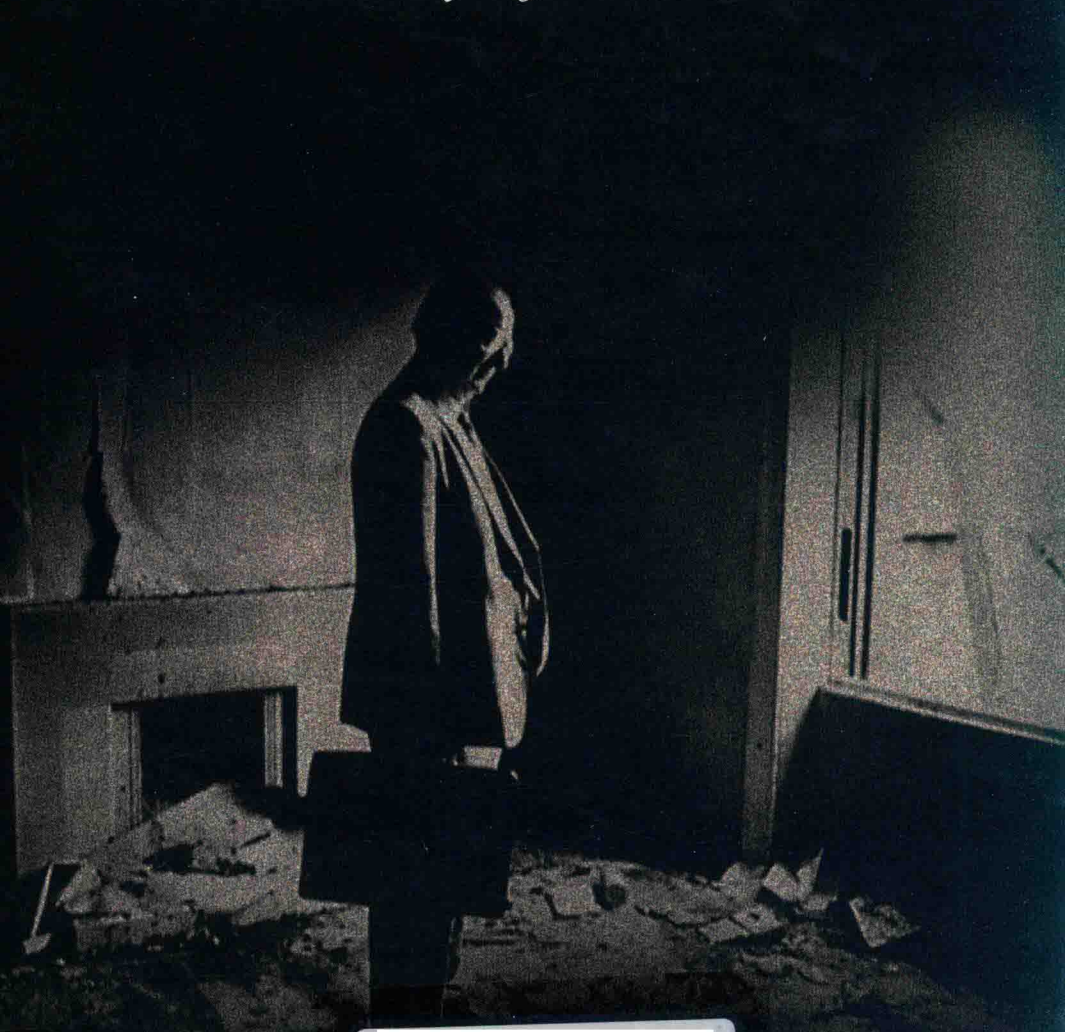


GERRY FITT AND THE SDLP

'In a minority of one'



Sarah Campbell

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Manchester University Press

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Gerry Fitt and the SDLP

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Dedicated with love to my parents

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Note on terminology

The terms 'nationalist' and 'nationalism' (lower case) are used throughout this book to describe all shades of nationalist opinion in Northern Ireland, 1959–79, irrespective of individual political affiliation, excepting times where the Republican movement is specifically referred to; the term 'Nationalist' (upper case) applies specifically to the Nationalist Party and its members. The same applies to 'unionist', 'unionism' and 'Unionist'. The term 'minority community' refers to the Catholic or nationalist population within Northern Ireland.

