Climate Change or Plus ca Change? An analysis of attitudes to identity, sharing and the other in Northern Ireland between 1989 and 2012

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Tensions and violence between Protestants and Catholics has been the defining feature of political life in Northern Ireland for generations. While there is huge political and ideological dispute about the relative importance of religion as a causal factor in these tensions, there is little doubt that history has polarized people into political groups in which religious difference has been a critical indicator of attitude, behaviour and identity.

For more than twenty years, surveys in Northern Ireland have been monitoring attitudes to equality issues and inter-community relations during periods of conflict, peace-building and devolution (via the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey (NISA) 1989-1996 and the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT) 1998-2011). These monitoring statistics have provided important annual snapshots indicating how the Northern Ireland public as a whole perceived the most divisive and contentious issues in society. After more than twenty years, they have also built into an important time-line series charting change and continuity through a period of both political accommodation and ongoing suspicion and sometimes violence.

The so-called Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland are not and have never been monolithic groups. Yet one of the more obvious outcomes of the Life and Times surveys, even in the twenty first century, is that religious background remains inextricably linked with political attitudes, communal hopes and fears and national identity. Notwithstanding secularization, religious background and self-identification cannot yet be separated plausibly from community identity and formation.

More than two decades of attitudes surveys demonstrate that there are important nuances in the changing attitudes of different subgroups and cohorts; any attempt to separate religion or religious background from identity and politics in Northern Ireland is measurably less plausible than the difficulties which arise from over-generalizing the importance of religion in the structure of community identity. The manner in which overt religious belief and observance interacts with other factors to create identity and shape attitudes may have changed.   But in spite of the peace process, the most glaring conclusion of a 23-year analysis of attitudes remains the obvious one: cultural 'Protestants' and 'Catholics' are more likely to be like each other in attitudes to identity, politics and community relations than they are to people of similar age, gender, class or educational background but different religion. On pivotal and decisive political issues, perception, attitudes and the experience of change remain distinctive between those of a different religious heritage and similar amongst those sharing this characteristic.

At the same time, a longitudinal analysis allows us both to chart longer term changes in the 'climate' of inter-community relations and to analyse how change in attitudes is reflected within different parts of apparently polarized communities. This article is drawn from our full report to OFMDFM and illustrates that change has happened in different and sometimes surprising ways[1]. By examining survey data gathered between 1989 and 2012, the Life and Times Survey emerges as an important study of change through very different political conditions, challenging us to examine the factors which translate into change of attitude, behaviour and identity and identifying some of the enabling and inhibiting factors in moving towards better relations.

After some delay, the Northern Ireland Executive brought forward its policy to build a shared future entitled *Together-Building a United Community*[2] in May 2013.   The Executive has now acknowledged that success in improving community relations is one of the most important outcomes anticipated by the peace process. However, the publication of policy also shifts the focus away from a general commitment to improved relations towards a debate on 'what works?' and an important debate on policy priorities.

Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) remains the most comprehensive data base on attitudes across Northern Ireland. This in-depth study allows for the full impact of this data recorded over more than twenty years to be applied to emerging policy. As such, it is our hope that this research can play an important role in public policy by creating an evidence-based framework for understanding the causes and dynamics of inter-community division and

understanding how policy and events impact across different income-groups, age-groups and themes.

Attitudes to and confidence in community relations are still haunted by violence. Progress depends on a plausible political alternative to polarization.

Measured over a twenty year period, the Life and Times Survey confirms that the peace process has had a measurably positive effect on the underlying 'climate' of intercommunity relations. Allowing for changes from one year to the next, underlying assumptions about progress towards better community relations and expectations for the future have gradually improved. At the same time, a closer analysis of attitudes indicates that responses tend to be closely linked to political events and the presence of or absence of violence and tensions at key flashpoints. Perceptions of community relations remain extremely fragile and subject to immediate events. Violence can still easily set back community relations. Confidence ebbs and flows with events and does not appear to be sustained during times of political polarization. In other words, public confidence appears to take its cue from political leaders and their ability to prevent or control violence and tension. Sustainable progress remains vulnerable to immediate political events.

Within the broader picture of slow improvement, the last 20 years can be divided into four periods marked and punctuated by specific events. Furthermore, optimism in the 1990s stimulated by the paramilitary ceasefires and the achievement of the Good Friday Agreement were followed by an identifiable period of pessimism and disappointment. Thus by far the most negative period in public attitudes took place in the period following the Good Friday Agreement apparently closely associated with the Holy Cross dispute and its aftermath, the collapse of devolved institutions of government at Stormont and political polarisation over the question of decommissioning.

