



## Bonfires, Flags, Identity and Cultural Traditions

Gillian Robinson and Paula Devine

Flags and bonfires are expressions of identity and cultural traditions for many people in Northern Ireland, but can often be contentious. This was highlighted in Gráinne Kelly's Research Update in 2014, which explored attitudes to markers of identity in public space following a troubled period in late 2012 and throughout 2013 after Belfast City Council voted to fly the Union flag on 18 designated days rather than every day over Belfast City Hall. Since then, while there have been few dramatic events, the issue of flags remains 'as a constant irritant on the body politic' (Nolan and Bryan, 2016, p.14).

The policy importance of the issues is reflected in the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) which was appointed on 20th June 2016. The Commission's task is to take forward a programme of work which includes:

- scoping the range, extent and nature of issues relating to flags, identity, culture and tradition;
- mapping the benefits and opportunities in terms of flags related issues whilst highlighting where challenges remain; and
- producing a report and recommendations on the way forward.

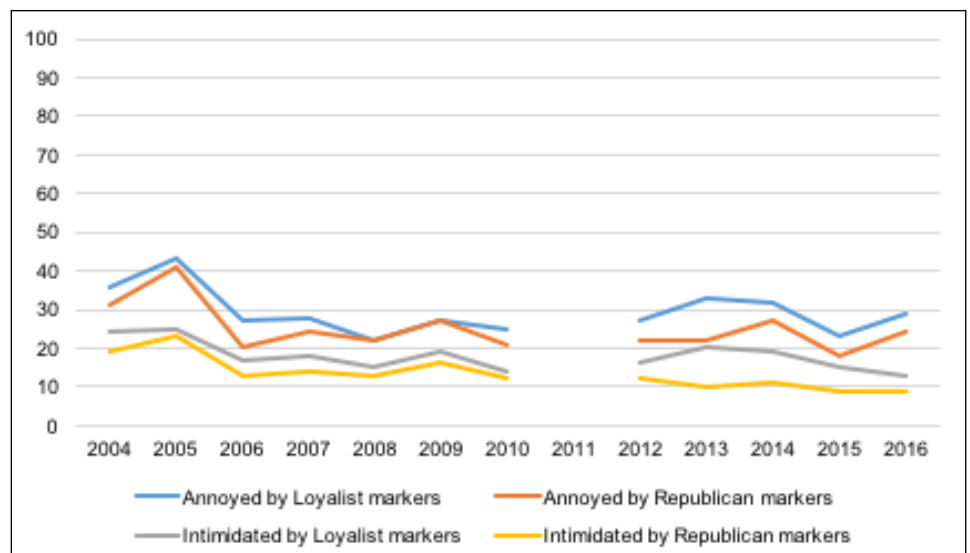
In their 2016 report, Paul Nolan and Dominic Bryan give a detailed overview of the history of the flags issue and the policy and legal contexts. This Research Update aims simply to explore the data collected in the 2016 **Northern Ireland Life and Times** (NILT) survey pertinent to the interests of the Commission and to feed those findings into the public debate. Where possible, comparisons are made with data from previous NILT surveys.



### Markers of identity

Murals, kerb paintings and flags can be used as markers of identity which can be positively supported by individuals and communities, but can also provoke negative feelings. Figure 1 shows overall feelings of intimidation or annoyance with loyalist and republican markers of identity in the previous year, using NILT data from 2004 to 2016. These markers do not intimidate the majority of people, but do cause levels of annoyance. A spike in feelings of intimidation and annoyance with loyalist markers is evident in 2013, although the overall trend is that levels of intimidation and annoyance are decreasing. At the same time however, levels of annoyance have risen for both loyalist and republican markers between 2015 and 2016.

Figure 1: Reaction to markers, 2004-2016



\* note the survey did not run in 2011

When we look specifically at attitudes in 2016 (Table 1), it is clear that few respondents had felt intimidated in the past year by republican murals, kerb paintings or flags (9%), although one in four report being annoyed by them (24%). A similar pattern is seen in relation to loyalist markers, in that 13 per cent of respondents had felt intimidated, whilst 29 per cent have felt annoyed.