Abbreviations

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CDU	Campaign for Democracy in Ulster
CSJ	Campaign for Social Justice
DCAC	Derry Citizens' Action Committee
DFA	Department of Foreign Affairs
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
EEC	European Economic Community
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
HC Debates	House of Commons Debates, Hansard 1803–2005, hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/
IIP	Irish Independence Party
IRA	Irish Republican Army
LAW	Loyalist Association of Workers
LHL	Linen Hall Library, Belfast
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NDP	National Democratic Party
NICRA	Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association
NILP	Northern Ireland Labour Party
NIO	Northern Ireland Office
NIPC	Northern Ireland Political Collection
PD	People's Democracy
PR	proportional representation
PRONI	Public Records Office of Northern Ireland
RLP	Republican Labour Party
RTÉ	Radio Telefís Éireann
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
TD	Teachta Dála (a member of Dáil Éireann)
TNA	The National Archives, Kew

UDA	Ulster Defence Association
UDR	Ulster Defence Regiment
UPNI	Unionist Party of Northern Ireland
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party
UUUC	United Ulster Unionist Council
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force
UWC	Ulster Workers' Council
VUPP	Vanguard Unionist Progressive Party

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Introduction

If I were not a Belfast man, if I were not a Catholic, if I were not Irish, if I were not a socialist, I would be forced to arrive at the same conclusion: that the partition of this country was an absolute disaster.¹

Gerry Fitt has been described with many labels. Indeed, he described himself with many labels. In his early political career, he claimed to be a republican socialist. By the end of his career, and in death, the republican element of his identity has been abandoned and he is remembered as a socialist. With the above words at the Social Democratic and Labour Party's (SDLP) ninth annual conference, just weeks before his resignation, Gerry Fitt listed the key elements that had gone to make up his political career. What is most interesting is the order in which he preferences them, with 'socialist' coming last. Yet all had been formative influences in his career. For Fitt, these were not conflicting ideas, and he could be all at once. This attitude also shaped his vision for the SDLP when it was formed in August 1970. The party emphasised issues of social reform and civil rights, and Fitt's achievement was in publicly bridging Catholic representatives from Belfast and the rest of Northern Ireland for the first time since 1945.² However, although the aims of the SDLP may have been to put socio-economic questions to the fore, the nature of the political system in Northern Ireland required it to prioritise its nationalist aspirations when formulating its electoral tactics.

The SDLP was, until recently, the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland. For more than thirty years it was the dominant voice of the minority community there and self-proclaimed champion of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland.³ Forty years on, it asserted that it is proudly nationalist and is unequivocally in favour of a united Ireland.⁴ This description does not sit easy with the party's founding

ideals, which claimed the party was a 'radical socialist party', and that while a united Ireland was one of its main aims, it prioritised socio-economic issues over the constitutional question.⁵

Drawing on unpublished party and private papers, recently released Irish and British Government papers, and interviews, this book offers an alternative and more nuanced view of the machinations that moulded party policy in its first decade by examining the party through the lens of Gerry Fitt's leadership. Fitt played a central role in creating the identity of the SDLP as a socialist party and was a driving force behind the original vision of the party. Yet, Fitt noted that he was often in an 'unhappy minority of one' over many issues and at times the relationship between himself and his party colleagues was 'very uneasy'.⁶ The book argues that unity between the sometimes contrasting aims of socialism and nationalism, most evident in the clashing personalities of John Hume and Gerry Fitt, was painfully won. By the time Fitt left the party in 1979, the SDLP had been significantly 'greened' by Hume's policies and ideology. In fact, by 1979 the influence of the original seven members within the party had been side-lined completely, with the exception of John Hume.

In 1916, James Connolly married the aims of nationalism and socialism when he proclaimed, 'The cause of Labour is the cause of Ireland. The cause of Ireland is the cause of Labour. They cannot be disserved.'⁷ However, the two ideologies have always competed for primary position in Irish politics, and nationalist ideology had a hegemonic role in Irish society.⁸ Northern Ireland was an anomaly in post-1945 British politics. The post-war high unemployment and housing shortages should have united working-class elements, particularly in industrial cities like Belfast and Derry, but this working-class unity failed to materialise in Northern Ireland. There was a renewed hope, with the civil rights movement in the 1960s, that this might occur, and for the first time since the 1930s⁹ there appeared an opportunity to create something other than sectarian politics in the region. The combination of the newly minted, post-Welfare State semantics of the civil rights movement and a discourse that linked social justice with reunification, evident in the SDLP's early unpublished policy papers and public statements,¹⁰ was viewed as 'new' nationalism. It was quite distinct from the 'old' Nationalist Party and its perennial concern with the constitutional question to the detriment of all other policies. This book traces the evolution of the policies of the SDLP and its relationship to traditional forms of Irish nationalism, questioning how 'new' the SDLP actually was, while at the same time highlighting the internal tensions within the party. These tensions reached their peak

during the Sunningdale negotiations, the five-month power-sharing executive of 1974, and its aftermath – a series of crises that changed irrevocably the internal dynamics of the early party.

