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Northern Ireland: society and culture

Katy Hayward and Cathal McManus

Northern Ireland is a fascinating part of the UK in which to research society and culture. It is a small region (a population of 1.8 million) that contains, one might say, a great deal of 'culture'. For a start, the existence and parity of two national cultures and citizenships are officially recognised: British and Irish. There is a deep-knit closeness that is reflected in the society and culture of Northern Ireland, in which popular, cultural, sporting and kinship ties from Britain and Ireland are very present. But this familiarity sits alongside the legacy of a complex and often violent history. Northern Ireland was created in 1921 in an effort to manage conflict between nationalisms on the island of Ireland through creating two different territorial jurisdictions. But whilst the 26 counties of Ireland underwent a classic process of intense nation-building and state-building, the 6 counties of Northern Ireland formed the basis for a disquiet 'statelet' and a society at some unease. The recent history of society and culture in Northern Ireland reflects persistent issues of discomfort. Whether it be in relation to commemoration, religion, immigration or education – the wizened roots of Northern Ireland are still producing unhealthy and prickly branches that extend awkwardly into the present.

These circumstances have given rise to interesting challenges for social science and humanities research on society and culture in Northern Ireland. The tendency has been to research what are already recognised as traditions and identities and it has been much more difficult to analyse those aspects of social change which are at the sidelines or counter to the norm. If Northern Ireland is often described as 'over-researched' there is clearly a predominant focus in that research on conflict and, to a lesser extent, peace. And the conflict research has concentrated on what has come to be accepted as the causal influences: paramilitarism, ethno-nationalisms, religion, economic inequalities, rights abuses, masculinities. Northern Ireland has given rise to some excellent methods and practices in research in these areas. This chapter will outline some of the most outstanding studies in that regard. Less well-researched are the more low-key aspects of peaceful transformation. This is partly because it is more difficult to identify measures and processes of change. It is a pity that this is so because what comes to be accepted as 'normal' and unremarkable is often where the greatest achievements of peace lie. Such complexities are key to understanding contemporary Northern Ireland. Therefore, albeit in a handbook on British politics and society, this chapter is necessarily going to be expressly looking at phenomena that are determinedly non-British, that are quite unique in the United Kingdom, and that are still quite fragile and exposed to great pressure.

Institutionalised insecurity

When Northern Ireland was created, it was to assuage the concerns of unionists about the risks of Great Britain granting Ireland 'home rule'. The delineation of Northern Ireland on a map was therefore carefully drawn to ensure that unionists were the dominant majority in the region. Their narratives of Northern Ireland's history and purpose were sometimes bold and brash but never completely divested of a sense of insecurity. They were aware of the fact that a significant portion of the population in Northern Ireland believed the region – and the Irish border – should not exist in the first place. And this sense of internal threat was exacerbated by a perceived menace from Dublin – something brought home when the 1937 Constitution of Ireland laid claim over the territory of Northern Ireland. Furthermore, Northern Ireland's unionists could never be entirely confident they commanded much interest, let alone full-hearted support, at Westminster. Internal cohesion within unionism was therefore particularly important and it was Protestantism that became the unifying factor for establishing a majority on which to build the Northern Ireland state (Brewer, 2004). This was not only because it provided a vivid contrast with the overt Catholicism of the Irish state at the time; it was also because 'Protestant' was a handy label under which to unite the diverse non-Catholic traditions in the north. Reform of any type or scale was, thus, often viewed warily and many unionist leaders shared (or felt compelled to reflect) the deep conservatism of supporters of the union.

For their part, Catholics in Northern Ireland also had feeling of existential insecurity (O'Connor, 1993). Unexpectedly, they found themselves partitioned into a statelet that was expressly created to separate the Protestant majority in the north-east of Ireland from the emerging nation-state of Ireland. The representation of Catholics in the Northern Ireland Parliament was always poor – not only because of the reluctance of some to participate in such institutions, but also because of the practices of the dominant power-holders to ensure that they remained in control. Many measures to protect the large Catholic minority – such as the use of proportional representation in the regional electoral system – were abolished or undermined, and powers in the hands of unionist politicians only grew. The Special Powers Act 1922 and the Offences against the State Act 1924 (renewed annually until it was made permanent in 1931) were early signs of a society being created on a foundation of discrimination and insecurity. In the 1960s, a civil rights movement in Northern Ireland built on progressive trends emerging across the UK (e.g. free access to higher education) and found inspiration in international examples. The violent, heavy-handed response to this movement by political and security forces in Northern Ireland was typical of an uneasy, paranoid state. The violence of the Troubles made such divisions manifest and saw innocent civilians targeted and harmed by armies, both state and guerrilla. At the root of it all was the too-simplistic, directly

contradictory assumptions held by both sides: that stability would come through enforcing the will of the majority, be it for the UK union or (on an all-island basis) for Irish unity.

