



# Research Update

## Presbyterians in Northern Ireland: Living in a society in transition

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Presbyterianism has left a distinctive mark on Northern Ireland. While the Church of Ireland may have dominated the physical landscape of small towns and there were always more Catholics, Presbyterians left their mark on the political and public space through their status as the majority of the majority, especially in eastern Ulster. For many years, the annual General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) was part of the calendar of Northern Irish politics as well as religion.

Not all of the cultural Presbyterians were in the PCI. Prone from the start to splits and dogmatic schism, anti-hierarchical Presbyterianism has always been as much a culture as a denomination. But Presbyterians have always been part of what made the North distinctive from the rest of Ireland. And while never established, the PCI probably identified more fully with Northern Ireland and its institutions

than any other denomination. Unlike members of the Church of Ireland or the Roman Catholics, the Presbyterians had their headquarters in Belfast, and Church House in Fisherwick Place often seemed like Belfast's real ecclesiastical powerhouse.

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey**, and the **Northern Ireland Social Attitudes survey** have been measuring attitudes to social issues since 1989, and from these, we are able to trace the views of Presbyterians. Religious affiliation still matters in Northern Ireland, even in an age of secularisation. The years since 1989 have seen dramatic change in the political landscape. They have also seen an ongoing retreat in the proportion of people who identify themselves as Presbyterian. In 1989, 22% of respondents said they were Presbyterian. The proportion rose to 26% in 1993, but has since fallen to 18% by 2001.

## Importance of religion

Although the proportion of respondents who identify themselves as Presbyterians may be falling in the overall population, are those who continue to do so more clearly associated with the Church rather than with a more general cultural Presbyterianism? The data suggest that those calling themselves Presbyterian continue to treat their faith as a matter of considerable importance for their personal behaviour.

While the proportion of Presbyterians who claimed to attend church services at least once a month has fallen by 11 percentage points since 1989, this still represents over half of Presbyterian respondents in 2001 (55%). In contrast, the number of respondents who never attend church services has only risen by four percentage points - from 14% in 1989 to 18% in 2001.

As may be expected, there is a distinct age dimension to these changes. There has been a large fall in the number of Presbyterian respondents aged 18 to 39 years who attend church at least once a month - from 62% in 1989 to 44% in 2001. In the same time period, there has been an increase - from 15% to 25% - in the proportion of this age group never attending church and so do not regard attendance at church as a pre-requisite of their belonging to the tribe.

In contrast, the fall in the proportion of Presbyterian respondents aged 60 years and over who attend church at least once a month is relative small - from 68% to 63%. The proportion of this age group who never attend church has remained fairly constant (13% in 2001).

## Identity

Even before the Home Rule crises, Presbyterians in Ulster were

Table 1: Church attendance

	%	
	1989	2001
Once a week or more	45	37
2 or 3 times a month	8	12
Once a month	13	6
Several times a year	10	16
Less frequently	8	11
Never	14	18
Varies	1	0

Presbyterians continue to maintain a formal distinction between religious and national identity in Northern Ireland, the Life and Times survey continues to demonstrate how close the connection remains in real politics.

While there is some variation in the number of people who prefer to describe themselves as Ulster and British, only a very small proportion of Presbyterians understand themselves as Irish. Since 1989, the Life and Times Survey has never identified more than 3% willing to adopt this nomenclature. Instead there has been a trend towards Britishness as well as a trend away from Northern Irishness especially since the signing of the Belfast Agreement. See

