



## A tale of two cities? Community Relations in Northern Ireland

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It is now 18 years since the Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement was signed, and Northern Ireland has undergone significant political changes since then. At the same time, it has been affected by increased diversity and growing secularisation. Yet, how far has this changing Northern Ireland impacted upon how the two traditional main communities view each other and live together? Drawing on data from the **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey**, this Research Update will explore public attitudes to community relations, and issues of space. In particular, it highlights key government policy in relation to shared and contested space.

### Perception of relations

In 2007, the year in which devolution was restored, 65 per cent of respondents felt that relations between Protestants and Catholics were better than five years previously. This was the highest figure since the NILT survey began in 1998. However, as highlighted by Duncan Morrow in 2014, public perception of improved cross-community relations fell to 45 per cent in 2013. This was following the cultural and commemorative disputes of 2012 that created challenges for communities. However, the increase seen in 2014 was repeated in 2015. 52 per cent of people now think that community relations are better than five years ago, 39 per cent think that they are about the same, and only 4 per cent think they are worse. Therefore, despite international

and local interventions, the relationships between inter-communal groups remain challenging.

The 2015 NILT survey presents a number of sobering realities. When looking forward, there is little brightness about enhanced cross-community relations. While nearly two thirds of respondents in 2007 (64%) felt that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in five years' time, this figure fell to 40 per cent in 2013. However, the higher figure of 46 per cent in 2014 was repeated in 2015.

There is some variation, however, among different groups. Figure 1 shows that, over the past three years, there has been a rise in optimism among Protestant respondents regarding future inter-communal relations. At the same

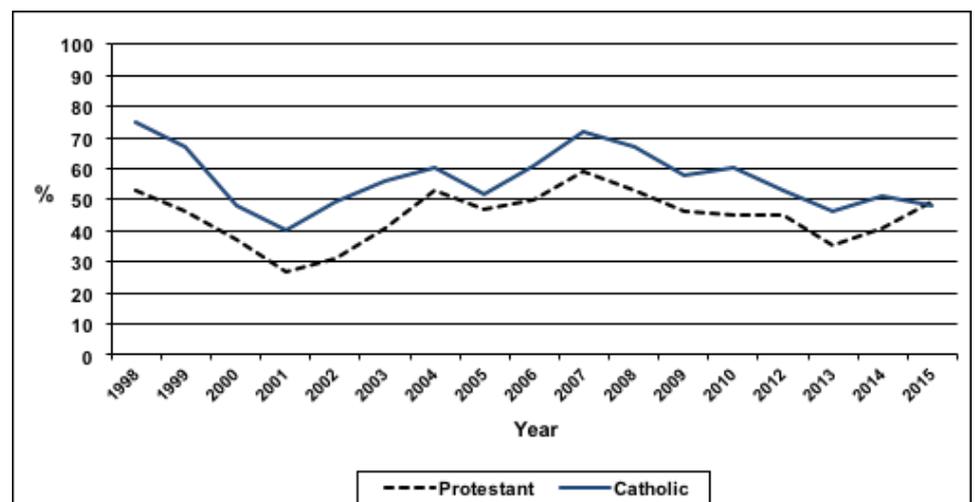
time, Catholic responses are following a general downward trend, and so the attitudes between these two groups are starting to converge.

### Belonging

With often highly segregated residential, social and leisure areas, Northern Ireland is a place of both belonging and othering, or 'us and them'. In 2015, a strong sense of social cohesion within space and communities in Northern Ireland is evident: 87 per cent of respondents felt a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood. In particular, the extent to which both Catholic and Protestant respondents felt this is quite striking: approximately nine out of ten of respondents from either community felt a connection with their neighbourhood. This is in contrast with 74 per cent of those with no religion

Moving beyond the very local, most respondents (83%) said that they felt a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland. Whilst the sense of belonging to neighbourhood was similar for Protestant and Catholics, there was some difference in relation to belonging to Northern Ireland. Protestants were more likely to feel this than Catholics were (90% and 84% respectively). Again, those with no religion were least likely to feel this sense of belonging (70%).

