

'Caught up in the past'? The views of 16-year olds on community relations in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Young people in Northern Ireland can be viewed as the post-ceasefire generation, who have grown up in mainly peaceful times since 1994. However, as recent riots and car bomb attacks have shown us, Northern Ireland's violent past has not totally disappeared. Indeed, young people are still growing up in a society deeply divided along socio-religious lines in which 'us' and 'them' mentalities continue to persist.

ARK has monitored attitudes to community relations and religious mixing in Northern Ireland for over a decade. Descriptive findings of these attitudes among the adult population (Hughes and Donnelly, 2001 and 2003; McGinty, 2003 and 2004; Hayes et al, 2006; Muldoon et al., 2008) and young people (Devine and Schubotz, 2004; Schubotz and Devine, 2005; Schubotz and Robinson, 2006; Schubotz and McCartan et al., 2008) – and a comparison of these views (Fullerton, 2004) were published on a regular basis. This paper begins with a review of the most recent trends among survey respondents. We then take this data analysis one step further in order to explore statistically what factors contribute to segregation preferences among young people. The empirical findings are then linked to theoretical concepts of social categorisation processes by Tajfel (1978 and 1982) and collective memories by Durkheim (1965) and Halbwachs (Coser, 1992), in order to explain how these continue to shape identities among a generation that has not experienced violence and sectarianism at its worst in Northern Ireland. We conclude our contribution with an outlook to how the Northern Ireland Peace Process and its associated policy frameworks deal with attitudes to segregation. Here we relate our findings to Karl Mannheim's (1952) idea of 'communities of experience' described in his essays on the sociology of knowledge.

Survey data

The data used in this paper comes from the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey, which is an annual survey undertaken by ARK, itself a joint initiative between Queen's University and the University of Ulster. Undertaken in its current format since 2003, the survey asks the opinions of 16-year olds living in Northern Ireland about a wide range of social issues that affect their lives. Using the Child Benefit Register as a sampling frame, all young people who celebrated their 16th birthday in February or March of the survey year are asked to take part. Respondents have the option of completing the questionnaire on paper, online or by phone.

Whilst the range of issues covered in the survey varies year by year, YLT has consistently asked questions about relations between Catholics and Protestants, as well as attitudes towards religious mixing. The responses to these questions provide a useful time series of attitudes.

The YLT survey is one of a suite of surveys undertaken by ARK, which also includes the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey. This annual survey of adults aged 18 or over living in private households in Northern Ireland, records attitudes to a wide range of social policy issues, including community relations. Since NILT asks the same questions on integration preferences as YLT, it provides a useful comparative dimension to the views of 16-year olds, and their frequently voiced claim that their parent generation is 'caught up in the past'. NILT has been running since 1998, but since YLT is a much younger survey in its current format, comparisons made here relate to the survey years 2003-09.

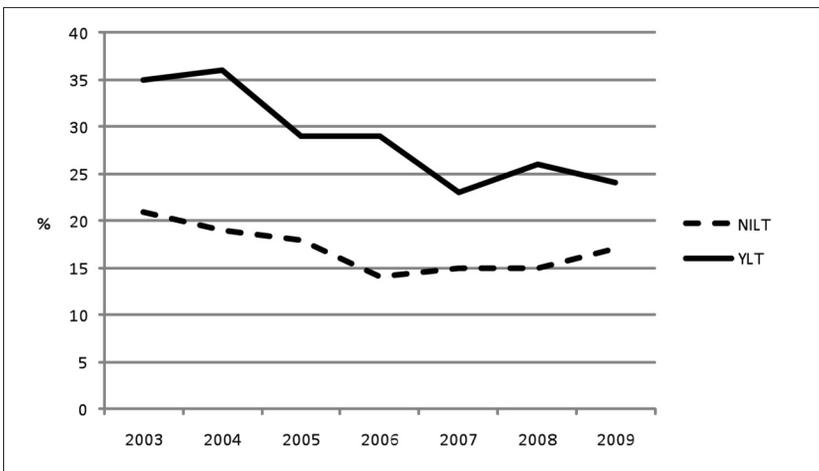
The statistical analysis provided in this article relates to the 2009 YLT survey. In this most recent survey, 3,850 16-year olds were invited to take part, and 856 (23%) took this opportunity to voice their opinion. Tables of results for all questions in the survey, broken down by sex and religion, are available on the YLT website (www.ark.ac.uk/ylt), as well as the questionnaire, the dataset and full technical details. Further information on the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey can be found at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt.

