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Some Examples of Sectarian Practices by Northern
Ireland Local Authorities 1973-81

General

Up to 1973 the Northern Ireland system of Local Government was similar to that which still pertains in the South. There were two County Boroughs (Belfast and Derry), six County Councils and 65 Boroughs, Urban District and Local District Councils. The Civil Rights Movement which emerged in the late sixties focussed much of its attention on the grave dissatisfaction felt by the minority at the abuse and discrimination which categorised the functioning of many of the authorities.

The Cameron Report which reported in 1969 in particular felt that there was discrimination in local government appointments, gerrymandering of local government electoral boundaries and inadequate provision of housing and unfair allocation of the houses available.

The Cameron Report led to the setting up of a Local Government Review Group under the chairmanship of Mr. Patrick MacRory. The report of the group recommended the transfer to Stormont of all substantial functions belonging to the Councils including responsibility for education, health, welfare, planning, roads, motor taxation, water and sewerage, tourism and electoral arrangements as well as for gas and electricity, transport, harbours and fire. The report also recommended the setting up of 26 district councils which would have certain executive, representative consultative and ceremonial functions of a local nature. Apart from a limited power of nomination to other bodies including area boards (e.g. Health and Social Welfare Boards) the Councils have specific responsibility only for cleansing and sanitation, abattoirs, cemeteries, environment, entertainment, sport and recreation, markets and fairs, gas supply, consumer protection, promotion of tourism development schemes and enforcement of building regulations.

Elections to these Councils take place every four years and the last election was in May 1981. There are 526 Councillors in the 26 District Councils. Following the May 1981 election the Unionist/Loyalist Group hold control of 18 of the 26 Councils. In 7 District Councils there is control by the non Unionist Loyalist Group and in one case neither group has overall control.

The following are some examples of sectarian practices by the District Councils in the period 1973-81:

A. 1. Armagh

In the period 1973-77 the Council steadfastly refused to accept responsibility for a £48,000 Community Centre, situated in a mainly Catholic area, despite the fact that it had the powers and indeed the duty to do so. The Centre, which had been started by the former Town Council and completed by the Housing Executive lay idle for two years. A local community association was finally forced to assume responsibility for the Centre with the aid of the Central Authorities.

In June 1977 the SDLP charged the Council with discrimination in the allocation of the Council Committee positions. It should be noted that the Council has pursued in the 1977-81 period a policy of total exclusion of the minority from the statutory area boards.

In September 1977 the Council refused a GAA application for grant aid and subsequently also refused an invitation to the papal ceremony in Drogheda.

The SDLP reported the Council to the Fair Employment Agency in February 1979 and again in February 1981 over sectarian appointments to a number of positions. The Council was found guilty by the FEA of discrimination in the appointment of a wages clerk in the Council in September 1981.

2. Ballymena

In January 1976, the council decided by a majority vote to exclude GAA clubs from participating in planning local sports facilities. Explaining the ban, a DUP councillor claimed that Gaelic associations are "politically motivated" and seek to "usurp our British heritage".

The refusal in July 1977 by the Council's technical services centre to print programmes which included words in Irish for the GAA annual sports day was referred to the Commissioner of Complaints who ruled that the Council was guilty of 'political bias and prejudice'. In November 1977 the Council quashed an invitation from the British Legion to a Catholic Priest and former Royal Navy Chaplain to conduct a Remembrance Day service and closed the public swimming pool on Sundays to avoid 'a flood of godlessness' in the community. In January 1978 the Council was referred to the Ombudsman for its refusal to include Gaelic games in a coaching scheme entitled to Government grants. The Commissioner of Complaints criticised the Council for its "sectarian stance" in refusing to publish Sunday sport items in its Calendar of Event. The exclusion of Gaelic words from the Calendar was also declared an "offence against Gaelic culture in general".

3. Banbridge

In early 1975 four Catholics were employed by council officials as temporary labourers, but the Loyalist majority on the council arranged to have them dismissed. None of the senior officers of the Council in the period 1973-77 Council was a Catholic. The single SDLP member of the council (1973-77) was excluded from membership of the major committees and from representation on area boards.

The Council (1977-81) refused to give aid to the GAA who were taking part in a 'month of sport' in the area although other sports were Council-sponsored. The Council was critical of Cardinal O'Fiaich's comments on the Long Kesh/Armagh prison protests and protested to Buckingham Palace at the Queens request that flags be flown at half-mast on the death of Pope John Paul I.

4. Coleraine

The single SDLP and three Alliance members of the council (1973-77) were excluded from all major sub-committees and from representation on area boards.

The SDLP accused the Council (1977-81) majority of blatant discrimination following a decision by the Local Government Staff Commission that the Council had not followed the procedures laid down in the 1973 Local Government Act in its recruitment of a tourism development officer.

5. Cookstown

The only Catholic Official employed by this Council prior to the opening of a new town swimming pool on 29 November 1976 was the recreation officer who was statutorily inherited from the earlier urban council. SDLP members of the Council have alleged discrimination in appointment of staff for the swimming pool and maintained that out of 15 appointments made there was only one or two Catholics and these had been appointed to the most menial jobs.

