THE DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT: POLITICAL ECONOMY, EQUALITY AND CONFLICT

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This article looks at the impact of communal economic inequality on conflict in Northern Ireland. It argues that strongly egalitarian policies (of which affirmative action programmes were an important part), introduced late and against strong resistance, have at once lessened inequality and changed and moderated national conflict: resistance to these policies has lessened and the issue of communal economic inequality is now depoliticised. Even by 2011, equality is neither perfectly assured nor stable, and national identities and oppositions remain salient, yet there is a discernible identity shift and change in the urgency of nationalist aims, which appear to be related to the equality measures. The intellectual challenge is to pull apart the various strands of causality, to see how equality (for the purposes of this working paper, economic equality and in particular, affirmative action measures) contributed to this.
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Books on which the authors have collaborated include: *The dynamics of conflict in Northern Ireland: power, conflict and emancipation* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); *After the Good Friday agreement: analysing political change in Northern Ireland* (UCD Press, 1999); *Europe’s Old States in a New World Order : The Politics of Transition in Britain, France and Spain* (UCD Press, 2003); *Ethnicity and Religion: Intersections and Comparisons* (Routledge, 2010).

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INTRODUCTION

This article looks at the impact of communal economic inequality on conflict in Northern Ireland. It argues that strongly egalitarian policies (of which affirmative action programmes were an important part), introduced late and against strong resistance, have at once lessened inequality and changed and moderated national conflict: resistance to these policies has lessened and the issue of communal economic inequality is now depoliticised.

To bring the economy back into the analysis of conflict allows us to ask key questions about nature of conflict and role of inequality/equality in it. The economy was an arena central to the constitution of opposed communities in the 17th century; it took on a new national significance in the nineteenth century; it was renewed as a source both of communal and national opposition in 20th century Northern Ireland. What happens when one key mechanism of communal differentiation (economic inequality) and one key mark of national difference (economic progress) changes? We argue here that equality measures have played a role in shifting the terms of communal conflict, but more because they have substantially reduced inequality and created a context from which proactive projects and participation can be effective, rather than primarily because they have achieved strict communal equality of condition. The extent to which equality legislation itself was the main factor in reducing inequality, and whether and to what extent other factors were also relevant, is one which needs more sustained quantitative/qualitative study than is possible in this chapter.

To bring the economic factor back into analysis of communal conflict requires justification. Walker Connor makes the classic argument that ethnicity has its own logic and determinations quite separate from those of the economy, and that ethnic conflict is a matter of identity not economics. This radical opposition of “identity” and “economy” rests on a misconception of both economy and identity, which precludes exploration of the ways in which equality can change communal projects and even shift ethno-national self-conceptions. It is misconceived, first, because the “pure” economy is an ideal type whose explanatory value, while real, is strictly limited: even in successful capitalist economies, the institutional organisation of production varies and may be determined in part by political direction, in part by informal social

linkages and cultural expectations which frame institutional conflict and negotiation. In these societies, social classes conceive of themselves in terms of a variety of categories and act for a range of motives—power and morality, security and honour, intergenerational transmission—among which market oriented motives are not necessarily the most important. Second, just as there is no “pure” economy, so there is no “pure” ethnicity. Ethnicity derives from cultural constructions of “peoplehood” but the abstract notion of a people provides only a thin identity, always filled with other content that determines the particular boundaries and interests of each particular ethnic group. This can include precisely those self-conceptions of advanced and backward status, superiority and inferiority, which in turn are closely linked to past and present place in the politico-economic system. Finally, the economics vs. identity dichotomy unduly limits the field of research. There are good comparative reasons to believe that the most powerful motivating factors for group conflict are neither purely “national identity” nor purely “individual material economic interest” but result from an intersection of cultural division and power inequality to create “horizontal inequality”. Such inequality can be between communities who do not explicitly claim ethno-national status: yet such communal inequality can, as the Northern Ireland case shows, provide a basis for ethnicisation and intense ethno-national conflict. The Northern Ireland case also indicates that remedying this inequality changes (although does not itself dissolve away) ethno-national identity and opposition. To understand this process requires us to look at the changing economic conditions of the communities within a wider socio-political frame.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF NORTHERN IRELAND: 1921-1968

When Northern Ireland was formed in 1921 it contained the most industrialised, economically progressive areas of the island. Belfast was the fastest growing city in


the British Isles in the later nineteenth century, going from a population of 20,000 in 1800 to one of 400,000 in 1900; many smaller provincial towns—Lurgan, Portadown, Dungannon—also became important centres of industry. Early 20th century Ulster was the world’s leading centre for mechanised linen production; it was a major exporter of textile machinery and possessed the world’s largest shipyard. Economic modernisation was overwhelmingly the achievement of the Protestant population, and they kept the fruits of their achievement primarily for themselves. In Belfast the Catholic proportion of the population declined from over 40 per cent in 1841 to 25 per cent in 1901. By this time they were more heavily weighted in the unskilled than the skilled trades, more likely to be manual than white-collar workers. They were...47 percent of the barefoot women spinners, but 29 percent of the ‘superior’ women weavers; 41 percent of the dockers, but 7 percent of the shipwrights; 32 percent of the general labourers, but 13 percent of the commercial clerks.

Catholics and Protestants inhabited two divergent but overlapping economic worlds. The Protestant population comprised the entire class range from aristocracy and substantial bourgeoisie down to skilled and unskilled working class, with a cultural self-perception as an industrious, prosperous, forward-looking people. Protestants, for the most part, saw themselves as part of the British family of peoples, loyal to crown and empire, building in Ireland a regional economy that could rival, and in some ways surpass, the achievement in other parts of Britain. On the other hand was the Catholic population led (if that is the word) as much by its clergy as by its middle class, disproportionately made up of small farmers and unskilled labourers, with lower levels of education and training than its Protestant counterparts, a vulnerable minority in Protestant dominated urban centres and workplaces, attributing its weak position to its historic displacement, political subordination and continuing economic exclusion.

The new state inherited this spatial differentiation and ethno-religious stratification. In 1921 Protestants owned the best land and the largest firms; they controlled industry and finance and the higher reaches of the service sector. They were spatially concentrated in the areas of most developed infrastructure. They predominated in

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9 Walker, History of Ulster Unionism, pp. 1-3.

the professions and among the skilled workforce. They dominated the major agricultural and business organisations, professional associations and influential informal networks. They had an excess of cultural and social as well as economic capital. They now had the powers and resources of a state, albeit a devolved one, at their disposal.

