

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

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Integrate or Segregate? Ten Years of Social Attitudes to Community Relations in Northern Ireland

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A key objective of the peace process in Northern Ireland has been to promote good relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities. To this end, the Central Community Relations Unit was established in 1987 to support projects that would increase cross-community contact and promote greater mutual understanding and respect for diversity between Protestants and Catholics.

Key developments included the setting up of the Community Relations Council in 1990 which takes responsibility for delivering community relations policy objectives set by Government, and the District Council Community Relations Programme designed to encourage the promotion of community relations at the local level.

So how successful have these initiatives been at achieving their aim of improving cross-community contact and relations in Northern Ireland? A growing body of evidence suggests that community relations initiatives are having some positive impact at grass roots level (Capita, 1997, Deloitte and Touche, 2001). Measured by outcomes such as greater understanding of cultural diversity and an increased willingness to engage in shared working, the evidence in support of community relations interventions is substantial. Despite this, however, some research indicates that Northern Ireland has become a more divided society, with for example, increasing segregation and interface violence in many housing estates (NIHE, 1999).

The impact of political reform

This increasing polarisation and sectarian tension has been attributed to the growing sense of alienation within the Protestant community (e.g. Hughes, 1998; O'Neill, 2000). It has been suggested that Unionists feel particularly insecure about their position within the United Kingdom

because they perceive that nationalists will ultimately accept nothing less than "political and cultural domination throughout Ireland". This insecurity is intensified by British Government engagement with the Irish Government since the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1995 (O'Neill, 2000). Aughey (2001) has suggested that concessions made to republicans during the implementation of the Belfast Agreement have exacerbated the problem, particularly in the light of the failure of republican paramilitaries to deliver decommissioning within stipulated timeframes. This has caused problems at both political and grass roots levels within the Protestant community that threaten to destabilise the peace process.

The years between 1989 and 1999 have seen seismic changes in the political and policy landscape of Northern Ireland with paramilitary cease-fires, new constitutional arrangements, and the establishment of a policy agenda and legal framework that uphold the principles of pluralism and equality for all.

Social Attitudes - survey evidence

So what has been the impact of these changes on the attitudes of Protestants and Catholics towards community relations? This paper uses four questions which were asked in the 1989 and 1996 *Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Surveys* and the 1999 *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* to examine whether there is evidence of increasing polarisation between the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland.

Relations between Protestants and Catholics

Respondents were asked whether relations between Protestants and Catholics were better, worse or the same as they were 5 years ago. In the period 1989 to 1996 the percentage of respondents who believed that relations had improved rose from 21% to 46%. This is in contrast with the picture which emerges after 1996 where there was only a slight overall increase to 50%. Of particular significance, however, is the growing disparity in

attitude between Protestants and Catholics after 1996. In the period 1989 to 1996 those who thought that relations had improved increased from 20% to 44% and 23% to 47% for Protestants and Catholics respectively. From 1996 to 1999 the positive trend continued for Catholics with a further 13% indicating that relations had improved. Conversely, the Protestant response to the same question indicated a decline of 2%.

What about relations between Protestants and Catholics? Would you say that they are better than they were 5 years ago, worse or about the same now as then?

	1989		
	All %	Cath. %	Prot. %
Better	21	23	20
Worse	28	31	26
Same	47	44	50
Don't Know/Other	4	4	4

	1996		
	All %	Cath. %	Prot. %
Better	46	47	44
Worse	11	10	11
Same	42	41	43
Don't Know/Other	2	1	2

	1999		
	All %	Cath. %	Prot. %
Better	50	60	42
Worse	7	4	10
Same	41	33	46
Don't Know/Other	3	2	2

Similarly, when asked whether relations between Protestants and Catholics would be better, worse or the same in five years time the total numbers who believed that they would be better increased from 25% to 56% in the period 1989 to 1999. Again, however, Catholics are far more favourable than Protestants in their assessments. Compared to 1996, the 1999 data show that 19% more Catholics and only 7% more Protestants believed that relations would improve.

The growing disparity between the Protestant and Catholic responses is perhaps an endorsement of a Catholic community growing in confidence and a Protestant community feeling increasingly marginalised by wider political developments. In the most recent elections, commentators suggested that the key deciding factors for those who changed their vote from UUP to DUP were the failure of the Belfast Agreement to deliver de-commissioning and the reform of the RUC

(Belfast Telegraph, 2001a). Attempts to generate a political culture based on equality and fair treatment have been interpreted by the Protestant community as undermining their interests (Belfast Telegraph, 2001b). This is likely to influence their attitudes to, and relations with, the Catholic community.

What about relations in 5 years time? Do you think relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better than now, worse than now, or about the same as now?

	1989		
	All %	Cath. %	Prot. %
Better	25	30	22
Worse	16	16	16
Same	54	51	56
Don't Know/Other	5	4	6

	1996		
	All %	Cath. %	Prot. %
Better	43	48	39
Worse	8	4	10
Same	42	43	41
Don't Know/Other	8	5	10

	1999		
	All %	Cath. %	Prot. %
Better	56	67	46
Worse	4	2	7
Same	32	25	39
Don't Know/Other	8	6	9

Continuing segregation in housing....

