

Home Sweet Home? Housing Activism and Political Commemoration in Sixties Ireland.

Abstract (283 words)

This paper examines the explosion of activism around housing in Ireland in the late Sixties. At a time of political commemoration around the anniversaries of the 1916 Rising, and the establishment of the first revolutionary independent parliament (Dáil) in 1919, a group of activists calling themselves the Dublin Housing Action Committee sought to disrupt political consensus and ask serious questions about the priorities of the Irish state. The group began through cooperation between homeless people in the city, but soon garnered support from anti-establishment agitators within the republican party, Sinn Féin. By 1969, the group was pressing government for response to the acute housing crisis in the city.

The significance of the DHAC was threefold. In the first instance, it sheds light on a local political problem, challenging the consensus of an Irish 'success' narrative, and putting the spotlight on the failure of the state to deliver on its promise to its citizens at exactly the time when this 'success' was being celebrated. The strategies of the DHAC demonstrated how the wider national question of Irish unity could be fused with local issues in order to successfully build alliances beyond its organic political base. Secondly, it sought to exploit a rights-based language placing socio-political protest in Ireland within a much broader international context. Thirdly, the case of the DHAC prompts us to rethink the position of Ireland within the global 'sixties', beyond the dominant narrative of civil rights activism in Northern Ireland. The actions of this housing movement indicate that the struggles of a small modernizing economy on the fringes of Europe produced the same kinds of protest as were evident in urban unrest in Britain, the US and other parts of Europe.

Keywords: Dublin Housing Action Committee; housing activism; Ireland; political commemoration; republican socialism; homelessness; Denis Dennehy; squatting

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Introduction

A few weeks before the end of 2016, a housing action group dubbed 'Home Sweet Home' grabbed headlines in Ireland when they occupied the former offices of the Department of Social and Family Affairs at Apollo House in Dublin, a building which had lain vacant for years, and which was in the hands of the state-owned receiver company the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA).¹ Seeking to focus on the endemic problem of homelessness in the city, left wing politicians and celebrities mobilized public support to criticize the government for failing to use vacant state-owned buildings to house hundreds of homeless people and those sleeping on the streets. Brendan Ogle, a group spokesperson and high-ranking official within the Unite Trade Union, directly linked the 'national shame' of homelessness to the ongoing commemorations of the 1916 Rising, seen by many as a key turning point in the foundation myth of the state.² In framing their protest within a narrative of national commemoration, the Home Sweet Home movement echoed the efforts of activists almost fifty years before. In 1967, a group calling itself the Dublin Housing Action Committee (DHAC) positioned its response to the contemporary housing crisis within three broad discourses: state commemoration, domestic political discourses of social justice, and an international language of civil rights. Through their actions, the DHAC brought together unlikely bedfellows: anti-state actors from Sinn Féin and the Communist Party who saw an opportunity to undermine political elites and connect the to the political turmoil in Northern Ireland; members of the political class who embraced a new language of social justice, including those from the Catholic Church;

homeless activists who had imported squatting tactics from the London and other British cities. The DHAC appeared at a time of enormous change for the relatively young Irish state, which was struggling to modernize in order to both accommodate a growing urban population and to prove its ability to join the European Economic Community. The clash between these local and international political imperatives opened up space for a discussion of what nation meant in a new republic. Within this political and social space, the significance of the DHAC was threefold. In the first instance, the group hijacked a national 'success' narrative, and put the spotlight on the failure of the state to deliver on its promise to its citizens. Secondly, it proved that the wider national question of Irish unity could be fused with local issues in order to successfully build alliances beyond its organic political base. Thirdly, it sought to exploit a rights-based language that would place socio-political protest in Ireland within a much broader international context.

This paper sets out in the first instance to set the activities of the Dublin Housing Action Committee within the context of a global sixties 'movement' that challenged political consensus. That this movement in Ireland was shaped by decidedly local concerns does not mean it should not be considered as part of a wider movement on the left. Secondly, it will consider the ways in which the DHAC framed their activism through the prism of local historical commemoration to reveal the gap between the promise of the independent Irish state and the delivery of those promises to the people who were at the bottom of the social ladder. When Georgy Katsiaficas wrote about the squatting movement in Germany, he focused on their autonomy.³ There are echoes of this political autonomy within the DHAC, but more significantly, this housing movement demonstrates the ways that citizens marginalized by capitalism can be

harnessed by those political actors marginalized by the state. Finally then, the paper will examine the ways in which grassroots social protest fused with larger questions of national identity. The housing protest movement in Dublin demonstrates the ways that local agitation could put national politics at its service, wrapping itself up in the markers of the national question and playing off international events, while being primarily concerned with local change.

1. Apathy, Protest and Housing in Historical Context

In November 1965 an American called Robert Head, then living in Hatch Street, Dublin, wrote home to the Students for a Democratic Society, observing that the Irish, ‘Catholics all,’ were ‘apathetic’ and ‘couldn’t care less’ about protest.⁴ Complaining about the incompetence of the Communist Party of Ireland, the complacency of the newspapers, and the lack of physical protest against the Vietnam War, Head was desperate to get back to the US in order to do some more militant organizing. Head’s complaints about a lack of political engagement in Ireland were not unusual, nor were they inaccurate. Not since the farmers’ strikes of the early forties had there been any national protest movement; the unemployment marches of the 1950s were the last demonstrations of anti-establishment protest seen in the capital city. In 1964, the young Trinity College academic David Thornley had published an essay examining the interconnection between politics, economics, and the advance of modernity.⁵ Thornley suggested that the Irish had lost a lot of the radicalism that characterized nineteenth and early twentieth century political action, concluding that ‘Labour is much less socialist in ... 1952 than it was in its programme of 1918,’ and that Fianna Fail was ‘arguably less socially radical’ than it was in 1927 or 1932.⁶ Foreshadowing Head, Thornley wrote that

‘the voters, uneducated, apathetic, grasping at a little (perhaps transient) prosperity, are jaded with the prolongation of the old slogans into the present.’⁷

Although coming from completely different perspectives, both Head and Thornley were concerned with the same thing: civic engagement for progressive change. For Head, the problem was that the Irish were not engaged with the international problem of the Vietnam war; for Thornley it was that they chose to remain detached from the business of domestic democracy, allowing instead a sleepy consensus to endure. But Thornley was more optimistic, predicting cracks in the consensus, leading to a ‘delayed peaceful, social revolution.’⁸ These cracks would start to show by 1966: a year in which the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising gave space for discussion of national priorities, farmers led a 30,000 strong protest march over 177 miles from Bantry to Dublin (echoing the Delano farm protests earlier that year in California), and Irish Republicans blew up Nelson’s pillar as an act of defiance only a month before the Rising commemoration was due to take place in Dublin. The cracks in the consensus were becoming more pronounced, and reflected a sense of political solidarity which went outside the borders of the state, and even the contours of the island.