Developing these resources was, however, a serious challenge, politically the more pressing because of the relatively high population density that had accompanied the industrialisation of the north-east. The strength of the industrial economy was in linen and shipbuilding/engineering. During the 1920s and 1930s these industries were in recession. Shipbuilding recovered during WW2 but by the 1950s it was evident that the traditional industries were in long-term decline. This coincided with a decline in the numbers employed in agriculture. A process of radical renewal was needed to sustain employment, either through indigenous entrepreneurship or by attracting industry from outside. Each path faced major difficulties and the problem was eventually resolved only by reliance upon central British funds. Per capita public spending in Northern Ireland rapidly increased after the Second World War (although it still lagged behind other parts of the United Kingdom through the 1960s). The benefits were improved roads, housing, education, health and welfare, public utilities and—not least—direct employment. British support was the major factor in widening the gap in incomes per head between the two parts of Ireland from the post-war period onwards. It also increased unionist vulnerability to pressure from Westminster.

Unionists kept the resources of the province firmly in their own hands. In part this was an effect of local action: there was general agreement that agricultural land should not be sold to the “other” religion. In part, it was a product of the distribution of resources. Catholics were disproportionately located in the poorer regions and in social classes with high unemployment rates and they had proportionately less access to second-level “grammar school” education and lower levels of educational attainment. This ensured a low ability to compete in the market place along with a


14 For the structure and origins of Northern Ireland's religiously divided school system, see D. H. Akenson (1973) Education and Enmity: The Control of Schooling in Northern Ireland 1920-1950. Newton Abbot: David and Charles. Catholic schools together with some high-status Protestant schools were in the voluntary sector and received less government finance for capital expenditure than schools in the maintained (Protestant) sector. Educational segregation was affirmed by both populations: in those few areas where there was choice, the Catholic church applied pressure on parents to send their children to the Catholic schools which—although in general producing less good results overall than the Protestant—were extremely effective educationally if the overall lower class background of the pupils is taken into account. The primary area where
higher likelihood of emigration and a continuation of the pattern in the next generation. The pattern was partially broken by the (Westminster) Butler education act of 1947 which gave qualifying pupils free access to the secondary school system.\(^{15}\) However Catholics’ locational and class disadvantages remained: for example the spatial structure of the Northern economy in the 1950s and 1960s encouraged new firms to locate in the areas with the best infrastructure that happened also to be areas that were majority Protestant.\(^{16}\) It would have taken an exceptional political effort to have broken this pattern, and not one that the unionist controlled state made.

Where the structural effects making for inequality were ineffective, they were topped up by practices that were in one form or another discriminatory. Indirect discrimination was as important as direct, for example taking existing workers’ relatives or shop stewards’ references, preferring ex-servicemen, advertising first in the immediate neighbourhood, stressing the “right” attitude to authority. But a good deal of discrimination was direct: a deliberate preference for Northern Protestants over Catholics and Southerners.\(^{17}\) In the public sector, discrimination was deliberate if uneven. It was most elaborate in the areas of greatest unionist vulnerability: the worst offenders were local authorities in the areas of precarious unionist control west of the Bann.\(^{18}\) At the provincial level, it was most pronounced in the departments of state that unionists deemed the most vulnerable to nationalist attempts at subversion, in particular Home Affairs. Not all unionist politicians or employers were equally discriminatory, but the pattern was clear.\(^{19}\) Catholics, in turn, compounded the effect of discrimination, refusing on political grounds to apply to the RUC or civil service, or not applying for jobs on the grounds that they would be discriminated against so there was no point in applying.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{17}\) Southern employees (including Protestants) were sent home after WWII when the need for employment for returned unionist servicemen increased. See Walker, History of the Ulster Unionist Party, pp. 107-8.


\(^{19}\) Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, Northern Ireland, 48-57 distinguish populists and anti-populists in government.

One justification for discrimination was straightforwardly political: Catholics posed a danger to the state because of their “nationalist sympathies” and should not be given the power to destroy it: Basil Brooke’s well-known call to fellow Protestants “wherever possible, to employ protestant lads and lassies” is the standard reference.\(^21\) However, much discrimination had more diffuse cultural roots: it was easier to do business with “one’s own” and “natural” or “normal” to try to help “one’s own” whether by hiring them or giving business to them; these were sentiments which Protestants assumed—with some justification—Catholics also shared.\(^22\) Embedded perceptions and distinctions (chapter 3) reinforced interest: Catholics were “not to be trusted”, they were “shifty, idle and unreliable, fit only to be employed on unskilled work”, they were resentful of authority, more likely to be troublemakers or to have “a chip on the shoulder”; they could not be trusted with business secrets (presumably a reference to the religious practice of confession) and they would “pack” the firm with other Catholics;\(^23\) they might upset customers or other workers;\(^24\) Protestants might not “work well under Catholic supervision”.\(^25\)

The extent of discrimination was, and is, the subject of dispute. In Rose’s 1968 study, 74 per cent of Protestants denied that it existed at all, and of these 65 per cent thought complaints should be investigated “fully confident that investigation would vindicate their position”.\(^26\) Charges of discrimination were interpreted in political terms and countered as such: they were “the work of trouble-makers in the Catholic community”, a form of ill-disguised nationalism, or simply Catholic “whinging”.\(^27\) Protestants affirmed that whatever economic advantage they had was due to the working of market forces, their hard work, their modernising ethos and their different educational values. In contrast the vast majority of Catholics—74 per cent—

\(^{21}\) Barton, Brookeborough. The Making of a Prime Minister, Belfast, Institute of Irish Studies, 1988, p. 78. His grounds were that “Roman catholics were endeavouring to get in everywhere and were out with all their force and might to destroy the power and constitution of Ulster. There was a definite plot to overpower the vote of unionists in the north.” Barritt and Carter compare unionist concerns about nationalist subversion to an English employer’s doubts about hiring a communist as a manager: Northern Ireland Problem, pp. 101-2.

\(^{22}\) Brian Barton, Brookeborough, p. 79; Brian Faulkner, “Ireland Today”, article published in Aquarius, 1971, reprinted in David Bleakley (1974) Faulkner: Conflict and Consent in Irish Politics. London: Mobrays. Protestants were correct in their claim that Catholics also discriminated. To that extent the inequality lay in the fact that Protestants had many more opportunities to discriminate than did Catholics.

\(^{23}\) Barritt and Carter, Northern Ireland Problem, p. 94.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., p. 102.

\(^{25}\) Significantly this was not taken to imply a negative attitude to authority among Protestants.

\(^{26}\) Richard Rose (1971) Governing without Consensus: An Irish Perspective. London: Faber and Faber, pp. 272-3; 19 per cent of Protestants agreed that there was discrimination; 4 per cent reported personal knowledge of it.

believed that discrimination existed, although only 36 per cent claimed personal experience of it.  

