

Questions and Answers: comparing the attitudes of elected representatives, political party supporters and the general public towards minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Northern Ireland is becoming a more diverse society. Aspects of this diversity include the presence of second and third generation migrants and the growth of a migrant worker population as a result of globalisation, European Union enlargement to the east and the demands for more labour in the workplace.¹ Moreover, indicators such as the growth of voluntary and community organisations representing migrant workers, Travellers and other minority ethnic groups, suggest that minority ethnic communities are playing an ever increasing role in public life. Other indicators, such as the growth of racist incidents recorded by the police, suggest that there is ongoing resistance to minority ethnic communities and migrant workers becoming part of everyday life in Northern Ireland.² There have been a number of different surveys of public opinion on minority ethnic communities.³ Some of these surveys have compared differences in attitudes as these have varied by political party. Gilligan and Lloyd (2006), for example, found that at least 19% of the supporters of political parties in Northern Ireland reported being a little prejudiced against people from minority ethnic communities. When these figures were broken down party by party they found significant variation. Supporters of Unionist parties were much more likely than supporters of other political parties to report being either 'a little' or 'very' prejudiced against people from minority ethnic communities (Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) 46%; Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) 31%; Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) 21%; Sinn Féin 19%; Alliance Party 19%;).

To date there has been very little research on the views of political parties and elected representatives regarding the above matters in Northern Ireland. Connolly's (2002) review of the literature on ethnic minorities, for example, makes no specific mention of political parties. The issue of political parties' minority ethnic engagement to some extent does arise though from research carried out amongst minority ethnic community organisations. As Lewis noted in a survey of organisations serving a range of 'communities of interest': '70 per cent of organisations interviewed for this study called for greater political support for their work and their communities. In particular, many requested that politicians go beyond moral condemnation of racist attacks and deliver policies and resources on the ground'.⁴ We do not, however, know the extent to which views on ethnic minorities reported in general population surveys, such as the annual Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey, reflect the views held by elected representatives. Some of the data we have gathered during this research enables us to compare the attitudes of elected representatives with those of their party supporters. Elsewhere we have provided a detailed outline of the way that the election manifestos of the main political parties in Northern Ireland have dealt with minority ethnic issues.⁵ In this article we draw upon a survey that we carried out amongst elected representatives in Northern Ireland and compare the responses of elected representatives with those of their party supporters. The authors of this article have benefited from the support of the *EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland 2000 – 2006* (Peace II) to investigate elected representatives relations with, and attitudes towards, minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland.

Details of the survey

We drew up a survey containing thirty eight questions. Half of the questions were on the nature of contact that elected representatives have with people from minority ethnic backgrounds. We asked questions about how often elected representatives had contact with minority ethnic persons and communities and where this contact took place. We also asked questions on prejudice against minority ethnic communities, on policy regarding them and a range of questions on the participation of minority ethnic people in public life. A copy of the survey was posted to all of the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and all local councillors in Northern Ireland. We received back 201 completed surveys, which is a response rate of 32% – a respectable enough return for a postal survey. Almost 17% of respondents were MLAs and more than 94% were local councillors (11% were both). The response rate was fairly representative of the party weightings in local, and in Northern Ireland

(Stormont), government. Most of our respondents answered every question on the survey. The poorest response rate was on the questions regarding contact. Even with these questions, however, the response rate rarely dipped below 170 (85%) out of the 201. The lower response rate of these particular questions may possibly be because elected representatives who had little or no contact declined to answer the question. If this is the case then the answers slightly overestimate the levels of contact between elected representatives and minority ethnic communities. Another caveat about attitude surveys needs to be noted here. Attitudes can fluctuate quite dramatically depending on a range of different factors, including: the staging of a high profile event, such as publicity around a new policy; the phrasing of a question; the respondent's perception of what the question is asking for; the sensitivity of the question asked; the respondent's perceptions of the consequences of giving a particular answer; etc. On the issue of attitudes towards minority ethnic communities, therefore, the responses which are given may or may not be accurate.