A small conservative state on the western fringes of Europe, it is perhaps not surprising that Ireland would look outwards for political inspiration. In particular, Irish activists (republican and socialist) saw in the successes of the Civil Rights movement opportunities to shift political power out of the hands of controlling elites and into the hands of politicized grassroots organizations. At first glance, this seems quite different to the waves of social revolution that hit Europe in 1968. The ‘gentle revolution’ of the

students on the campus of University College Dublin can be hardly compared with student revolts in France, West Berlin or even London.⁹ This sense that Ireland somehow ‘missed’ the 1960s has been sustained by historians of twentieth century Ireland. With few exceptions, the tendency is to locate in the 1980s and 1990s the kind of social revolution that Thornley predicted, while acknowledging that major social changes were ultimately brought about by economic prosperity rather than anti-establishment upheaval.¹⁰

Scholars have traditionally located the ‘Irish Sixties’ in Northern Ireland, where there were clear parallels between the struggle for African American Civil Rights and the agenda of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association.¹¹ Very little scholarly attention has been paid to the story of socialist, republican, anti-poverty activists in the Republic of Ireland, except insofar as they figure in the story of the ideological split in the IRA in 1969.¹² One notable exception to this is Erika Hanna’s examination of the Dublin Housing Action Committee alongside other urban preservation groups in late 1960s Dublin. Within a narrative of modernization, Hanna argues that efforts to resist redevelopment of the city speak to the ‘unique position of Dublin in the sixties, both within Ireland and the historiography of post-war urban change.’¹³ But neither the clashes over development, nor the methods of resistance to this development, were unique. They sit alongside similar movements of poor people in Cleveland, Chicago and London, who sought to gain control over their environment even as they continued to be marginalized by the state.

Buying into conventional views (similar to Robert Head’s) of an apathetic, protest-reluctant Irish public, few scholars have examined the significant indicators of social revolt south of the border in the late 1960s within a broader context and have remained reluctant to trace the story of Irish protest in the post-independence era. This

contrasts with the attention paid to protest in the nineteenth century, a century marked by anti-state rebellion.¹⁴ In addition, sociologists have tended to ignore the sixties and tend to be more interested in more contemporary protest movements.¹⁵ This approach misses an important aspect of the modernization of the state. By framing its opposition to the state against a backdrop of commemoration, the DHAC managed to advance an anti-state protest while simultaneously embracing the language of patriotism. They challenged the systematic marginalization of poor people. They did so in ways that echoed squatters movements in Europe and elsewhere. Undoubtedly, the case of the DHAC allows us to re-evaluate the position of Ireland within what we might call the 'global sixties' phenomenon.

2. Social Justice and the Development of a Housing Movement

The organization at the heart of housing protest in the late 1960s was the Dublin Housing Action Committee. The DHAC muttered itself into existence in 1966 with the dual purpose of pressurizing Dublin Corporation to address the problem of housing and homelessness in the capital city, and creating a grassroots protest movement that would mobilize poor people in Dublin behind the 'new' socialist vision of the main instigators of the DHAC, Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin's efforts to mobilize the urban poor echoed New Left strategies to create interracial movement of the poor in the US.¹⁶ Whether deliberate or not, their focus on employment, local services and housing might have been taken directly from Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven's ambitious plan to overhaul the American welfare system.¹⁷ Although their plan gained little purchase, they based their theory on two assumptions: firstly, that there was a positive prevailing political will for reform and secondly, confidence in the power of mass mobilization to force new legislation. In Ireland of 1966, one could be forgiven for making similar

kinds of assumptions. The publication in 1965 by Fine Gael of its new policy document, 'The Just Society,' suggested that European-style Social Democracy was filtering into Irish politics.¹⁸ The general election that same year saw the Irish Labour Party win 22 seats, its highest number of deputies in the Dáil since 1922, and its highest share of the vote in Dublin at 18.5%.¹⁹ But it was not until the party's conference in 1966 that Labour, long dominated by Catholic Church interests and largely disassociated from socialism, began any appreciable shift to the left. Part of this was due to the elevation of new voices within the party, but it was also because of renewed interest, on the anniversary of the 1916 Rising, in the socialist politics of James Connolly. This push to the left would be accentuated in response to housing activism.

In reality, left wing politics in Ireland had been suffocated in the aftermath of independence. The domestic Catholic Church followed the Vatican in condemning all hints of communism. Despite the fact that as a political force, communism was virtually non-existent, several bishops, including the politically influential Archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid, regularly preached against the dangers of communism.²⁰ Nevertheless, the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council seemed to herald a more open relationship between the Catholic Church and its congregation. But the promise of openness heralded by the Second Vatican Council, the rise of Christian democracy, and the slowly filtering ideas of liberation theology from Latin America, shaped new ideas around social justice. Notable clerics began to engage with the media, especially the new national television broadcaster, Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTE), which had begun public service broadcasting at the end of 1961. In 1966, the *Newsbeat* current affairs programme ran a series of reports about the housing crisis.²¹ By 1968, Dominican priest Austin Flannery was using the religious affairs programme *Outlook* in order to spotlight housing problems. Religious voices such as Flannery's served as a bridge between

traditional Labour politics, a new vision of a socialist platform, and the more marginalized voices on the republican left who were keen to use criticism of inadequate housing as an organizing tool.