Table 1 indicates that there is little difference in feelings about republican markers according to the religion of the respondent. However, feelings of intimidation by loyalist markers do vary significantly according to religious affiliation: Catholic respondents are much more likely than Protestants to feel intimidated (19% and 8% respectively). Similar proportions of Protestants have negative feelings (intimidation or annoyance) about loyalist emblems as they do about republican emblems. In contrast, Catholic feeling is stronger against loyalist emblems than it is against republican emblems.

We know that religious affiliation is just one layer of identity in Northern Ireland. Table 1 shows that identity based on constitutional preference (Nationalist/Unionist) or nationality is more discerning of attitudes. For example, Unionists are much more likely than others to feel annoyed at republican markers, whilst Nationalists are much more likely than others to feel intimidated by loyalist markers.

The analysis so far has focused on feelings of intimidation or annoyance. However, the data indicate that not all respondents report negative reactions to loyalist or republican markers. Indeed, two thirds of respondents in 2016 (67%) had not felt annoyed about either republican or loyalist emblems in the past year, especially those respondents who felt they were neither Unionist nor Nationalist (71%). At the same time, one in five respondents (19%) had felt annoyed about both types of markers, and this was highest amongst Unionist (24%) and Northern Irish respondents (24%). Whilst four per cent of respondents reported that they had felt annoyed only with republican emblems, twice that proportion (10%)

Table 1: Reaction to markers, 2016

	%			
	Republican murals, kerb paintings or flags		Loyalist murals, kerb paintings or flags	
	Intimidated	Annoyed	Intimidated	Annoyed
All	9	24	13	29
Protestant	11	26	8	25
Catholic	8	21	19	32
No religion	9	26	12	31
Unionist	13	34	8	28
Nationalist	7	19	24	36
Neither Unionist nor Nationalist	7	19	12	27
British	11	26	8	22
Irish	7	21	21	35
N Irish	9	28	12	35

Table 2: Annoyance at markers, 2016

	%			
	Neither	Both	Republican only	Loyalist only
All	67	19	4	10
Protestant	68	20	7	6
Catholic	65	19	2	14
No religion	65	22	4	9
Unionist	61	24	11	4
Nationalist	63	19	1	18
Neither Unionist nor Nationalist	71	18	2	9
British	69	18	8	5
Irish	63	20	2	16
N Irish	62	24	4	11

had felt annoyed only about loyalist emblems. Catholics were twice as likely to feel annoyed only about loyalist emblems (14%), as Protestants were to feel annoyed only about republican emblems (7%).