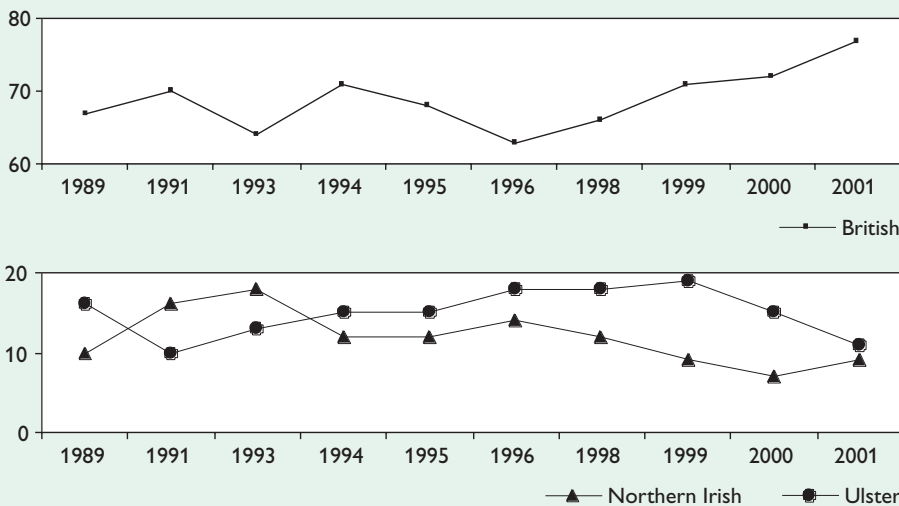
Although the survey does not identify the underlying reasons, over three quarters (77%) of the largest Protestant denomination in Northern Ireland continue to emphasise their Britishness. This may give pause for thought to those who believe that Northern Ireland should move quickly towards severing Northern Ireland's connection with Britain. Even if a political majority for such a change should emerge, the results shown here suggest that the Britishness of many of the citizens of an all-Ireland state will remain a significant factor with major social consequences.

The absence of any evidence for Presbyterian Irish nationalism is confirmed in Table 2. Perhaps of greater interest is the fact that up to a quarter of Presbyterians continue to consider themselves neither unionist nor nationalist.

This same broad pattern of allegiance was repeated throughout the 2001 survey, especially when respondents were asked to measure their emotional reaction to specific cultural situations. In the first of these, respondents were asked how they would feel if they were in a public building and there was a list on the wall of Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) men and women killed in the Troubles. In the second scenario, respondents were asked how they would feel if they received a letter from a hospital about an appointment and the letter heading was in Irish as well as English.

Some 91% of Presbyterians were comfortable with public memorials to RUC officers murdered in the Troubles—see Table 3. This figure confirms the deep attachment of the vast majority of Presbyterians to the RUC and their investment in its record as upholders of law and order. By asking questions about how each respondent would feel, the survey highlights the degree to which policing and the holding in esteem of those who died is an emotional as well as a political and rational issue. It is hardly surprising therefore that reform of policing in Northern Ireland presses emotional buttons with which formal

Figure 1: National identity



overwhelmingly unionist. Although the PCI has a responsibility for all of Ireland, the overwhelming predominance of members in Northern Ireland has continued this close association with unionism in empirical fact if not in dogmatic certainty. While many

Figure 1. This suggests that the climate since the Agreement has led Presbyterians to emphasise their connection to their fellow citizens in England, Scotland and Wales at the expense of any fellow feeling with their Northern Irish neighbours.

Table 2: Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a unionist, a nationalist or neither?

	%									
	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001
Unionist	74	76	76	78	77	80	76	75	70	75
Nationalist	<1	<1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	<1
Neither	26	23	24	21	22	20	22	22	28	23

Table 3: Responses to scenarios A (memorial to RUC) and B (hospital letter head in Irish)

	%	
	A	B
I would feel fine about it	63	7
I wouldn't mind it	28	29
I would feel uncomfortable about it	4	24
I would feel annoyed about it	3	35
I wouldn't notice	1	3
Not answered/Don't know	2	2

liberal politics is ill-equipped to deal. The survey also highlights the potential for the Irish language and its public use to become an issue of sectarian division as its use multiplies. Among Presbyterians, only 7% professed to be entirely comfortable with bilingual letterheads, with a further 29% saying that they wouldn't mind it, whereas 59% would react negatively. The way in which the use of Irish is expanded may determine its long-term significance as a political issue.

## Equity and diversity

Figures from 2001 suggest that Presbyterians start from the presumption that few groups in Northern Ireland experience discrimination in.