Whatever the precise balance of causal factors, it is clear that the pre-existing pattern of Protestant advantage and Catholic disadvantage persisted—and if anything intensified—through the Stormont years. In a study of occupational mobility in Belfast between 1901 and 1951, Hepburn found no narrowing of the gap between the two communities; Cormack and Rooney reached a similar conclusion for Northern Ireland as a whole. Bew, Gibbon and Patterson point to a slight improvement in the position of the Catholic middle class between 1911 and 1971 but a substantial worsening of the position of the Catholic working class: the proportion of unskilled Catholics increased while that of Protestants decreased, the Catholic male unemployment rate increased from slightly less than that of Protestants in 1911 to well over twice that of Protestants in 1971. The most striking evidence of all of Catholic disadvantage is emigration, which countered the high Catholic birth-rate (although it was not sufficient to prevent an increase in the Catholic proportion of the population from the 1930s): Barritt and Carter estimate that while Catholics made up a third of the population they made up 55-58 per cent of emigrants for the period 1937 to 1951; Compton estimates 60 per cent for the period 1951-61, 54 per cent for 1961-71. Aunger’s analysis of the 1971 census shows that Catholics were underrepresented in key occupational sectors, in particular administration and management, engineering and allied trades, clerical and professional, more likely than Protestants to be in less skilled, lower status jobs, at a lower status/supervisory capacity in them, in lower social classes and over twice as likely to be unemployed as Protestants. This amounted not simply to communal inequality, but to different economic worlds inhabited by the two communities: different industries where each community dominated, different sets of career paths for talented young people. With massive

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Catholic emigration, each community had a very different demographic structure: Eversley points to the “hollowing out” of whole cohorts of the Catholic population by emigration.35

The increased public sector spending after World War II highlighted the socio-economic differentiation of the communities. Decisions had to be made over the location of new industry, access to public authority housing, the location of a second university, access to the new jobs in the public sector, and those decisions were heavily influenced by local unionist pressure.36 The civil rights movement (CRM) was informed by discontent on all these issues, and more generally by the sense that Catholics were “second class citizens” in social and economic as well as political terms, a long-standing complaint of Northern nationalists.37 The initial Campaign for Social Justice (CSJ) policy statement in 1964, stated their opposition to the “The Government of Northern Ireland’s policies of apartheid and discrimination”, pledging themselves to “collect comprehensive and accurate data on all injustices done against all creeds and political opinions including details of discrimination in jobs and houses...” and ending “Our aim is, we think, both basic and Christian but, nevertheless, has not been realised here for hundreds of years, namely equality for all”.38 This focus on social justice preceded the CRM’s focus on civil-political rights (for example on the Special Powers Act), although, with the police overreaction and disorder that was to surround the civil rights marches, it was political and civil rights which were to be highlighted from 1969.

A CHANGING ECONOMIC CULTURE AND POLITICS: 1968-2001

Between 1968 and 2001 there was radical change in the legal framework of employment, in the extent of communal economic inequality, and in the differentiation of Protestant and Catholic economic worlds. The changes began slowly. The economic demands of the CRM were limited to an end to discrimination in the public sector; as it radicalised, it focussed on the ending of unionist political power, not economic inequality. Only when it became clear that the problem of Catholic inequality went deeper than unionist power did economic demands again become politicised, in the 1980s, and at this stage the entire politico-economic structure of Northern Ireland was put into question. Three kinds of equality claims were involved: a demand for fair treatment (in the sense of an end to deliberate discrimina-


37 Purdie points out the very similar mode of reporting discriminatory employment and salary structures in Cahir Healy’s 1937 Mutillation of a Nation, and in the Campaign for Social Justice documentation in 1964: Bob Purdie, Politics in the Streets, 95-101. Exactly the same repertoire (and a very similar table of relative salary payments) is also to be found in Uílacht’s Orange Terror of 1943 (part 1).

38 Irish News 16 January 1964, quoted Purdie, Politics in the Streets, p. 94.
tion whether direct or indirect), a demand for equality of opportunity (which includes a demand for fair treatment but, more importantly, for structural changes and affirmative measures to enable Catholics to compete on more equal terms with Protestants) and a demand for equality of condition (as measured by statistical aggregates of employment and unemployment, wealth and poverty).\(^{39}\) A consciousness of all three was present in the 1960s. Moderate reformers emphasised that with minimal fair play, “a spirit of resistance” and middle class encouragement, the (Catholic) people would get “up off their knees” and achieve economic success.\(^{40}\) Radicals and republicans were conscious of the structural obstacles to full and equal participation in economy and society: they believed that struggling for the relatively moderate reforms called for by the CRM would make evident to both Catholic and Protestant working class that more radical change was necessary, that Northern Ireland was irreformable.\(^{41}\) What changed over thirty years was the belief that policy instruments within the British state might achieve equality of condition, and the increasing capacity of nationalists and their allies to ensure that these policies were enacted. Two things contributed: a changing economic structure, and the politicisation of the issue of economic equality. We look at each in turn.

**The changing structure of the economy**

The troubles had far-reaching implications for the form of the economy, on the one hand intensifying changes that were already underway, on the other hand producing the conjunctural effect of a “war economy”. The running down of the industrial sector, the expansion in the public sector and the increased dependence on the British subvention continued. There was a further sharp decline in the traditional industries (and in the case of shipbuilding, a final collapse), the closure of many of the new firms that came in the 1950s and 1960s, and the failure of attempts to generate or attract new industry. Employment in manufacturing fell from 36 per cent of total employment in 1950 to 18 per cent in 1990, declining more gradually thereafter.\(^{42}\) Much of the slack was taken up by expansion in the public sector.\(^{43}\) The expansion required a sharp increase in the subvention from the British exchequer: in the late 1960s it contributed between 5 per cent and 10 per cent of public expenditure in Northern Ireland; by the late 1980s it contributed about one third and represented


\(^{41}\) See Purdie, *Politics in the Streets*, 126-130.


more than a fifth of personal income before tax.\(^{44}\) One aspect of the “war economy” was the enormous expansion in the publicly funded security sector. Rowthorn and Wayne estimate that by 1985 there were almost 20,000 employed in the local security forces and an additional 10,000 in security-related employment.\(^{45}\) A further effect was the destruction of public buildings as a result of the republican bombing campaign (which also involved heavy costs in the payment of compensation) and the demands of reconstruction.\(^{46}\) There was also the investment in urban renewal designed to improve the material conditions of Catholics, to wean them from support for republicanism, and to make paramilitary movement and escape more difficult.\(^{47}\)

The new jobs in the public sector—particularly in the security forces—compensated in part for the loss of industrial jobs but only in part and the economy as a whole was in difficulty throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Total employment grew only by 0.5% per annum between 1971 and 1991 and male employment fell.\(^{48}\) Unemployment reached 18.6 per cent in 1986, making further demands on public expenditure.\(^{49}\) In the 1990s the situation improved with a higher growth rate in Northern Ireland than in most of the rest of the United Kingdom.\(^{50}\) Employment grew by 1.8% per annum through the decade, and unemployment fell sharply in the later part of the decade, although this was partially due to an administrative change of categories.\(^{51}\) New jobs were created, but many were in the low-skill, high-turnover, female consumer service sector, and there was little growth in the high technology sectors.\(^{52}\) Long-term male unemployment remained a serious problem, with two-thirds


\(^{46}\) See O’Leary and McGarry, Politics of Antagonism, pp. 44-6.