Attitudes and confidence demonstrably returned in both communities in the lead up to the restoration of devolution in 2007. However, it is clear that, for many, progress in community relations and perceptions of relations remains fundamentally correlated with structural progress in politics and the absence of violence in the streets rather than with the presence of any other social variable such as economic progress, change in education or equality policy. Put another way, expectations of progress in the future and estimations of progress or otherwise in the past are ultimately measured by the symbolic importance of political co-operation and violence in particular locations.

**Figure 1: Percentage saying relations between Protestants and Catholics
are better than they were 5 years ago**
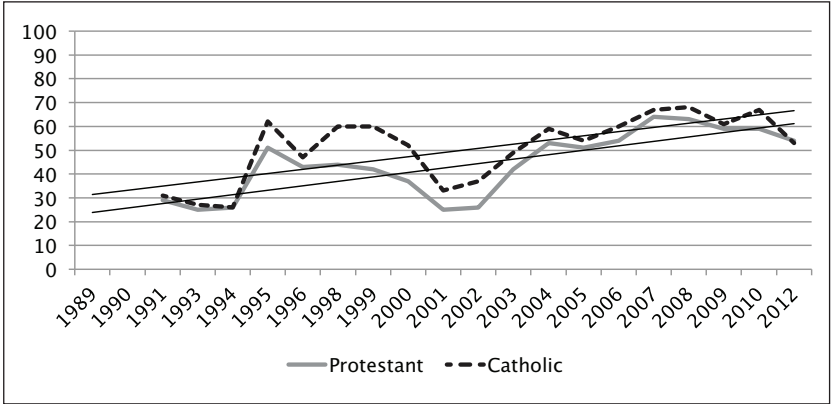
Improvements in perceptions of community relations have occurred where
violence is seen to recede (ceasefires of 1994) or where an accommodation has
been successfully achieved (devolution in 2007).

Over the past twenty years, evidence of substantial political change has
always boosted general confidence in community relations and the reappearance
of violence, however narrowly experienced, appears to be interpreted as evidence
of a broader community crisis. In addition, the figures suggest that where there
is a perception of progress which is not sufficiently shared across both
communities (Agreement in 1998), community relations remain unstable. Where
sectarian violence returns (Holy Cross 2001 and potentially in the violence of
2012-13) perceptions of community relations in general become negative.

The early evidence of deterioration in the perception of community
relationships between 2010 and 2012 suggests that progress depends on visible
evidence that a shared society has meaningful political support and cannot be
taken for granted. Problematically, this may suggest that confidence in
community relations is easily set back by anyone or incident which can provoke
significant street violence. In policy terms, political efforts to find resolutions to
cultural issues and to matters relating to safety and the rule of law are therefore
paramount in creating a climate of confidence and community well-being.

**In contrast to summative attitudes to progress in community relations,
there appears to be a widespread and sustained preference for mixing and
sharing. This appears to be independent of changes in each or any of the
areas where it might be suggested.**

The desirability of plural, shared and/or integrated solutions to social division appears to have become established across all communities in Northern Ireland over the past two decades. Public approval for efforts to achieve mixed workplaces, shared neighbourhoods and more sharing between children and young people has been a consistent feature of the responses to the Life and Times Survey and has generally increased in both communities over time. Importantly, approval for shared neighbourhoods, workplaces, marriages and schools has been the majority stated preference for over twenty years, yet does not appear to have been the priority of the larger political parties.

Interestingly, this increase in approving attitudes does not seem to be directly related to change in behaviour and policy and is independent of change in events. Thus, over 90% of respondents now prefer open and mixed workplaces, which have become normative for all public and larger employers in recent decades. However, high levels of support are also evident for shared and mixed neighbourhoods (around 70-80% of both groups) where there has been far less actual progress. A majority has continued to support integrated schools for twenty years, and this does not appear to have changed as a result of the availability and opening of more integrated schools. The number who object to inter-community or mixed marriage has fallen consistently so that only around 12% of Catholics and 28% of Protestants state or record any difficulty.

