The Northern Ireland 'Culture Wars'

Symposium Report

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Background to the Symposium

On 22nd November 2013, the Political Studies Association Britishness Specialist Group organised a symposium on the theme of Northern Ireland's 'culture wars' at the University of Ulster campus in Belfast. The event was organised by a team drawn from the Institute for Research in Citizenship and Applied Human Sciences at the University of Huddersfield and the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences at the University of Ulster. It brought together leading scholars from a range of disciplinary background and representatives of prominent civil society organisations. It sought to provide a forum for critical assessment of current conceptual and empirical approaches in the fields of culture, identity and citizenship in Northern Ireland, the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. The event provided compelling insights into contemporary Northern Irish politics and civil society. Deliberations between individuals and groups are essential to deepening understanding and building trust and cohesion in post-conflict societies.

The event and subsequent report were kindly supported by the Political Studies Association, and the Universities of Ulster and Huddersfield and we offer them all grateful thanks. We were also fortunate in being granted an immediate wider audience through the ever-popular Slugger O'Toole political blog (http://sluggerotoole.com/tag/psaculturewars/). The symposium was a lively and dynamic event and has laid the foundations for future research and interaction. We would therefore like to acknowledge and thank the participants to the day who are listed in the programme at the end of this report.

The views expressed in this report may not necessarily reflect the views of individual participants or their respective institutions.

Part One: Framing the Northern Ireland 'Culture Wars'

Since the 1970s, the increasingly febrile and divisive public debates about the consequences of social, cultural, and political change in a number of Western States have been typified as a form of 'culture war'. The 'frontlines' of such 'conflicts' have been framed by groups and individuals linked to key religious, political and cultural institutions within either traditionalist/conservative or progressive/liberal parameters. Proponents have increasingly questioned the neutrality of state and other public institutions and their values and policies including a diverse range of historical, cultural, social and political issues including history teaching in schools, abortion and euthanasia, climate change, LGBT rights, stem-cell research, and parenting.

It was these different axes of identification and mobilising that informed the scope of the symposium. However the organisers were always aware that the term 'culture war' remains problematic in at least three ways. Firstly, applying a metaphorical label of war to a place where people are still living with the pain and loss caused by the violence of the conflict must be acknowledged as potentially insensitive. The specific challenges of post-conflict societal reconstruction in Northern Ireland are significant and acute but cannot be compared the violence that defined the recent past. The analogical depiction of public disputes over culture, identity, and citizenship in Northern Ireland as a 'war' is thus somewhat inappropriate. Secondly, it would be a drastic simplification and distortion of Northern Ireland's past to present cultural tension and division as a new phenomenon and one that has supplanted the a territorial war completely. Thirdly, public disputes in Northern Ireland since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998 are not confined simply to issues of culture and cover an expansive range of issues and demands for different kinds of justice, recognition and redress.

It is arguable however that conflict over trenchant articulation of cultural identity has proven particularly corrosive. Moreover, the on-going demonstrations by some members of the loyalist community in Northern Ireland against the decision by Belfast City Council to limit the number of days the Union flag is flown from City Hall has highlighted the extent to which culture, identity and nationalism continue to divide communities and can provoke violence. In utilising the term 'culture wars' we remain conscious of the limits it could place on the complex dynamics of social and political change. However, the symposium also revealed the positive potential of using the concept as a framing device. This is in part because in placing Northern Irish society in a wider contemporary political context it challenges the supposed uniqueness of its current difficulties, a perspective which can encourage introspective pessimism about the possibility of resolution. It is also important because it heightens awareness of the eliding of different layers of estrangement over different cultural, moral and social issues which, if they are allowed to reinforce each other, will damage the existence of genuinely equal citizenship in Northern Ireland.

Part Two – The Key Themes of the Symposium

The symposium highlighted multiple dimensions of a Northern Irish 'culture war'. Speakers highlighted the impact of the past on the present, and the domination of public space both physically and verbally by certain perspectives and messages which have precluded the already existing potential for pluralism and accommodation. These contributions have formed the backbone of the policy recommendations we have offered in this report and also provide wider explanation and contextualisation.

Theme One: Putting young people centre stage

Lisa McElherron, representing the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) was one of the contributors to our plenary session on the role of civil society in Northern Ireland. She highlighted issues of social class and economic justice, drawing attention to the unequal nature of the 'peace dividend' across Northern Ireland. Many in working-class communities felt they had gained little, thus offering opportunities for criminal/paramilitary elements to exploit grievances, particularly among young people. This posed a significant challenge for the security of the peace process. She argued that politicians in Northern Ireland have tended to think only in terms of structure and function of the peace process, stifling debate through hypersensitivity about cultural terminology and identity. Their failure to articulate aspirational and positive visions of the future for young people has had significant ramifications regarding youth citizenship.