Voices on the left also reacted to changes in the Irish economy, and particularly the apparent growing wealth gap. In 1960, economist and future leader of Fine Gael Garret Fitzgerald summed up the mood of the nation with the headline of his *Irish Times* column 'Good Times Coming.'²² It appeared in 1960 that the economic policies of then Taoiseach Sean Lemass and his chief economic advisor T.K. Whitaker were working to drag the Irish economy into prosperity, for the first time since independence.²³ Industrial production rose by 7 per cent, exports rose by £21.7 million to £152.4 million; while there was a growth in manufacturing, there was also an explosion of agricultural exports, with live cattle exports rising by 178%.²⁴ It seemed that finally Ireland was moving into a new modern era: in Dublin, there was a building boom fuelled by a general rise in employment, wages and private house buying. But the gradual move away from agricultural dependency, and the growth of the industrial sectors meant a general move off the land and into the cities, putting pressure on existing housing availability and local services. In 1961, the population of Ireland was at a historic low at 2.8 million, but the population of Dublin stood at almost 600,000.²⁵ This demographic shift put pressure on local infrastructure, especially housing.

The ability of the average Irishman to purchase his house was a relatively new phenomenon in the early 1960s. Andrew Kincaid suggests that the 'possessor principle' and the obsessive attachment of Irish people to land ownership, is to blame for the lack of 'risk taking, innovation, and ambition' in 1960s Ireland.²⁶ The politics of housing

rights was not peculiar to the Irish context: in 1966 the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights reiterated the right to housing.²⁷ In Dublin, a city littered with reminders of working class frictions of the revolutionary period, the old Georgian buildings that had housed the political elites of the eighteenth century now housed the poor and destitute of the city in tenements. By the late 1950s, many of the slum tenements of Dublin had been cleared by relocation of tenants to new developments outside the city, by suburban sprawl, and by the inevitable emigration that blighted the population in a time of economic stagnation. But many derelict areas still remained and the numbers of families on local authority waiting lists also continued to grow. The tenement buildings remaining in the city centre were to become the site of conflict in the late 1960s between two housing interest groups: one, the Georgian Society, which sought the preservation of Georgian buildings; the other, the Dublin Housing Action Committee, which coordinated protests against homelessness and inadequate housing provision by Dublin Corporation. For the DHAC, and their Sinn Féin supporters, housing was to prove a populist and historically meaningful point of contest, which would serve to highlight the ways in which the Irish government was failing in both its national promise and its international standing.

The responsibility for state housing provision in Dublin lay with two bodies. The Department of Local Government was responsible for allocating government funding for local authority housing schemes. Responsibility for planning and provision of social housing lay at local level. In Dublin, it was the City Council (also known as the Corporation) which held responsibility for most of Dublin city's social housing, although housing provision in the growing suburbs lay within the remit of a handful of local councils. As early as 1962, it was widely acknowledged that rapid intervention in

the housing situation would be needed to prevent a serious crisis in housing from occurring in Dublin. In 1964, an official report suggested that nearly 13,000 houses would need to be built in order to replace uninhabitable houses and eliminate overcrowding.²⁸ However, despite successive Housing Acts, no government had managed to address the problem of social housing provision. On the contrary, legislation made matters worse. The 1960 Rent Restriction Act and the 1962 Housing (Loans and Grants) Act addressed twin concerns: improve safety in housing, especially where houses had fallen into significant disrepair, and improve the prosperity of the city by allowing landowners to clear tenants from old houses, freeing up the land for sale and redevelopment. The Rent Restriction Act set out to control rents and make living costs more affordable for the city's poor; but in reality, when coupled with the Housing Act two years later, landlords had enormous incentive to allow houses to decay so that they could push out rent-controlled tenants.

Matters deteriorated rapidly in the summer of 1963, when a series of floods caused numerous houses to collapse, almost all in areas traditionally associated with 'tenement' dwelling. On both sides of the Liffey, fears increased regarding the safety of old houses. A disaster on Fenian Street in 1963, in which houses collapsed killing several people, highlighted the acuteness of the problem. The housing shortage became so critical that the Dublin Health Authority acquired a section of Griffith Barracks to house homeless families.²⁹ Criticism of the conditions in the Barracks centered on the failure of the government to uphold its constitutional duty to protect the integrity of the family, deemed to be the basic unit of the state in the Constitution. The Housing Act of 1966 did not solve the crisis for those on the margins, but it did signal a shift in policy by offering loan incentives for citizens to purchase their own homes. This was a move

away from state responsibility for housing provision, and effectively called upon citizens to make provision for their own accommodation. With government-backed loans, the expectation was that these measures might provide adequate incentives for families to move out of the city centre and into family homes in the suburbs, without having to resort to adding their names to lengthy local authority lists in the hope of acquiring limited social housing.

3. Housing and the Left: Socialism is 'In'

The key issue in both the 1962 and 1966 Housing Acts was the question of house demolition. Both Acts provided for the demolition of 'uninhabitable' houses – the term was never adequately defined, and interpretation remained subjective. Importantly, there was no stipulation that a demolished house should be replaced with buildings designated for residential occupancy. Thus, by effectively allowing the rezoning of land made available through demolition of residential property, the government left the door open for increased land speculation. Landlords often accused tenants of being responsible for allowing properties to fall into decay. But what would happen, for instance, if landlords were to leave their houses vacant in the hope that they would fall into disrepair, thus allowing them to be demolished and the land rezoned for non-residential purposes? In addition, with loans making house ownership a viable possibility for lower middle class and some working class families, there was a reluctance to prioritize poor people over profit. Government policy did little to alleviate the difficulties faced by those on the economic margins.