Preferences for segregation

From the onset of the NILT and YLT surveys, each year respondents have been asked if they would prefer to live in a religiously-mixed neighbourhood, work in a religiously-mixed workplace and send their children to religiously-mixed schools. As evident in Figure 1, a minority of respondents to both

surveys are in favour of living in segregated areas, and this proportion has fallen since 2003. However, the preference for segregated neighbourhoods among NILT respondents has been consistently lower than among the young people participating in the YLT survey – the figures in 2009 were 17% and 24% respectively.

Figure 1: *If you had a choice, would you prefer to live in a neighbourhood with people of only your own religion, or in a mixed-religion neighbourhood? - % saying 'own religion neighbourhood'*



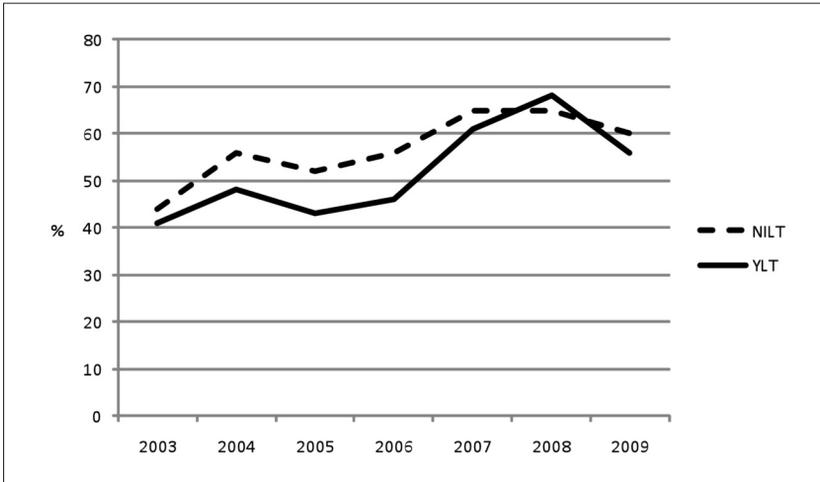
A very similar pattern emerges in relation to workplace and education. Whilst 10% of YLT respondents in 2009 were in favour of own-religion workplaces, a slightly smaller proportion (6%) of NILT respondents was too. In relation to sending a child to a mixed-religion school, support for segregation was much higher for both surveys, although still with lower levels of support amongst NILT respondents compared with YLT respondents (32% and 40% respectively).

Perceptions of relations

Respondents to both surveys were also asked about their perception of relations between Protestants and Catholics, both past and future. Figure 2 indicates that there has been a general improvement in the perception of relations since 2003. There was a particularly sharp increase in 2007, perhaps related to the reinstatement of the Northern Ireland Executive earlier that year (Morrow, 2008). However, since then the proportion of those saying that community relations were better now has dwindled, perhaps due to a rise in

sectarian tensions and dissident Republican activity. For all survey years, NILT respondents were slightly more positive about community relations than YLT respondents, except in 2008 when the situation was reversed.

Figure 2: *What about relations between Protestants and Catholics? Would you say they are better than they were 5 years ago, worse, or about the same now as then? - % saying 'better'*



When asked about relations between the two communities in the future, a similar, and more distinct, pattern emerged: 52% of NILT respondents were optimistic about future relations in the next five years, compared with 38% of YLT respondents. Of course, this is not to say that both sets of respondents were highly pessimistic; rather, they thought that relations were likely to stay about the same as now (41% of both YLT and NILT respondents responded in this way in 2009).

Overall, these figures indicate that young people living in Northern Ireland are less supportive of integrated housing, workplaces and education, and have a slightly more jaundiced view of perceptions of relations than NILT respondents do. Some of the differences in the level of support for integration between survey respondents could be due to the way that the surveys are carried out. The YLT survey is a self-completion survey, with the majority of respondents completing a paper questionnaire. Within NILT, however, the questions are asked in a face-to-face interview, which is likely to increase the potential for respondents to give more socially acceptable responses. Nevertheless, this social desirability bias is unlikely to explain why 16-year

olds, who have no direct experience of the worst periods of Northern Ireland's violent history, have a more pessimistic outlook on community relations and are more in favour of religious segregation than their parent and grandparent generation who have lived through the decades of the 'Troubles'.