This lack of a 'peace dividend' for younger people was further explored by Siobhán McAlister (Queen's University, Belfast). She drew on research from the *Childhood in Transition* project to highlight that the on-going legacy of division and sectarianism continues to affect the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland where there is little sense of the hoped-for 'peace dividend'. Bitter debates about the past continue to underpin the violence and threat of violence that is an ever-present feature of everyday life for young people who grow up in these areas. Many of those who engage in violence saw identities under threat as something worth fighting for, this further fuelled by the economic uncertainty and deprivation that characterises many of the most divided communities in the region. Despite the peace process, a considerable percentage of Northern Ireland's youth continue to live segregated lives, and possess a limited understanding of their own and the other's history, culture or identity.

The work of organisations such as the Nerve Centre, who lead the 'Teaching Divided Histories' (TDH) project, is vitally important in helping young people build knowledge and come to terms with the past. John Peto, Director of the TDH project, observed that despite the peace process, young people continue to live segregated lives and there is often little interaction between and among young people across the ethno-

religious divide. He noted there was a need to enhance transferable skills among both teachers and students, to develop the way the recent past is taught and understood by young people in Northern Ireland. Training and support for teachers and young people is vital in helping communities engage with Northern Ireland's contentious past, particularly through the innovative use of digital technology. This can help young people deal with and better understand contentious issues such as commemoration and identity.

Neil Symington from the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF) highlighted that significant disparities between the post-conflict experiences of young people from different socio-economic backgrounds had stratified life expectations and perceptions. The NIYF's experience in running the UK Youth Parliament in Northern Ireland demonstrated the salience of class in young peoples' lives. Those from more affluent backgrounds tended not to focus on questions of identity and segregation, but placed more emphasis on social issues such as equal marriage and the economy. By contrast, in working-class areas, many young people cared little about their future life prospects and were much more likely to engage in street protest. Although young people protesting can be an expression of active citizenship, there is a need provide safe spaces for young people to engage politically and discuss contentious issues. He argued that there was an urgent need for civil society organisations to find neutral space where young people could express themselves safely. Political institutions, parties, and politicians in Northern Ireland have a critical role to play in the creation of such spaces to allow young people to discuss future visions for post-conflict society. Future policy and research initiatives need to benefit young people and develop empowered opportunities for them to make meaningful and positive changes in their lives.

Theme Two: Ensuring equality of citizenship

Debates about culture in Northern Ireland have often overlooked the implications of rapid social change. Issues such as gay marriage, access to abortion, and even blood transfusion policy suggest there is increasing polarisation amongst the politicians, media commentators, and wider public in Northern Ireland. The confrontational and sometimes febrile tone of recent public disputes indicates such issues are contentious and divisive but cannot be seen in simplistic sectarian contexts. One of the interesting dynamics is the extent to which Northern Ireland's different communities have internally fractured and established loose cross-community alliances when addressing issues of gender and sexuality rights.

Fiona Bloomer (University of Ulster) argued that an example of this is the impact of abortion legislation in Northern Ireland, which means that women particularly those on low incomes lack access to services that are free elsewhere in the UK. On average, over 1,000 women resident in Northern Ireland access terminations in other

parts of the UK. Opinion polls have consistently shown that the public would support similar legislation being extended to Northern Ireland, but while some individual legislators are pro-choice there is a lack of political party support for change. Indeed proponents of pro-life policies cross the communal divide of the Northern Irish Assembly.

The issue of gay marriage has similarly revealed that public attitudes are open to recognising same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (2012) revealed indicated 57 per cent of respondents believed that same sex marriages should have the same rights as those of traditional marriages, a figure that rose to 70 per cent among younger age groups. However, John O'Doherty of the Rainbow Project told the symposium that politicians have not offered leadership in this area or done anything to alleviate the invisibility and isolation of the LGBT community with a complete lack of positive legislation since the Assembly was set up in 1998.

These issues highlight the extent to which citizenship rights within post-conflict Northern Ireland are tiered and potentially exclusory to certain minorities and marginalised groups. Northern Irish, UK, and Republic of Ireland citizenship rights are increasingly inter-connected. Politicians in Northern Ireland need to consider the implications of legislation passed by the British government and the other devolved bodies on how citizenship is understood and realised in Northern Ireland. The complexities of transnational and increasingly globalised forms of citizenship rights are also influential and may also have implications for the international image of Northern Ireland.