This was essentially a crisis of capitalism, and within the Irish political system, there were no champions of the 'underclasses'. After the declaration of a cease-fire by

the IRA (ending its border campaign in 1962) Sinn Féin sought to fill this vacuum. This marked a deliberate shift left, based on the belief that the SF agenda of a united Ireland would be stronger if they could connect with a grass roots movement built around core community issues. By 1965, 'a strong liaison had been established with a number of intellectuals with marked communist leanings.'³⁰ By late 1967, there was no doubt as to the party's intentions, signalled by their president, Tomás MacGiolla, speaking in Cork that October:

Socialism is IN at the moment in Ireland. There is a mad scramble to the left since Pope John made it respectable. Even Fine Gael tried to climb over the centre barrier with their 'just society'. Everyone wants to say 'I am a Socialist' but there are not so many who are prepared to 'be Socialists'.³¹

To understand the importance of this stance, one must bear in mind that in the aftermath of independence, political parties in Ireland did not develop around 'left' and 'right' divides. It was assumed that an Irish government would serve the interests of the Irish 'people' – and that it would do so simply because it was Irish (and not British). The Constitution of 1937 clearly promoted a Catholic ethos, and the assumption was that the state would ensure the best possible life for its citizens.³² The difficulty delivering on this fuelled the revival of an Irish socialism that (rightly or wrongly) traced its roots back to the socialist revolutionary James Connolly. Sinn Féin looked to grasp the imagination of the Irish electorate with socialist grass-roots activities, and provide an alternative to the Treaty-based choice between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The trick would be to fuse issues of both national and local importance, setting them in both a historical and modern context. The problem of 'ten thousand homeless people' on the streets of Dublin appeared to provide such an opportunity.³³

The United Irishman, the vehicle of Sinn Fein, reported the text of MacGiolla's speech alongside two other stories: one detailing 'Dublin's housing shame', the other describing how a 75 year old woman was evicted from her home in Co. Louth by the County Council, and left with her possessions 'on the pavement ... in the rain and the cold.'³⁴ Sinn Fein quickly established advisory groups whose stated aim was to help evicted tenants and homeless people find redress: this strategy eventually evolved into a network of grass roots committees in Bray, Cork, Drogheda, Dublin and Limerick. Housing agitation was entirely consistent with Sinn Fein's agenda to establish a 32-county Socialist worker's republic; it was also oddly reminiscent of the nationalist campaigns of the late nineteenth century, where protests over land and rents became an important building block of both national sovereignty and identity. Between 1967 and 1970 in Dublin, housing agitation revolved around two committees: the Citizen's Advice Bureau, centrally located at Sinn Fein's offices on Gardiner Street; and the Dublin Housing Action Committee, which claimed its headquarters at the caravan home of Denis and Marie Dennehy in Inchicore, just outside the city, before eventually moving its operations to the Gardiner Street offices. The divisions between the two bodies were blurred. Dennehy's main concern was mobilization of the homeless in order to build a socialist movement from the ground up. In the mode of Katsiaficas' 'autonomen', Dennehy had been involved in squatting movements in the UK; his agenda was not always in keeping with that of Sinn Fein. Meanwhile, Sinn Fein's objective was to harness a movement of the poor in order to create a viable left-wing alternative in an Irish political landscape where the Irish Labour Party was notoriously conservative. Before long, these two strands of the housing movement were joined in a single effort.

4. The Dublin Housing Action Committee

In October 1967, Patrick Stanley, signing himself as the Honorary Secretary of the Dublin Housing Action Committee, wrote to Dublin City Council, requesting that the Council meet a deputation from the group to discuss the housing problem.³⁵ This marked the first significant appearance of the DHAC on the political radar.³⁶ The Council referred the issue to a subcommittee, where it was buried until early 1968. Antipathy towards the DHAC escalated when the group caused a public disturbance at the City Council meeting in October, and the Lord Mayor refused to engage with the group in the immediate aftermath. To put pressure on the Council, the Committee increased its public profile by organizing pickets and occupations to protest against evictions and demolition of 'habitable' houses. They argued that landlords and speculators were manipulating the Housing Acts in order to profit financially from developing residential areas in the city, while thousands of citizens remained homeless. Even at this early stage, the rhetoric of the activists targeted 'foreign speculators', a term which usually designated British businesses and equated them with the landlords of the past. Thus, while the Housing Action Committee was undoubtedly a product of the sixties, and developed in the same vein as urban activism in other countries, it is impossible to divorce the ideology of the DHAC from its post-colonial historical context.

The first test for the DHAC came in early January 1968, when Dublin Corporation attempted to carry out eviction orders against four families at Sarah Place, a local authority residential housing area between Conyngham Road and Islandbridge. The Corporation had designated this area for commercial rezoning. In order to do so, the Corporation intended to take advantage of the loose interpretation of the law

regarding 'uninhabitable' housing. The dwellings at Sarah Place had thus been allowed to fall into disrepair, and the tenants were being evicted with the intention of rehousing them in the brand new social housing experiment of Ballymun, to the north west of the city. The plan met opposition from residents, who argued that the move would be an unacceptable hardship. One resident, a Miss Hincliffe, pointed out that a move to Ballymun would mean that she would have to give up a job she had held for twenty-five years: public transport from Ballymun to Dublin city was wholly inadequate.³⁷ Neither the DHAC nor the Sinn Fein Citizens' Advice Bureau was going to allow this opportunity pass. At the Annual General Meeting on 30 December 1967, the DHAC chairman Proinsias de Rossa had laid out a five-point plan to address the city's housing problem. The DHAC urged the government to declare a housing emergency, allowing the adoption of emergency measures, including the opening of all available vacant housing for habitation purposes. They sought the introduction of by-laws to halt the demolition of sound houses, and to prohibit the re-zoning of residential areas for commercial use. In an attack on prominent landlords, including the Minister for Finance Charles Haughey, de Rossa called on the Corporation to repair dwellings in cases where the landlords refused to do so.³⁸ Again, the emphasis here was on the retention of houses for residential use, rather than allowing houses to be demolished and the land sold to industry. Importantly, there was also a call for the government to provide 100% loans to low income house seekers at low interest rates. Thus, the DHAC were not opposed in principle to the ownership of land: in that sense, their aims were relatively moderate, although their tactics became more radical as the establishment refused to engage with their demands.