\(^{48}\) T. Dignan, “Community differentials and new TSN”, commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 17 Jan. 03.


\(^{50}\) This relative advantage began to fall off in the later 1990s.


of unemployed males remaining unemployed for more than a year, and considerable numbers for ten years; this group was in practice excluded from economic participation, “relatively detached from the labour force”. The economy continued to suffer from dependence on poor-performing traditional industries, a heavy dependence on sales to Britain, the importance of security related jobs, and a general structural problem of peripherality to the UK economy, although there was some incoming US investment particularly after the settlement of 1998. Despite economic improvement, Northern Ireland retains one of the lowest standards of living in the United Kingdom, with relative poverty more marked and greater in extent than in the rest of the UK. Its economic trajectory is in dramatic contrast with that of the Irish state: almost 70 per cent of economic activity in the North (as compared to 37 per cent in the Republic and 40 per cent in England, Scotland and Wales) is public sector oriented, and about a third of full time employees are in the public sector (the European average is 20 percent); most Northern businesses are small, without the inward investment from large multinationals which has brought prosperity to the South. However its structural flaw in the economic sense—Northern Ireland’s dependence on the British-funded public sector—has been a political virtue, greatly extending the British state’s room for manoeuvre in remedying communal economic inequality. When economic renewal began (unevenly) in the 1990s, it was now in a fair employment setting.

**Politicising inequality: from discrimination to fair employment to equality of condition**

Discrimination in the public sector was officially confirmed as a cause of conflict in the Cameron Report of 1970. Economic inequality was a constant underlying grievance, one about which John Whyte noted nationalists were “acutely aware”. Consistently in opinion polls from 1968 until at least the late 1980s, a majority of Catholics believed that they were unfairly treated and less likely to get a job than Protestants. A significant minority thought this the most important issue facing them: po-

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58 R. D. Osborne, “Discrimination”, pp. 31-38 in P. Stringer and G. Robinson, eds. (1990-91) *Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Blackstaff. From the early 1990s, the perception of unfair treatment diminishes until, by 2001, Catholics were less likely than Protestants to believe that their community was unfairly treated. Tony Gallagher, “Community relations, equality and the future”, pp. 178-192 in R. Breen, P. Devine, L.
political support for a united Ireland was directly correlated with belief that the Catholic community was treated unfairly; in interviews conducted by the authors in 1988, even moderates who had no strong nationalist ideology held that “the jury is still out” on whether or not Northern Ireland was reformable. Yet it was not until the mid 1980s that economic inequality became a focus of political demands, and not until the late 1980s that discrimination began to be effectively addressed. Why the delay in addressing factors which seem clearly to have contributed to Catholic anger? Why the delay in demanding redress? In part it was a question of political prioritisation. Some issues were dealt with immediately, notably housing, which required only the financial commitment to ensure an adequate housing stock along with a means of allocating it fairly (the Northern Ireland Housing Executive established in 1970). The issue of employment and wealth was of a different order, particularly when the industrial economy was in free-fall and unemployment levels were rising. In this context, the competition for jobs was zero-sum and the concept of discrimination carried with responsibility and blame, not just for inequality but for the conflict itself. Unionists were hyper-sensitive on the issue, seeing their “honour” at stake in claims of discrimination. The SDLP was anxious not to appear to be seeking jobs for Catholics at Protestant expense, and instead urged job creation and cross border schemes to increase total employment. Sinn Féin at that time was focused wholly on politics and its economic strategy was conceived in the context of a future Éire Nua.

In part, it was a question of available policy instruments. Allegations of discrimination were investigated and the British government in a series of declarations stood against discrimination and for fair and equal treatment, progressively broadening the area of concern from the public to the private sector. But direct discrimination was almost impossible to prove, its existence was strenuously denied by unionists and legislation resisted by business and the government was slow to enact strong


59 Smith and Chambers, *Inequality in Northern Ireland*, pp. 86-7; Richard Breen, “Who wants a united Ireland?”, pp 33-48 in Breen et al, eds., *Social Attitudes*, pp. 43-5. In the 1988 interviews (with 40 Protestants and 40 Catholics) equality (including economic equality) was a priority aim for very many of the Catholic respondents. Similar views are reported in Martin Cowley, “Unemployment seen as bigger issue in North than violence”, *Irish Times* 21.4.89.

60 Nelson, “Protestant ideology considered”.


measures in Northern Ireland that might then be demanded in Great Britain. A Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights (SACHR) was constituted in 1973 to advise the SOSNI on the adequacy of the law in preventing discrimination. Finally in 1976—against strenuous opposition from unionists and business groups—the Fair Employment (NI) Act declared illegal direct discrimination in public and private sector employment and set up the Fair Employment Agency (FEA) as an independent public agency to help eliminate discrimination, to promote equality of opportunity, to undertake research on the barriers to this, and to investigate individual complaints. Harold McCusker (UUP MP) said that this reflected the “sackcloth and ashes period of Northern Ireland”...when...“people who were genuinely and sincerely trying to find a way out of what has happened were perhaps prepared to accept guilt for anything and never examined just what they were admitting to or what others were supposed to be guilty of”. The workplace, on McCusker’s view, was “almost the one oasis of sanity” in the society, while John Dunlop (UUP MP) spoke of one of the “outstanding features” of Northern Ireland industry as the “complete absence of sectarian violence or intimidation of workers” and Jim Kilfedder (UUP MP) said that the FEA would be “the stamping ground of the professional agitator and the troublemaker”.

The 1976 Act showed movement from a concern simply with fairness (anti-discrimination) to a concern with equality of opportunity, but it was extremely weak. The Agency's powers were limited, it was underfunded and understaffed and, given the economic recession, its director (R. G. Cooper) took a cautious line. It conceived its role largely in terms of education, exhortation and moral pressure rather than legal enforcement. Employers were urged to sign a “Declaration of Principle and Intent” to say that they agreed with the principles of the legislation, and from 1982 those seeking government contracts were required to sign it. Over half of those eligible signed in the first year (and could advertise themselves as Equal Opportunity employers) but the undertaking was entirely self-regulated, and later research showed that most of those who signed paid little attention to its provisions. Evidence for discrimination was also very difficult to obtain: only a few of the cases

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69 Ibid. ch. 6; Cunningham, *British Government Policy*, p. 131.
investigated by the Agency were upheld, and it was ignored even by the firms that it investigated.  