The two quotes below from two respondents to the 2009 YLT survey provide evidence that young people put the blame on these more negative responses on the shoulders of their elders,

I don't feel that the damage that has been caused in Northern Ireland as a result of sectarianism will ever be repaired. Parents are teaching children to follow in their sectarian footsteps and I feel that this will continue to happen for many years to come. (Not that I want this to happen).

People are still bitter about the past, and at the end of the day no-one can change those people's views, but they should try to move on for the sake of the young people of the new generation.

Theoretical perspective

Rather than offering yet another theoretical explanation for the cause of the Northern Ireland conflict, in this section of this article we would like to put forward some theoretical perspectives on collective memory formation which may help us to understand how socio-religious segregation and negative attitudes towards mixing are reproduced, and therefore why it may be that young people hold more negative views than the adult population. Within sociological and social psychological literature, three theories appear particularly relevant when explaining continued preferences for segregation.

Tajfel's theory of social categorisation has previously been applied to the Northern Ireland context. According to Tajfel (1978 and 1982), people divide the social world they live in into two categories: 'us' and 'them', or '*ingroups*' and '*outgroups*'. Tajfel and his followers argue that humans do this because they are 'cognitive misers' by nature, that is, they can only consume a limited amount of information and therefore have to be selective in what information they deal with and absorb. As a consequence of this process, people develop social identities which distinguish them from others.

According to this theory, the desire to enhance good feelings about the groups people belong to (*ingroups*) is intrinsic to human nature in order to ensure positive feelings about themselves. At the same time, groups that

people do not feel they belong to (*outgroups*) are then seen more negatively. The desire to belong to a group also results in a misperception of both differences and similarities within groups and between groups. Within-group differences and between-group similarities are under-stated, whereas between-group differences and within-group similarities are overestimated. Social psychology has applied the concepts of stereotyping and prejudice to these processes. It is known that such negative feelings, stereotypes and prejudices often arise without any contact with members of the '*other*' groups, whilst group membership itself has been seen as indicative of the perceptions of the self (Muldoon and Trew, 2000; Zárate and Garzer, 2002). Thus, the ongoing socio-religious segregation and 'us-and-them' mentality in Northern Ireland can be explained by social categorisation processes and the human nature of social cognition. Related to this is Allport's much cited contact hypothesis (1954), according to which meaningful contact at equal status helps to reduce tensions and prejudices between groups experiencing conflict. In particular, the planned integrated education movement in Northern Ireland has used Allport's inter-group contact theory to support their case from very early on (Spencer, 1987).

Emile Durkheim's theory on the elementary forms of religious life (1965) sheds some light on the role of religion as a key marker of identity. According to Durkheim, religion provides a sense of the sacredness, a common destiny and identity linking past, present and future. He argues that sacred symbols and celebrations hold the communities together. Within these ceremonies, the past is 'represented for mere sake of representing it and fixing it more firmly in the mind' (1965) in order to confirm the group identity and unity.

Attempts have been made recently to mainstream and reinvent the two main Northern Irish cultural and religious celebrations - namely St. Patrick's Day as a festival for *all* Christians and 12th of July as 'Orange Fest'. For outsiders (such as tourists) who are strangers to the Northern Ireland conflict and not part of it, this strategy may have some appeal. However, beyond this, there has been little evidence for a change in ownership of these celebrations. St. Patrick's Day remains almost as firmly rooted within the Catholic and Nationalist community as the 12th of July is within the Protestant and Unionist community, and with Durkheim one can argue that their historical outlook confirms socio-religious allegiances.

In his 1997 book *Material Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland*: Neil Jarman writes about the 'the endless parade':

While the loyal orders feel threatened by the demands to give up or change their traditions of parading, the nationalist community have

readily asserted their own rights to parade. A little-publicised feature of the Troubles has been the way in which the nationalist community, and in particular the republican movement, have used public parades to assert their growing power and to extend their tradition of commemorations. (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/parade/jarman.htm>)

Again, this can be seen as further validation of Durkheim's view that sacred celebrations and commemorations contribute to cohesion among a religious community.

