sup> PRONI, CAB/9/B/312/20A, “Civil Disobedience Campaign - MPs and Senators”, *Civil Disobedience Campaign: Recovery of Rents and Rates Withheld under Civil Disobedience Campaign*, 26 November 1971.

and People's Democracy, two of the main groups supporting the strike, had the personnel and capacities for publicity to drive the campaign. This goes some way to explaining the immediacy of the strike. In 1970, People's Democracy had launched a rent strike against a rent hike and bus fare strike against the cost of tickets<sup>73</sup>.

There was also a rent strike of around 35,000 people in the Republic of Ireland in November 1971 against the 1966 Housing Act, and later in Great Britain against the 1972 Housing Finance Act. The latter was significant in that, like in Northern Ireland, some local authorities rebelled against the legislation that had been imposed on them by central government and defended their tenants on strike. The British government then brought in measures to punish local councillors for not implementing the rent increases, making them personally financially liable. Indeed during a 1972 railworkers' strike, the British government in Westminster considered bringing in legislation to "curtail the entitlement to social security benefits which enabled strikers to transfer to the community at large their responsibilities for supporting their families during a strike"<sup>74</sup>. Although this was not introduced, the conditionality of social security based on good behaviour was behind this concept as it was with the Payment for Debt Act.

The rent and rates strike was effective in hitting the exchequer precisely because of the demographic situation – Catholics were more likely to take action in protest against internment, as it was Catholics who tended to be interned, and were overrepresented in public sector housing. The participation in the rent strike was not simply a communal reaction that can be explained by religious denomination/ethnic identity, as there were particular areas where the takeup in the rent strike was higher, and where local councillors were more truculent, which tended to coincide with civil rights-era areas of contention where the groundwork had been laid in terms of organising groups and committees to coordinate action. Enniskillen, for example, had seen police take action, with military back up, in November 1970 when a ban on marches was broken by civil rights activists<sup>75</sup>. According to NICRA, this was the one town in Fermanagh where support for the rent strike was near on 100%<sup>76</sup>.

One consequence of the rent strike was the total break between the SDLP and the civil disobedience movement which was further emphasised

<sup>73</sup> LHL, NIPC, PPO0553, People's Democracy, "Down with Fares", 1970; LHL, NIPC, PPO0511, People's Democracy, "Not a Cent on the Rent", 1970.

<sup>74</sup> TNA, CAB/128/50/15, "Cabinet Meeting", 9 March 1972.

<sup>75</sup> TNA, CJ/4/462, "Internment without Trial in Northern Ireland: Possible Imposition", 9 December 1970.

<sup>76</sup> LHL, NIPC, NICRA, *Emergency Bulletin*, 26 August 1971, Microfiche.

during the anti-H-Block/Armagh campaign. The SDLP ended up joining the executive that was created in 1973 under the Sunningdale Agreement, with Austin Currie, who had been a champion of both the Derry-based housing action struggle and the rent strike in its early stages, becoming housing minister. Currie advised tenants to come off strike, despite the fact that internment was still in active use. Ironically, his position was shortlived when the executive fell in May 1974 following the loyalist UWC strike. This position of the SDLP was strongly rebutted by local tenants steering groups. In Andersonstown, West Belfast, tenants argued that since the strike was not started by the SDLP but by “mass, spontaneous and unorganised protest of the group”, no one group could own it and have the authority to call it off<sup>77</sup>.

The apparent betrayal of the SDLP for their positions of power in the executive – as illustrated by a 1974 Sinn Féin poster of an SDLP dagger stabbing someone in the back<sup>78</sup> – drew another comparison with the rent strike in Britain against the Housing Finance Act. After Currie had issued an ultimatum threatening an increase in arrears payments in April 1974, activists drew attention to what was happening in Britain, calling on SDLP members of the executive to resign and either obtain an amnesty for all tenants or “accept the fate of the Clay Cross councillors and pay the arrears themselves”<sup>79</sup>. In Clay Cross, one of the most truculent local authorities where central government eventually took over control of council mechanisms, the burden of the unpaid rent was placed upon the individual councillors, some of whom faced financial ruin as a result.

Overall the 1971-1974 rent and rates strike has made little mark on Irish history, perhaps deservedly in that its impact on the trajectory of the conflict is relatively small compared with other terrains on which the injustices of Stormont and Westminster were fought. But the government’s response through the Payment for Debt Act was a significant turning point in the overt use of social security to punish political dissidence. It is in the use of this emergency legislation that the rent strike becomes significant. The postwar settlement of the welfare state, council housing and social security was to irrevocably fracture during the 1970s. Whilst Northern Ireland was certainly in a different situation to Great Britain at this point in history<sup>80</sup>, and had a different relationship with welfarism, the mechanisms by which the state could use social security to punish and reward were certainly not dissimilar from those deployed in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. This is apparent in the fact that the sale of council hous-

<sup>77</sup> LHL, NIPC, *Andersonstown News*, 29 November 1973, Microfiche.

<sup>78</sup> LHL, NIPC, PPO0277A, Sinn Féin, “Support rent and rates strike”, 1974.

<sup>79</sup> PRONI, D/3072/4/23/1, “SDLP and the Rent and Rates Strike”, May 1974.

<sup>80</sup> A description of the particulars of the welfare state settlement in Northern Ireland detailed in Bew, Gibbon, Patterson 1996, 17; see also Hennessey 2005.

ing stock to tenants was introduced in Northern Ireland before the rest of the United Kingdom, albeit with conditions that didn't exist in Britain to ensure the replacement of housing stock<sup>81</sup>. The reward and punish mechanism is visible in the extension of the Payment for Debt Act to include salaried workers, and the further extension of its use to all debts not just those incurred through civil disobedience. We see in this the tendency for the welfare state to develop an employer-employee relationship, establishing greater purchase over the control of behaviour as universality paves the way for behavioural conditionality.

In Northern Ireland in 1971, this was of particular use for the state and security forces dealing with political opposition to internment and the Stormont government. At the same time, there were continuities from the treatment of Catholics through the welfare system of the postwar period into the 1970s. The issue of housing is the most germane as discrimination there was a motivating factor of the civil rights movement, and the large numbers of Catholics reliant on social housing and welfare payments underlines why the civil disobedience campaign against internment took the form it did, and why the state's response was effective. What came out of the rent and rates strike was mass opposition to the government's discriminatory policies that heightened after the onset of the conflict, and also the defiance of a vast proportion of the Catholic community to weather the draconian attempts to stop the strike. What it also illustrates for historians is the state's willingness to use a catalogue of tools to contend with political unrest in Northern Ireland, beyond military and policing strategies against the armed struggle. That social security was part of this is instructive not just in understanding Northern Ireland's precarious position within the United Kingdom throughout the twentieth century, but in re-assessing the trajectory of the welfare state and its use by government to condition and control behaviour.

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