More important than its practical interventions was the research sponsored by the FEA. Investigations of individual firms (which it published from 1982) showed striking disparities in many workforces and identified some of the hidden ways that discrimination operated, including informal recruitment networks, Protestant dominated recruitment boards, selection criteria that were indirectly discriminatory. Other research showed the inadequacy of some of the stock explanations for Catholic disadvantage, including the absence of a work ethic and poor education. Analysis of the 1981 census returns showed the extent of the disparity between Catholics and Protestants in their employment and unemployment patterns. The deep and persistent disparity between the communities (with Catholic men 2.5 times more likely to be unemployed than Protestant) was confirmed in a major study commissioned by SACHR. The disparity held for all regions, for every age group, in all the major sectors of the economy, and for men across all social classes. Catholics were at relative disadvantage in job level, type of industry, class profile, income level and standard of living. They were also at serious disadvantage in the civil service, where in 1980 (with an estimated over 37% of the economically active population) they had less than 5% of the 43 highest positions (senior assistant secretary and above), less than 7% of 121 positions of assistant secretary and above and less

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70 See Pollak, “The civil service investigation”, p. 9; Smith and Chambers, Inequality in Northern Ireland, p. 248. McCrudden, “Legal enforcement”.


72 R. L. Miller, Attitudes to Work in Northern Ireland, FEA research paper no. 2, Belfast, Fair Employment Agency, 1978; R. C. Murray and R. D. Osborne, “Educational qualifications and religious affiliation”, in Cormack and Osborne, eds., Religion, Education and Employment. Educational differences, particularly in science subjects were marked, but how this was linked to class differences, underfunding of the voluntary school sector, and the lesser prevalence of grammar schools especially for Catholic boys, is difficult to assess on the available evidence (see pp. below).


74 Smith and Chambers, Inequality in Northern Ireland, pp. 161-3, based on CHS data from 1983-5.


than 20% of 1582 positions as staff officer and above, as an FEA report (whose publication was much delayed under official pressure) showed.\footnote{Osborne and Shuttleworth, Fair Employment, p. 4.; Fair Employment Agency, Report of an Investigation by the Fair Employment Agency for Northern Ireland to the Non-Industrial Northern Ireland Civil Service. Belfast: FEA, December 1983, table XVI.}

The early hopes that “good government” by the British would resolve the question of discrimination were shattered by these findings. By the early 1980s it was clear that the law was inadequate even to ensure fair treatment, much less equality of opportunity while inequality of condition was as stark as before. FEA research had shown that direct discrimination was only the tip of the iceberg, and that indirect discrimination was pervasive, officially unacknowledged and unchecked. The legal sanctions in the 1976 Act were too weak to ensure compliance.

Meanwhile in 1984 Irish-American political activists launched the MacBride Principles Campaign, modelled on a similar campaign in the 1970s directed at apartheid in South Africa; the strategy was to persuade US companies with investments (or plans to invest) in Northern Ireland to adhere to a much tougher set of fair employment principles than required by the existing legislation. Both in the parallel with apartheid and in its eventual effectiveness in promoting change in employment practices, the campaign embarrassed the British government. The MacBride principles included increased representation of underrepresented groups, affirmative action measures (including training programmes and targeted recruitment measures), the abolition of discriminatory measures in recruitment and layoff procedures, the banning of sectarian or provocative symbols from the workplace, security for members of minority groups travelling to and from work and at work, and timetables for these measures.\footnote{R. J. Cormack and R. D. Osborne, “Disadvantage and discrimination in Northern Ireland”, in Cormack and Osborne, eds., Discrimination and Public Policy, p. 16.} The avenue of pressure was shareholders’ meetings, state legislatures and municipalities. Despite the opposition of the British and Irish governments and the mainstream parties in Northern Ireland (including the SDLP), the campaign was highly successful. Firms and states across the United States signed up to it, threatening American investment at a time when jobs were much needed; thus it impacted on company policy in Northern Ireland and highlighted the weakness of the British government’s own legislation. Human rights activists, senior members of the civil service, the British Labour Party, SACHR and the ICTU all argued for stronger legislation.\footnote{Richard Jay and Rick Wilford, “Fair employment in Northern Ireland: a new initiative”, Irish Political Studies, vol. 6, 1991, pp. 26-9.} The Irish government eventually took up the issue and it was one of the most frequently raised topics in meetings of the Anglo-Irish Conference.\footnote{It was discussed on at least twelve occasions between 1985 and 1989. See Cunningham, British Government Policy, p. 230.} In 1987 the British government introduced a new code of practice, and this was followed in 1989 by a new Fair Employment Act (NI).
The 1989 Act was more ambitious and much more effective than the 1976 one, in Osborne’s description going beyond all existing legislation in the United Kingdom.\(^{81}\) It took as its model recent Canadian legislation which abjured quotas but incorporated strong monitoring requirements.\(^{82}\) It outlawed indirect as well as direct discrimination.\(^{83}\) It gave greater powers of enforcement to the newly named Fair Employment Commission and broadened the range of legally acceptable compensatory measures, for example the targeting of specific groups in job advertising and training programmes. It made monitoring of the religious composition of the workforce (and, for the public sector and large private firms, of job applications) a requirement and it set up a new Fair Employment Tribunal to hear individual cases of discrimination. Timetables and quotas were excluded despite arguments from the FEA, SACHR and others; there was no definition of the goal of “fair participation in employment”, and only limited affirmative action measures were explicitly permitted: setting targets for improving employment patterns based on the relevant travel to work area. Bob Cooper, Chairman of the FEA explained in a letter to the *Irish Times* (21.4.90):

affirmative action is defined in the new legislation as action designed to secure fair participation in employment by members of the Protestant and Catholic communities by adopting practices to encourage such participation or abandoning practices which discourage such participation. The new Act contains a number of exceptions, in the interests of affirmative action; to the principle of non-discrimination….The most important of these…..permits an employer to take special measures to encourage members of an under-represented community to apply for jobs…..At the point of selection, however, the best person for the job must be selected irrespective of religion.

It did not bring an end to American pressure; on the contrary MacBride campaigners used the new monitoring returns and the FEC’s yearly reports to strengthen their case.

Meanwhile Catholic numbers were rising (from 36.8 per cent of the total population in 1971 to 44% in 2001, from 31% of the economically active population in 1971 to 43% in 2001), making fair employment a “moving target”.\(^{84}\) Yet the legislation

\(^{81}\) Osborne and Shuttleworth, *Fair Employment*, pp. 5-6.

\(^{82}\) Osborne and Shuttleworth, *Fair Employment*, p. 5.

\(^{83}\) Indirect discrimination was defined in terms of unjustifiable employment requirements or conditions which in effect disadvantage one community; for alternative definitions of “indirect discrimination” which were fought out in the debates over the bill, see Jay and Wilford, “Fair employment”, p. 29 and Christopher McCrudden, “The evolution of the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 in parliament”, in Cormack and Osborne, eds., *Discrimination and Public Policy*.

proved less problematic than unionists had anticipated. Protestants as well as Catholics successfully won cases under it and many of those who had vigorously opposed the new legislation came round to accepting it.  