Figure 2: Percentage saying they would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood
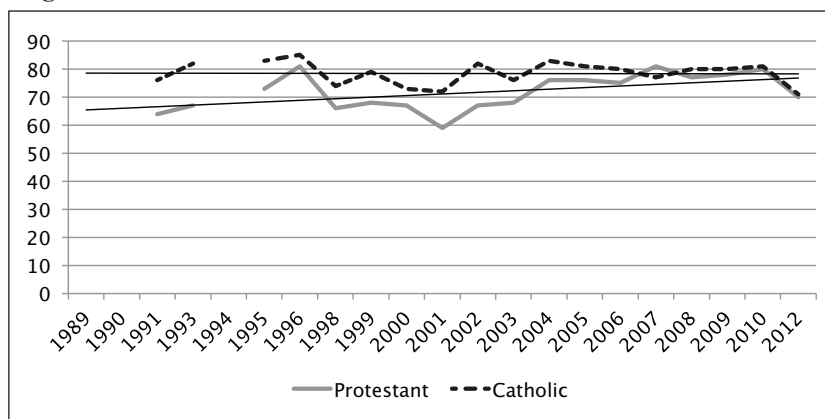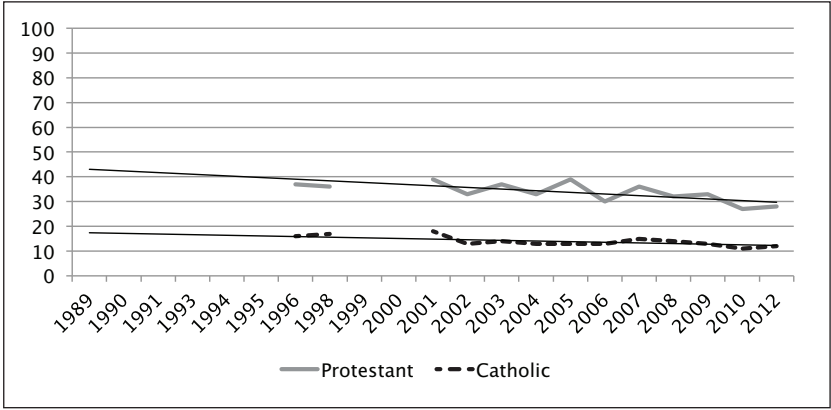
Figure 3: Percentage saying they would mind if a close relative married someone of a different religion

Widespread survey evidence of an underlying desire for 'sharing' in both communities does not appear to define overall perceptions that community relations are or are not improving when set against the symbolic importance of political co-operation or street violence. On the other hand, it may suggest that plausible policies directed to ensure sharing in education or residential areas would command popular support.

Life and Times suggests that young people are neither more nor less sectarian than their elders but that they react to progress and violence more quickly and with greater extremity. Young people are particularly responsive to better co-operation and vulnerable to a rise in fear and antagonism.

The evidence of Life and Times over twenty years is that attitudes among young people change more quickly and with greater extremity than among older adults. In times of general optimism, there is evidence that young people are among the most enthusiastic, while in times of concern and anxiety, young people have become negative more generally and more quickly.

This may reflect that young people are often the frontline of inter-community tension and violence, both as perpetrators and victims. It may go some way to explaining why the Life and Times survey has recorded younger people as more reticent to support mixed religion neighbourhoods than adults while supportive of shared schooling, mixed marriage and shared workplaces and suggests that the obstacles lie in real fears and the risks which some young people run in relation to violence.

Figure 4: Percentage saying they would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood (Young Protestants)
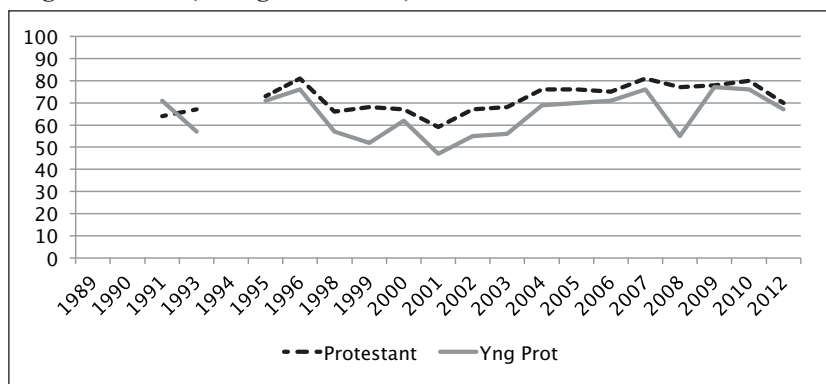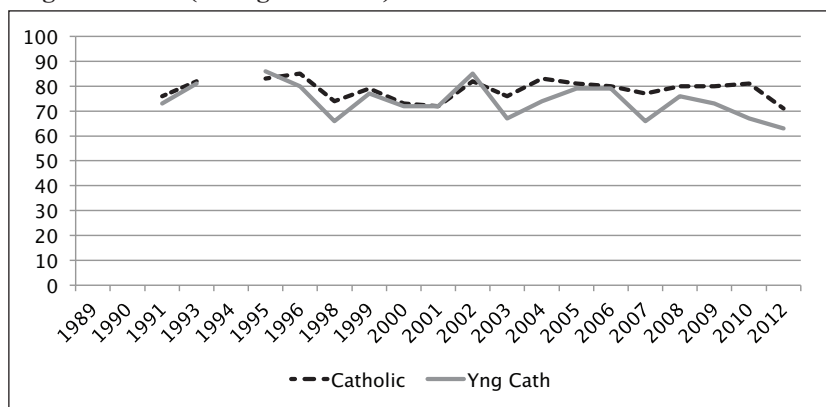