The YLT survey itself provides evidence about how 16-year olds today still relate to these celebrations, how they and their symbolisms are an important part of who they are, and what socio-religious group they belong to:

I prefer associating with my own religion as it is safer especially around 17th March and 12th July and also there would be less controversy on matters such as unification of Ireland, etc. (YLT respondent, 2004).

The Catholic community is always talking about compromise but yet they wish to stop all Protestant parades, which is part of our culture. Nobody is trying to stop the Catholic culture. Why is the Union Jack not allowed to be displayed? It's our national flag, yet it is not allowed to be seen, and yet a foreign flag like the tricolour is displayed everywhere. (YLT respondent, 2003).

The final social theory that we want to table here in order to contextualise our empirical research is Maurice Halbwachs' theory on collective memory (Coser, 1992). Halbwachs maintains that memorialising is a social process. Whilst only individuals have the capacity to contemplate the past, it is with the help of other social actors that people can recall and situate their memories. This collective memory makes our individual recollections possible. Halbwachs argues that memory is not merely the sum of individual recollections among people in the same society, but rather a product of joint collective effort. Being a student of Durkheim, Halbwachs develops Durkheim's ideas of commemoration with regard to collective memory. Within the processes of collective memory, the past is not simply preserved, but rather it is *reconstructed* in terms of the present. Halbwachs' idea that we perceive the past only in terms of the present can aid our understanding of the ongoing socio-religious segregation in Northern Ireland. Significantly though, the same theory can be applied to argue that it is changes to the Northern Irish society today that are key to the diminishing of socio-religious segregation.

In summary then, sociological and socio-psychological theory can help us to contextualise our empirical findings on attitudes to community relations and preferences for segregation. Theories on collective memory, the role of religion and commemoration within the reproduction of collective memories, as well as an understanding of social categorisation processes and inter-group contact theory are useful tools to recognise mechanisms of socio-religious segregation in Northern Ireland. But does a statistical analysis of our empirical data from the YLT survey support any of these theories?

Factors determining depositions of segregation

The main aim of this paper is to explore attitudes to religious mixing in a more in-depth manner than previously undertaken using YLT survey data. Earlier research on this topic has tended to be limited to simple crosstabulations of one variable with another. Here, we try to take this further, and present a more nuanced approach. Namely, we try to establish what factors, statistically, contribute to segregation preferences.

The first stage, then, was to create a scale that counted respondents' segregation preferences in three areas: neighbourhood, workplace and school. Therefore the values of this scale ranged from 0 (that is, the respondent did not support segregation in any of the areas) to 3 (that is, the respondent supported segregation in all three areas): see Table 1 for the frequency distribution. The scale was statistically reliable (Cronbach's alpha=0.7, which is within the acceptable range of values). One half of respondents were not supportive of segregation at all, with a further quarter supporting segregation in only one situation. Conversely, one in ten respondents were supportive of segregation in all three areas. For comparative purposes, this scale was also calculated for NILT respondents, and we found that over two thirds of these respondents did not support segregation in any situation, again confirming that 16-year olds, overall, are more favourably disposed towards segregation than their adult counterparts.

Table 1: Number of areas within which respondent prefers segregation

	%	
	YLT	NILT
0	51	69
1	24	19
2	15	9
3	10	4

Using a statistical procedure known as multiple regression analysis, we then tried to identify a set of variables which predict levels of support for segregation. We used 'hierarchical' or 'sequential' regression, during which explanatory or 'independent' variables are entered in steps or blocks. At each step, each variable (or set of variables) is assessed for how much it adds to the prediction of the variable we are exploring (referred to as the 'dependent' variable), after the variables within the previous step have been controlled for (Pallant, 2005).