Figure 1: % believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in 5 years' time, by religion



Matching the pattern of previous years, 37 per cent of respondents in 2015 described themselves as British, whilst similar proportions described themselves as Irish (28%) or Northern Irish (27%). Table 1 shows that there is a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland among all these identities. However, this is especially strong among British and Northern Irish respondents, with a higher proportion saying 'yes, definitely'. These figures suggest a degree of belonging in local neighbourhoods, as well as an increasing identification with Northern Ireland.

Table 1: Belonging to Northern Ireland, by national identity

	%		
	British	Irish	Northern Irish
Yes, definitely	58	41	57
Yes, probably	27	40	32
Probably not	10	9	6
Definitely not	5	8	4
Don't know	1	3	1

## Sharing space

Shared space is integral to government policy in Northern Ireland. 'Our Shared Community' is one of the four key priorities of the *Together: Building a United Community* [T:BUC] (OFMDFM, 2013) good relations strategy. The stated aim linked to this priority is 'to create a community where division does not restrict the life opportunities of individuals and where all areas are open and accessible to everyone'. There have been significant advancements in creating shared spaces in Northern Ireland. Recent examples of such spaces include the initiative at Girdwood (North Belfast), as well as shared neighbourhood developments such as Ballynafoy Close (Ravenhill Road, Belfast) and Crossgar Road (Saintfield, Co. Down). However, the outcome of these initiatives remains to be seen.

Within this policy context, the NILT survey explored attitudes and behaviour to shared space. Far from viewing neighbourhoods as segregated, two thirds of respondents (66%) did not think that their local community was divided (defined as Protestants and Catholics using different local shops, GP surgeries or other services). Just over a quarter of respondents thought the use of separate facilities according to community background happened 'a lot' or 'a little' in their area (Table 2). Whilst those with no religion were least likely to say that this does not happen at all, this was also the group most likely to say "don't know". However, given the Protestant/Catholic focus of the question, it is not surprising that those with no religion are not sure how to respond.

Table 2: Use of separate shops and services according to community background

	%			
	Catholic	Protestant	No religion	All
A lot	8	12	10	10
A little	16	17	17	16
Not at all	68	67	59	66
Don't know	8	4	14	8

## Safe space

For many people, the use of local shops and services is due to convenience, and is not contentious. However, the use of different types of space can cause concern, especially when these premises are associated with a particular religion. Another key government priority within T:BUC is 'Our Safe Community', with the aim 'to create a community where division does not restrict the life opportunities of individuals and where all areas are open and accessible to everyone'.

NILT respondents were asked to think about an event that they wanted to go to in a nearby town, and consider how they would feel if it was to be held in four different premises (a GAA club, an Orange Hall, a Catholic Secondary School, and a Protestant secondary school). Table 3 shows that secondary schools are the least contentious of the specified premises. Approximately nine in ten respondents said that they would feel 'very' or 'quite' safe visiting a Catholic secondary school, or a Protestant secondary school. However, Protestant respondents were least likely to feel safe

visiting a Catholic secondary school, and vice versa. Nevertheless, at least eight in ten would feel safe going there.

Respondents were less sure about going to an event in a GAA club or an Orange Hall, although seven in ten said that they would feel safe. As might be expected, there was some variation according to the religion of the respondent. Just over one half of Protestant respondents (55%) would feel safe attending an event in a GAA club, and a similar proportion of Catholic respondents (53%) would feel safe visiting an Orange Hall for an event.

One of the indicators used to monitor progress against these key strategic priorities of the T:BUC strategy relates to the perception of safety within towns and city centres. Just over one half of NILT respondents agreed that towns and city centres in Northern Ireland are safe and welcoming places for people of all walks of life. Just over one half of respondents (57%) agreed with this statement, and one quarter (26%) disagreed. There was no statistical differences according to the religion of the respondent.