These tensions also had a geographical dimension. Traditionally, northern nationalism, in the form of the Nationalist Party, claimed most of its support in the rural west of Northern Ireland, while labourism was largely a Belfast phenomenon.¹¹ While the SDLP tried to transcend these divisions, and publicly did so by appointing Belfast MP Gerry Fitt as the party leader, privately the party was still hounded by these divisions, which were particularly evident in its attitudes on policing, power-sharing, and the Irish dimension. When Fitt left the SDLP in 1979, the party did not have a Belfast leader again until Alasdair McDonnell was elected in November 2011. Derry representatives dominated the leadership until the election of Margaret Ritchie in February 2010. In 2014 approximately one-third of the party seats were located in Belfast or in east-of-the-Bann areas: the party has one MP in Belfast South from a total of three MPs, and four MLAs in Belfast from a total of fourteen.¹²

The first decade of the SDLP was the formative period of modern northern nationalism. The party developed a pivotal role in politics during the heady days of the 1970s. Although many works have already been published, it is becoming apparent that major political histories regarding the 'Troubles', and the personalities and organisations notable within that period and beyond, still remain unwritten. This is certainly the case with Gerry Fitt. Fitt was a major protagonist for over twenty years in Irish politics. Yet, there is no major historical evaluation of his contribution, nor his legacy or place in the memory of the minority community in Northern Ireland. To date, there are only two biographies of Gerry Fitt.¹³ Both these books were written in the years immediately after Fitt's death in 2005 and, as both cite interviews with Fitt, they provide the only guide on what he was thinking on many issues. This is in stark contrast to John Hume, of whom no less than seven books have been written (including two by Hume himself). The influence of the debate between nationalism and socialism in shaping northern nationalism has largely been ignored in favour of a Hume-centric approach.¹⁴ There is, consequently, a gap in the historiography and a need to revise and reappraise the role of Fitt in nationalist politics during the first decade of the 'Troubles'.

Both Peter McLoughlin and Gerard Murray credit John Hume with redefining northern nationalism and outline the ways he broke with traditional nationalism and advanced the cause in a more inclusive way. This book argues, however, that the SDLP had many similar

characteristics to traditional forms of nationalism. Christopher Norton proposes that the politics of constitutional nationalism in Northern Ireland before 1970 was complex and that its history is coloured by a legacy of ideological diversity.¹⁵ With that in mind, this book sheds new light on the formation of the SDLP, examining the reasons for and processes through which the party was formed, and the often conflicting policies and sense of political identity that the party portrayed throughout the 1970s. This is not a biography of Gerry Fitt, nor is it a complete history of the SDLP. Rather, it is a revisionist history of the origins of the SDLP, which places Fitt at the centre of the party's early ideology and accounts for its conflicting identity and strategic aims between 1970 and 1979. It argues that the break with traditional nationalism was not as clear cut as McLoughlin and Murray suggest. Further, it examines how nationalists were articulating this 'new' political vision at the end of the 1960s and suggests that the SDLP did not represent a move by northern nationalism to the left, but more a desire for Catholic political unity, and should therefore be seen as a more organised form of the old Nationalist Party.

While Fitt's leadership of the party is explored, this is not a history of the SDLP rank-and-file membership. When the SDLP was formed it was a top-down party, and Gerry Fitt was appointed as leader, rather than elected. However, gradually, throughout the 1970s, party representation and influence opened to a wider caucus, including the parliamentary party, Assembly members, and the party executive, which increasingly minimised Fitt's role in the leadership of the party. Ian McAllister has already covered this aspect of the party and no further comment needs to be made.¹⁶ This research instead investigates the unpublished SDLP party papers and interactions with the British and Irish Governments at a high politics level to analyse how nationalists attempted to articulate an alternative political vision in the 1970s.