In devising the survey we tried to ask elected representatives the same questions on minority ethnic communities that were asked of the general public in the 2006 NILT survey. The questions on contact are not directly comparable between the two surveys, but many of the other questions are. In this article we focus on the questions which are directly comparable. Before looking at these though, a few further words of caution should be noted. In our survey and in the 2006 NILT survey a number of questions on prejudice against ethnic minorities were asked. Both surveys also asked questions on their participation in public life. Again, both surveys asked a question on immigration control from the eight Central and Eastern European countries (A8) which joined the European Union in 2004, and another question on the respondents' knowledge of the culture of minority ethnic communities living in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the survey of elected representatives asked a question on legislation on hate crimes, which had been asked in the 2005 NILT survey.

Although many of the same questions were asked in the two surveys, there are other features of the surveys which suggest that we should exercise caution when comparing the results from each of them. First, the NILT survey is an annual survey that is carried out through face to face interviews by a professionally trained interviewer, whereas ours was a self-completion postal survey. Second, the size of the sample for the NILT survey is much larger, which makes the statistical analysis more reliable. Third, the return rate on the NILT survey was also better, making it more likely to be representative of the population sampled. Against this, however, our survey was completed by a much higher proportion of the target group. This factor means that the answers

given are likely to be more representative than are those in the NILT survey.⁶ The survey of elected representatives was a short survey focused on a particular topic, whilst the NILT survey contains several hundred questions and covers a range of different topics. The other major factor which may not make the two surveys directly comparable is the time-lag between them. The NILT survey was carried out in late 2006 (and some questions were asked in 2005, but not in 2006), whereas our postal survey was carried out in late 2007. The political context was also different. In late 2007, unlike a year or two previously, the Northern Ireland Assembly was up and running, with Sinn Féin and the DUP as the two main parties in Government. There was also accumulated media coverage of 'race hate' incidents to take into account in the years leading up to 2007, which may have affected perceptions on this topic in particular. Caution should also be exercised when comparing the answers that are given by the different parties to our survey. Elected representatives may be giving an accurate and honest answer to each and every question, or they may be thinking about how their answers would reflect on perceptions of their party. The answers which are given need to be interpreted, but they can be interpreted in different ways. As one of the authors put it, when commenting on the 2005 NILT survey findings about differences between levels of Catholics' and Protestants' own reported prejudice against ethnic minorities:

[The] research shows that Protestants in Northern Ireland are more honest than Catholics. Well not really. That is only one possible interpretation of the figures... Another possible interpretation is that Protestants are twice as likely to be prejudiced against ethnic minorities as Catholics are. The problem is that the figures do not tell us which, if any, of these interpretations is correct. The figures tell us who answered the questions and what answers they gave, but they do not tell us why they gave those answers.⁷

In this article we will provide some limited interpretation of the data. But we want to re-emphasize that the data is open to a range of different interpretations.

Comparing the two surveys: attitudes by party

Elected representatives are expected to be representative *of* the community, in the sense that they share the outlook, views and opinions of that community, or at least of a substantial portion of that community, and particularly of those who support them. They are also expected to be representatives *for* the community, in the sense that they strive to act in the best interests of the people they represent. In this regard they represent not

only the views of their party and supporters, but they are also expected to represent the interests of their constituents, irrespective of whether those constituents actually voted for them or not. Moreover, in acting in the interests of their constituents, they may also sometimes act in ways which are contrary to the outlook, views and opinions of those who elected them.

In order to gauge the extent to which elected representatives are similarly-minded to those who support their party, we examine the divergence between the opinions, or attitudes, of elected representatives from a particular party with those of their party supporters (i.e. the difference in likelihood of elected representatives choosing a particular answer compared to their party supporters). This disparity can be narrow – we use a difference of less than 6% ($\leq +$ or $- 5\%$) – or wide ($> +$ or $- 5\%$). A narrow disparity shows a close correspondence between the views of elected representatives and their party supporters. The disparity can be a positive one or a negative one (i.e. elected representatives can be more likely (+), or less likely (-), than their party supporters to opt for a particular answer). In some instances, the divergence between elected representatives and party supporters are all in the same direction (+ or -). In other instances, the divergence is in different directions (i.e. + for some parties and - for others). In this section, we compare the two surveys under the following subheadings: prejudice; knowledge of minority ethnic culture; participation in public life; and policy (on hate crimes and on immigration).