## Marking space

Many different types of symbols can be used to demarcate space and territory. Since 2005, NILT has included a number of questions, which focus on feelings towards murals, kerb painting and flags – three distinct markers of community identity or affiliation in Northern Ireland.

There is mixed levels of support for the flying of flags on lampposts throughout Northern Ireland on special dates for particular celebrations. Overall, 38 per cent of NILT respondents would support this, and a similar proportion (40%) would not. In addition, a small proportion (3%) say that it depends on the flag. There are statistically significant differences in how people of different religious background answer this question. A majority of Protestant respondents support flying flags on lampposts (52%), whilst 29 per cent disagree. The reverse is true for Catholic respondents (22% and 57% respectively). Respondents with no religion are less definitive – 40 per cent support the flying of flags on lampposts, whilst 34 per cent do not.

Approximately one half of respondents (47%) agreed that *If flags appear on lampposts I would like them all taken down straight away even if this causes trouble*. However, 26 per cent disagreed, and 3 per cent said that it depends on the flag. Again, there are statistically significant differences according to the religion of the respondent. Nearly six out of ten (59%) Catholic respondents would support this view, whilst support was lower among Protestant respondents (43%) and those with no religion (36%).

Following the dispute about flying the Union flag at Belfast City Hall, NILT has included a question exploring public attitudes to this issue. Table 4 indicates that just over one half of respondents (55%) support the idea that the Union flag should be flown on designated days only from all public buildings, and this is fairly similar for Catholics (60%), Protestants (53%) and respondents with no religion (51%). However, there is a significant minority of Protestants (40%) who feel that the Union flag should be flown on public buildings *all the time*. At the same time, support for *never* flying the Union

flag on public buildings is highest among Catholics (31%), and lowest among Protestants (3%).

Figure 2 shows a downturn in annoyance at Loyalist murals, kerb painting and flags among both Catholics and Protestants.

Among Catholic respondents, the proportion annoyed by displays has dropped from 36 per cent in 2014 to 28 per cent in 2015, and for Protestants from 30 per cent to 20 per cent (Figure 2). This may mark an ebbing of tensions emerging from the dispute about flying of

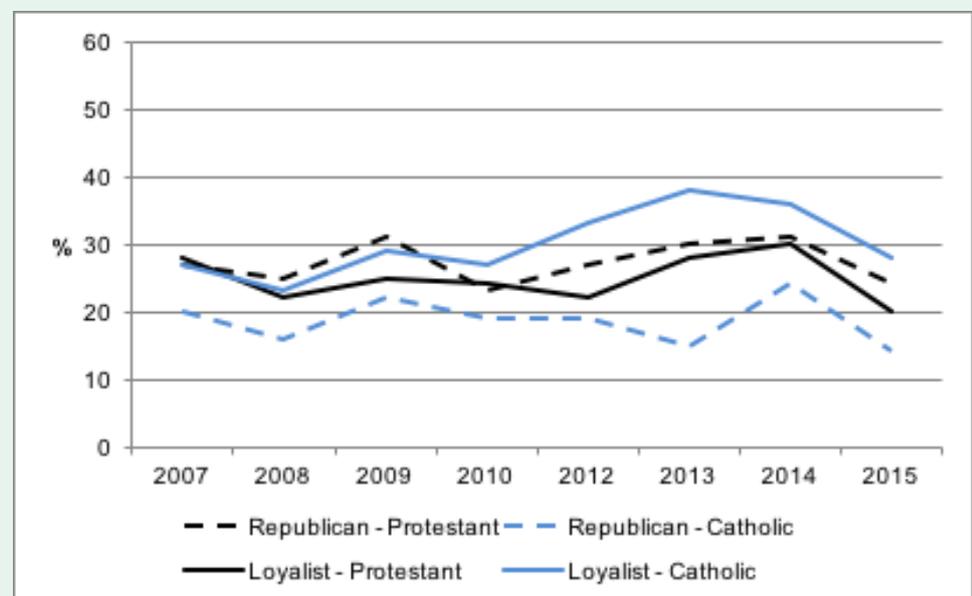
Table 3: Feeling of safety visiting specific premises