When Fitt won the West Belfast Westminster seat in 1966, an Ulster Unionist MP assured his supporters that there was no need to worry. Fitt would be a 'one-day wonder' and the 'Mother of Parliaments would soon reduce this cheeky upstart to size'.¹⁷ Fitt, however, retained the seat for seventeen years and, as the only minority representative in Westminster,¹⁸ became the main voice of the Catholic community. Fitt's election to the House of Commons transformed anti-partitionist politics in Northern Ireland, and Chapter 1 examines the political options open to Catholics during the 1960s and the evolution of nationalist thought on the constitutional question, including how Gerry Fitt merged his republicanism and socialism. Using previously

unpublished material from party and private papers, Chapter 2 examines the founding aims of the SDLP and questions them in light of the party's first year in parliamentary opposition. Its aims were a mixture of socialism and nationalism and very much in keeping with the language of the civil rights movement. The conglomerate title of the party suggests that there was tension within it from the outset over its identity. It signalled the fundamental difficulties confronting any attempt to forge a real degree of coherence and unity among the anti-partitionist lobby in Northern Ireland in the 1960s. Fitt's apprehension about the different aspirations of the founding members was vindicated when the party adopted an abstentionist policy in July 1971. The withdrawal signalled that the party no longer wished to participate within the Northern Ireland political system and seek reform internally.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the major hurdles facing the SDLP in achieving their aim of being a non-sectarian, cross-community party. Chapter 3 reviews events such as internment (1971) and Bloody Sunday (1972), tracing how the anti-British feeling among the minority was mirrored in the SDLP, and explores the premise that the SDLP became a reactive, rather than a proactive, party. It demonstrates the efforts of the SDLP to remain politically relevant when the Catholic community was becoming increasingly polarised politically. It was during this period that Gerry Fitt began to feel a gap forming between his own thoughts on internment and abstentionism and those of his party colleagues, and he was uneasy about the official policy of the SDLP on these matters. Chapter 4 examines the unpublished policy documents drawn up by the party that laid the groundwork for both *Towards a New Ireland* (1972) and the Sunningdale Agreement, tracing the intellectual development of nationalist thought. It also sheds lights on future party policy on the strategy for reunification for the next decade. While this period highlighted the SDLP's move from repudiation to participation – to become, by June 1973, the largest anti-Unionist group in Northern Ireland – it was also during this period that Fitt began to feel that the party was becoming more 'green' than he would have liked. He noticed this in particular during the local and Assembly elections in June 1973, where many of the candidates who were standing on SDLP tickets came from middle-class professional backgrounds, which was an anathema to Fitt.

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the party's experiences at the Sunningdale negotiations and as members of the power-sharing executive in 1974, outlining the development in party thinking on issues of power-sharing, the Council of Ireland, and the Irish dimension. Chapter 6

offers analysis of why the Sunningdale experiment failed in the North and what legacy it left for constitutional nationalism in Northern Ireland in the short term. In doing so, it shows that the Sunningdale Agreement and power-sharing executive brought the problems of unity in the SDLP to the fore and highlighted the differences between the Labour and Nationalist agendas within the party. As Hume's influence within the party became more dominating, Fitt's had diminished significantly.

Chapters 7 and 8 examine the SDLP's response to the political vacuum created by the failure of power-sharing and the constitutional convention. During the period from 1975 until the end of the decade, the limits of British policy in Northern Ireland became apparent. A failure to convince local parties to agree on a system of government prompted the British Government to abandon power-sharing and adopt a policy of 'Ulsterisation'. In this political void, the SDLP drifted back to more traditional forms of nationalism, emphasising the Irish dimension. For Gerry Fitt, the Sunningdale Agreement and power-sharing executive proved to be the watershed in his career, and the hardening of nationalist attitudes within the SDLP in its aftermath highlighted the extent to which he was out of step with the rest of his party colleagues. Fitt left the party in 1979, without discussing his intentions with them. By that stage, his Belfast and Labour fellow party member, Paddy Devlin, had also been expelled. The gradual marginalisation of the influence of the founding members of the party (with the exception of Hume) was complete by the end of the its first decade. Fitt claimed that the SDLP had ceased to be a socialist voice and lamented those within the party 'who would have a united Ireland at any price'.

The concluding chapter examines Gerry Fitt's place and legacy in the northern minority's political memory by drawing on Bridget Fowler's pioneering work on obituaries as a form of collective memory.¹⁹ It explores the deconstruction and reconstruction of Fitt's memory after his death – one that emphasises his socialism despite his accession to a peerage of the realm in 1983.

Notes

- 1 Gerry Fitt, at SDLP ninth annual conference, reported in *Irish Times*, 23 November 1979.
- 2 In 1945, after coming at the bottom of a poll in the Falls division behind a 'Socialist Republican' and an independent Labour man who was also a Catholic anti-partitionist, the Nationalists relinquished their strongholds