Figure 5: Percentage saying they would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood (Young Catholics)

It may therefore be of particular concern that there appears to have been a sharp decline in the perceptions and attitudes of young people towards improving community relations in recent years. Indeed among young Catholics the number wishing to live in a shared neighbourhood is now lower than at any time in the last 20 years. This may indicate a significant increase in anxiety and antagonism in youth culture which runs counter to any hopes that the peace process has somehow liberated young people from the fears of the past in a specific and linear way. Furthermore, it may signal that tackling fear and hostility needs to involve a priority for youth policy.

One of the most striking and unanticipated aspects of the longitudinal study was the marked variation between urban and rural perceptions of progress in community relations. Whereas rural respondents have been broadly optimistic for progress over the past ten years, this is not reflected in urban areas. This may reflect an unequal experience of community tension and a differential experience of change in the security climate.

Figure 6: Percentage saying they would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood (Urban Protestants)
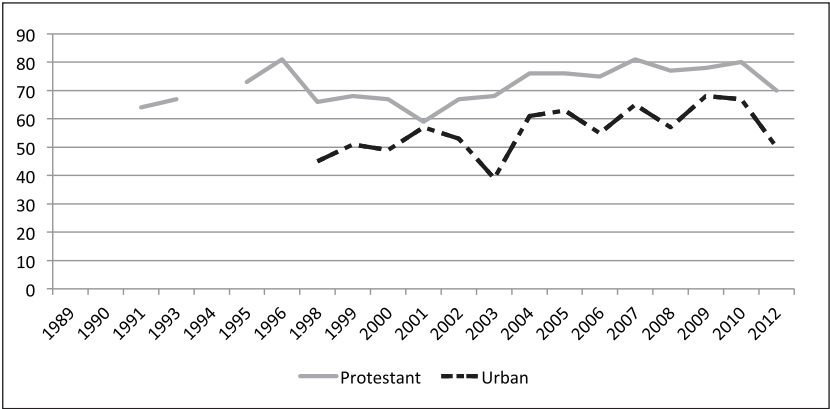

Figure 7: Percentage saying they would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood (Urban Catholics)
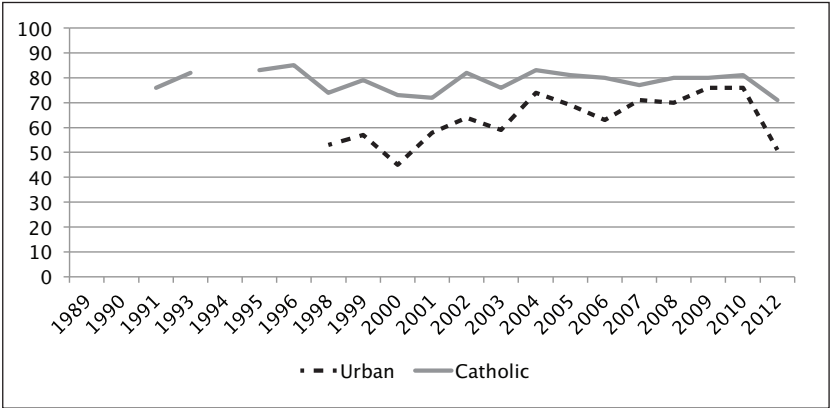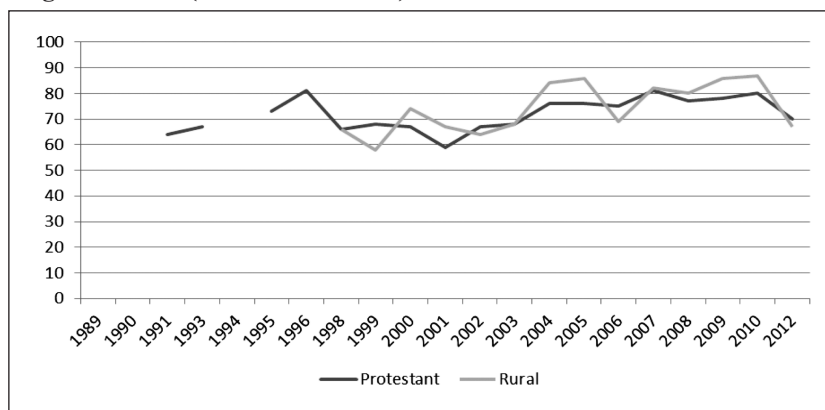
Figure 8: Percentage saying they would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood (Rural Protestants)

