

# The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association

## Sample Essay

### **What were the aims of the NICRA and how successful were they in achieving those aims?**

The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was founded in 1967. There was many factors which led to its formation. The treatment of Catholics in NI at the time was appalling and frustrations about this finally led to this pressure group. The abuses of Catholics were numerous and some of the NICRA's aims were to erradicate the B-Specials and have Catholics treated equally in society. They had varying success, although NICRA was a peaceful organisation and certainly never intended for the movement to spiral into uncontrollable violence as it did. They also led indirectly to a number of changes in NI at the time.

The NICRA had a number of aims to instigate political reform. An important one of these was the desire to change from the property qualification system of voting to one man, one vote. The property qualification clearly favoured the unionists and led to discrimination against Catholics in allocation of housing in certain gerrymandered areas west of the Bann, such as Derry, Omagh and Dungannon. As well as this they wanted an end to this gerrymandering. In Derry for example with a 60% Catholic population the local council was still entirely controlled by Protestant unionists. The NICRA wlaowanted an end to the heavily armed paramilitary police force, the B-Specials, who terrorized Catholics. Their abuses of Catholics were numerous, including firing on innocent people and stopping and searching Catholic neighbours. Finally they also wanted an end to the the Special Powers act. It had

been passed in 1921 as a defensive measure against the IRA, intended only to be temporary but in fact continued to allow internment and the banning of Catholic organisations.

The NICRA also had a number of aims for social and economic reform. Catholics were discriminated against in these areas in a variety of forms too. For example as previously stated in certain areas houses were not allocated fairly. In Derry for example the Housing Trust which distributed houses under a fair points system, could only build in the over crowded South Ward. On the other hand local councils built in the more spacious North and Waterside wards and typically favoured Protestants. Another of their main aims was to end discrimination in jobs. While unemployment in the general population was at 30%, it was at 50% among Catholic men. Typically also Catholics occupied the more low wage jobs, such as cleaners and gardeners rather than clerks and technicians. An example of this was in Stormont as all MPs and ministers who ran NI were Protestants. The NICRA aimed to gain more equality for Catholics in all of these areas and nothing more. At no point did they campaign to return to the republic, singing the American civil rights song 'We Shall Overcome' and avoiding Nationalist slogans and flags.

The origins of the NICRA were varied. These discriminations against Catholics led to a number of campaigns, protests and groups which later were concentrated into the NICRA. For example a major leader of the organisation, John Hume, came to prominence with the University for Derry Committee, following the Coleraine University scandal. Other major components were Patricia and Conn McCluskey. They helped set up the Campaign for Social Justice in January 1964. They collected evidence of discrimination against Catholics within NI, mainly with regard to housing. The success of the NICRA was aided by the CSJ as it led to the formation of the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster, a pressure group composed of Labour MPs. Gerry Fitt also added to their success. While not an actual member of the NICRA he worked closely with Hume and the organisation to achieve its aims. As an MP he was able to draw attention to the civil rights issues in NI, within Westminster. Of course these leaders

would most likely never have gone to these lengths had it not been for the education reform of the Welfare State. The free secondary education allowed more young Catholics to receive third level schooling. As this had been brought in in the 40's, the 60's was the exact time that those who benefitted from this system were coming into their own and had the confidence to stand up for themselves and their families, friends and neighbours.

The NICRA's primary action was marching. This was how they managed to finally achieve many of their aims. They were an entirely peaceful organisation and had no intention of turning to violence. The first significant march took place in Dungannon in August 1968. It was directly following an incident in which two Catholic families who were squatting in council houses were expelled by the RUC. The houses were then given to Protestants, one to a single 19 year old woman. The NICRA marched in protest led by Currie and Fitt. Ian Paisley announced a counter demonstration the night before and the RUC stopped the NICRA from entering the town, claiming to fear riots. The next significant march was in Derry 1968. Here the NICRA backed the Derry Housing Action Committee. However once again Paisley announced a counter demonstration and both marches were banned. Eamonn McCann and local radicals proceeded anyway and about 400 showed up to march. The result was that police beat many of the marchers, including Gerry Fitt, and all of this was caught on camera and televised. These marches and Hume's awareness of the new television age were used expertly here in order to achieve their aims. The marches were seen in the South as well as Britain and this began to place pressure, not only on the Unionist but on the British government, particularly once the police force were seen attacking peaceful protesters. This helped the NICRA greatly in achieving their aims and contributed enormously to their success in leading to reform. However the violence of the police led to retaliation on the side of the Catholics, which soon spiralled into a pattern of violence and animosity between the Catholics and the Unionist state. NICRA was a peaceful organisation and had never intended their platform to lead to violence and ultimately numerous deaths. This placed a shadow over their success.

The NICRA were successful in the sense that much reform was brought in due to their actions. Pressure from the British PM Wilson by means of threatening to remove British subsidies led O'Neill to take action. He brought in a package of moderate reform including a fair points system in all areas for council housing, and an end to the Special Powers act, as well as a Development Commission to replace Derry City Council. However he failed to include one man, one vote and this allowed the NICRA to continue. This began a chain of events which led to the resignation of Terrence O'Neill in March 1969. The violence in NI continued to worsen, until it was entirely out of control to the extent that the British army had to be called in. This led the Home Secretary James Callaghan to become much more involved in affairs. Another series of reforms were brought in over the following months and Callaghan put extra pressure on the new PM, Chichester Clark. Further demands of the NICRA were met as the B Specials (who had returned due to the violence in NI) were disbanded for good and replaced by the UDR. Allocation of housing was taken from local councils and given to a Housing Executive. Local government was to be reorganised, with the return of proportional representation and finally the ability for all over 18 to vote. In this sense the NICRA were successful. They essentially achieved all of their initial aims. However this came at an enormous cost as human lives were lost and NI moved further and further towards civil war.

The NICRA clearly weren't entirely successful however, as we can see by the splintering of the organisation in 1970, primarily into the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) and the Provisional IRA. Moderates founded the SDLP, believing that a political party was essential in order to effect change. These included Hume, Currie and Fitt. They aimed to work for the co-operation between nationalists and unionists within NI and to improve relations between the north and south in the hopes that they would eventually peacefully reunite. They were technically non-sectarian but had little Protestant support. They adopted policies to end partition and propose power sharing. The Provos on the other hand were supported, initially by extremists, but later by those radicalised by the British army's actions such as the Falls Road curfew July 1970 and Bloody Sunday Jan 30th 1972. The Provos were extremely

anti-British and wanted to force them out, using violence if necessary. Support for the Provos grew through out the early 70's and they even received aid from Irish Americans and the south in the form of money to buy guns. They commenced a bombing campaign in NI which eventually extended to Britain. Clearly the members of the NICRA didn't consider themselves to be entirely successful as they felt there was more to be done with other organisations.

When looked at in purely black and white terms the NICRA were extremely successful. They achieved all of their initial aims, for equal treatment of Catholics, an end to the B Specials and one man, one vote. However by the time the NICRA split in reality Catholics were in a much worse situation than before. The NICRA marches set off an unforeseeable chain of events which led to the descent into chaos and the worsening of the tensions between the Catholic and Protestant populations and hundreds of deaths.