	% feeling 'very' or 'quite' safe			
	Catholic	Protestant	No religion	All
GAA club (Gaelic Sports Club)	90	55	64	70
Orange Hall	53	86	68	70
Catholic secondary school	96	84	86	89
Protestant secondary school	82	96	92	90

Table 4: Views on flying of the Union flag on public buildings, by religion

	%			
	Catholic	Protestant	No religion	All
The Union flag should be flown from all public buildings <i>all the time</i>	2	40	25	22
The Union flag should be flown on <i>designated days</i> from all public buildings	60	53	51	55
The Union flag should not be flown at <i>all</i> from any public building	31	3	13	15
Don't know	8	5	11	8

Figure 2: % feeling annoyed by Republican and Loyalist murals, kerb painting and flags, by religion



the Union flag over Belfast City Hall which began in December 2012. On the other hand, it may indicate growing apathy, or perhaps it suggests that there are fewer visible murals, kerb paintings and flags.

There is a similar decrease in the proportion of respondents saying that they have felt annoyed by Republican markers. For Catholics, this has dropped from 24 per cent in 2014 to 14 per cent in 2015, and from 31 per cent to 24 per cent among Protestants. Nevertheless, the territorialisation of space through markers of symbols such as flags, murals, kerbstone painting does continue to annoy around one fifth of the population.

## Parades

In the midst of a decade of centenaries, 2016 has been a particularly momentous one with numerous anniversaries commemorated. Across Northern Ireland, significant effort was put into opening up what were once seen as divisive commemorations. There has also been much work put into the branding and marketing of annual events, such as OrangeFest and St. Patrick's Day, with

the emphasis being placed on a carnival atmosphere. Over recent years, there has been a widening of debate, engagement and discussion around contentious histories and previously divisive parading. Nevertheless, NILT findings show that marches continue to evoke different reactions in Northern Ireland.

Overall, 64 per cent of respondents agreed that *parading is a legitimate form of cultural celebration*. However, whilst this was the view of the vast majority of Protestant respondents (81%), this was not the case amongst those with no religion (63%), and Catholics (48%). There was general agreement (70%) that parades should only be allowed if the organisers and local residents agree to the arrangements. Catholic respondents were statistically more likely to agree with this (82%) than Protestant respondents, or those with no religion were (63% and 67% respectively).

A minority of respondents agreed that these days parades are less confrontational (29%), and the same proportion thought that people are more tolerant or parades than they used to be. Protestant

respondents were the group most likely to agree with either of these statements.

When asked about their personal experience, one in five NILT respondents (21%) said that they have felt annoyed by Loyalist parades or marches during the past year, including 27 per cent of Catholics, and 18% of Protestants. Annoyance at Republican parades or marches was slightly lower, at 13 per cent, including six per cent of Catholics, and 20 per cent of Protestants. This illustrates that the contention around space and symbols used in marches still remains.

## Conclusion

In sum, the space between the two main communities in Northern Ireland continues to be well defined in terms of attitudes towards each other, and attitudes towards space and symbols. As we approach the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1998 Agreement, it is clear that peace building and enhancing communal relations remains a key task, given that there remains distinctive attitudes that represent incompatibilities on a range of cultural and political issues.

## References

Morrow, Duncan (2014) *Mixed Messages: Community Relations in 2014*, Research Update 105, Belfast: ARK  
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The questions on community relations were funded by The Executive Office. *Perceptive Insight* carried out the interviews for the 2015 survey. 1,202 adults took part.

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT 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.

## Key points

- 52% of respondents think that community relations are better than 5 years ago, and 46% think that community relations will be better in 5 years' time.
- 55% of respondents support flying the union flag on public buildings on designated days only. However, 40% of Protestants think this should be done all the time.
- 64 per cent of respondents agreed that *parading is a legitimate form of cultural celebration*, including 81% of Protestants, and 48% of Catholics.

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