The peace process has not been experienced in the same way in urban and rural parts of Northern Ireland. Evidence from the Life and Times survey indicates that urban dwellers have continued to be more sceptical about progress and are more reticent about shared neighbourhoods than those living in rural areas. We can draw on a number of variables to explain this. Firstly, the security situation in rural areas has changed markedly since the disbandment of the IRA and the demilitarization policy of the British forces. This has not necessarily been the case in urban areas where both loyalist and dissident republican organisations have remained a constant presence and where interfaces have at times been locations for violence. Secondly, sharply segregated space is more obviously prevalent in some urban areas and the prospect of integration is much more immediately threatening to existing security norms. Thirdly, violence and threat around issues such as Holy Cross, parades and, latterly flags, have been largely urban phenomena in recent years, possibly influencing perceptions of progress.

This indicates that policy to tackle community relations issues may have to take the differences of urban and rural areas into account in a more systematic way than heretofore. The speed and nature of change in both contexts may be different, although it is important to emphasise that current urban difficulties do not imply that tensions in the rural areas do not exist.

Although Life and Times has only surveyed wider community attitudes to people of ethnic minority background in more recent years, it has already established that there is a worrying level of hostility and prejudice against people from an ethnic minority among Catholics and Protestants in

Northern Ireland. Active hostility appears to be particularly high among Protestants in urban areas, where the availability of social and affordable housing, and therefore the interaction with new migrants, is usually greatest.

Evidence gathered by the Life and Times Survey since 2005 suggests that prejudice against ethnic minorities is widespread and sustained. Although there is a clear association with changing economic conditions since 2008, this does not account for the consistent level or spread of recorded hostility over time.

While prejudice extends into all communities, Life and Times records markedly higher levels of negativity among Protestants which is even more marked among Protestants in urban areas. Location in urban areas appears to be a more marked indicator than levels of educational attainment, age or church attendance. In general, depopulation of the inner cities has led to a greater availability of social and affordable housing in previously Protestant areas and these attitudes may reflect the relatively higher level of new settlement in urban areas where Protestants live.

Figure 9: Percentage saying that they are 'very' or 'a little' prejudiced against people of minority ethnic communities
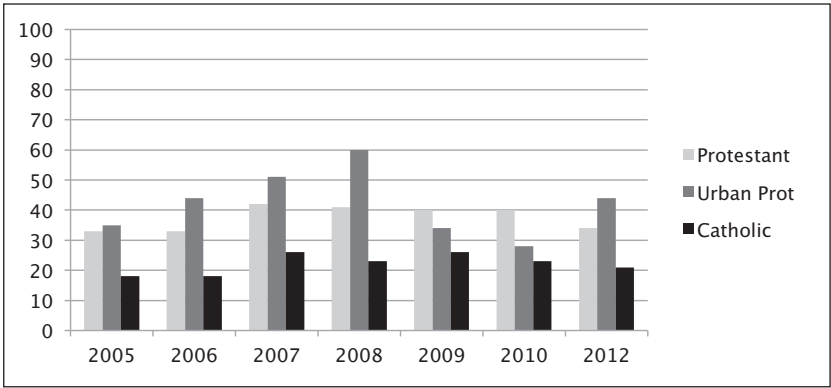

The fact that over 30% of all Protestants between 2005 and 2012 declared that they feel a degree of prejudice towards people of minority ethnic communities suggests potentially serious social consequences, particularly for those from a minority background. While the level of the prejudice and the vulnerability of small minorities indicates that this challenge should be prioritised by policy-makers, intervention to tackle these issues must necessarily be sustained and complex including aspects of community safety but also

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integrating opportunities for community engagement, youth work and education. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that further research is required to establish the nature and depth of this prejudice and to develop appropriate and community-focussed interventions.

Responses to questions of national identity and of constitutional preferences are subject to more variation in a shorter period of time than many commentators appear to assume. The results of the Life and Times Surveys in relation to nationality and political preferences since the 1990s have been complex and may suggest that people are able to make more sophisticated differentiations between nationality and constitutional issues than is normally assumed.

The period of the Life and Times survey has seen significant changes in the political and constitutional environment of Northern Ireland. In 1998, the Belfast Agreement ushered in a new compromise on nationality and citizenship in which the Irish Republic altered the two most contentious Articles of the Irish Constitution; British and Irish citizenship were formally declared as legitimate choices for everyone in Northern Ireland and all parties subscribed to the doctrine of doctrine of 'parity of esteem'.