Prejudice

Our survey asked four questions on prejudice (all of the questions were also asked in the 2006 NILT survey). One of these questions was on the individual respondent's own personal prejudice. The other three were on perceptions of prejudice in Northern Irish society more generally. One was on perceptions of whether, in Northern Ireland generally, there has been increasing respect for the culture and concern of Irish Travellers; another was on the extent of prejudice against people from minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland today; and a third asked whether respondents thought that there was more prejudice against people from minority ethnic backgrounds in Northern Ireland nowadays than there was five years ago.

On the question regarding respondents' own personal prejudice against people from minority ethnic communities, no elected representatives said that they were 'very prejudiced' (compared to 1% of respondents to NILT). Elected representatives were also less likely than members of the public to say that

they were ‘a little prejudiced’ (15% compared to 23%). Also, they were considerably more likely to say that they were not at all prejudiced against people from minority ethnic communities (85% compared to 75%). When the responses to this question are broken down by political party we find that elected representatives from *all* the main political parties were less likely than their party supporters to claim to be prejudiced. Elected representatives from the DUP and Sinn Féin were just as likely (14%) to say that they were ‘a little’ prejudiced against people from minority ethnic backgrounds. In terms of divergence between parties and their supporters, however, the DUP was the party that demonstrated the greatest divergence and Sinn Féin demonstrated the least (or in other words, the DUP was the least representative of the attitudes of their party supporters on this question and Sinn Féin the most representative). There was a difference of 16 percentage points between elected representatives from the DUP and their party supporters on this question (14% compared to 30%). For Sinn Féin that difference was 9 percentage points (14% compared to 23%). Figures for the other major parties are shown in Table 1.

	NILT 2006, %	Elected Representatives, %	‘Divergence’
UUP	39	27	-12
DUP	30	14	-16
Sinn Féin	23	14	-9
Alliance	23	10	-13
SDLP	18	5	-13

Table 1: Elected representatives and party supporters saying that they were ‘very’ or ‘a little’ prejudiced against people from minority ethnic backgrounds

The measure of divergence is not a measure of own recorded prejudice. As we can see from Table 1, elected representatives from the UUP were the most likely to say that they are prejudiced, and those from the SDLP least likely to say that they are prejudiced. This was true of their party supporters also. We do not know whether those elected representatives who say they are a little prejudiced are concentrated in the same constituencies as their party supporters who also say they are a little prejudiced, since neither the NILT data nor our survey had a variable which allows data to be examined at a constituency level. The fact that the rank ordering of the elected representatives and party supporters are the same (i.e. UUP supporters *and* politicians are most likely to report being prejudiced, DUP second, SF third,

Alliance fourth and SDLP least likely) suggests that parties are in some respects representative of the views of their party supporters. According to the data, Unionist parties and their supporters are more likely than Nationalist parties and the Alliance Party to say that they are prejudiced. The data, however, can be misleading and needs to be read in the context of responses to other questions.

On the other questions regarding prejudice the findings are much more mixed. On perceptions of prejudice in Northern Ireland today, for example, elected representatives from the UUP were less likely than their supporters to think that there is a lot of racial prejudice in Northern Ireland today (86% compared to 93% i.e. a difference of -7 percentage points) and elected representatives from Sinn Féin were more likely than their party supporters to think that there is a lot of racial prejudice in Northern Ireland today (98% compared to 92% i.e. a difference of +6 percentage points). On the question of whether the culture of Irish Travellers was more respected today, elected representatives from the UUP were more likely than their supporters to think that it is more respected today (19% compared to 13% i.e. a difference of +6 percentage points) and elected representatives from Sinn Féin were less likely than their party supporters to think so (13% compared to 19% -i.e. a difference of -6 percentage points). The rank ordering of parties on this question, however, was fairly similar for politicians and their party supporters. On the question of whether there was more prejudice in Northern Ireland today than five years ago, we find significant divergence between elected representatives and their party supporters. This time, however, all diverge in the same direction. Elected representatives are consistently less likely than their party supporters to say that there is more prejudice in Northern Ireland today. The rank ordering of parties on this question is dissimilar (see Table 2).