5. Police Action and Developing Language of Rights

Having been snubbed the previous October by the Corporation, members of the DHAC staged a disturbance at the City Council meeting on 8 January 1968, protesting against the planned evictions at Sarah Place and calling for political action to relieve the city's housing shortage. Shouting opposition from within the public gallery, the DHAC members forced an adjournment to the meeting, and were forcibly removed from City Hall. Described by the *Irish Independent* as 'wild scenes', the disturbance delayed proceedings by 40 minutes, but even after the meeting resumed, the protesters assembled on the street outside could be heard chanting 'Houses for the people'. Although many of the city Councillors opposed the tactics of the DHAC, some expressed sympathy with the general sentiment, including the Labour T.D. Frank Cluskey, who put this motion to the meeting:

We the City Council deplore the delay in acquiring more land for building purposes and call on the City manager to implement immediately the existing powers for the compulsory acquisition of land presently in the hands of speculators.³⁹

Although this motion was unsuccessful, the tactics of the DHAC and the response by both the police forces and the media ensured that the issue of housing would remain on the agenda for the rest of the year. Immediately after the meeting, spokesmen for the committee pointed to the 'unwarranted amount of physical violence' used by the Gardaí and the Special Branch in removing the protesters from the chamber.⁴⁰ Although the Gardaí denied any excessive use of force, the DHAC vowed to bring the matter to the attention of 'the Civil Liberty League and the National Civil Liberties Association and other interested bodies.' The concept of 'rights', and the political potential of this pseudo-legal approach, was relatively new in the progressive discourse – the rhetoric of

the DHAC points to the increased level of awareness of the parameters of the law and Constitution. Of course, it is important to bear in mind that the Sinn Fein elements of the DHAC were intent on undermining the structures of the state in order to establish an all-island socialist republic. It is also important to recall that images of police violence in the USA had permeated Irish political awareness: it is likely that these informed the committee's tactics. After all, the damage done by police was described in rather tame terms as 'torn coats and shirts, twisted arms, broken spectacles, broken watch and the attempted seizure of camera equipment.'⁴¹ But by casting the police in opposition to the citizen, the DHAC framed a clear distinction between the citizen and the state, where these two terms were in opposition to each other. This instinctive separation between citizen and police was most clearly articulated during the January scuffle, when one DHAC protester stated 'No police violence here. The homeless people of Dublin have tickets for this citizens' chamber. The police have not.' The civic chamber of the Corporation thus became a space to argue over interpretations of citizenship. Thus, the language of rights helped to frame this contestation between state and citizen. At a meeting of the Peter McCarthy Cumann of Sinn Fein (in the Pearse Street area of Dublin), the chairman specifically framed housing in nationalist and citizens' 'rights'-based terms: 'This scandalous attack on the houses of our people by foreign speculators must be resisted if we are to retain our democratic right to live in Dublin city.'⁴² Dennehy would echo this language of rights, specifically constitutional rights, in a court appearance in late 1968. Housing and nation, and interpretations of the responsibilities of the state, quickly became key to the way the DHAC framed their arguments regarding the housing crisis.

Publicity for the DHAC was facilitated through demonstrations, police action, arrests and an inefficient justice system, where the time between arrest and trial was often punctuated by intermittent bail hearings; such hearings were usually deemed ‘newsworthy’ by the Dublin-based print media. For example, on 15 January, twenty-one people were remanded on bail after their arrest at the scene of the attempted eviction at Sarah Place. On 17 January 1968, thirteen men and one woman were arrested and charged after a demonstration near the home of the Minister for Local Government, Kevin Boland. These cases dragged on until late spring, with multiple adjournments, and were finally thrown out by the District Court at Kilmainham. Nevertheless, each time the newspapers reported on the case, the names of the accused were listed, resulting in a certain degree of notoriety for some of the activists. By late January, the two primary names associated with the DHAC were those of Denis Dennehy and Proinsias de Rossa.⁴³ Various other officials, including Sean Dunne (Secretary DHAC), Sean O Cionnaith (DHAC and Sinn Fein) and Mairín de Burca (Sinn Fein) repeatedly submitted lengthy letters to the editors of national newspapers, and such letters were frequently published. The leaders of the Committee were quick to use even the slightest whiff of police brutality in order to challenge the fairness of the state: as the protests became more frequent, the level of police repression increased, to the point where Gardaí removed their badges in order to avoid identification lest charges of brutality be made.⁴⁴ While the Committee claimed that all of the demonstrations were peaceful, there can be no doubt that protesters goaded the police, most probably in the hope that a skirmish might prove newsworthy.

Despite, or perhaps because of, police interference, the protests at Sarah Place continued. On 28 January, the Committee sent another request to the City Council,

again asking for permission to address the next meeting, scheduled for 5 February.

Further correspondence proposed that a three-man delegation might address the Council, comprising of de Rossa, Dennehy and the DHAC treasurer Albert Kennedy. The Council refused, on the basis that the delegates could not assure a peaceful meeting. The protests spread out from Sarah Place, and by late January, the DHAC had placed pickets at five city areas where it claimed that 'sound houses' were scheduled to be demolished – these areas included Mount Street, not far from Haughey's offices (where the land use was to change from residential to commercial); Pembroke road, where houses were being cleared to make way for an office block; and Northumberland Road, where three houses were due to be demolished to clear a site for the construction of the Kennedy Concert Hall (the Hall was never built). For housing activists, this seemed to be a clear indication that profit came before people. The architect, social activist and member of the DHAC Uinseann MacEoin criticized this as bad social planning by both politicians and planners: 'Too many have failed to pull their weight in giving a social sympathy and coherence to our urban and rural developments. Too many are interested more in profit than in people.'⁴⁵ By March, other groups were taking their lead from the DHAC. Residents of Mountjoy Square, supported by Labour T.D. Michael O'Leary, marched to the Customs House to protest against moves to convert some of their houses into office blocks.⁴⁶ Not only were they preoccupied by the issue of homelessness; they also expressed concern about the basics of urban planning, especially the impact on the life of the city were residents to be moved out of the centre into suburban schemes like that at Ballymun.⁴⁷ Protests were also organized to support the preservation of the Royal Canal, which was in danger of being filled in⁴⁸, and members of the Georgian Society staged public demonstrations in order to prevent the demolition of various Georgian houses across the city. In mid-1968, it seemed that half of Dublin was taking to the

streets, as demonstrations against the Vietnam War, against the visit of the King and Queen of the Belgians, and university reforms took place alongside rising labour disputes led by the major trades unions.