**Figure 10: Protestant national identity (Young Protestants)**
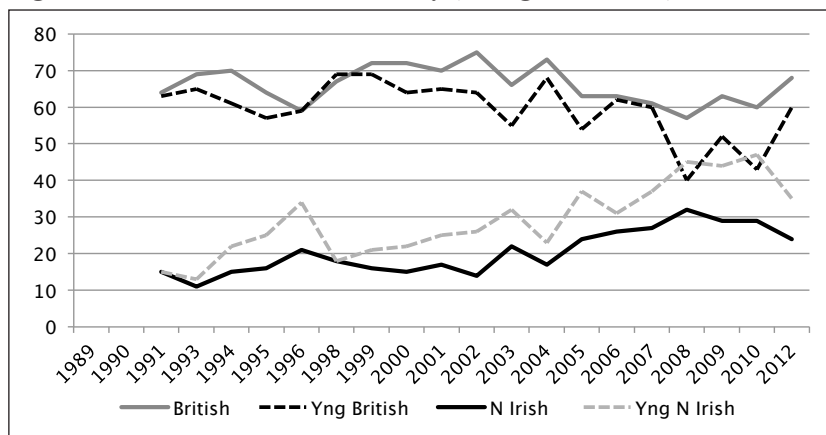
At the same time, division over national identity has been a constant of Irish politics for over a century. Unsurprisingly, the most constant evidence remains that very few Protestants consider themselves to be Irish while few Catholics describe themselves as British. However, the most striking change is in the numbers describing themselves as 'Northern Irish' which appear to be

measurably affected by the changes ushered in by political events. This was particularly marked among young Protestants where Life and Times records the numbers of young people describing themselves as Northern Irish rising from 13% in 1991 to 47% in 2010. This contrasts with a decline in the number describing themselves as British, which has fallen from 69% in 1998 to 40% in 2008. Interestingly, given the marked deterioration in the atmosphere around community relations between 2010 and 2012, this trend in national identity went into sharp reverse among young Protestants over the same period.

If attitudes to national identity have changed most radically among Protestants, changes among Catholics are much more marked when it comes to translating a national identity into a constitutional preference. Between 1994 and 2012, the number of Catholics saying that their preferred constitutional outcome for Northern Ireland was a united Ireland fell from 60% to 30%. The drop has been particularly marked since 2006 suggesting that it may be a response to a combination of political change (devolution) and economic difficulties in the Celtic Tiger. After 2007, Life and Times offered a further preference option of devolution. Since 2009, the surveys detected a larger proportion of Catholics preferring devolution to a united Ireland over the long run, although this trend went into reverse between 2010 and 2012.

Figure 11: Constitutional preferences of Catholics
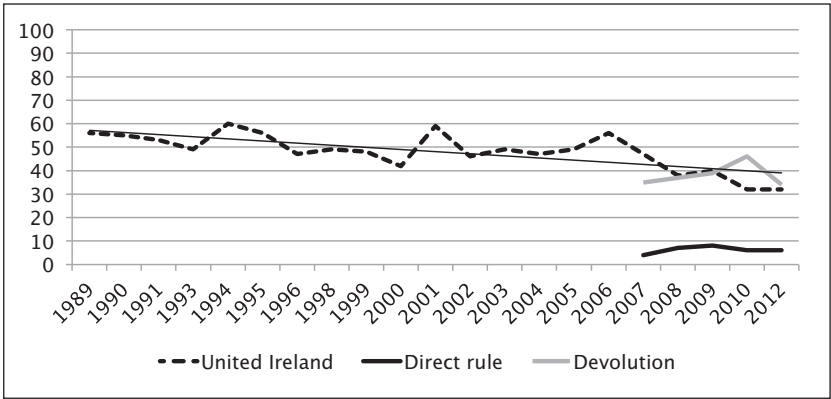
Attitudes towards living and working apart seem to be shared by people of shared political or cultural background and national identity rather than differentiated by educational attainment, age or church-going. At the same time, there is some evidence of an increase in suspicion of sharing among those in social housing.

The presumption that negative attitudes towards sharing are closely correlated with poverty is a commonplace in Northern Ireland. In order to investigate this, we carried out a number of logistic regressions to examine the factors associated with a desire for single-religion neighbourhoods and opposition to mixed marriage. For the purposes of our analysis the survey datasets were divided into five distinct time periods:

- Pre ceasefire years 1989-1993
- Post ceasefire and up to the Agreement 1995-1998
- On-off devolution 1999-2006
- Settled devolution 2007-2010
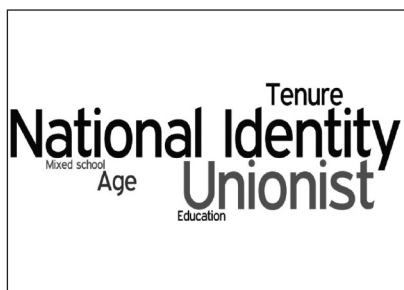- Flags dispute onward 2012 –

In each of the periods, we identified the most common correlations with resistance or hostility to sharing, and some of these are reproduced below. The relative importance of each of a number of factors is visible from the 'word clouds' by giving prominence to each association depending on their relative importance to the model. The words which have most weight visually are the ones that have most weight in the model itself and contribute the greatest explanatory value[*].