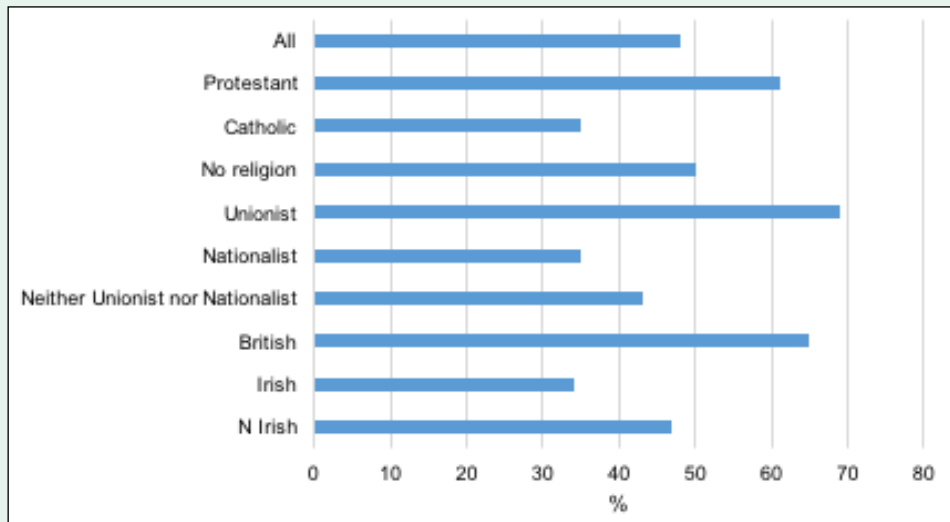
## Flags and lampposts

As mentioned earlier, the timing and location of flag flying in Northern Ireland has often been controversial and contested. Figure 2 shows that, in 2016, attitudes towards the flying of flags on lampposts throughout Northern Ireland on special dates for particular celebrations are split: 48 per cent of respondents are supportive of this, whilst 34 per cent are opposed. There is also significant variation according to religious affiliation and other forms of identity.

Thus, highest levels of support for this form of flag flying are from Unionist (69%), British (65%) and Protestant (61%) respondents, whilst Irish respondents are least supportive (34%).

Opinion was also split about whether flags should be taken down straightaway, even if this causes trouble: 45 per cent of respondents agreed with this, whilst 33 per cent disagreed (see Table 3). Given the lower level of support by Catholic, Nationalist and Irish respondents for the flying of flags on lampposts shown in Figure 2, it is unsurprising that these groups are most supportive of taking flags down straightaway. The highest level of support is from Nationalist respondents (62%), whilst the lowest is from British respondents (35%).

Figure 2: Support for flying of flags on lampposts throughout Northern Ireland on special dates for particular celebrations



## Flags and public buildings

Respondents were asked to identify how often they thought that the union flag should be flown from public buildings in Northern Ireland. Table 4 shows that a small majority (59%) supported flying flags only on designated days. One in five thought that the union flag should be flown all the time, whilst 14 per cent thought that it should not be flown at all from any public building. There is majority support for flying of the union flag on designated days among all groups in Table 4, although this ranged from 52 per cent among British respondents to 73 per cent among Northern Irish respondents.

Table 3: If flags appear on lampposts I would like them all taken down straightaway, even if this causes trouble

	%	
	Supportive	Opposed
All	45	33
Protestant	36	43
Catholic	58	23
No religion	39	35
Unionist	37	45
Nationalist	62	20
Neither Unionist nor Nationalist	41	34
British	35	42
Irish	60	22
N Irish	49	32

Support for flying the union flag all the time varies from 2 per cent among both Irish, and Nationalist respondents to 45 per cent among Unionists. At the same time, whilst very few Unionists feel that the union flag should never be flown on public buildings, 35 per cent of Irish respondents would support this. Not all respondents knew how to answer this question - 10 per cent of Catholic respondents, and 11 per cent of those who are neither Unionist nor Nationalist said that they did not know how to respond.

Nolan and Bryan (2016) undertook a polling exercise in autumn 2015, which showed a similar pattern: 16 per cent felt that the union flag should never be flown, whilst 26 per cent would prefer it to be flown 365 days a year. One in three (32%) supported the idea of flying the union flag

Table 4: Attitudes on flying of union flag on public buildings

	%			
	All the time	Designated days	Never	Don't know
All	20	59	14	7
Protestant	38	56	2	4
Catholic	2	61	27	10
No religion	19	60	13	8
Unionist	45	53	<0.5	2
Nationalist	2	59	34	6
Neither Unionist nor Nationalist	14	63	13	11
British	43	52	2	2
Irish	2	55	35	9
N Irish	14	73	9	4

on 18 designated days. However, Nolan and Bryan offered an additional option of 'a compromise between 18 and 365 days', and this was the preference of 27 per cent of their respondents.

## Bonfires

Contention also surrounds the building and burning of bonfires to mark significant events in loyalist and republican calendars, such as the loyalist 'eleventh night' celebrations in July to herald in the Twelfth of July, and republican events to mark internment in August. Historically, there were also bonfires in Catholic communities to mark the Feast of the Assumption on 15 August. These bonfires have formed part of cultural tradition, but in recent years and the summer of 2016 and 2017 in particular, have created considerable tension in Belfast and Derry~Londonderry. The issues include the siting of bonfires, public safety, the burning of hazardous materials such as tyres, the burning of emblems, flags and effigies, and who should be responsible for any damage or costs incurred. At a local level, voluntary and community leaders, business and council representatives and the PSNI have been involved in negotiations to minimise tensions.