The final two weeks of April 1968 saw the housing campaign shift from the streets to the airwaves. As noted earlier, the campaign tapped into the social justice agenda of radical elements of the Catholic Church. Most notably, Fr. Austin Flannery began to examine the housing crisis through his short, religious, late-night television show called *Outlook*. Flannery, a Dominican priest, had been closely associated with various social causes, but had become particularly involved in the campaign around housing. The use of *Outlook* (part of RTE's religious programming) for political purposes did not sit well with many commentators, especially the RTE programme controllers. The format of the show involved interviews with homeless people, local politicians and members of the DHAC. Flannery timed the show to coincide with the annual debate on the budget, to put pressure on government to allocate more money for social housing. This was partly in response to comments made by Minister Kevin Boland in late March, at the opening of a new housing scheme in Fermoy, where he stated that 'we would all love to see local authority tenants being provided with houses of better and better standards if we could afford it, at the present time, but we cannot.'⁴⁹ Flannery was heavily criticized for broadcasting a distorted picture of the housing problem. Fianna Fail's Joseph Dowling attacked the show and Flannery in the Dáil, suggesting that Flannery was 'completely ignorant' of what the government was doing to address housing shortages. The Minister for Finance, Charles Haughey, caused public outcry by calling Flannery a 'gullible priest' during the same Dáil debate.⁵⁰ That housewives across Dublin took to the streets to demand an apology from the Minister is

perhaps more indicative of the sacred position of the Catholic church in Ireland, rather than an endorsement of Flannery's position on housing. Nevertheless, demonstrations such as this seemed to reinforce the DHAC claims of success in raising popular consciousness of the housing crisis. Throughout 1968 and into 1969, the DHAC held public meetings on the main thoroughfare outside its Gardiner Street offices.

By late May 1968, the Dublin housing protests were one of the factors informing the draft Criminal Justice Bill, which sought to limit the scope of public meetings and increase the power of the Garda Síochána. The debate over the Criminal Justice Bill forced a re-evaluation of the place of the citizen vis-à-vis the establishment. Both Fine Gael and Labour deputies opposed the Bill in the Dáil chamber, although opposition was not all aimed at preserving civil liberties. Barry Desmond (FG) immediately raised the possibility that the Bill would provide a major public incentive to any group who intended to proceed with their meeting without State approval 'in the hope of gaining the general notoriety of a few weeks in jail because of a proper refusal to conform to this high-handed legislation.'⁵¹ As the debate continued, the Dublin Housing Action Committee stepped up their campaign, placing pickets on houses on major thoroughfares: Amiens Street, Mount Street, Middle Abbey Street and City Hall. Three representatives of the Sinn Féin Citizens Advice Bureau were arrested while investigating a threatened eviction in Rathfarnham: they later claimed that they had been denied legal aid, although no charges were laid. Sinn Féin pointed to this incident as a 'serious breakdown of citizens' rights', and called for an explanation from Garda authorities. Incidents such as this, widely reported in the newspapers, encouraged further support for the protests. The escalation of the campaign drew support from outside groups, most notably the Union of Students of Ireland, and the republican clubs

in the two Dublin Universities (University College, Dublin and Trinity College, Dublin). Even members of City Council took on elements of the DHAC platform: on 17 May Frank Cluskey (T.D., Lab) caused a major disturbance at the Council meeting when he proposed a motion that the Council should put pressure on the Minister for Local Government (Kevin Boland) to control the indiscriminate demolition of habitable houses.⁵² Housing activism was becoming mainstream. By placing well-organized pickets at City Hall for each monthly meeting of the City Council, the Committee hoped to 'use every method to bring the present housing scandal to the notice of the entire country.'⁵³ Furthermore, housing action became an all-island issue by late June 1968, as parallel housing protests and associated civil disobedience fuelled the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland.

The escalation of housing protests also coincided with a crucial debate on the political future of the nation: the government proposal to alter the electoral system in fundamental ways that critics feared would lead to an unbreakable dominance by Fianna Fail, dooming the country to becoming a one-party 'democracy'.⁵⁴ For the members of the Dublin Housing Action Committee, this appeared to be yet another attempt by a 'faceless and soulless bureaucracy'⁵⁵ to smother the democratic rights of the citizen. In response, the DHAC ramped up their protests. The date for a referendum on the proposal was set for October 1968. In the interim, it appeared that some of the Committee's demands were being addressed: in July 1968, a draft Housing Bill was published to provide for tighter control of the demolition of some houses, and would restrict their use for reasons other than for habitation.⁵⁶ However, the publication of this draft coincided with a court case heard from 16-24 July, dealing with the arrests of two men and a woman associated with the DHAC. This put the focus squarely back on the

issue of police brutality. All three stated that they had been arrested in error, during a protest outside City Hall on 6 May, at which police officers had allegedly punched and used batons on peaceful demonstrators. The charges against the protesters were settled under the Probation Act, but the case was given wide coverage in the pages of the newspapers. The publicity continued, and in September 1968 fifteen men and three women were arrested after causing a disturbance outside the Shelbourne Hotel, on the occasion of the annual Royal Air Forces Association meeting.⁵⁷ The Shelbourne protest represented a serious shift in the focus of the group, away from the single issue of housing, and towards an anti-British stance (in response to the escalation of the crisis in Northern Ireland). The recruitment strategy of Sinn Féin reinforced the connections between socialism and republicanism, asserting that

Our freedom *has not yet been won*, that the 26-county 'Republic' declared in 1949 is a sham. Ireland cannot be free until her *whole wealth* is under the control of the *organized working people* of the *whole country*. To achieve this we must sweep aside the present administrators of money-grabbing politicians and their foreign monopolist bosses.⁵⁸ [italics in original]

Despite attempts by the new Lord Mayor of Dublin, Frank Cluskey, to meet with a deputation from the DHAC in August, the problem remained that Minister Boland remained intransigent on the issue. In fact, apart from the Minister, it seemed as if the whole country was obsessed with the issue of housing in the run up to the referendum. In his presidential address to the annual conference of the Association of Municipal authorities of Ireland, T.D. Dan Spring stated that 'the provision of houses was one of the most pressing matters for all councils'⁵⁹; RTE's *Seven Days* program invited housing activist Fr Michael Sweetman to show them around what he considered to be

the worst parts of Dublin (they were unable to broadcast the footage because it was deemed too upsetting); Kevin Boland was plagued by questions from deputies in the Dáil regarding plans to address the lengthy housing waiting lists.