The 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement was remarkable in that it not only acknowledged the existence of differing identities, traditions and political aspirations within Northern Ireland, it actively recognised and institutionalised them. The principle of 'parity of esteem' for the so-called 'two communities' in Northern Ireland showed society here to be intrinsically heterogeneous. There was more than one national culture and there was no strong overarching Northern Ireland culture or identity. The environment created by the 1998 Agreement was one in which – instead of trying to repress or ignore half of the population – the two communities would be valued and protected from discrimination. Whilst the political scene included power-sharing and consociationalism, the social landscape was intended to be one of recognition and accommodation. This has been very positive, in so far as it has gone – sustained by an experienced and active community and voluntary sector. There have been a few key problems with it, however.

The first problem is that the political set-up means that there remains an obsession with unionist or nationalist as the only two properly valid communities, leaving no room for diversity or for the middle ground to have equal strength and validity. The second is that the provision for a border poll (in which Northern Ireland can vote on Irish unity) means that there remains a focus on the protection or creation of a majority when it comes to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. This in turn sustains the unionist/nationalist divide in politics. The third problem is that the definition of the two communities is rather too crude and doesn't allow for diversity within and across these communities (for example, not all Catholics are nationalist, and not all Protestants' primary identity is British, see Figure 1). And finally it doesn't include the fact that there is a growing group of people who avowedly resist or object to those two communal identifiers (Hayward and McManus, 2019). Northern Ireland is not only more diverse in its population than it was 20 or 100 years ago, those who were born here also have a spread of different identities and aspirations. Northern Ireland society, in this regard, is far more progressive and changeable than the institutions that represent it.

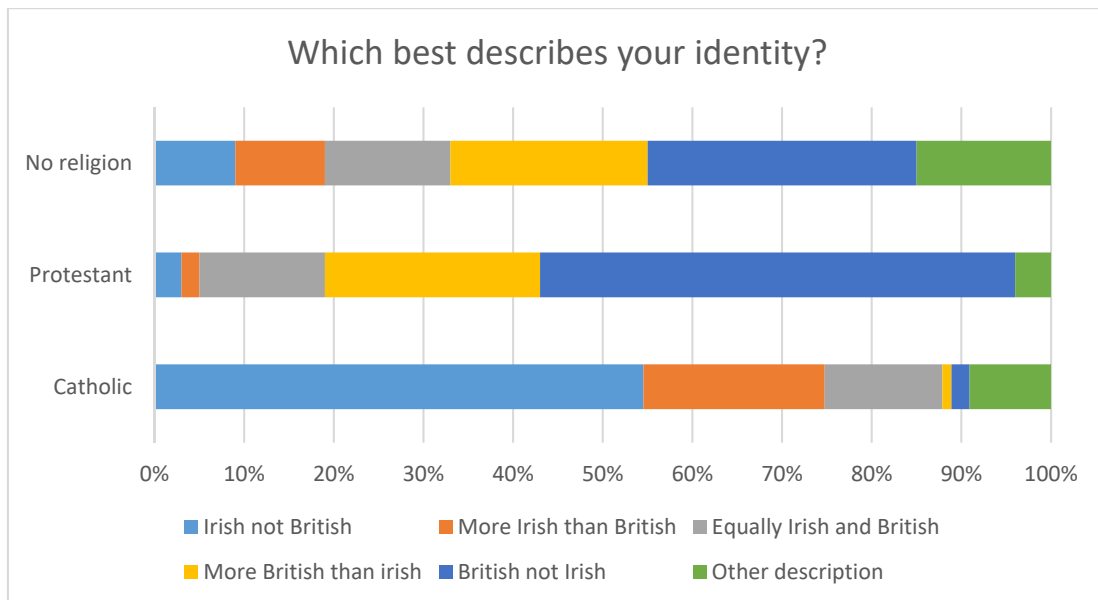


Figure 1. British and Irish identity in N. Ireland by religion. *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (2018)*

Transition from conflict

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement was not just a ‘peace accord’. It may be seen as a highly significant statement of policy by two states (and various political parties) on cultural relations within a sub-national region. In some ways, the principles of interculturalism are at the core of this agreement. First there is the recognition of human rights as a foundation for progress. In the Declaration of support for the Agreement, the parties ‘firmly dedicate’ themselves ‘to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all’. Connected to this are the means of upholding safeguards for these rights and equality of opportunity. In particular,

the ‘power of the sovereign government with jurisdiction [in Northern Ireland] shall be exercised with rigorous impartiality on behalf of all the people in the diversity of their identities and traditions and shall be founded on the principles of full respect for, and equality of, civil, political, social and cultural rights, of freedom from discrimination for all citizens, and of parity of esteem. (Article 1.v)