Theme Three: Articulating Northern Ireland's multiculturalism

Cultural contestation has been the inevitable outworking of the parking of the constitutional question in Northern Ireland, according to Jon Tonge (University of Liverpool). For unionists there is widely-held belief that nationalists have benefited from the peace process while they are too divided to challenge Sinn Fein's republican agenda. This has contributed to unwillingness amongst the unionist political parties to try to avoid the impasses that arise over contested public displays of Protestant/unionist and loyalist culture. However, as Marisa McGlinchey (Coventry University) demonstrated, republicanism is not a monolithic bloc and cultural conflict is pertinent here too because there is potential for challenges by dissident groups to the established political leadership through cultural motifs such as upcoming centenary commemorations of the Easter Rising.

Gavin Hart and Catherine McGlynn (both University of Huddersfield) argued that discussions about the potential that increasing diversity could underpin an emergent Northern Irish multiculturalism were being limited by divisions between and within unionist and nationalist political parties. They noted that while the larger parties

(DUP and Sinn Féin) stressed the economic benefits of migration and the work ethic of migrant communities, smaller parties (UUP, SDLP, and Alliance) focused on the potentially positive cultural impact that immigration might have in diluting the traditional nationalist-unionist cleavage. Racism has been publically condemned by all parties. There is evidence however of political cleavages between unionists, who have sought to minimise it as a social problem, and nationalists who emphasised its prevalence within Northern Ireland and linked it to established narratives regarding anti-Catholic discrimination. Politicised divisions were also evident in debates about minority languages policy where both sides sometimes claim that Irish or Ulster-Scots should not receive funding at the expense of more commonly-used minority languages. It is clear that a key challenge for policy-makers is ensuring that minority ethnic communities are afforded opportunities to shape policy and are not allowed to be utilised as proxies in cultural disputes between nationalists and unionists.

Helena Macormac, representing the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) highlighted the significant challenges still facing minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland. She noted migrants often settle in poorer communities, which are amongst the most contested in terms of territory and culture. Consequently, they are more likely to fall victim to racism and sectarianism, sometimes even facing expulsion. She stressed the urgent need for a new Northern Ireland racial equality strategy, and the extension of the more robust legal protections afforded minority ethnic groups in the rest of the UK to Northern Ireland.

Theme Four: Understanding the power of flags

Dominic Bryan (Queen's University, Belfast) stressed that commemoration rituals are not primarily rooted in the past, but are present-centred. They are primarily about the living not the dead. Public spaces were crucial both for those in control and those seeking access. Since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, a number of power-shifts have occurred in who controlled public spaces. The flags issue is a complicated one and highlighted that symbols change over time in terms of their meaning, context, motivation and interpretation. Public ascription to particular symbols did not result in universalism in terms of identity of communities. The official flying of flags had often proven less problematic than the unofficial flying of flags, particularly paramilitary emblems. Despite their proliferation, there is very little public support for the flying of national flags on lamp-posts as they associated the flying of these emblems with the demarcation of paramilitary space. Therefore, the two national flags are actually understood by many as paramilitary flags. He concluded by noting that the management of public space was essential and contested in conflict societies but, unlike parades, the Northern Ireland Assembly had failed to intervene on the issue of flag flying.

Paul Burgess (University College, Cork) acknowledged that the term 'culture war' itself, and the idea that one is being waged in Northern Ireland, are both open to challenge. However, he argued that the outbreak of the recent flag protests can be seen as evidence that Protestant working-class community sees itself, and its sense of British identity, as being under attack. This threat is seen to come primarily in the guise of Sinn Féin which is said to be pursuing a cultural policy of the 'de-Britification' of Northern Ireland. However, the recent flag protests and their aftermath also brought out important differences within Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) identity, particularly differences based around social class. There was a need, he argued, for working-class members of this community to be able to re-engage with the unique characteristics that made them different and distinct within their shared British family – namely their Irishness. Such an approach has historical foundations, proving a durable element of PUL identity prior to partition, and could contribute to the desensitisation of issues of cultural identity and encourage reciprocative acts of identity recognition in other communities in Northern Ireland.

Theme Five: Addressing the contested past

History, memory and acts of collective commemoration play a central role in many states in terms of nation-building and the generation of common identities. In post-conflict, transitional societies, the role of history, memory and commemoration is often deeply contested. This is certainly true of Northern Ireland, where public debates about the past are highly contentious and social unrest is often stimulated by communal displays of identity and culture. Disputes concerning flag protests, nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist parades, and the commemoration of former paramilitaries can mean that civic spaces cease to be potentially shared by citizens. Sean Keenan from the Northern Ireland Arts Council noted in his contribution to the plenary how public paramilitary monuments were strong focal points for shared community remembrance but also marginalised others who did not share those traditions.