While 21% of Presbyterians conceded that disabled people and elderly people were generally treated unfairly and 13% believe that there is discrimination against Travellers, Presbyterians in general conceded almost no discrimination on grounds of gender and very little on grounds of ethnicity or sexual orientation - see Table 4. Perhaps most interestingly, 20% of Presbyterians asserted that Protestants were generally treated unfairly, whereas only 2% perceived any unfairness to Catholics. At the very least, this suggests that there is

no active Presbyterian support for an equality agenda which foresees massive improvements in the relative position of Catholics and little significant political support for ongoing change in relation to other groups.

This is not the same as arguing for the dismantling of all equality legislation. When asked for their views on the statement that there is no need for equality laws in Northern Ireland, less than one in five Presbyterians agreed or strongly agreed. Nonetheless Table 5 shows that a far higher proportion perceived equality laws to be currently more biased against Protestants than Catholics.

Table 4: Are these groups generally treated unfairly when compared with other groups?

	% saying 'yes'
Disabled	21
Elderly	21
Protestants	20
Travellers	13
Gays/lesbians/bi-sexuals	10
Other ethnic minorities	8
Women	3
Catholics	2
Men	<1

The equality agenda, so central to nationalist political concerns in Northern Ireland, may meet more resistance in the future, rather than less, given the political constellation of Northern Ireland after devolution.

## Politics and the future

While the equality agenda is greeted with indifference by most Presbyterians, the Life and Times survey of 2001 provides evidence of considerable concern in the same circles about the

Table 5: Perception of equality laws

	%	
	Protect Catholics at the expense of Protestants	Protect Protestants at the expense of Catholics
Strongly agree	13	1
Agree	22	3
Neither agree nor disagree	18	19
Disagree	28	49
Strongly disagree	2	11
Don't know	18	18

protection of Presbyterian cultural concerns in post-Agreement Northern Ireland.

While 28% of Presbyterians believed that their cultural tradition was protected, over 44% believed the opposite - see Table 6. For as long as this is the case, large numbers of Presbyterians will continue to remain suspicious of the protection of Britishness under the Agreement and remain sceptical of those who argue in the Agreement's favour. Similarly, 36% of Presbyterians believed

Table 6: Confidence in cultural traditions  
A: I am confident that my own cultural tradition is protected in Northern Ireland these days  
B: My cultural tradition is always the underdog

	%	
	A	B
Strongly agree	5	14
Agree	23	22
Neither agree nor disagree	21	29
Disagree	30	25
Strongly disagree	14	3
Can't choose	7	7

Table 7: How do you personally feel about what might happen in the next few years?

	%
I feel confident about the future	8
I feel optimistic about the future	19
I have mixed feelings	50
I am worried about the future	20
None of these	<1
Don't know	2

that their cultural tradition is the established underdog in modern Northern Ireland as opposed to 28% who do not believe this to be the case. While 29% remain to be convinced, these results confirm that a battle for the future of Ulster unionism is being fought within Presbyterianism. When

asked about expectations for the future within the context of the search for peace in Northern Ireland, the survey produced yet another three-way division.

Thus, while 27% were confident or optimistic about the future and 20% highlighted concerns, 50% of the community remained to be convinced either way. - see Table 7. As far as the future is concerned Presbyterians have yet to form a 'settled will' in Donald Dewar's memorable phrase.

## Conclusions

Presbyterians in Northern Ireland remain united in their committed unionism and their indifference to claims of discrimination in Northern Ireland. In their estimation of the present political context and their expectations for the future, Presbyterians as a whole remain

to be convinced that relations really have undergone historic change. The largest group appear to have adopted a 'wait and see' approach, open to being convinced by their more cautious or their more optimistic co-religionists. In the mean time, many harbour concerns about the implications of real relationships beyond traditional and more recent differences.

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## Key Points

- Over half of Presbyterians attend church at least once a month. However, nearly one fifth never attend.
- Most Presbyterians describe themselves as British, and the proportion doing so has risen since the signing of the Belfast Agreement. In 2001, 77% said they were British.
- Presbyterians seem committed to unionism - three quarters would describe themselves as unionists.
- While little discrimination is acknowledged, there is still support for equality laws. However, these laws are seen to be biased against Protestants.
- Half of Presbyterian respondents have mixed feelings about the future in Northern Ireland.

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](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)) or call the survey directors on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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