This extends beyond human and social rights into cultural rights in the 1998 Agreement, with all participants recognising ‘the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland’. This cultural expression is in addition to the national citizenship of those in Northern Ireland who – uniquely, by birthright – can ‘identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose’. Those born in Northern Ireland hold either or both British and Irish citizenship, which in many ways is a vision of the region as a point of overlap between the British and Irish states. Certainly although there are fewer people holding

both British and Irish passports than holding one or the other, the majority of people of all generations in Northern Ireland attest to mixture of British and Irish identities (see Figure 1).

Religion

Whilst the proportion of the population of England, Wales and Scotland claiming religious affiliation fell by 10% between 2001 and 2011, in Northern Ireland it only declined by a small margin: from 86 to 83% (NI Census, 2001 and 2011). Although it is likely that this figure has declined significantly since that point, it is still the case that Northern Ireland remains one of the most religious societies in Western Europe. This is in part because the process of functional differentiation, when religion becomes separated from the working of the social system, has been slow to emerge in Northern Ireland (Bruce, 1996). Such a close relationship between religion and social structures in Northern Ireland is intrinsically connected to the wider political sphere. Bear in mind that Protestantism took on a weighty significance as a result of the state-building practices led by unionism in Northern Ireland in the mid-twentieth century. Processes of segregation manifest in education spread into the wider social sphere, as employment opportunities and residential patterns were influenced by the mutually-reinforcing cycles of nepotism and discrimination. Boundaries between communities in terms of cultural values, norms and habitus became effectively institutionalized. Religion offers ritual, routine, and support networks as well as shared values and practices. In a society in which religious observance is still high, religion remains a crucial dimension of identity and community - and one that distinguishes between groups.

There has been ongoing debate among scholars as to how important religion is in contemporary Northern Ireland. Attitudinal surveys would suggest that there has been a rapid decline in religious observance – particularly among the Catholic community. There is also a generational aspect to the trend of non-observance; 15% of those over the age of 65 never go to church and 37% attend at least once per week, whilst 28% of adults under the age of 24 never go and 14% attend at least weekly (NI Life and Times [NILT] survey, 2018). The figures of religious observation for young adults in Northern Ireland are, however, very high compared to the rest of the UK. This in part reflects the connection between religion and education, with religious rites of passage (e.g. first communion) closely connected to children's school experiences, with overtly religious doctrine being taught compulsorily through school assemblies and with Religious Education being a compulsory GCSE subject in a large proportion of post-primary schools.

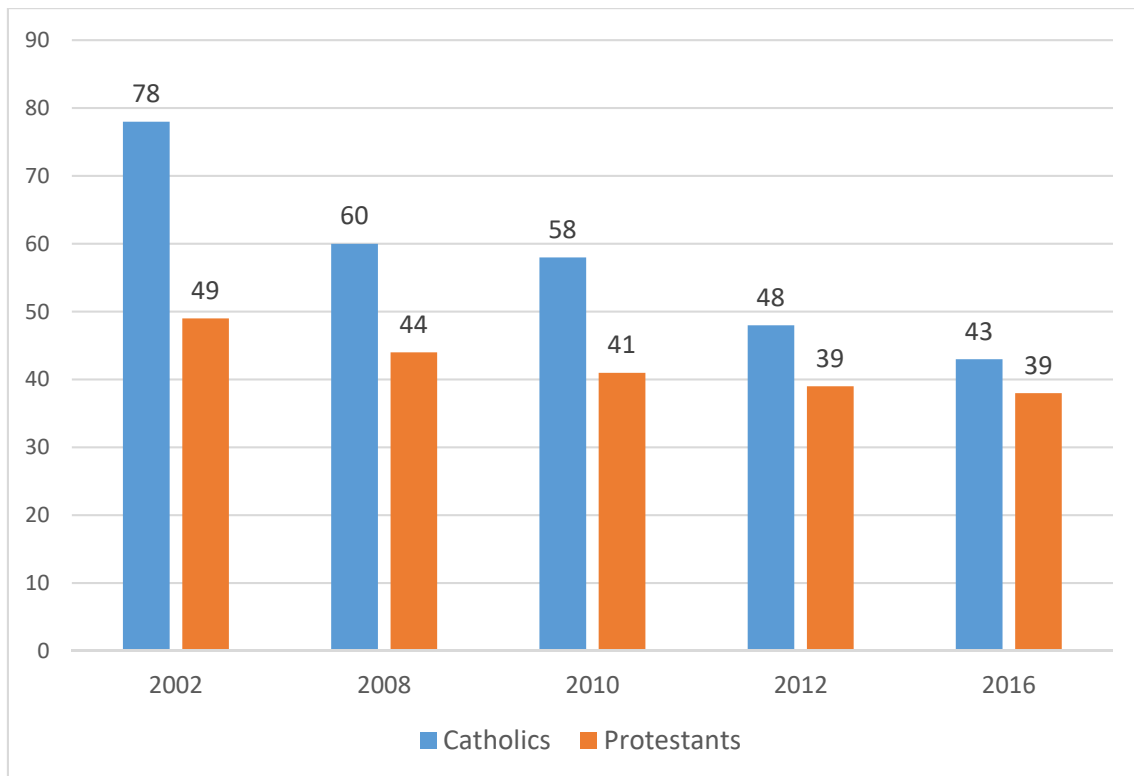


Figure 2. Regular church attendance (2+ times per month) (NI Life & Times Survey)

There have been strong arguments made to interpret religion as much more than an ‘ethnic marker’ – a mere label to separate groups – but rather as something that is actively used to construct ethnic identity itself. Symbols, rituals and habits derived from practice within religious groupings ‘give meanings, values and moral evaluations to communal boundaries’ (Mitchell 2004: 248). The inter-generational transfer of religious practice is given a greater significance in light of the history of conflict and segregation in Northern Ireland. Churches and associated networks continue to be important in building and sustaining identity and community, in both urban and rural settings. Instead of confining religion to the private sphere, global migration and modern communications systems routinely produce more public religion in Northern Ireland (McKnight & O’Dowd, 2014). This is further exacerbated by the evident politicization of religion. It is not unusual for Protestant clergy and laypeople to play prominent roles in political organisations (such as the UUP and DUP) and quasi-political organisations (such as the Orange Order). In turn, religious values have a disproportionate effect on socio-political and legal norms in Northern Ireland.

This is seen in the fact that the law in Northern Ireland on abortion and same sex marriage is so out of line with that of the rest of the UK or Ireland. Although human rights were given a uniquely important status in the 1998 Agreement, the rights of the LGBTQ community in Northern Ireland and the reproductive rights of women in Northern Ireland are of a low status. At the time of writing (Summer 2019), Northern Ireland is the only place in these

islands without marriage for same-sex partners (it was legalised in 2014 in England and in Ireland in 2015). In November 2015, in the fifth vote on the subject in the NI Assembly, MLAs voted in favour of legalisation for the first time, with the slim majority of 53 votes to 52. At that time, the DUP used a petition of concern mechanism (intended to be used as a last resort to protect a community from the tyranny of a majority), to block the motion and prevent any change in the law. Since that point, legal cases consistently result in judgements that it is for the Assembly to decide on social policy. In the absence of a sitting Assembly, campaigners face the disappointing situation in which they are being told that only MLAs can legislate on the matter whilst at the same time having no likely point at which they will return to take their seats.

A similar situation exists when it comes to reproductive rights. The 1967 Abortion Act never applied in Northern Ireland but in 2010 abortion powers were extended there under the Hillsborough Castle Agreement. As things stand in 2019, abortion is illegal in all cases except where a woman's life is at risk or there is a permanent or serious risk to her mental or physical health. As such, fatal foetal abnormalities, rape and incest are not circumstances in which abortions can be performed legally. The High Court ruled (in November 2015) that this was incompatible with the human rights of women but also noted that law can only be changed by legislators, i.e. resting in the hands of MLAs. In February 2016, a proposal to legalise abortion in cases of fatal foetal abnormality was defeated in the Northern Ireland Assembly by 59 votes to 40. Of course, the failure to provide for abortion in Northern Ireland does not mean that Northern Irish women never undergo terminations. In 2014, there were just 16 procedures performed in Northern Ireland but approximately 837 in England to women from Northern Ireland. Even in cases of fatal foetal abnormality, women from Northern Ireland are not entitled to free abortions on the NHS in England, and so women must fund the cost of the procedure from their own pocket on top of paying for travel and accommodation. Furthermore, if women do seek means of abortion in Northern Ireland (for example purchasing pills online), they face prosecution and severe penalties. Although most political parties are socially conservative in Northern Ireland, it is on issues such as this that they have been falling out of step with the views of their supporters. The NI Life and Times survey in 2016 asked several questions on this topic, and found that public opinion is increasingly distinct from that of the churches. Over half of respondents say that abortion should definitely be available in Northern Ireland in cases of fatal or serious foetal abnormality, rape or incest.

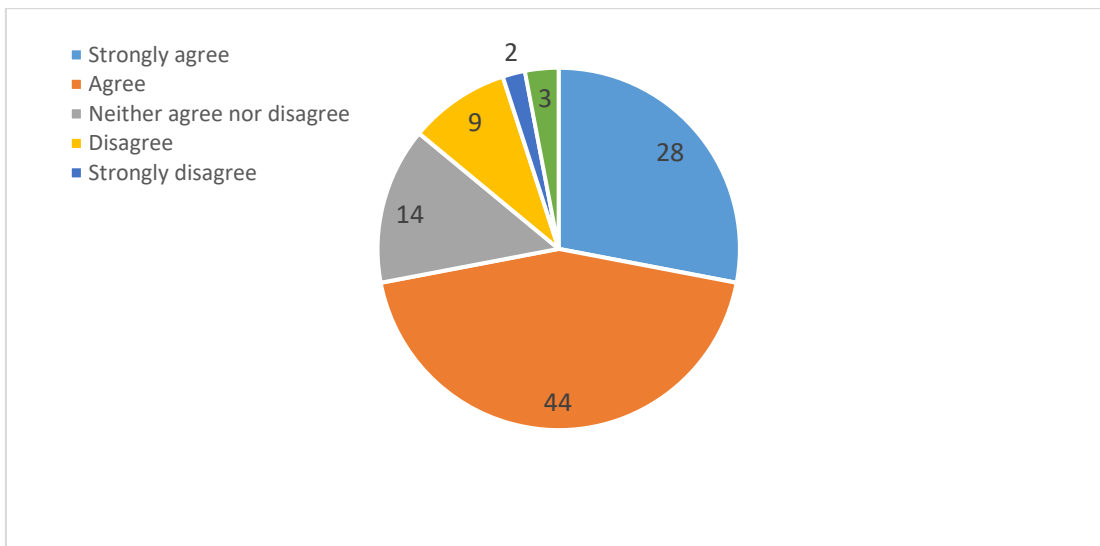


Figure 3. “It is unfair that some Northern Ireland women can afford to travel and pay for a private abortion in England and others don't have the money to do this.” (NILT, 2016)

Immigration and Diversity

The two main immigrant communities that were traditionally resident in Northern Ireland are the Jewish community (which grew in the mid-nineteenth century) and the Chinese community (which began to grow in the 1960s). The diversity of the population has increased in recent years. Nevertheless, Northern Ireland is remarkably racially homogenous. In 2011, the census of Northern Ireland found it to be 98% white, with 89% of the population having been born inside the region and 95% born in the UK or Ireland. It is possible to see the difference made by EU integration by noting that, of those whose first language is not English, the majority speak EU languages such as Polish (1%) or Lithuanian (4%) (NI Census, 2011). Indeed, the enlargement of the EU coincided with the change in the trend of net migration for Northern Ireland, with in-flows greater than out-flows from 2004 for a period of 6 years. The rise in immigration coincided with an increase in incidents of hate crime, with Northern Ireland coming to be labelled the ‘race hate capital of Europe’. The Chinese Welfare Association issued a press release in 2004 in response to the rise of hate crime incidents being recorded by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI): ‘we have witnessed the alarming fact that many victims of racial incidents are actually internalizing their experiences and accepting this as a routine part of living as a minority community in Northern Ireland’ (see Delargy, 2007).

A few years later, an analysis of the Human Beliefs and Values Survey findings across the EU produced startling results for Northern Ireland, as cited in a press release from Boorah and Mangan (2007) from Ulster University: ‘In Northern Ireland 44% of the 1,000 respondents did not want persons from at least one of the five groups (people of another race, immigrants or foreign workers, Muslims, Jews and homosexuals) as their neighbours’. Ten years later, 18% of

respondents in Northern Ireland describe themselves as being prejudiced against people of ethnic minority communities, 15% said they would not willingly accept them being resident in their area; 36% said they would not accept them as a close friend and 41% said they wouldn't accept them as a relative by marriage (a figure that increases to 52% when applied to a member of the Muslim community (NILT, 2017)). A dependent variable that makes a key difference when it comes to acceptance of other communities and cultures is education, particularly experience of mixed or integrated schooling.

Education

Education in Northern Ireland is typically neither mixed nor integrated; 9 in 10 students leaving school in Northern Ireland have never been taught in a classroom with more than a smattering of pupils of a different religious affiliation. An examination of the efforts to reform the education system, in many ways, provides a snapshot of broader attempts to bring about social change in Northern Ireland. That is to say, although there has been much positive change, this is often overshadowed by more high-profile failings in areas deemed to be of greater (symbolic) importance. This is evident, for example, in relation to curriculum change and modernisation which sought to improve educational outcomes for all young people by delivering greater flexibility for schools and students in terms of teaching and content. This was reflected in the introduction of a revised statutory curriculum in 2007 which had three key aims:

1. to ensure that the core curriculum delivered in all grant-aided schools was relevant to the needs, aspirations and career prospects of all young people;
2. to promote a greater focus on skills and their application as well as knowledge and on connecting learning across the curriculum;
3. to reduce the prescription that had applied since 1989 and to give teachers much more flexibility to exercise their professional judgement in planning and delivering lessons that were connected, relevant, enjoyable and supported pupils in achieving their full educational potential (DENI, 2013).

A very significant target, therefore, was to enhance educational outcomes for all students. This has met with considerable success, with Northern Ireland's overall GCSE and A' Level results regularly bettering other regions in the UK. In 2018 70.2% of pupils achieved at least 3 A-Levels at grades A*- C, while 71.8% attained at least five GCSE's at A*- C including English and Maths.

This picture is complicated, however, by the continued application of academic selection – a model of education that was largely abandoned elsewhere in the UK during the 1960s with a preference towards a more comprehensive education. A closer examination of Northern

Ireland's educational data highlights a continued inequality between the grammar and non-grammar sectors which, although slowly closing, remains considerable. In 2018, for example, just over half (52.4%) of students attending non-grammar schools achieved the minimum five GCSE's at A*- C including English and Maths.

Since the late 1990s there have been growing calls for an end to academic selection as its negative impact became increasingly evident (Burns, 2001; Gallagher & Smith, 2000). In 2003 a government-established Post-Primary Review Working Group recommended that transfer tests should be abolished from 2008 with transfers determined by parental and pupil choice but informed by a Pupil Profile (Costello, 2004). Under direct rule, in 2006, the Labour government introduced the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 which prevented Boards of Governors from including academic ability as a criterion for admission. When the Assembly was restored, the Sinn Féin Education Minister, Caitríona Ruane, decided to push ahead with the changes despite significant opposition from both the DUP and the Grammar school sector. Although the last state-sanctioned academic selection tests took place in 2008, the Grammar schools, ignoring the guidance issued from the Department, introduced their own unregulated entrance examinations and this remains the case at present.

A positive development has been the continued growth of the Irish-medium education sector, particularly at nursery and primary school levels, and which was a key component of the political Agreement reached in 1998. Under the terms of the Agreement, the British government was required, 'where appropriate and where people so desire it', to 'take resolute action to promote the language' and this included placing a 'statutory duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate Irish medium education'. In the 2001/02 academic year, there were ten Irish-medium primary schools with 652 students. By 2018/19 there were twenty-eight primary schools catering for 3,473 students with a further 878 students being housed in seven Irish-medium "units" attached to English-medium schools. There are currently two post-primary Irish-medium schools and three units catering for 799 and 404 students respectively. In 2001 the number of students studying in a post-primary Irish-medium school was 342. The total number of students within the Irish-medium sector in 2018/19 stood at 6,519.

One characteristic of the Irish medium sector is that its pupils are drawn almost exclusively from the Catholic/Nationalist population. This draws attention to the wider issue that, since its inception, Northern Ireland's educational system has been divided along religious lines. With the outbreak of violence in the late 1960s and early 1970s, fears were increasingly expressed that the segregated nature of Northern Irish society was perpetuating the sectarian divisions that were manifesting themselves in violence. It was argued that by promoting a new form of

religiously integrated schooling, ethno-religious segregation could be weakened as new friendships developed and attitudes towards the Other were subsequently revised (Allport, 1979 [1954]). Indeed, Gallagher (2016) argues that there is evidence to suggest that integrated education could have the desired impact and highlights that:

Studies which have compared outcomes for pupils in integrated, as opposed to Protestant or Catholic schools, have found them to have higher levels of contact, more moderate political views and more favourable views of the other community (p. 364).

That education was deemed to have a role in improving community relations was later reflected in the Agreement which, in a section dealing with “Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity”, stressed:

As essential aspect of the reconciliation process is the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing (Para.13; 18).

Despite such commitments, however, Integrated Education has not developed as many had hoped and expected. By the 2018/2019 academic year there were just over 23,600 pupils enrolled in integrated schools – over 11,000 in primary schools and more than 12,500 in post-primary schools – which represents approximately 7.5 per cent of the total school-going population (Department of Education, 2019, p. 14). Moreover, Gallagher (2016) maintains that it is ‘unlikely that this percentage will rise significantly in the foreseeable future’ (p. 364).

This has led to the development of a “Shared Education” model which can also be seen as a further significant policy success. The model aims to encourage ‘collaboration between separate schools in which pupils and teachers moved between schools to take classes on a regular basis’ and which ‘allow for a degree of mixing and contact, while at the same time protecting the ethos and existence of separate schools’ (Gallagher, 2016, p. 367). The Shared Education agenda has developed relatively rapidly since its inception in the Shared Education Project of 2007. Since that time the Programme has become increasingly mainstreamed and, prior to the collapse of the Stormont Assembly in January 2017, had secured government commitments to develop it even further.

Community Relations

The mainstreaming of Shared Education had been prioritised since at least 2005 with the publication of “A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations Northern Ireland” by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM, 2005). It identified education as being “pivotal to the search for an inclusive, reconciled and open society built on trust, partnership, equality and mutual respect” (p.24) and argued that:

It is essential that the challenges of diversity and tolerance are consciously integrated into the development curriculum of each child in all school sectors, so that every child leaves school with a direct and sustained engagement with diversity and is better equipped to meet the challenges of being an adult in a shared society (p.25).

This draws attention to the fact that improving relations between the Catholic/nationalist and Protestant/unionist communities has been a core element of social policy in Northern Ireland (Morrow, Robinson, & Dowds, 2013). This is evident, not just in policy approaches to education, but also policing and justice, housing, and those high-profile cultural issues that have, historically, become a characteristic of the sectarian divide such as the flying of flags, Orange Order parading and the Irish language.

Policing has been significant area of contention in the political history of Northern Ireland. In the aftermath of the State's foundations in 1921, the Catholic/nationalist populations came to view the then Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) as 'instinctively Unionist, the armed wing of an illegitimate state' (Tonge, 1998, p. 73). The 1998 Agreement sought to address these issues with participants committing themselves to work towards a 'new beginning to policing' through a 'police service capable of attracting and sustaining support from the community as a whole' (p. 22). To this end, an independent Commission was established to 'bring forward proposals...designed to ensure that policing arrangements, including composition, recruitment, training, culture, ethos and symbols', could attract members from both communities. Although the government, and unionists, were keen not to undermine the legacy of the RUC, which was seen as having played a critical role in the curtailing violence, the Agreement clearly recognised that significant and broad change was required in order for members of the Catholic community to overcome their historic doubts and grievances. This was very much confirmed by the subsequent report of the Commission, which stressed that:

The consent required right across the community in any liberal democracy for effective policing has been absent. In contested space, the role of those charged with keeping the peace has itself been contested...they [police] have been identified by one section of the population not primarily as upholders of the law but as defenders of the state, and the nature of the state itself has remained the central issue of political argument. This identification of police and state is contrary to policing practice in the rest of the United Kingdom (Independent Commission on Policing, 1999, p. 2).

The Commission's report put forward a total of 175 recommendations that highlighted the scope of the change they felt necessary in order to normalise and modernise policing in Northern Ireland. The recommendations were broadly focused on a number of key areas: the need for the police to protect human rights; the need to develop better community ties with the police; creating greater police accountability; ensuring fair and equitable composition

across the political divide; and ensuring a politically neutral environment which included renaming from RUC to the more neutral sounding Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) (Mulcahy, 2006).

Although the report was broadly welcomed by the British and Irish governments, the SDLP and, to a lesser extent, Sinn Féin, it was heavily criticised by unionists who believed that it went too far and besmirched the reputation of the RUC. As Mulcahy (2006, p. 160) has highlighted, many unionists believed that the primary issue the RUC needed to address was the low number of Catholic recruits but that this would rectify itself when republicans stopped using intimidation to deter Catholics from joining. Other reforms, therefore, were considered as little more than a political sop to nationalists and republicans and represented a slap in the face for the RUC and, more especially, for its 302 officers killed during the troubles. There was also considerable opposition from former RUC members, the Police Federation for Northern Ireland and from Conservative Party politicians all of whom backed a campaign to “Save the RUC” (Murphy, 2013).