Orla Muldoon (University of Limerick) highlighted that national identity stereotyping was an important factor in defining the characteristics of individual and community identities and differentiating between others. For example, her research on the commemoration rituals of the 1916 rising in the Republic of Ireland highlighted that formal and informal state and community actors were not the only active actors in shaping national identities. Families played a crucial but largely unrecognised role in the formation of peoples' national identity through the articulation and reproduction of shared values and narratives. The development of 'shared' identities, such as 'Northern Irishness', are thus problematized by the complexities of official and unofficial articulations of history and memory.

Jim McAuley (University of Huddersfield) highlighted the importance of events such as the forthcoming First World War centenary in shaping competing forms of identity. He noted that memorialisation and commemoration are not only about the past, but the present and the future. Crucially these processes of remembering are also processes of forgetting and exclusion. For example, the centrality of World War One and the Battle of the Somme in shaping and politicising contemporary loyalist memory cannot be overstated. Commemorative acts attempt to draw a seamless connection between the 36th Ulster Division who fought at the Somme and the modern Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). He noted that unionists and loyalists see themselves to be engaged in an on-going 'cultural war' with republicans where alternative versions of history were instinctively overlooked or rejected. The forthcoming centenary of World War One and the Easter Rising offered policy-makers opportunities to override residual suspicion within both communities regarding the recognition and appreciation of plural forms of history and memory

Despite the many problems facing Northern Ireland, Paul Nolan of the Community Relations Council concluded on a more positive note, observing that events such as the UK City of Culture and Fleadh Cheoil na h-Éireann (Festival of Irish Music) held in Derry/Londonderry in 2013 had encouraged significant cross-community participation. Dissident republican threats to the events dissipated in the face of overwhelming support for these projects from all sectors of the community. There was, he noted, need for more research to be done on those parts of the peace settlement that are working well, rather than focusing solely on the negative or problematic aspects.

Part Three: Policy recommendations

The symposium highlighted that although there are many problematic issues framing current community relations in Northern Ireland, there is also considerable evidence of potential for the provision of public space to aid meaningful dialogue between citizens. The purpose of this report is to draw together observations and ideas showcased during the symposium in order to formulate a number of policy recommendations for consideration by politicians, policy-makers and civil society actors in Northern Ireland. Their leadership is clearly central in encouraging public engagement and inter-community dialogue that might alleviate and address many of the current tensions that have resulted from the subsuming of issues of social and political citizenship into cultural antagonism. There is a need to recognise that political culture and the development of civil society in post-conflict societies is driven by such leadership. Many individuals and groups in Northern Ireland are influenced by the segregated nature of citizenship and daily life. They may also lack the skills, knowledge, or experience to engage in public debate without recourse to established exclusory perspectives founded on community difference.

The following policy proposals are thematically framed, being founded on the deliberations of the symposium and the research and experiences of the participants. The proposals are intended to initiate discussion about the development of civil society in Northern Ireland to ensure public deliberation is both representative and also tolerant of community differences. We believe that widespread participation of Northern Ireland's citizens in civil society is crucial to the on-going and progressive building of democratically sustainable and participative citizenship.

Theme One: Putting young people centre stage

The Northern Ireland Executive should devise an immediate strategy to address the needs of the region's most deprived communities, independent of on-going attempts to implement an over-arching community relations policy for the region. This strategy should focus on young people, with particular reference to providing opportunities for socio-economic and educational activities, and also the provision of safe spaces for young people to express their opinions, aspirations and grievances.

Theme Two: Ensuring equality of citizenship

The Office of the Attorney General for Northern Ireland, in consultation with interested parties, should consider the potential legal implications of the disparity in access to services and legal protections for citizens of Northern Ireland against those

available in the rest of the United Kingdom. A report of these deliberations should be made and referred to the Northern Ireland Executive for appropriate action.

Theme Three: Articulating Northern Ireland's multiculturalism

Whilst the political discourse concerning multiculturalism in Northern Ireland is generally positive, more work needs to be done to ensure that minority ethnic groups are not used as proxies in identity disputes between the two dominant communities. The Northern Ireland Assembly should address the issue of a racial equality strategy as a matter of urgency. It should also reconsider the way in which funding is allocated to minority ethnic groups, to allow for the greater representation and participation of such groups in public debate.

Theme Four: Understanding the power of flags

The public display of official and unofficial flags remains one of the most contentious issues in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly should revisit issues concerning public culture as part of their attempts to develop a coherent and over-arching community relations policy. Detailed research should be carried out concerning the economic consequences of the on-going public disturbances for the Northern Ireland economy.