Since this analysis was exploratory, we included an extensive range of independent variables, namely:

1. Whether the respondent was male or female
2. Whether the respondent had always lived in Northern Ireland
3. The financial background of the respondent's family
4. Whether the respondent lived in an urban area or not
5. Whether the respondent thought that they would be in further education in two years' time
6. The type of school that the respondent attended (grammar, secondary or integrated)
7. Whether the respondent attended a religiously-segregated school
8. Whether the respondent lived in a religiously-segregated neighbourhood
9. Whether the respondent said that they belonged to a religious community
10. The importance of religious identity to the respondent
11. The importance to national identity to the respondent

These variables were included because previous research had identified them as being important in relation to support for segregation, or because we felt that they might be analytically useful. For example, analysis of YLT data had previously found that respondents who are neither Catholic nor Protestant, and those attending integrated schools or cross-community projects are most likely to prefer mixed-religion environments (Schubotz and Devine, 2005; Schubotz and Robinson, 2006).

Two types of output are presented here. Firstly, Table 2 shows the value of R^2 (the coefficient of determination), which provides a measure of how well the independent variables can predict the dependent variable (in this case, the segregation scale). If the R^2 value is multiplied by 100, this figure represents the percentage of the variation in the dependent variable.

The first block of variables related to the background characteristics of the respondent, namely their sex, if they had always lived in Northern Ireland, if they lived in an urban area, and whether their family was financially well off. The R^2 value is low, and only represents 5.5% of the variation in the segregation scale.

The next block of variables are related to school type and anticipated participation in further education, and does not result in a large change in R^2 . However, the inclusion of the third block (whether or not the respondent attended a religiously-mixed school) results in a larger increase, as does the inclusion of the next block of variables, which relates to living in a segregated neighbourhood. However, the largest change in R^2 (0.067) is associated with the importance of national identity to the respondent. The importance of religious identity within the final block also results in a fairly large change in R^2 . In summary, then, Table 2 indicates that whilst demographic variables do not play a large part in predicting differences in the segregation scale, religious and national background and identity do.

Table 2: Blocks of independent variables and resultant change in R^2

	R^2	Change in R^2
1 Background	.055	
2 School (type and further education attendance)	.074	.019
3 Segregated school	.111	.037
4 Segregated neighbourhood	.144	.033
5 Religious background	.203	.059
6 Importance of national identity	.270	.067
7 Importance of religious identity	.312	.042

Table 2 presents summary information for each block within the analysis. Additional useful information is gained by examining which of the variables within each block make a statistically significant contribution to the variation in the level of support for segregation. Table 3 presents the standardised beta coefficients for each of these significant variables, and this is an indication of the level of effect that each independent variable has on the dependent variable. A negative coefficient means lower levels of support for segregation.

In block 1, being female, having lived outside Northern Ireland or living in urban areas are all associated with lower levels of support for segregation. However, the independent variables added within block 2 (the type of school or participation in further education) are not statistically significant. In contrast, the output from block 3 indicates that the attendance of a religiously-segregated school is strongly associated with increased levels of support for segregation, and the size of the effect of the demographic variables is decreased (as evidenced by the smaller coefficients). This pattern is replicated in block 4, when living in a segregated area also appears to be strongly associated with preference for segregation. Indeed, membership of the Catholic or Protestant community is also associated with support for segregation, and the effect of demographic variables begins to wane. The inclusion of variables in blocks 6 and 7 results in demographic variables completely losing their statistical significance. Instead, the experience of segregation, membership of communities and strength of identity are strongly associated with support for segregation.

Table 3: Standardised beta coefficients and level of significance

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Female	-.127**	-.112*	-.104**	-.094*	-.101*	-	-
Not always lived in NI	-.117**	-.112*	-.108*	-.094*	-	-	-
Urban	-.135**	-.125**	-.113**	-.111**	-.084*	-	-
Segregated school			.224***	.219***	.178***	.162***	.166***
Segregated area				.183***	.153***	.128**	.128**
Member of Catholic community					.332***	.223***	.143*
Member of Protestant community					.323***	.240***	.179**
National identity important						.279***	.197***
Religious identity important						.237***	

* p< 0.5 ** p< 0.01 *** p<0.001

Discussion and conclusions

Our findings suggest that religious and national identities are the strongest predictors of segregation preferences. In other words, the more religious people are and the more important their national and religious identity is to them, the more likely they are to prefer to live, work and go to school with people of their own kind. This can be seen as clear evidence for what Tajfel calls 'social categorisation processes' in Northern Ireland. The overlapping finding that perceived membership of the Protestant and Catholic communities are also strongly related to a preference of segregation strengthen our view that Tajfel's theory is a suitable vehicle to explain socio-religious segregation.