6. Squatting and Commemoration

Despite this unprecedented interest in the housing problem, activists associated with the DHAC became increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress. At a Conference of Dublin's Homeless, held in November 1968, a resolution was passed stating that squatting was the only resort left to homeless people.⁶⁰ This idea was borrowed directly from a similar approach in Derry, where activists had been squatting in houses since the previous June. Denis Dennehy had also encountered squatting in London and Birmingham, and was in correspondence with squatter activists there.⁶¹ There were also echoed the Dutch 'Provos', whose 'White Dwellings Plan' had advocated squatting as a 'revolutionary solution to the housing problem' in Amsterdam.⁶² Squatting was a direct challenge on private property, and the action was designed to test Article 41 of the Constitution, which required the state to protect the family. In late 1968, with preparations in train to mark the 50th anniversary of the first Dail the following January, invoking constitutional promises was a clever tactic. On 17 November Denis Dennehy, moved his whole family into a room in a building at 20 Mountjoy Square. The property belonged to a prominent Dublin businessman, Ivor B. Underwood, but the property had been left vacant for some time, most likely with the intention of selling it for commercial development. Underwood was, perhaps ironically, a member of the Georgian society, which called for the preservation of Dublin's historic houses. He promptly took legal action against Dennehy in order to remove him and his family from the building. On 16 December, Mr Justice Butler ordered the Dennehy's to vacate the

premises, or find themselves in contempt of court. In court, Dennehy mounted his own defence which focused on constitutional rights. Which was to be more important to this Irish state on the eve of its commemoration of revolutionary democracy: commitments to protect the family, or the protection of private property?⁶³ Reporting the case in January, by which time Dennehy was in jail for contempt (for failing to vacate the premises), *The United Irishman* concluded that ‘despite the grand language of the Sacred 1937 constitution, a working-class family counts for nothing against the might and majesty of landlordism in Ireland.’⁶⁴ In prison, Dennehy went on hunger strike, deliberately coinciding with the January 1969 commemoration. The point was not missed. On 20 January, one day before a civic reception was planned to commemorate the anniversary, Lord Mayor Frank Cluskey sent a telegram to Taoiseach Jack Lynch, appealing for

the release from prison of Denis Dennehy to his wife and children on humanitarian grounds, as a tangible token of our acceptance on the great occasion we will commemorate tomorrow and of the principles (sic) espoused on that occasion.⁶⁵

Since Dennehy was in prison for contempt of court, neither the Minister for Justice nor the Taoiseach could intervene in the case. Notwithstanding this, the commemoration held on 21 January at the Mansion House in Dublin was interrupted by a veteran of the 1916 Rising, who used the occasion to highlight the perceived hypocrisy of the government. Una O’Higgins-O’Malley, daughter of veteran Kevin O’Higgins and member of a well-connected Irish political dynasty, wrote to Lynch the following day: The wrong elements may be being used for the wrong motives but the truth is that far too many people are living in sub-human conditions and the children of the nation are very far from being cherished equally.⁶⁶

Massive marches were organized in mid-January in support of Dennehy. In fact, the Dennehy hunger strike was the DHAC's single most important action: it increased popular support, and galvanized large sections of civil society including opposition politicians, students, and the unions. A statement from the Cooperative Society, Dóchas, summed up the mood of protesters:

A housing crisis exists in Dublin, despite all the good work of Corporation officials... What happened to Denis Dennehy on the eve of the first Dáil's 50th anniversary must never be allowed to happen again. The gaoling of homeless

Denis Dennehy should be the last indignity that we allow the homeless to suffer.⁶⁷

More radical voices also came out in support of the Dennehy protest. A group calling themselves the 'Irish Exiles Association' placed a picket on the Irish embassy in London: they threatened violence if Dennehy was not released from prison.⁶⁸ This push-pull between radical and moderate voices foretold the future of the Committee, as some prominent members became increasingly involved in the struggle in Northern Ireland.⁶⁹

Conclusion

The eventual release of Dennehy in late January, and the passing of the Housing Act in July, marked some degree of success for the DHAC. The main purpose of the Act, was to make provision to control the demolition or change of use of habitable houses, and represented a softening of the establishment's position regarding the housing issue in consideration of the most significant concern of the DHAC. It was not enough for many activists. Demonstrations continued until late 1969, but the focus of public attention began to gravitate north as violence escalated in Derry and Belfast. The antics of DHAC member Hilary Boyle, a 70 year old grandmother who chained herself to the railings

outside City Hall in November 1969 did not attract the same level of attention as Dennehy's hunger strike.⁷⁰ The split within the IRA and Sinn Féin in 1970, which produced the two factions of 'official' and 'provisional', dealt the final blow to the Housing Action Committee in Dublin. Those on the 'official' side advocated the style of activism demonstrated by the Committee: local agitation with a view to changing the structures of the state, ultimately aimed at undermining the establishment in order to replace it with a 32-county socialist alternative; those on the 'provisional' side followed the route to armed violence.

The significance of the DHAC is both local and international. In the context of a small city on the periphery of Europe, in a young state struggling with the social and political consequences of modernity, the movement deliberately drew on a rights-based discourse and an language of social justice that allowed it to position itself at the juncture of social change in both the US and Europe. It prompts us to re-evaluate our understanding of Ireland's place in the 'Sixties,' which clearly goes beyond a tame student revolt and the social and political unrest in Northern Ireland. More importantly, the DHAC demonstrated the political potential of mobilizing the marginalized, and using the tactics of the marginalized, in order to connect localized political problems with national ones. Denis Dennehy's decision to squat at Mountjoy square was a consciously political one: it was not just driven from the necessity to house himself and his family. It was also not unique. While Dennehy and his family occupied Underwood's vacant house in December 1968, a small group of homeless people calling themselves the London Squatters Campaign were undertaking similar action in east London.⁷¹ That Dennehy's actions did not provoke a sustained squatting movement (as was the case in London) had much to do with the response of the government and the

shift in national politics as key actors in the DHAC turned their attention to the situation in the North.

Also significant is the manner in which the DHAC deliberately cast their campaign within a historical context that revealed a gap between promise and delivery by the state of basic principles of protection. Dennehy's in-court debate with Butler over the primacy of people over profit is a clear indication of this. Much like the Home Sweet Home movement almost fifty years later, the language of commemoration supplied the context to harness undercurrents of popular unrest. Once the moment of commemoration in January 1969 passed, and Dennehy was released from jail, the impetus behind the movement petered out, and the ability to 'shame' the government into action was lost. We shall have to wait and see if there is more longevity in the more recent movement to shame the state into dealing with the problem of homelessness.