The bar was being raised all the time, with continued politicisation of the issue. All parties—and particularly the statutory bodies such as the FEC and SACHR who had been proven right on the need for stronger legislation—analysed and published the results of research with the benchmark being the male unemployment differential. SACHR pressed for new measures focusing less on discrimination and more on the aim of ending the economic inequality of the communities. International practice in dealing with gender inequality had moved towards the concept of “mainstreaming” the norm of equality into all public decision-making, and towards formulating “positive equality duties” which would anticipate the effects of policy. From the early 1990s this was called for by rights and equality activists in Northern Ireland. The British government introduced two new policies: PAFT (Policy Assessment and Fair Treatment) in 1994, designed to encourage public bodies to assess their policies in light of their potential impact on communal inequality; TSN (Targeting Social Need) designed to focus economic resources on the areas most in need. Neither was very effective. The peace process provided an opportunity and an incentive to strengthen them further, as part of the package which would bargain strong equality measures and a systematic programme of economic development against weak constitutional change. Rights activists and the smaller political parties strengthened the proposals as part of the GFA. The subsequent Northern Ireland Act (1998) placed a statutory duty on all public authorities to work out an equality plan (to be lodged with and approved by the Equality Agency) and to publish impact assessments of their policies in light of the equality plan. This legislation was in the forefront of international practice.

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88 The new employment in TSN areas disproportionately went to workers from outside the areas. Shirlow and Shuttleworth “Who is going to toss the burgers?”, pp. 39-41. See, however, the discussion and recommendations for “new TSN” in Dignan, “Community differentials”. PAFT did not place a clear statutory duty on public authorities either to follow it, or to open their procedures to accountability: McCrudden, “Equality and the Good Friday Agreement”, pp. 100-102.

Economic inequality, 1971-2001

Has the process of legislative reform eliminated economic inequality? How much change has there been in the past 30 years? There is evidence to suggest persistent inequality in the structures of land-owning, in the highest levels of management particularly in private employment, and in the embeddedness of business networks ("old" rather than "new" wealth) although there are no objective public measures of this. It is middle-level and lower-level economic inequality which have been most politicised and on which reliable data exist which provide benchmarks for the changing balance of economic resources in Northern Ireland. They show that, in 1971, inequality in employment and unemployment was stark—in many respects worse than seventy years previously. On all the quantitative markers, the Catholic position had substantially improved thirty years later (see table 1) although a significant level of inequality remained, particularly in economic condition (poverty and deprivation) and male and long-term unemployment.

Catholics in 1971 were more than twice as likely (and Catholic males 2.6 times as likely) to be unemployed as their Protestant counterparts. The disparity persisted through most of the 1980s, and Catholic male unemployment and long-term unemployment remained more than twice that of Protestant through most of the 1990s. In the 2001 census Catholic male unemployment had fallen to 1.8 times that of Protestant (the female ratio was 1.6:1). By 2001, however, the overall numbers of unemployed had fallen and the issue was no longer considered a political priority by parties or by government. Yet there was still a greater degree of poverty among Catholics than among Protestants, and more health problems for each age-sector of the Catholic population. These factors were highlighted in the 2005 Labour Force

90 In some rural areas, land-sales are intra-community, with unofficial sanctions or threats against those contemplating inter-community land-sales: Brendan Murtagh (1999) Community and Conflict in Rural Ulster. Coleraine: University of Ulster, Centre for the Study of Conflict, Section 6. It should also be noted that managers are now predominantly neither Protestant nor Catholic (Census, Equality commission report, table A13) which may suggest either secularisation or significant proportions of incomers in management positions.


92 R. Osborne and R. Cormack, “Religion and the labour market: patterns and profiles”, in Cormack and Osborne, eds., Discrimination and Public Policy, p. 57; Cormack et al., Fair Enough?, pp. 21-2; Gallagher et al., Fair Shares?, pp. 55-6.


94 Osborne and Shuttleworth, “Fair employment”, p. 15.

95 Osborne and Shuttleworth, “Fair employment”, p. 15.
Survey, which showed that the unemployment differential remained at 2.3, that there was considerably more economic inactivity among Catholics than among Protestants (mostly due to illness and disability) and that one in five of the working population were disabled.  

Among those at work in 1971, Catholics were more likely to be of lower status, authority and class within each occupational sector and Protestant men had almost twice the chance of a professional or managerial position than did Catholics.  

By 1991, Catholics were no longer underrepresented among foremen and supervisors. Between 1990 and 2000, the Catholic proportion of managerial, administrative and professional occupations began to approximate their percentage of the population, although Catholic men remain underrepresented in the managerial category and at the upper levels of the professional civil service. In the 2001 census, Protestants were still slightly over-represented in the highest social categories, but given the higher educational qualifications of younger Catholics, it is expected that this will even out over time. Upward mobility was a feature of the Catholic population in these decades, and the new recruits to the middle class moved beyond the sphere of “servicing” the Catholic community—teachers, doctors, lawyers and priests—to such positions as financial service professionals, middle managers, middle ranking civil servants, architects, planners or university and further education lecturers; much of the expansion was in the public sector. The central area of Protestant over-representation, which increased between 1971 and 1991, was security related services: demilitarisation, a radical reduction in the numbers of police, and strong time-dependent quotas for Catholic applicants has partially redressed the balance: by May 2011, just over 30% of the new Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) were Catholics.


99 Cormack et al, Fair Enough?, table 6.5, p. 30; Cormack et al., Fair Enough?, table 6.4, p. 29; Gallagher et al., Fair Shares?, tables 2.1, 2.2, p. 15; Ibid. table 2.7, p 18.

100 Equality Commission: Monitoring return no. 11, tables 2 and 5. These data do not, however, show the rank of managers, the type of firm, or the status of professionals and there may still be Catholic disadvantage on these grounds. Equality Commission, Monitoring Report no 11, 2000, tables 9-10, 25M, 26. See also Equality Commission, Monitoring Report; Key Facts, November 2002.


A SUCCESS STORY FOR FAIR EMPLOYMENT LEGISLATION?