Table 5 shows that the attitudes towards bonfires among NILT respondents are split: four in ten respondents (42%) agree or strongly agree that bonfires are a legitimate form of cultural celebration, whilst one third (33%) disagree or strongly disagree. As before, there are marked differences according to religious and other forms of identity. Protestant,

Unionist and British respondents are most likely to agree, with highest levels of support among Unionist respondents (67%). Nationalist respondents were the group most likely to disagree (59%).

Table 5: Bonfires are a legitimate form of cultural celebration

	%		
	Agree	Neither	Disagree
All	42	23	33
Protestant	56	21	20
Catholic	24	22	51
No religion	52	22	24
Unionist	67	15	18
Nationalist	23	18	59
Neither	38	29	29
British	60	21	19
Irish	22	21	56
N Irish	42	25	33

Given the tension in 2016, a new question explored attitudes to the accountability of bonfire organisers. An overwhelming majority of respondents (86%) agreed that bonfire organisers should be held to account if there is property damage or injuries as a result of their bonfires, and only five per cent disagreed. In stark contrast to the response to the question about the legitimacy of bonfires as a form of cultural celebration, there was little disparity between the religious or identity groups on this question.

## Conclusion

The NILT data indicate that flags and other forms of markers continue to be controversial in Northern Ireland. Reaction to these markers vary significantly according to religious and other forms of identity. One key finding is that negative feelings against loyalist markers is more widespread than against republican markers. Of course, it must be noted that the survey does not ask about the context of these markers. For example, some respondents might be referring to their annoyance about flags being flown on an arterial route into a town, whilst others might be referring to markers in their local neighbourhood. Such nuances are important for politicians and policy makers to take into account. On a more positive note, it is notable that two thirds of respondents did not report annoyance or intimidation by any republican or loyalist flags, kerb painting or flags in the previous year. New evidence on attitudes to bonfires show that the public is divided in their assessment of whether or not bonfires are a legitimate form of cultural expression. However, they are fairly unanimous in thinking that bonfire organisers should be held to account if there is property damage or injuries as a result of their bonfires.

## References

Kelly, Grainne (2014) *Flying the flag? An update on attitudes to markers of identity in public space*. ARK Research Update 92

Nolan, Paul and Bryan, Dominic (2016) *Flags: Towards a new understanding*, Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University Belfast

The questions on flags and bonfires were funded by The Executive Office.

Gillian Robinson is Research Director of ARK and Professor of Social Research in the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences at Ulster University.

Paula Devine is Co-director of ARK, and coordinates the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. She is based in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

## Key points

- Two thirds of NILT respondents had not felt intimidated by republican or loyalist markers of identity (murals, flags and kerb painting) in the past year.
- Significant minorities (35% of Catholics and 32% of Protestants) have felt annoyed by markers of identity in the past year.
- 48% of NILT respondents support the flying of flags on lampposts throughout Northern Ireland on special dates for particular celebrations, but 34% are against this.
- Opinion was split about whether flags should be taken down straightaway, even if this causes trouble: 45% of respondents agreed with this statement, whilst 33% disagreed.
- 20% of respondents think that the union flag should be flown from public buildings all the time, while 14% think that it never should be flown there.
- 59% of respondents support flying the Union flag on designated days on public buildings.
- 42% think that bonfires are a legitimate form of cultural expression; however, 33% disagree with this.
- Nine out of ten respondents think that bonfire organisers should be held to account if there is property damage or injuries as a result of their bonfires. Only 5% disagree with this.

### In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences  
Jordanstown campus, Ulster University  
Shore Road, Newtownabbey BT37 0QB  
Tel: 028 9036 6339 E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work  
Queen's University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN  
Tel: 028 9097 3034 E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk