



Research Update

Attitudes to community relations in Northern Ireland: grounds for optimism?

Joanne Hughes



The last decade in Northern Ireland has witnessed political developments that appear to reflect progress in a hitherto elusive quest for reconciliation. The Downing Street Declaration of 1993 marked a turning point, with the British and Irish Governments resolving to work together in the search for peace. By the mid-1990s the main political parties were engaged in a protracted multi-party talks process. This led eventually to the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998 which, supported by the majority of the electorate in the North and South of Ireland, laid the foundations for the establishment of devolved power-sharing.

Juxtaposed with these political developments, the last ten years have also seen a scaling down of headline grabbing paramilitary violence. The first cease-fires in Northern Ireland were declared by republican and loyalist paramilitaries in 1994. Whilst they have not always remained intact, there has been no return to the levels of violence that characterised the pre cease-fire years. Ostensibly, at least, Northern Ireland has enjoyed relative calm.

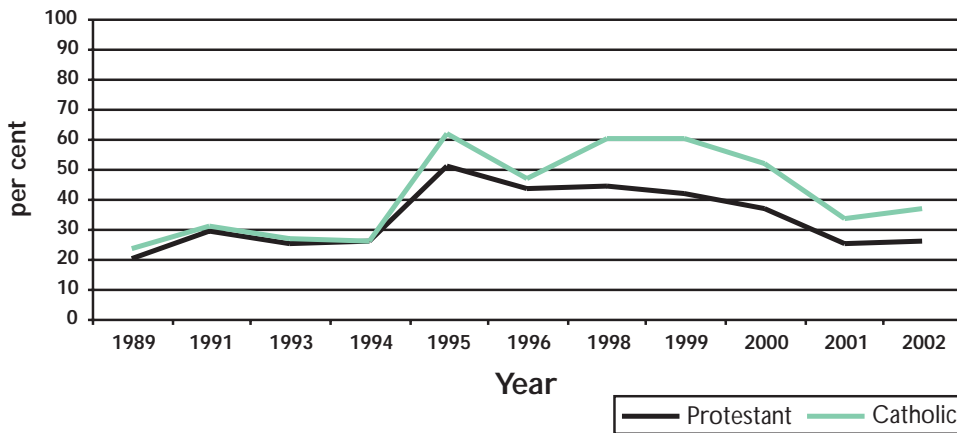
At superficial glance it may seem that conditions are ripe for the citizens of Northern Ireland to build on the reconciling processes now in place. It is within this context that this Research

Update examines data from the **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** (1998 - 2002) and the **Northern Ireland Social Attitudes survey** (1989-1996) to explore if there are grounds for optimism.

Perception of community relations

Taken at face value, it seems possible that traditional barriers between Protestants and Catholics might be overcome to facilitate the development of a political and civic life that is acceptable to all. Despite this, it is disconcerting to note then that there

Figure 1: % believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than 5 years ago.



are signs that Northern Ireland has also become a more deeply divided society. In housing and education, for example, segregation has become more acute, particularly in working class areas and there is little evidence of change. In some interface areas violence has reached such an extreme that, rather than dismantling the so-

called "peace walls" (as might have been an expected outcome of the post-cease-fire period) the British army has been engaged in erecting new ones.

Looking first at some of the key indicators used to monitor the state of community relations (or at least

optimism about community relations), there are consistent signs that both Protestants and Catholics feel marginally more optimistic about matters in 2002 than they did in 2001. For some of these indicators, the overall trend between 1996 and 2002 remains a downward one and it is conceivable that the 2001 results (measured against the background of the Holy Cross school dispute) were simply a particularly low point. However for other indicators there is some evidence that the latest results may be the first signs of an upswing in community relations - or at least a levelling off of the decline of the previous five years.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of people who believe that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than they were five years ago. Given that the 2002 survey was carried out immediately after the spectacular collapse of devolution in October 2002 it is, on the face of it, surprising that the results indicate a slight increase in optimism among Catholics and at least a levelling-off of Protestant pessimism from 2001 to 2002. Looking at the time-trend more broadly over the five year period it seems likely that it is the 2001 results that represent a 'blip' in this pattern. The 2001 survey was carried out against the background of the Holy Cross dispute and the fact that this had a widespread effect on public opinion was clear at the time. If the 2001 results were excluded from this chart it is clear that the overall trend remains a downward one. Nonetheless this could possibly be indicative of a halt in the decline of the previous five years.

Figure 2: % believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in 5 years time

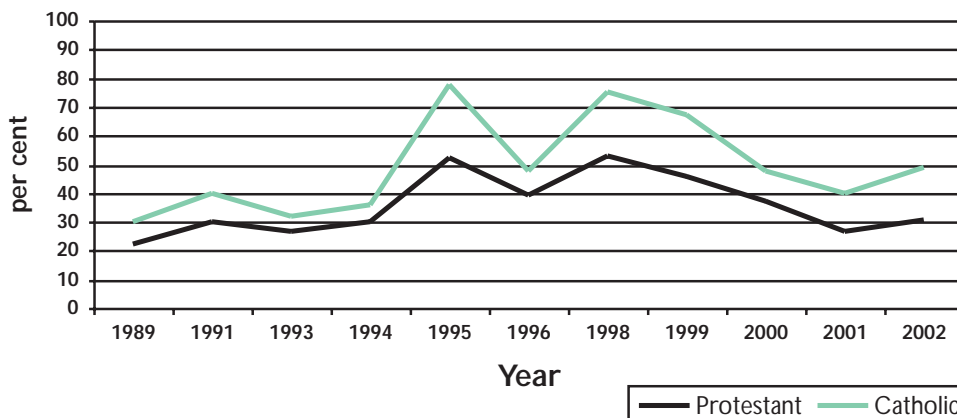


Figure 3: % who would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood

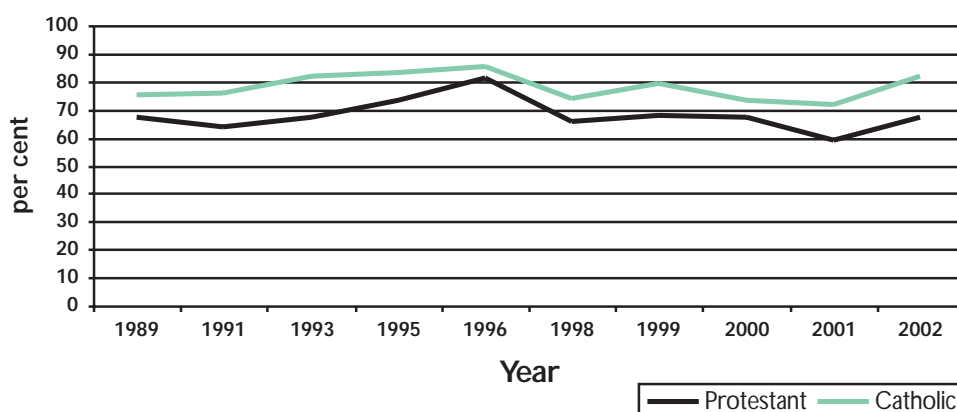


Figure 2 reflects a similar type of indicator and shows the proportion of people who believe that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in five years time. Here Catholic optimism about the future definitely appears to have taken a turn for the better as the proportion of

people expressing optimism is higher in 2002 than in 2001 and, more importantly, the 2002 figures are similar to the levels of optimism expressed in 2000. Protestants show a slight increase in optimism since 2001 but the overall time-trend over the five year period is still downwards.

Preference for contact

The survey includes a series of questions asking whether respondents would prefer to live in mixed-religion neighbourhoods and work in mixed-religion workplaces. Substantial

majorities of respondents have always indicated their desire to live and work in mixed-religion environments but, again, there has been a downward trend in levels between 1996 and 2001. However, results for 2002 indicate an upswing in support of eight percentage points for Protestants and ten percentage points for Catholics. Although this doesn't reach the highest level of support (in 1996) it nonetheless marks a recovery among Catholics for the desire for contact - and to a lesser extent, among Protestants as well. For Protestants, the overall trend between 1996 and 2002 is still a downward one, but for Catholics the trend is much flatter.

Figure 4: % who would prefer a mixed-religion workplace

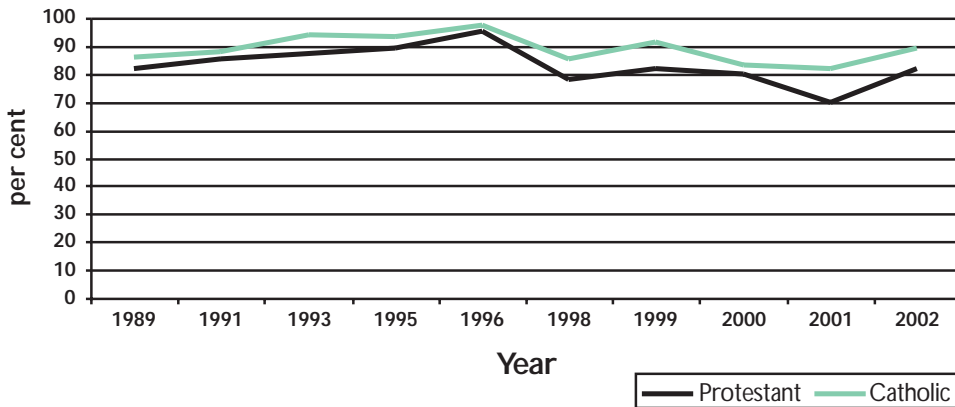


Figure 5: % agreeing that "My cultural tradition is always the underdog"