	NILT 2006, %	Elected Representatives, %	'Divergence'
SDLP	79	40	-39
Alliance	74	53	-21
UUP	71	23	-48
DUP	69	41	-28
Sinn Féin	65	43	-22

Table 2: Elected representatives and party supporters saying that there is more prejudice against people from minority ethnic backgrounds today than there was 5 years ago

Knowledge of the culture of minority ethnic communities

Both surveys asked a question on the respondents' knowledge of the culture of ethnic minorities. Elected representatives were much more likely (49%) than the general public (19%) to either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with the following statement: 'I personally know quite a bit about the culture of some minority ethnic communities living in Northern Ireland' (i.e. a divergence of 30%). When the responses to this question are broken down by political party we find that elected representatives from two parties - Alliance and the UUP - are most likely to diverge from their party supporters in the response that they give to this question. The divergence was most marked for the Alliance Party. The party's supporters were the least likely to claim some knowledge of the culture of minority ethnic communities, whereas their elected representatives were the most likely to claim some knowledge. The relative rank ordering between political parties, on this question, is also very dissimilar (see Table 3). Another point which is worth noting here is that elected representatives from the UUP, who were the most likely to say that they were a little prejudiced against ethnic minorities, are more likely than their counterparts in the DUP, SDLP or Sinn Féin to say that they know quite a bit about the culture of some minority ethnic communities. This finding is difficult to explain and helps to remind us that the statistics do not speak for themselves.

	NILT 2006, %	Elected Representatives, %	'Divergence'
Sinn Féin	21	49	+28
SDLP	18	42	+24
UUP	13	54	+41
DUP	13	42	+29
Alliance	12	70	+58

Table 3: Elected representatives and party supporters who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with the statement: 'I personally know quite a bit about the culture of some minority ethnic communities living in Northern Ireland'

Participation in public life

Two questions on the participation of ethnic minorities in public life were asked in both surveys. One question was: 'Organisations and leaders in public life, such as politicians, community groups and churches, should encourage members of minority ethnic communities to participate in public life.' On this question elected representatives were much more likely to 'agree' or 'strongly

agree' with the statement (95% compared to 69%). This suggests that elected representatives, much more so than the general public in Northern Ireland, believe that, as elected representatives, they have a responsibility to encourage members of minority ethnic communities to participate in public life. We do not know the reason why they are much more likely to give this response. It may be that as elected representatives they are much more likely to have a sense of civic duty and may believe that everybody, including people from minority ethnic backgrounds, should be more involved in public life. It may be that, in constituency mode, they are more familiar with and sympathetic to the problems that are faced by minority ethnic communities. Again, there is the time and context lag factor that we referred to above and that too might need taking into account. We also do not know whether the elected representatives think that politicians, rather than community groups and churches, should encourage members of minority ethnic communities to participate in public life.

The second question asked about the kinds of institutions through which members of minority ethnic communities can best participate in public life. Members of the general public were much more likely (14%) than elected representatives (3%) to support ethnic minority participation through their own institutions. We do not know, however, whether this is support for ethnic minority self-organisation, or support for ethnic separatism. Elected representatives were more likely (33%) than the general public (26%) to suggest that the best way for members of minority ethnic communities to participate in public life is 'through existing institutions such as political parties, community groups and religious organisations'. Elected representatives were also more likely to favour participation through both existing organisations and minority ethnic communities' own organisations (60% compared to 43%). The latter option was most popular with elected representatives and the general public. This suggests that, in general, support for participation through minority ethnic communities or organisations constitutes support for some level of organisational autonomy for minority ethnic communities, as part of, rather than instead of, broader participation in public life.

When the responses to these questions are broken down by political party, we find widespread divergence between elected representatives and their party supporters. On the question of whether organisations and individuals in public life should encourage the participation of minority ethnic people in public life, the responses of elected representatives of the SDLP, the Alliance Party and the UUP were fairly similar to the responses of their party supporters. The

responses of elected representatives from Sinn Féin diverged significantly from those of their party supporters (68% of elected representatives thought that they should be encouraging participation, compared to 60% of their supporters – a divergence of +8 percentage points). The most dramatic divergence, however, was between elected representatives from the DUP and their supporters (92% compared to 58% - a divergence of +34 percentage points). The main difference between elected representatives from political parties on this question was between Sinn Féin and the UUP (68% and 72% respectively) and the other political parties (Alliance and SDLP both 87%, DUP 92%). The ranking of elected representatives and their supporters on this question was very similar, with a dramatic exception of the DUP. Elected representatives from the DUP were most likely to think that minority ethnic communities should be encouraged to participate in public life, whereas their party supporters were the least likely to think so.