Theme Five: Addressing the contested past

The politics behind commemoration of the recent conflict and the more distant events in the history of Northern Ireland needs to be acknowledged and questioned to prevent the past being used to control and deny more pluralist narratives and experiences. Any process for dealing with the legacy of past events should be removed from the arena of professional politics in so far as this is possible. The Department of Education in Northern Ireland should be proactive in providing significant support for developing the skills and knowledge of young people in schools focusing on the upcoming centenary of both of World War One, particularly the Battle of the Somme, and the Easter Rising of 1916.

Appendix 1 – Event Programme

9.30-10.15 – **Opening address**
Paul Burgess (University College Cork) *Cultural identity: the new battleground in contemporary Northern Ireland society*

10.15-11.15 – **Social Change and the Culture Wars**
Fiona Bloomer (University of Ulster) *Reproductive rights*
John O'Doherty (Rainbow Project) *Equal marriage*
Discussant: Phil Scraton (Queen's University Belfast)

11.15-11.30 – Refreshments

11.30-12.30 – **Memory and Culture Panel**
Orla Muldoon (University of Limerick) *1916 and Remembrance*
Dominic Bryan (Queen's University Belfast) *Flags as cultural weapons*
James W. McAuley (University of Huddersfield) *First World War and memory in unionist culture*
Discussant: Don MacRaild (University of Ulster)

12-30-13.15 – Lunch

13.15-14.15 – **Culture, Politics and Society Panel**
Jonathan Tonge (University of Liverpool), *The Unionist party politics of culture in Northern Ireland*
Marisa McGlinchey (Coventry University) *Culture wars and the various shades of Green: contemporary Republicanism assessed*
Catherine McGlynn and Gavin Hart (University of Huddersfield), *Multiculturalism and political change*
Discussant: Shaun McDaid (University of Huddersfield)

14.15-15.15 – **Youth and Education Panel**
Siobhán McAllister (Queen's University Belfast), *Youth identity/sectarianism in post-conflict Northern Ireland*
John Peto (Nerve Centre Teaching Divided Histories Project)
Discussant: Alan McCully (University of Ulster)

15.15-15.30 – Refreshments

15.30-17.00 – Concluding Plenary: Enhancing Understanding in Northern Irish Civil Society

Chair: Cathy Gormley-Heenan (University of Ulster)

Lisa McElherron (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action – NICVA)

Helena Macormac (Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities - NICEM)

Sean Keenan Northern Ireland Arts Council

Paul Nolan (Community Relations Council)

Neil Symington Northern Ireland Youth Forum

Appendix 2 – Notes on contributors

Fiona Bloomer is Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown.

Dominic Bryan Reader in Social Anthropology at Queen's University Belfast, Director of the Institute of Irish Studies and a Fellow at the Institute for Collaborative Research in the Humanities.

Paul Burgess is Senior Lecturer in Applied Social Studies at University College Cork.

Cathy Gormley-Heenan is Director of the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences, University of Ulster.

Gavin Hart is a doctoral candidate at the School of Human and Health Sciences, University of Huddersfield.

Sean Keenan is Programme Manager of the Building Peace Through the Arts: Re-imaging Communities Project at Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Orla Muldoon is Professor of Psychology at the University of Limerick.

Andrew Mycock is Reader in Politics at the University of Huddersfield.

John O'Doherty is Director of the Rainbow Project.

James W. McAuley is Professor of Political Sociology and Associate Dean for Research and Enterprise at the University of Huddersfield.

Helena Macormac is Strategic Advocacy Policy Manager at the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM).

Donald MacRaild is Professor of Modern British and Irish History at the University of Ulster, Coleraine and an affiliate of the Academy for British and Irish Studies, University of Huddersfield.

Siobhán McAlister is a Lecturer in Criminology at the School of Sociology, Social Policy & Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

Alan McCully is Senior Lecturer in Education (History and Citizenship) at the University of Ulster, Coleraine.

Shaun McDaid is Research Fellow at the Institute for Research in Citizenship and Applied Human Sciences, University of Huddersfield.

Lisa McElherron is Director of Public Affairs at the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA)

Marisa McGlinchey is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Community Cohesion at Coventry University.

Catherine McGlynn is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Huddersfield.

Paul Nolan is Research Director of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council

John Peto is Director of Education at the Nerve Centre in Derry/Londonderry.

Phil Scraton is Professor of Criminology at the School of Law, Queen's University Belfast and Director of the Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative.

Neil Symington is a Participation Development Worker for the Northern Ireland Youth Forum.

Jonathan Tonge is Professor of Politics at the University of Liverpool.