Figure 12: Factors that predict Protestants preferring single religion neighbourhoods
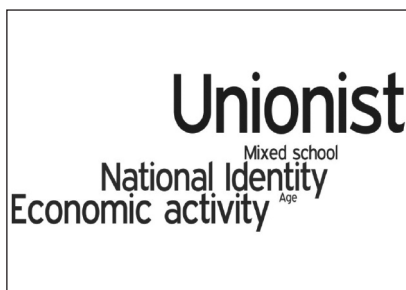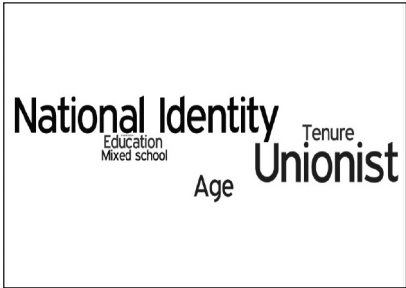
Pre ceasefire years   Post ceasefire and up to the
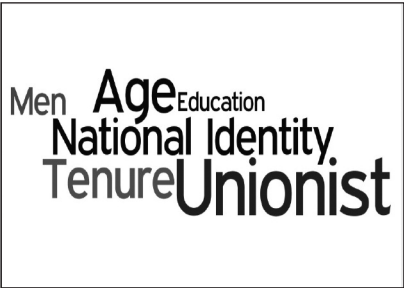1989-1993   Agreement 1995-1998

[*] Using advanced wordle.net where the weight used is the size of the change in the model if the term is removed.
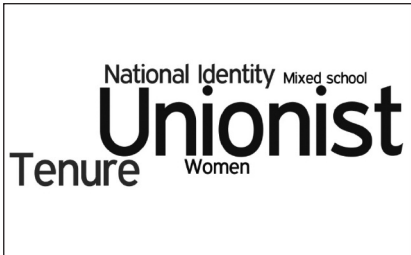
On-off devolution 1999-2006

Settled devolution 2007-2010

National Identity   Tenure   Education   Mixed school   Unionist   Age

Men   Age   Education   National Identity   Tenure   Unionist

Flags Dispute 2012-onward

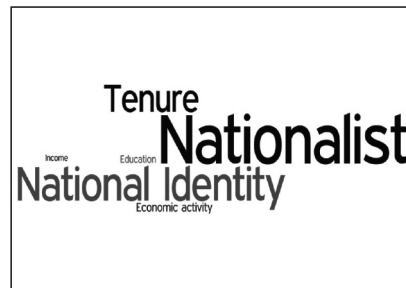National Identity   Mixed school   Unionist   Tenure   Women

What this indicates is that among Protestants, the closest association of negative association with sharing is with a strong sense of political identity (Unionist) or national identity (British). There does appear to be some association between people living in social housing and suspicion of sharing, but only minor correlation between educational attainment and hostility. Those who went to mixed schools are least likely to have negative attitudes to shared neighbourhoods or mixed marriage.

Figure 13: Factors that predict Catholics preferring single religion neighbourhoods
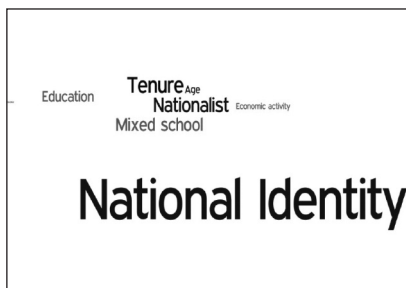
Pre ceasefire years
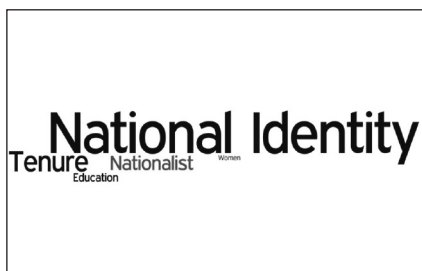1989-1993

Post ceasefire and up to the
Agreement 1995-1998

Education Age
National Identity Mixed school
Income
Nationalist
Economic activity

Tenure
Nationalist
Income Education
National Identity
Economic activity

On-off devolution 1999-2006

Settled devolution 2007-2010

Education Tenure Age
Nationalist Economic activity
Mixed school
National Identity

Economic activity
Age
Education Nationalist
Tenure National Identity
Mixed school

2012 onwards

National Identity
Tenure Nationalist Women
Education

The parallels between Catholics' and Protestants' responses are striking. Among Catholics, the closest association with suspicion of sharing is with National Identity and Nationalist politics. Again, it appears that those living in social housing may be more hostile to sharing, but very little association with educational achievement since 1993.