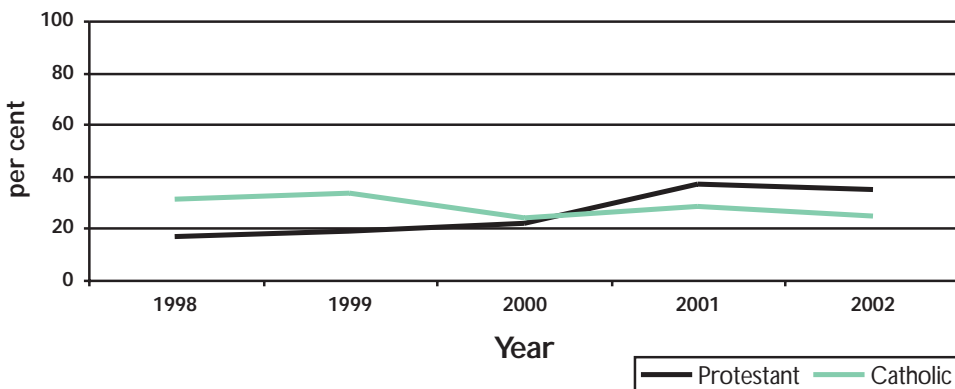
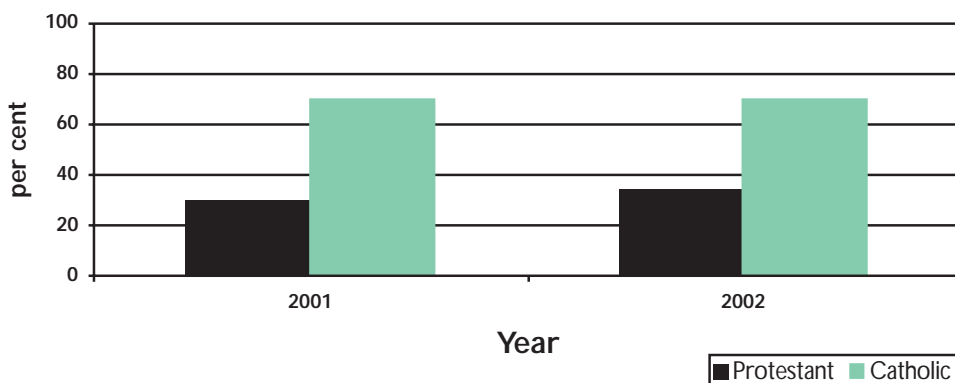


Figure 6: % agreeing that "I am confident that my own cultural tradition is protected in Northern Ireland these days"



The picture is similar for the desire to work in mixed-religion workplaces (Figure 4). Catholic support has risen by seven percentage points and Protestant support by 12 percentage points between 2001 and 2002. The overall trend between 1996 and 2002 is still a downward one for both communities, but again 2002 may mark the beginning of a recovery in relations to some extent.

Confidence in the protection of cultural traditions

Another set of results worth examining concerns a more fundamental sense of confidence in the status of 'cultural traditions'. These indicators are of a much shorter time-series but one of them has displayed an interesting pattern over the five years in which it has been asked on the survey. Respondents are asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement "My cultural tradition is always the underdog".

Over time, the proportion of Catholics who agree with this statement has decreased exactly in line with the increase in the proportion of Protestants who agree with the

statement. Although both Catholics and Protestants feel more optimistic about community relations in 2002 than they did a year ago and although this may mark a return to a greater desire for contact in many areas of life, it is nonetheless still the case that underlying Protestant distrust and unease is more resistant to change.

A second question asked only in 2001 and 2002 further underscores the depth of Protestant unease in relation to the status of their cultural tradition. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement "I am confident that my own cultural tradition is protected in Northern Ireland these days".

A confident 70% of Catholics agreed with this statement in both 2000 and 2001 compared with only around one third of Protestants. The figure for Protestants is very slightly higher in 2002 than it was in 2001. Nonetheless the results mainly serve to reinforce the picture of declining Protestant confidence in their position in the post-agreement Northern Ireland.

Conclusions

The figures presented here can be examined in both the long-term and the short-term. In the long-term view, since 1989, the overall trend in attitudes towards community relations issues is downward. However, within

the short-term context, since 2001, attitudes have tended to be more positive. This is especially true for Catholics. Protestants, on the other hand, still tend to be less optimistic and confident towards their cultural position in Northern Ireland, and towards community relations in general.

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Key Points

- In 2002, both Protestants and Catholics feel marginally more optimistic about community relations than in 2001.
- A majority of Catholics and Protestants would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood, and also to work in a mixed-religion workplace.
- More Protestants than Catholics believe that their cultural tradition is the underdog in Northern Ireland.
- In contrast, more Catholics than Protestants believe that their cultural tradition is protected.
- Protestants tend to be less optimistic and less confident towards their cultural position and towards community relations in general than Catholics.
- Overall, there is scope for some optimism about the 2002 figures, although there is still a long-term downward trend.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2002, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. 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 directors on 028 9027 3034 with any queries.

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