Word count (excluding endnotes): 8404.

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²⁵ Contemporary commentator, Labour activist and Trinity academic David Thornley discussed many of these changing trends in his important essay 'Ireland: the End of an Era?' *Studies* 53: 209, Spring 1964, pp. 1-17.

²⁶ Kincaid, *Postcolonial Dublin*, p. 113.

²⁷ Article 11 of UN General Assembly, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, 16 December 1966, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 993, available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>.

²⁸ White paper, 'Housing Progress and Prospects,' November 1964.

²⁹ In reality, the accommodation at Griffith Barracks divided families: women and children were housed, while their husbands were not. A strict curfew was imposed on men visiting their families, which added further hardship to families who sought normal existence. See John O'Donoghue's report on Housing in Dublin for RTE's current affairs programme *Sixty Four*, broadcast on 16 January 1964 (available at <http://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/894-house-and-home/139167-housing-in-dublin/>).

³⁰ Memorandum for Government in relation to the IRA, 14 July 1969, National Archives of Ireland (NAI) 2000/6/299.

³¹ *The United Irishman*, 21, 11 November 1967, p. 1.

³² This point was recalled by the Jesuit priest Rev. Michael Sweetman, who became closely associated with the DHAC. In early January, he attended a protest meeting, at which he reminded those present that they were constantly told from the highest authority that the family was the basis of society, and thus the government should take action to address the plight of homeless families. This was against the background of ongoing discussions regarding the papal ban on the contraceptive pill, as well as a national debate regarding the possible introduction of legislation to allow divorce.

³³ 10,000 was the figure used by the DHAC and the Citizens' Advice Bureau, calculated by combining the number of people on the official housing list with those who were seeking homes, but not entitled to place their names on the list. The Corporation put the figure close to 5,437; this was the exact number of people on the official Corporation housing list in 1968. The actual figure is most likely somewhere between the two.

³⁴ *United Irishman*, 21, 11 November 1967, p. 1.

³⁵ Stanley himself had been homeless, and had been contacted by Dennehy to help mobilize the homeless against homelessness. See Bill McCamley, *Dennis Dennehy, Socialist Agitator*, Dublin: Labour History Workshop, 1985, p. 13.

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- ³⁶ In a letter to the editor of the *Irish Independent*, 2 February 1968, the secretaries of the DHAC, Sean Dunne and Denis Dennehy, explained that the Committee was ‘formed early in 1966 by a number of people who were themselves in dire need of suitable accommodation. A number of others who sympathised with their plight, though not themselves in urgent need, assisted them.’ This may be an exaggeration: the date of origin is usually agreed to be around the Local Elections in 1967.
- ³⁷ *Irish Independent*, 15 January 1968, p. 11.
- ³⁸ Haughey was an accountant by profession: he owned a significant number of houses adjacent to his offices on Mount Street, on the south side of Dublin’s inner city.
- ³⁹ Minutes of the Municipal Council of the City of Dublin (Dublin, 1968), 8 January 1968, p. 29.
- ⁴⁰ *Irish Independent*, 9 January 1968, p. 9.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
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- ⁴³ Proinsias de Rossa moved into mainstream politics through the Worker’s Party, became leader of the Democratic Left, before joining the Labour party. He served as a Member of the European Parliament between 1999-2012.
- ⁴⁴ *Irish Independent*, 6 June 1968, p. 12.
- ⁴⁵ In an interview with Terence Connealy, *Irish Independent*, 31 May 1968, p. 11.
- ⁴⁶ *Evening Press*, 4 March 1968, p. 3.
- ⁴⁷ The housing project at Ballymun was designed on the principle of high-density suburban living. The project consisted of large tower blocks of apartments, but the experiment was hit by problems early on, ranging from the refusal of prospective tenants to move out of their city centre dwellings, to mechanical problems with the lifts, and most importantly, the lack of infrastructure in the area.
- ⁴⁸ Ironically, Corporation officials argued that the closure of the canal would facilitate the upgrade of sewage facilities, necessary because of the increase in house building.
- ⁴⁹ *Irish Independent*, 23 March 1968, p. 3.
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- ⁵² *Irish Independent*, 18 May 1968, p. 10.
- ⁵³ Spokesman for the DHAC, quoted in the *Irish Independent*, 1 July 1968, p. 3.
- ⁵⁴ There were two proposals to change the constitution in 1968, and Kevin Boland was the minister in charge of pushing both. The first proposal was in relation to constituency boundaries and calculation of representatives based on population ratios; the second was the

proposal to abolish the single transferable vote (proportional representation system) and replace it with a 'first past the post' system. Both measures would likely have favoured Fianna Fail in subsequent elections. For the detail of the text, see <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1968/act/34/section/1/enacted/en/html#sec1>

⁵⁵ *United Irishman*, April 1968, p. 11.

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<http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/takes/dail1968071000004?opendocument>

⁵⁷ *Irish Independent*, 19 September 1968, p. 8.

⁵⁸ This membership bulletin appeared in issues of the *United Irishman* from mid-1968 through 1969.

⁵⁹ *Irish Independent*, 18 September 1968, p. 7.

⁶⁰ *Irish Independent*, 18 November 1968, p. 13.

⁶¹ See McCamley, *Dennis Dennehy*, p. 14.

⁶² Provos, 'Het Witte Huizenplan,' April 1966. IISG collections, <http://www.iisg.nl/collections/provo/provo59a.php>.

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⁶⁴ *United Irishman*, January 1969, p. 10.

⁶⁵ Cluskey to Lynch, 20 January 1969, Papers of the Dept. of the Taoiseach, NAI 2000/6/423.

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⁶⁷ *Irish Independent*, 21 January 1969, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Security briefings, 20-24 January 1969, Dept. of the Taoiseach, NAI 2000/6/423.

⁶⁹ For example, Seamus Costello, a local councillor in Bray who was involved with the Dublin Committee and the Bray Housing Action Committee, joined the INLA and was shot dead in 1971.

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