The evidence of the Life and Times survey over twenty years is that antipathy to sharing is much more strongly connected with a strong sense of national identity rather than with the experience of poverty or educational under attainment. Attitudes surveys are notoriously poor at exploring the causal links which lead to this association (ie does national identity lead to a strong antipathy to the other or does hostility to the other lead to a strong identity in the nation?). However NILT does suggest that attitudes to separation are an inter-class issue between people of shared identity rather than an issue of poverty which can be ameliorated through social redistribution alone.

At the same time, it is also clear that attitudes to sharing are more hostile in areas of social housing. This may reflect the fact that social housing in Northern Ireland is currently more segregated and that sharing is perceived as a greater threat to stability. This should be set aside the evidence of earlier tables that concern about shared neighbourhoods is greater among the young and in urban areas. The common factor in each of these groups is their greater likelihood of direct experience of violence. We might therefore suggest that fear or experience of violence may be the most important additional factor in driving concerns about sharing, and that these factors are significant for policy makers. In contrast, opposition to mixed marriage is mostly strongly correlated with national identity although there is also evidence in the survey that churchgoers also hold greater reservations. In neither case is there evidence that educational attainment, the best proxy in Life and Times for economic life chances, is the most significant factor. Overall, however, 20 years of data suggests that while social and economic issues are important aspects of policy to address hostility and separation, it is clear that intervention cannot be limited to or defined by socioeconomic issues alone and must address the cultural and religious concerns of people in many settings.

Conclusions

The Life and Times survey suggests that measurable progress has been made in improving inter-community relationships in Northern Ireland over the past two decades. However it also suggests that community relations in Northern Ireland remain fragile and vulnerable to events and political changes. In spite of the fact that values in relation to sharing are remarkably and strikingly constant, wider positive perceptions of and hopes for community relations are easily undermined by immediate political events. One of the consequences is that while hopes remain constant, concerns make it difficult to maintain consistent policy and do not appear to lead to long term behavioural change. However, if attitudes are to translate into changed behaviour, sustained and plausible co-operation at political level, symbolic change in attitudes and

behaviour by leaders and action to minimize violence over contentious issues will be required.

At the same time, it is clear that under certain circumstances, people make malleable and complex choices around nationality and constitutional outcomes. Unlike support for sharing, NILT figures imply that they may be changeable over time, and that people take their cue about national identity from events to a greater extent than might be supposed. Far from being 'fixed', national and constitutional identity are very definitely subject to change over time and may be amenable to complex solutions as well as simple formulas.

As part of the project, the team was also asked to identify the policy priorities which might be best suited to tackling some of the outstanding questions of community relations and hostility to the other emerging from the analysis. While an attitudes survey does not of itself suggest a full complement of policy initiatives, evidence over the last 20 years of community relations surveys suggests that any attempt to create a sustainable inter-community basis for stability will require:

- Consistent efforts to maintain and extend political agreement, the tolerance for cultural pluralism and active inter-community co-operation and interaction;
- The development of mechanisms to tackle flashpoints and manage trigger events which have the capacity to set back attitudes for a much more sustained period if they are allowed to spread or to be understood a symbolic of a wider malaise;
- New policy to tackle the issues of threat and safety which impede improved community relations between young people and in urban areas; (This might include action to create better security between communities which does not rely on interface barriers and active youth work.)
- Policy to promote cultural and national pluralism and tolerance and which suggests that co-existence, mutual understanding, gradual change and interaction are desirable and possible;
- Policy to promote greater sharing and integration among young people particularly in youth work, in interfaces and in education;
- Policies to address issues of territorialism, including paramilitary control, and to create models of sharing in social housing which eliminate or reduce wider fears;
- Active inter-departmental policy to tackle racism and relationship-building and mutual understanding work to reduce hostility to those from ethnic minorities.

After twenty years, community relations policy might usefully focus on:

- Issues of safety and threat including political co-operation;
- Cultural pluralism in all aspects of public life including the active management of contentious issues and events by all parties;
- Active opportunities to engage across community barriers especially in areas of violence;
- Attempts to reduce exclusive territorialism including ending paramilitary organization at local level;
- Addressing issues of access and disadvantage as a contribution to reducing social disadvantage.

Notes

1 Duncan Morrow, Gillian Robinson and Lizanne Dowds: The Long View of Community Relations in Northern Ireland: 1989-2012 available at http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/the-long-view-of-community-relations-1989-2012-dec-2013.pdf

2 OFMdFM (2013), Together: Building a United Community, available at http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/together-building-a-united-community-strategy.pdf