In the Council's first year of operation in 1973 one Catholic Councillor was elected to sit on the Housing Council and this was the only post of significance given to a Catholic Councillor. In 1974, however, this person was replaced by a loyalist and the Council has pursued a policy, despite the narrowness of the majority, of total exclusion of the minority from the statutory area boards.

In June 1977 the SDLP complained that all the major Council posts had gone to Unionists and that only one Catholic was employed in the Council's Office staff. The SDLP also alleged at the time that 6 of the 8 Unionist Councillors had been involved in setting up road blocks during the UWC strike.

The Ombudsman found the Council guilty of discrimination against two Catholics who had unsuccessfully applied for posts in the Council in August 1977. In June 1978 the Council voted not to award any grant to the GAA until it changed its rule excluding members of the Northern Ireland security forces. In 1979 the Council supported a resolution calling for the abolition of the FEA.

In February 1981 the FEA told the Council to take a series of actions to correct what was said to be a "substantial religious imbalance" in their work force. According to the FEA report the Council salaried staff consisted of 13 Protestants and only two Catholics with none of the Catholics being employed in head office and one of the two of whom was only appointed after the FEA had commenced its investigations. On the manual side the FEA noted that out of the 57 employees 42 were Protestants and only 15 were Catholics. The FEA discovered that since 1977 about 45% of those who applied for jobs in the Council were Catholics and 55% Protestants but only 33% of the Catholics were successful compared to 68% of the Protestants. In a heated discussion by the Council of the FEA report it was thrown out by one vote.

6. Craigavon

In October 1974 the Manager of a £500,000 recreation centre resigned following a ban by the Council on Sunday opening. In January 1975 the Councils Recreational Committee refused the use of a local hall on Sunday for an Irish dancing competition. The Council also banned Sunday swimming in its three swimming pools and Sunday boating on its two lakes. In addition it decided to close its golf course and ski slope on Sundays. Referring to the issue of Sunday closure a DUP Councillor said "We in Craigavon are involved in a struggle against Republicanism this whole issue is designed to undermine the Protestant way of life." The Council in the period 1977-81 maintained a policy of restricting the opening of cinemas, leisure centres etc on a Sunday. The Council overturned a decision of its recreational committee to lease a portion of land to St. Peter's GAA Group.

In December 1978 the Council was accused by the FEA of political or religious discrimination following the rejection of an application by Mr. Tim Duffy for the post of the outdoor recreation officer. In the appeal by the Council to Armagh County Court the Court decided that there was a case for the Council to answer and in June 1980 the Court of Appeal finally decided that Mr. Duffy had indeed been discriminated against. In his judgement Lord Lowry noted that in the interview with Mr. Duffy one of the Councillors, Alderman John Wright put the question to Mr. Duffy "Mr. Duffy, are you loyal?" The Judge said that this was, to say the least, evidence of religious or political discrimination.

It should be noted that in the 1977-81 period the Council has pursued a policy of total exclusion of the minority from Area Boards.

In April 1979 the Mayor and other Unionist Councillors refused to attend the Official opening of a Catholic Church in Craigavon. In October 1980 in a case backed by the FEA involving a Mr. Pat McGahan it was claimed that because of the fact that he was a Roman Catholic he had only been allowed progress so far up the management ladder but was then effectively blocked. It was also claimed that the Council Chief Recreational Officer had replanned his recreational Department conscious of the politico-religious composition of the Council. In the Court case the judge said that the FEA had established a prime facie case of not only discrimination but discrimination on religious grounds.

7. Fermanagh

The 1973 elections returned 4 Official Unionists, 4 UPNI, 1 Unity Unionist, 1 Independent Unionist, 4 SDLP, 4 Unity, 1 Independent and 1 non-party. In practice, the council comprised 10 Unionists and 10 non-Unionists and failed initially to reach agreement. The area was administered for some time by a Commission of six civil servants appointed by the Secretary of State. A council meeting in January 1974 elected a Unionist chairman and the absence of a non-Unionist councillor at the

annual general meeting in June 1974 allowed a Unionist majority to retain the chair. A subsequent series of motions of no confidence was defeated by means of the Chairman's own casting vote.

In April 1975 the Council was instructed by the Local Government Staff Commission to reverse its decision not to appoint a Catholic as recreation officer. The Catholic had been selected by the Council's own duly appointed appointments committee. Two UPNI councillors voted with the non-Unionists to uphold the appointment.

In June 1975 the same two UPNI councillors were called upon to resign when they voted with representatives of the minority to allow the election of an SDLP chairman.

8. Larne

The 1977 elections returned a Unionist/Loyalist bloc with a majority of 8 to 7. The Un/Loyalists held all three posts on statutory bodies. A Vanguard member was elected Mayor for 1977 and then a DUP member held the position until the end of the Council's term. The Vanguard member and former Mayor resigned from the Council in August 1979 following a row over an accusation that a DUP member of the Council had organised a protest march against an AOH demonstration during which there was some violence. A Council organised memorial service for Lord Mountbatten and 18 soldiers killed at Warrenpoint was boycotted by Alliance Councillors because all religious denominations were not involved. There was much opposition in the Council to plans for a GAA pitch and for a proposal to send a telegram of congratulations to the new Church of Ireland Primate. In August, 1980 there was a major row in the Council over an invitation from Dun Laoghaire to attend their Golden Jubilee celebrations. The DUP mayor led a group of Councillors to Dun Laoghaire in October, 1980 and was as a consequence suspended from his party and later resigned.