What was the impact of the new policy instruments? Is this proof positive of the effectiveness of the affirmative action legislation? The answer is less clear. A study of the firms with which the FEC entered fair employment agreements shows that they did move towards a more balanced Catholic/Protestant employment profile, but less quickly than those monitored firms with whom the FEC did not have such agreements. This may, as McCrudden et al argue, be due to the fact that the FEC concentrated on the hardest cases. It suggests, however, that the causal factors that lead to employment segregation and inequality are complex: the interrelation between and the respective causal roles of workplace procedures, legal frames, and communal expectations and practices require study. Certainly legal frames can be circumvented: Shirlow and Murtagh argue that multi-sited firms have considerable imbalance between sites (where the “chill factor” still operates), and within sites between functions; in some workplaces “balance” has come only at the office and not at the shop floor level, where it is felt by managers to be more dangerous to introduce minority group employees. Yet examples of substantive integration on the shop floor exist. Initial research suggests that to sustain good work relations requires a communally neutral workplace, which differentiates and cordons off work from personal lifestyle and communal practices. Even in these circumstances, procedures for making and adjudicating complaints remain a source of tension. In addition, there is evidence that some individuals from economically depressed and highly segregated neighbourhoods find mixing in the workplace highly stressful: it appears that problems of integrating the workplace are interrelated with territorial and housing segregation and related attitudes. There appears, however, to be a possible positive feedback pattern: where work relations are good, many express the wish to broaden contact into social and leisure time, although this is difficult.

105 Dickson et al, Relational communication, p. 8, 1.4.7; D.A. Dickson, O.D. W. Hargie, Relational Communication between Catholics and Protestants in the Workplace: A study of Policies, Practices, Procedures. A report on research funded by the Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers (Northern Ireland) University of Ulster, Jordanstown, 2002.
106 Dickson et al, Relational communication, p.8., 1.4.10, 1.4.11.
given territorial segregation.\textsuperscript{108} In short, for fair employment legislation to make a real difference not just to communal economic condition but to work practices and communal oppositions, requires a dovetailing of employment and community relations policy. Otherwise, the effectiveness of the legislation is likely to be blunted, as minority candidates refuse to apply for jobs in uncongenial settings.

Mainstreaming is one way of integrating policy areas. A qualitative study of the process of “mainstreaming” equality was commissioned by the First and Deputy First Ministers of Northern Ireland.\textsuperscript{109} Its conclusion was nuanced. Change has taken place in the process of policy making, although public bodies have faced very intense criticism when they have opened the process to consultation. This antagonistic relationship between sections of the public and policy makers leads to a formalistic approach to mainstreaming, a “ticking of boxes” which is unlikely to affect policy outcomes. There is a danger that “the spirit and ethos of the reason for the duty is being lost in a sea of paperwork”.\textsuperscript{110} A “culture” of mainstreaming has not yet taken hold, and McLaughlin and Faris argue that this requires a change of attitude in interest-groups and stake-holders as well as in public bodies and it can best be facilitated in a non-adversarial context.\textsuperscript{111}

Bringing culture back in highlights another factor which is related to the (partial) evening up of communal condition: education. Until the 1990s, the voluntary sector (which included the Catholic sector) had lower funding for capital investment than the maintained (Protestant) sector.\textsuperscript{112} Moreover the pupils at Catholic schools were from a relatively lower class background and there was a lesser provision of Catholic grammar (as distinct from secondary) schools. Given this disadvantaged position, the relative equivalence of results in pupils in Protestant and Catholic school system in the 1970s was striking; differences in educational attainment were too minor to explain the differences in job prospects; one study in the 1980s found that they were explained more by class background, gender and type of school attended (grammar or secondary) than by the religious character of the school.\textsuperscript{113} However in one area—science subjects—pupils from Protestant schools achieved significantly

\textsuperscript{108} Dickson et al, \textit{Relational communication}, p. 8, 1.4.9.


\textsuperscript{110} McLaughlin and Faris, Section 75, p 6.

\textsuperscript{111} McLaughlin and Faris, Section 75, pp. 31, 36-38, 58-9.

\textsuperscript{112} Osborne, “Education and the Labour Market”, pp. 70-1.

more at A levels and the disproportionate achievement was even more striking at third level.  

In the 1990s, a series of government measures provided full funding for all schools, with additional resources for schools with pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (thus in aggregate favouring the Catholic sector). Recent studies now show that not only have Catholic schools fully caught up with Protestant in educational qualifications, but that they outpass them for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Pupils in Catholic schools (and girls in particular) are, however, still less inclined to do the full range of science subjects, and significant numbers of Catholic boys leave school without any qualifications.  

However it is Protestant working class schools where achievement is lowest. The causal patterns are far from clear: any inherent superiority of the Protestant ethos or school system in educational attainment is clearly refuted, with the Catholic school system succeeding in compensating for class background in considerably greater degree than the Protestant. What is clear is that cultural factors play a role: in the malaise of working class Protestant education; in the pockets of low achievement among young males; in the continued relative underrepresentation of pupils in Catholic schools in the full range of science subjects; and in the overrepresentation of Protestant school leavers among those who go to university in England.

Can we then say that the new legislative instruments have led to increased economic equality? It is more accurate to see the marked relative improvement in Catholics’ economic position as a product of multiple determinants operating over different time scales, not all of which are set to continue. One set of factors clusters around the changing structure of the economy: the long decline and eventual collapse of the traditional industrial sector which ended important areas of privileged Protestant skilled employment, the growth of a conjunctural “war economy” which for a time offered Protestants an alternative in the security sector; the expansion of the public and private service sector. A second set of factors is the long run tendency (beginning well before the fall of Stormont) toward the expansion of the Catholic middle class which itself is linked to the expansion of middle class service occupations.  

A third cluster centres on education and patterns of migration, including better funding for Catholic schools, such that in 2001 Catholics represent 46.2% of those with third level qualifications, the vast majority of these from colleges in Northern Ireland where they also then seek employment. Meanwhile, their Protestant counterparts are more likely to attend third level in Britain and to remain there. Finally, there is a cluster that combines political will, legislation and public attitudes: the (slow) acceptance by the British government that the issue of discrimination had to be seriously addressed, the putting together of a battery of instruments to ensure

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114 Osborne and Murray, “Educational qualifications”.


116 Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, Northern Ireland, p. 143, table 3.
that it was addressed, and the institutionalisation and partial internalisation of a culture of “fair-mindedness”, “even-handedness”; the eventual realisation that inequality was itself a problem open to government intervention.

Only the latter cluster is set to continue indefinitely and its capacity to ensure convergence is by no means guaranteed. Given differential migration and future changes in the structure of the economy, it appears unlikely that the class profiles and employability of the two communities will equalise without constant intervention in education and retraining. The capacity of present forms of “mainstreaming” to deal effectively with the problem of potential over- as well as under-representation of minorities remains to be tested and there are no more advanced international models to follow. If communal economic inequality is finally to be overcome, short of a dissolution of communities, it is necessary that a new “culture of equality” promote social learning processes to counter structural inequality and new forms of indirect discrimination. Instead the tendency is towards a bureaucratisation of equality procedures while the new positive equality duty is sometimes taken in a thin sense—superficial consultation, a bare compliance with minimum requirements—without effects on actual inequality. McLaughlin suggests that strong socio-economic rights may be the next stage after positive equality duties, in order to counter the worst cases of deprivation. Significantly, these would not tackle wider issues of perceived communal economic imbalance.