Although the questions about relations may be relatively superficial because they are impressionistic, a series of questions that aim to gauge behaviour were also included in the surveys. These refer to residential and workplace segregation and the willingness of respondents to engage with the other community. The total number of respondents wishing to live in a neighbourhood with only people of their own religion increased from 14% in 1996 to 23% in 1999, whilst the total preferring to live in mixed religion neighbourhoods decreased from 82% to 73%. In 1999, more Protestants (26%) than Catholics (18%) said they would prefer to live in neighbourhoods with only their own religion. There is a greater decline from 1996 to 1999 in the numbers of Protestants (80% to 68%) relative to Catholics (85% to 79%) who prefer to live in a mixed religion neighbourhood.

If you had a choice, would you prefer to live in a neighbourhood with people of only your own religion, or in a mixed-religion neighbourhood?

	1989		
	All %	Cath. %	Prot. %
Only Own	23	18	27
Mixed	70	75	67
Don't Know/Other	6	7	7

	1996		
	All %	Cath. %	Prot. %
Only Own	14	11	17
Mixed	82	85	80
Don't Know/Other	4	5	3

	1999		
	All %	Cath. %	Prot. %
Only Own	23	18	26
Mixed	73	79	68
Don't Know/Other	5	4	5

And in employment....

Support for segregated workplaces increased during the late 1990s from 3% in 1996 to 9% in 1999. There was a greater tendency in 1999 than in 1996 for both Catholics and Protestants to express a desire to work in religiously segregated workplaces although this trend was more pronounced for Protestants. In 1999, 10% fewer respondents overall said they would prefer to work in mixed religion workplaces when compared with the 1996 data.

If you were working and had to change your job, would you prefer a workplace with people of only your own religion, or a mixed-religion workplace?

	1989		
	All %	Cath. %	Prot. %
Only Own	11	7	14
Mixed	83	86	81
Don't Know/Other	6	7	5

	1996		
	All %	Cath. %	Prot. %
Only Own	3	2	4
Mixed	96	97	95
Don't Know/Other	2	2	1

	1999		
	All %	Cath. %	Prot. %
Only Own	9	6	12
Mixed	86	91	82
Don't Know/Other	5	4	6

Conclusion

The proportions of both Catholics and Protestants preferring to live and work with only their own religious group fell between 1989 and 1996, but has now more or less returned to the 1989 figures. One possible reason for the marked increase in preference for living and working in mixed religion environments in 1996 could be the more congenial and sanguine atmosphere inspired by the 1994 cease-fires and the low level of violence in the inter-cess-fire period. However, an increase in other forms of sectarianism since the cease-fires such as intimidation and harassment has meant that residential and workplace segregation has become critical for some groups.

Although the 1999 survey evidence indicates a general improvement in attitudes toward community relations over the ten year period, the data have shown that, since 1996, the Catholic and Protestant communities have developed notably different attitudes on a range of issues associated with improving community relations. In general, Catholics seem more amenable to efforts to promote cross community contact, demonstrated by their greater willingness to integrate. This suggests that Catholics may be more confident that their rights and cultural traditions will be protected. The general optimism inherent in Catholic responses is however tempered by a growing sense of mistrust and unease within the Protestant community. Protestants expressed less enthusiasm for inter-religious mixing, a pattern which becomes more pronounced after 1996.

It is not yet clear whether the Protestant responses recorded by these surveys are a product of the 'transitional' period in which Northern Ireland now finds itself. However, in the light of growing frustration within the Protestant community (endorsed by the gains of anti-agreement unionists in the recent Westminster and local government elections), it would seem that Aughey's argument (2001), which highlights the fallacy of creating an agreement perceived to be based on concessions to Republicans, could prove prophetic.

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KEY POINTS

- In the period from 1989 to 1996 the percentage of respondents who believed that relations between Catholics and Protestants had improved rose from 21% to 46%. However, between 1996 and 1999 the figure increased only slightly to 50%.
- Between 1989 and 1996, there was a rise in the percentage of both Protestant and Catholic respondents who thought that relations between the two communities had improved (20% to 44% for the former and 23% to 47% for the latter).
- From 1996 to 1999 the positive trend continued for Catholics with a further 13% indicating that relations had improved. Conversely, the Protestant response to the same question indicated a decline of 2%.
- Catholics were more optimistic about future relations between the two communities - compared to 1996, the 1999 data show that 19% more Catholics and only 7% more Protestants believed that relations would improve.
- In 1989, 67% of Protestants said they would prefer to live in a mixed religion neighbourhood - this figure rose to 80% in 1996 but fell to 68% in 1999.
- In each survey year, more Catholics than Protestants said they would prefer to live in mixed religion neighbourhoods; however, the figure for Catholics fell from a high of 85% in 1996 to 79% in 1999.
- Support for mixed religion workplaces among all respondents rose from 83% in 1989 to 96% in 1996 but fell to 86% in 1999.

The *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 1999, 2,200 adults were interviewed on the main survey and 449 young people on the accompanying Young Life and Times Survey. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The Life and Times Survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey coordinator at Queen's University (028 90 273034) with any queries.