



Community Relations / Good Relations in Northern Ireland?

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In this ARK Feature, the public perception of community/good relations in Northern Ireland (NI) over the 20 year period since the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and the decade leading up to it is considered.

It is important to consider what the terms community relations and good relations mean. A paper by Robbie McVeigh (2014) for the Equality Coalition explores the evolution of the community relations paradigm from the federal state response to civil rights protests in the USA. This term was subsequently adopted in the context of early British 'race relations' interventions. In Northern Ireland, the Race Relations Act of 1968 created the Community Relations Commission and a series of Community Relations Councils. However, the focus was on relations between the two main communities, that is, Catholic and Protestant, and did not address racism. The shift from community relations to good relations was a change imposed by the NI Act 1998. By 2004, the Community Relations Council publication *A Good Relations Framework: An approach to the development of Good Relations* stated:

“Those who have worked on anti-racism and anti-sectarianism approaches in Northern Ireland have acquired decades of experience. The promotion of good relations requires that both these areas of expertise

be joined together to provide an approach that will enable racism and sectarianism to be addressed equally and together. (2005:4)”

For nearly three decades, two surveys in Northern Ireland have monitored changing attitudes to equality issues and relations between the two main religious communities during periods of conflict, peace-building and devolution. The Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (NISA) Survey ran every year between 1989 and 1996, and the annual Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (NILT) Survey began in 1998. These monitoring statistics have provided much needed indicators on how the Northern Ireland public as a whole has perceived the situation on a year by year basis. NILT and NISA together represent the richest available data source on changing attitudes and approaches in Northern Ireland with a sequence of almost 30 years of polling and analysis (1989-2016). This is a unique resource in international terms and the investment made has been substantial.

Time-series survey data is invaluable in measuring and monitoring long-term movement in values across a population – the analogy of 'climate change' is sometimes used to describe this. But inevitably these population level indicators mask nuances within specific groups within the population, as well as the more volatile year-on-year shifts within those groups.

Yet time-series data can also offer insights into these individual 'weather systems' in addition to the picture of climate change.

In May 2013, the Northern Ireland Executive brought forward its new policy to build a shared future entitled *Together-Building a United Community (T:BUC)*. Understanding the causes and dynamics of inter-community division is essential to the success of policy for better inter-community relations. This includes understanding how policy and events impact across different income-groups, age-groups and themes. NILT remains the most comprehensive data base on attitudes across Northern Ireland. Community Relations policy remains one of the most hotly-disputed areas of public policy, and data from NILT already provide a direct evidence base for social attitudes. The rest of this Feature focuses on an example of how a key survey question can provide important evidence of the link between public opinion, events and policy.

Perceptions of relations

Since we started monitoring public attitudes in 1989, the two surveys (NISA and NILT) have contained a question asking people how they perceive relations between the two main communities are compared to five years previously. It is important to note that this is just one question

in a suite of questions that monitor people's attitudes and values towards community/good relations, integration and segregation. It is also important to note that the question focuses on general perceptions and not about the individuals' own position. This survey question is one of the indicators used by The Executive Office to monitor progress of T:BUC. The purpose of these indicators is to monitor the state of good relations in the population over time (see for example the latest report The Executive Office, 2017).

Figure 1 indicates that over the decades since 1989, there is a clear underlying upward trend in the proportion of people in Northern Ireland who think that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better than they were five years previously. Equally clearly, this upward trend is not a steady one and there have been many ups and downs along the way. Mostly the peaks and troughs are related to

positive political and public events, and it is important to bear in mind that the overall trend is upwards.

The peaks for positive views of cross-community relations coincide with the lead up to the Good Friday Agreement 1998, and in the period

the replacement of the RUC by the PSNI, and the bitter dispute over the Holy Cross School. In terms of current policy, though, the period from 2007 to 2013 showed a downward trend. The flags dispute which broke out in December 2012 and continued into 2013 clearly impacted on attitudes.

Note that the 2012 NILT fieldwork was taking place as Belfast City Council took the decision to fly the Union flag only on designated days. Tensions were already high followed a particularly volatile marching season and approximately 20% of interviews were carried out during the resultant flags dispute. Since 2014 attitudes have begun to improve.

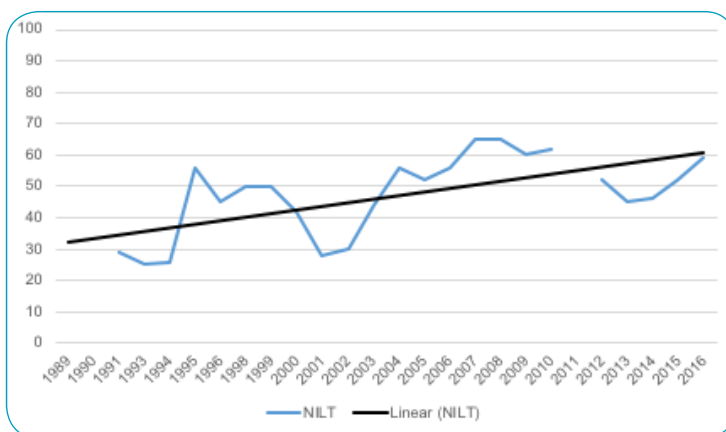


Figure 1: Percentage saying relations between Protestants and Catholics are better than they were 5 years ago 1989-2016

immediately after the restoration of devolution in 2007. The troughs also reflect the wider social and political context, and so that when things are not going well we see a dip in positive perceptions. The Assembly was suspended twice in 2001, and that year also saw a deepening of the stalemate over decommissioning,

The key message from this graph is that the long picture is generally positive, although public attitudes are impacted by the social and political context. Thus, public attitudes surveys such as NILT and NISA are vital for monitoring this climate change.

References:

- Community Relations Council (2004) *A Good Relations Framework: An approach to the development of Good Relations*, Belfast: CRC
- McVeigh, R. (2014) *Good Relations in Northern Ireland: Towards a Definition in Law*, Paper prepared for the Equality Coalition
- The Executive Office (Statistics and Research Branch) (2017) *Northern Ireland Good Relations Indicators: Annual Update*, Belfast: TEO

Notes:

This ARK Feature is part of ARK's Marking Anniversaries series, which reflects on important historical events, and explores how attitudes and perceptions in Northern Ireland have changed over time. In particular, 2018 marks 20 years since the first Northern Ireland Life and Times survey was run. For more information, see www.ark.ac.uk/ma2018.

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