The criticisms meant that some form of compromise was needed to ensure that the new PSNI could command the support of unionists but this was then heavily criticised by nationalists and republicans who called for the full implementation of the 1999 Patten Report into policing. When the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill was introduced to parliament it was clear that it was not delivering on all of the 175 recommendations and, as such, both the SDLP and Sinn Féin refused to join the newly established Police Board. Following a further round of political negotiations, the SDLP did eventually decide to join the Board but Sinn Féin continued to refuse. Policing was a particularly sensitive issue for republicans and, as such, Sinn Féin needed to ensure they could sell any new arrangements to their own constituency. Indeed, it would be 2007 before the party was in a position to take its place on the Policing Board and this was only after further negotiations and much behind the scenes work to improve relations between republicans and the PSNI (Murphy, 2013). Their decision to back the new policing arrangements has helped to give greater legitimacy to the PSNI within the Catholic community, although the situation remains far from perfect. It has not been helped by the actions of various dissident republican groups who continue to intimidate and target Catholics who associate with or join the PSNI. This has included the targeting of one Catholic PSNI man, Peadar Heffron, in a car bomb attack in 2010 and the murder of another, Ronan Kerr, in 2011. Despite this, Catholics now constitute 31.5 per cent of police officers (Murphy, 2018).

The implementation of the policing reforms recommended in the Patten Report was, unquestionably, a huge task and there can be little doubt that these efforts have enjoyed considerable success – although clearly work remains to be done. The difficulties encountered

as part of this process, particularly those that were framed along the old sectarian divide, highlight the complexities involved in building a “Shared Future” for Northern Ireland despite the fact that all parties claim to support that aspiration. This is largely a result of the lack of trust that continues to exist between the political parties and which is reflected in the wider community by a continuing electoral polarisation (Hayward & McManus, 2019). It is further evident in the continued existence of approximately one hundred “peace walls” in various urban centres such as Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, Lurgan and Portadown (Gray, et al., 2018, p. 129) and which exist to separate nationalist areas from unionist areas. This draws attention to the fact that parts of Northern Ireland continue to be characterised by segregation and particular geographic areas to be associated with one community or the other. The “Fresh Start” Agreement, negotiated primarily between the DUP, Sinn Féin and the British and Irish Governments in November 2015 as a means of giving fresh impetus to the Stormont House Agreement of the previous year, outlined the parties commitment to promoting ‘a culture of tolerance, mutual respect and mutual understanding at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate and encourage shared and integrated education and housing’ (NIO, 2015, p. 38). Although there is evidence of some improvement in regards to the housing situation, much more needs to be done as has recently been highlighted by the Fifth Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report:

The second and third Peace Monitoring Reports...provided analysis of the overall levels of residential segregation (owner-occupied, private rented and social housing stock), based on the 2011 census. These figures indicated that while the levels of segregation have proven very slow to change over the past two decades, there has been a decline in the proportion of ‘single-identity’ wards (above a threshold of 80 per cent of one religion) from 55 per cent to 37 per cent, though this decline has affected Protestant areas more than Catholic (Gray, et al., 2018, p. 177).

As the issues of both policing and housing demonstrate, the goal of building a shared society is complex and faces many difficulties. For nationalists, change is a must in order to build a society that better reflects their sense of identity and cultural heritage. For unionists, such change is seen to represent a danger to their sense of Britishness and, indeed, the British character of the state. This has been evident in the political crises surrounding the flying of the Union flag at Belfast City Hall (Nolan, et al., 2014) and most recently in the fallout over the implementation of an Irish Language Act – an issue that is at the heart of the long-running impasse to restore the Northern Ireland Executive following its collapse in January 2017.

Conclusion

Society and culture in Northern Ireland are characterised by the typical challenges and divisions that feature across the United Kingdom; at the same time, the fact that it is difficult

(inaccurate, even) to describe Northern Ireland as having 'a' society or culture points to its distinctive nature. This can produce unique benefits and riches in a small region such as this; the mix of British and Irish identities being one sign of Northern Ireland's potential as a culturally diverse and inclusive society. However, it can also bring about deep tensions. The political dynamics of the 1998 Agreement mean that cultural differences are still seen as politically salient. More significantly, the desire of political parties to be sure of a community majority (with a future poll on Northern Ireland's constitutional status in mind) means that we are as yet far from a society in which diversity and difference are welcomed and celebrated. Although the political parties representing Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism will often stress their tolerance and acceptance of the Other/s, they struggle to endorse those policies designed to better embody the diversity within the region today. This is reflected in the policies and attitudes towards policing, immigration, education and commemoration, as we have seen. The ongoing sectarian divisions evident in Northern Ireland society continue to have a major impact on crucial policy areas and often prevent the type of progress envisaged in the various peace agreements since 1998. All of this suggests that, for some time yet to come, Northern Ireland will continue to be seen as an awkward place apart rather than as melding point between the societies and cultures of two islands.

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