The impact of fair employment and equality legislation on conflict

Since the Good Friday Agreement, communal economic inequality has been low on the political agenda. Partly, this is because there has been a substantive evening of the Catholic position, and it is believed that policy instruments are now in place to ensure equality. Partly it marks a shift in the nationalist mood. The 2001 census shows that Catholics are now a majority of the population under 24 and, with higher educational qualifications than Protestants in the younger generations, can reasonably expect continuing benefits from the provisions of the GFA. The dominant mood in the Irish state and among the American Irish diaspora—economically bullish, impatient with a grievance culture, sensing the possibility of almost infinite achievement—has affected nationalists within Northern Ireland who, given equal opportunities and a “level playing field”, are ready to show that they too can achieve economically. Sinn Féin—dependent on Irish and US support, and broadening their popular base into the Northern Irish middle classes—have not had a political interest to focus on remaining aspects of communal economic inequality. Partly however, it is the changing economic structure: the radical fall in unemployment levels and the changing class structure. Inequality of economic condition is now even


118 Ibid.

119 Joanne Hughes, “Attitudes towards equality” points to a buoyant mood, with 40 % of Catholics in 2001 feeling they were treated better than 5 years before: 171-2.
more marked than before, but the most deprived—single parents, unemployed, women, the disabled and those with long term illness—are no longer defined by broad communal labels, even if Catholics are over-represented in these groups.\(^{120}\) The tone of nationalism has changed. Catholics now de-emphasise victimhood and look to the future Irish nationalist politics in Northern Ireland is no longer so grievance driven, particularly on economic issues where a major source of resentment has been removed for a majority of the Catholic population, and a plurality of ways of being nationalist has become possible.\(^{121}\)

The same process has had very different effects for different groups of Protestants. Despite almost universal unionist opposition to initial fair employment legislation, there is now general acceptance of it. Class inequality, however, has increased within the Protestant population and is correlated with political division. The Protestant higher classes and the upwardly mobile quickly sought political stability with the Agreement. The working classes feared that its purpose was to ensure that Catholics got jobs, houses and influence at their expense: for example, Gregory Campbell of the DUP claims that 90% of the new jobs in Derry have gone to Catholics.\(^{122}\) Protestant grievance is expressed as relative deprivation: “Ask Protestants in working class east Belfast what is wrong with their community and the same issues keep coming to the fore. It's a familiar litany—unemployment, poverty, lack of training opportunities, a shortage of affordable housing for young people, the everyday struggle to make ends meet. Point out that these are the same problems faced by people in working class areas in cities like Glasgow, Manchester or Liverpool and many will insist that their situation is different. "It's not the same because they have no way of measuring what they're getting and not getting," says Raymond Laverty. "We do, unfortunately, and it's on the other side of that wall. We see the other side getting lots more than we do."\(^{123}\) Other studies speak of the Protestant belief that Catholics are getting all of the available jobs,\(^{124}\) and of a widespread “sense of demoralisation …..Protestants feel that it is they who are now being put to the bottom of the

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\(^{120}\) Vani Borooah, “Measuring Economic Inequality: Deprivation, Economising and Possession”, *Social Policy and Society*, 6.1 99-109, 2007. While 25% of the Northern Irish population experience deprivation and poverty on a “complex hardship” measure which includes ownership and participation and 31% of Catholics, a full 38% percent of Sinn Féin supporters do so. See Hillyard et al, “A daughter to ELSI”.


heap……the social fabric of our communities is now beginning to disintegrate.”

Protestants are now more likely than Catholics to see themselves as victims.  

Protestants, even the economically marginalized and resentful, are, however, unable to politicise an economic situation in which their community remains—barely—ahead. Unionism too is changing. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which in the past would have sneered at the post-2008 economic collapse of the Irish state, is campaigning for a reduction in corporate profit tax on the Southern model. Working class loyalists have found political support and economic assistance in the South, through the activity of Dr Martin McAleese, husband of President Mary McAleese. The loyalists who speak most about the marginalisation of their community are looking beyond issues of equality of condition to issues where they can play an active role: attracting investment, improving education. Equality remains important, inequality a grievance for each population, but equality is no longer centred on economic equality, and affirmative action and equality measures are increasingly taken as a safety net for both populations rather than a focus of conflict. Specific issues (the requirement of 50/50 recruitment to the new Police Service of Northern Ireland) have been outrightly opposed by unionists, but the general framework of fair employment is increasingly accepted.  

These changes, significantly, have occurred without communal economic equality being assured. There has yet to be a stable equalisation of communal economic condition. Convergence at the middle class levels has been considerable but even now is not complete. Convergence at the lowest levels has been much slower, and a disparity in unemployment rates and poverty continues even during a phase of economic boom. It could be argued that communal economic imbalance no longer matters. Enough of a threshold has been passed that the economy is no longer a barrier to empowerment, and both populations are focussing on other barriers, and other resources. Fair employment and equality laws remain important for different reasons than before: first to prevent a slide to more radical communal inequality; second, to allow the tackling of the serious deprivation in pockets of the population. The relative success of the economic provisions has also, perhaps temporarily, given confidence in incremental reforms: and to that extent too has lessened the urgency of the aim of a united Ireland for Catholics, and the dangers of it for Protestants.  

Central debates over the economy today in Northern Ireland are not to do with communal jobs but to do with the general direction of political development. In this respect, it approximates the situation in nineteenth century Ireland rather than twentieth century Northern Ireland. The continuing dynamism of the Southern economy makes for a relationship of considerable structural tension between North and South leading as much to resentment as to emulation. There is a tendency—among the


126 MacGinty and Du Toit, “Disparity of Esteem”.  

managerial and professional strata of both communities of origin—to attempt to combat Northern economic peripheralisation within the United Kingdom by emphasising the Southern economic model and the need for North-South cooperation.¹²⁷ If generalised, this would lead to a recession of communal opposition and a highlighting of regional interests, with a pragmatic attitude to issues of sovereignty. Such a common project, however, has faltered on disputes over the direction of the economy, whether modelled on Southern and North-South, or on regional British lines: it is of considerable interest that these disputes have cross-cut communal boundaries. As these debates take centre stage, it signals changing self-conceptions. Nationalism remains, but there are signs that it may be becoming less closely linked to its ethnic (or ethno-class) basis. Now Sir Ken Bloomfield (a respected British-oriented retired Northern Ireland civil servant) suggests that there may be more dignity (even for cultural unionists) in a united Ireland. Meanwhile some strong nationalist party supporters see more economic opportunities in the United Kingdom than in a united Ireland.¹²⁸ For both, economic concerns become important in a national arena, not as a source of ethnic contest. At least for one relatively advantaged section of the population, the role of affirmative action programmes and equality provisions has not just moved towards an evening up of the economic conditions of the communities, and not just contributed to moderating political views, but even allowed the detachment of national and nationalist views from ethno-communal identity.


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