9. Limavady

The loyalist majority on this council (1973-77) used its majority of one to exclude the four SDLP members from the main council sub-committee and from representation on the area boards.

When the post of Head of Department in the new council's engineering division was being filled, the previous incumbent (a Catholic) was rejected in favour of a Loyalist, even though he was apparently the better qualified. It is understood that there is only one Catholic (a female clerical employee) on the staff of the council. The SDLP charged the new-Council (1977-81) with "blatant discrimination" over the appointments made at the first meeting. Eighteen out of twenty two appointments on Committees and other bodies to which the Council sends representatives went to Unionists. The SDLP criticised the "blatant sectarian narrow-mindedness of the Unionist majority" following the refusal of the Council to allow the local squash courts and swimming pool to open on Sundays. An SDLP proposal that the position of Chairman should rotate was rejected.

10. Lisburn

A major building development planned for the Poleglass area designed mainly to meet the needs of a large section of the Roman Catholic population of west Belfast was reduced by about half following, it is alleged, representations from members of Lisburn council and others. The development, which would in effect have extended Catholic West Belfast would have been in an area safe for Catholics, who constitute the bulk of the present emergency housing list. The Housing Executive original plans provided for a £50 million complex, with 4,000 houses, 6 schools and a 60 acre industrial area, and the overflow would have affected the electoral balance, particularly in neighbouring Lisburn Borough Council area, which is loyalist-dominated. (The decision to reduce the size of the development was taken by the Northern Ireland office). The Council (1977-81) continued to voice fierce opposition to the Poleglass development. In October 1980 the Councils refusal to provide a refuse collection service for the scheme was overruled by the Department of the Environment. A rejection by the Council's planning Committee of the divisional planning officers recommendation for the development of playing fields and the building of a pavilion for St. Patricks GAA Club was also overruled. Controversy surrounded the Councils refusal to pass a resolution of sympathy on the death of Pope John Paul I and to send a letter of congratulation to the Church of Ireland Primate elect Mr. John Armstrong.

On 10 December 1980 the Council passed a resolution "deploring the betrayal of the Unionist majority by the British Prime Minister in discussing the internal affairs of Northern Ireland with the Taoiseach" at their summit meeting on 8 December, 1980.

11. Magherafelt

The 1977 elections returned a Unionist Loyalist bloc which had a 8/7 majority and held all four statutory posts thus excluding all minority representation on these boards. In August 1977 an SDLP councillor challenged in the High Court a council decision not to include Gaelic football in its summer recreation scheme. The High Court ruled that the Council had acted unlawfully in not including Gaelic football. There was controversy over a Council decision of early 1978 to make a donation of £5,000 for widows and dependents of members of the UDR killed by the IRA in South Derry. The Local Government Auditor ruled the payment unlawful. In June 1979 the Council sent a letter of regret to the incoming President of the GAA "that a man from the district should have lowered its name by heading one of the most biased and discriminatory organisations in the country". In February, 1981 the Council passed a motion concerning the outcome of the Dublin summit and utterly repudiating the suggestion that Dublin should be involved in anyway in Northern Ireland affairs.

B Exclusion of the Minority Community from Representation on Statutory Boards

The powers exercised by the District Councils have, since 1973, been severely circumscribed. However, of what is left of their powers probably the most important is the Councils' ability to nominate members to the boards of statutory bodies (e.g Health and Social Services Boards, Education and Library Boards, the Housing Executive, the Fire Authority etc.). These nominees allow some local say in the general running of important local services. Examples of major imbalances between parties' Council strength and their representation on statutory boards between 1977 and 1981 are as follows:

- (1) Armagh: The Un/Loy bloc had a 12/8 majority: all 4 seats on statutory bodies were held by the OUP.
- (2) Cookstown: The Un/Loy bloc held all 3 statutory body positions despite having only an 8/7 council majority.
- (3) Craigavon: All 5 statutory positions were held by Unionists or Loyalists who had a 15/10 majority on the Council.
- (4) Larne: All 3 statutory body posts were held by Unionists/Loyalists despite having only an 8/7 council majority.
- (5) Limavady: The Un/Loy bloc, with an 8/7 majority held all 3 statutory posts.
- (6) Magherafelt: All 4 representative posts were held by the Un/Loy bloc who had an 8/7 council majority.

Department of Foreign Affairs
2 November 1981

Annex: Table of Sectarian Abuses by Local Authorities 1973-81

Sectarian Abuses by Local Authorities 1973-81

Housing

Armagh	X	X	X
Ballymena	X	X	
Banbridge	X	X	
Coleraine	X	X	
Cookstown	X	X	
Craigavon	X	X	
Fermanagh		X	
Larne	X	X	
Limavady	X	X	
Lisburn	X	X	
Magherafelt	X		