The belonging to these communities is characterised by largely separated life worlds, such as segregated housing, segregated schooling, different rituals and commemorations, such as parades, festivals and celebrations, as mentioned above. These not only connect contemporary communities to the past, but, as Halbwachs would say, 'reconstruct' the segregated present using historical events and commemorative symbolisms, as Jarman (1997) demonstrated for Northern Ireland. This phenomenon of *Verzuiling* – or pillarisation of society - (Lijphart, 1969 and 1977) has also been seen as the reason for the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland. McGarry and O'Leary (1990) argue that it is this failure of political elites to seek and find a compromise which has proliferated and prolonged the Northern Ireland conflict.

Allport (1954) would find validation of his contact hypothesis in our finding that those attending segregated schools and those living in segregated neighbourhoods are more likely to support segregated settings. This also confirms our previous work in which we argued that those with meaningful contact experiences, either through planned integrated schools or cross-community projects, are more likely to support religious mixing. The fact that the importance of religious identity is the main predictor of segregation preferences would also confirm Durkheim's (1965) view of the importance of religion in collective memory processes.

Although both belonging to the Catholic and Protestant community were significant predictors of segregation preferences, the predictive power of belonging to a Protestant community was somewhat stronger, as Table 2 shows. Five years ago we reported YLT findings that seemed to suggest that young Protestants were disillusioned with the Peace Process in Northern Ireland (Schubotz and Devine, 2005). The strong identification of young

Protestants with their community and their subsequent segregation preferences shown in Table 2 could be interpreted as evidence for continued discontent.

Whilst neither of these findings is groundbreaking, few - if any - publications have so far provided more nuanced quantitative evidence for the association between the experience of socio-religious segregation and segregation preferences. It is clear from our data collected 15 years after the ceasefire that mechanisms of social categorisation processes still operate in Northern Ireland, and it is equally clear that religion remains one of the key markers of identity.

There is, however, also reason to suggest that identity preferences are changing. In 2009, almost one third (30%) of 16-year olds respondents to the YLT survey identified as being Northern Irish. This figure is similar to the NILT survey (27%), and this can certainly be seen as a growth of allegiances beyond the traditional British-Irish national identity divide. Thus, a positive feature of the past 15 years is that there has been space for people to identify with non-traditional identities. Evidence for optimism also exists, as reported elsewhere (NCB NI and ARK/YLT, 2010): whilst 16-year olds may hold more negative views on community relations than their adult counterparts, YLT respondents have more favourable views than NILT respondents with regard to minority ethnic groups.

Without a doubt, Northern Ireland has changed over recent years and has become a more multi-cultural and diverse society. So far it remains unclear how this will impact on collective memories and integration preferences. Karl Mannheim (1952) argues that age cohorts form 'communities of experience' and 'frame groups' whose common experiences lead to similar dispositions and world views. No one will doubt that from the post-ceasefire area has emerged a generation with quite distinct experiences that differentiate them from their parent cohort who have grown up in a much more violent, and culturally homogeneous, Northern Ireland.

As we write this article, government is consulting on its new community relations framework. Whilst the previous policy document – *A Shared Future* (OFMDFM, 2005) – focused solely on community relations, this new framework deals with both sectarianism and racism (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2009). Within the proposed *Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration*, there is a stated commitment to 'addressing the issues for disaffected young people; welcoming and living in harmony with our neighbours from minority ethnic backgrounds; and tackling the conditions that

perpetuate the need for urban interfaces and rural segregation' (OFMDFM, 2010). Proposed strategies include focusing on education and promoting greater understanding of shared values, as well as facilitating and empowering youth groups to work together on civic responsibility projects. More broadly, government wants to support sharing in education, workplaces and communities. Again, this fits into the theoretical contexts that we have already highlighted, and sees them as possible solutions to issues of segregation and prejudice. Given the views (both negative and positive) of the YLT respondents, it is welcoming that the document highlights the need to recognise the range of issues and challenges facing our young people in all aspects of their lives (OFMDFM, 2010:27). Perhaps we need to be just a little bit more patient with this post-ceasefire generation.

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