On the question of the best way for minority ethnic people to participate in public life – through existing organisations, their own organisations or both – we find a more differentiated pattern. Elected representatives from Sinn Féin and the DUP did not vary much from their supporters regarding the option of participating through existing organisations. On the option of participation through existing and their own minority organisations, however, elected representatives from Sinn Féin and the DUP diverged most from the opinion of their party supporters (see Table 4).

	existing		own		existing & own		should not	
	NILT 2006	Elected reps	NILT 2006	Elected reps	NILT 2006	Elected reps	NILT 2006	Elected reps
Alliance	26	55	7	0	64	45	0	0
DUP	27	24	21	3	29	71	6	3
SDLP	29	43	9	5	53	51	1	0
SF	23	26	24	2	31	72	0	0
UUP	25	33	12	2	45	64	2	0

Table 4: Elected representatives and party supporters on the way in which people from minority ethnic backgrounds should participate in public life

Opinion on these topics may be related to views on how minority ethnic people should integrate into or relate to Northern Irish society. Those who favour participation through existing organisations, for example, may hope that minority ethnic people integrate with or assimilate into the rest of the population. Those who favour participation through ethnic minorities' own

organisations may favour ethnic separatism and/or may see this option as the 'best bet' for minority ethnic communities. Without doubt, this issue needs further analysis.

Attitudes towards policy

We also find significant variation between the views of elected representatives and the general public on the policy areas of immigration and, to a lesser extent, hate crimes. On the question of whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the UK government's decision not to place restrictions on immigration from the A8 countries, half of the elected representatives disagreed with this decision while almost two thirds of respondents (73%) to the 2006 NILT survey disagreed. Elected representatives were also more likely than members of the general public (33% compared to 26%) to agree with the government's decision. On the issue of hate crimes we find that elected representatives are more likely to believe that someone who commits a racist assault 'definitely' or 'probably' 'should be more severely punished than someone who commits an ordinary assault' (61% compared to 40%). This is in contrast to the attitudes of the general public who are more likely to believe that there 'definitely' or 'probably' should *not* be 'a more severe sentence because of the racial element' (44% compared to 42%). The general public is also much more likely to be undecided on this question (16% compared to 4%). The differences between elected representatives and the general public on this issue may be because elected representatives are more punitive in their thinking against hate crime perpetrators than are the general public. Another possibility is that the general public is less likely than elected representatives to take the issue of 'race hate' crimes seriously. Also, as leaders, elected representatives may want to send out a strong signal, following ongoing incidents of racist attacks, that racism is wrong and will be contested.

When we break down the figures by political party we find that there was significant divergence between elected representatives and their party supporters on the question of hate crimes. On the question of restrictions on immigration from Central and Eastern Europe we found little divergence between elected representatives from the two main Unionist parties and their party supporters, but significant divergence between elected representatives from the three other main parties and their party supporters. These policy questions were also the ones on which a Unionist/Nationalist split was probably clearest.

	NILT 2006, %	Elected Representatives, %	'Divergence'
Alliance	48	90	+42
Sinn Féin	42	84	+42
SDLP	41	68	+27
UUP	34	43	+9
DUP	31	46	+15

Table 5: Elected representatives and party supporters who say that those who commit a 'race hate' crime 'probably should' or 'definitely should' be more severely punished

On the question of hate crimes, we find that the elected representatives from all of the political parties diverged from those of their party supporters, but this was less marked in the case of the UUP and DUP (see Table 5). We also find that Unionist parties and their supporters are the least likely to support more severe punishment. This might be because they are more likely to think that all similar crimes should be treated similarly, irrespective of the target. Another possibility is that, given the higher incidence of recorded hate crimes in 'Unionist areas', they may feel that this change in the law will disproportionately adversely affect people living in those areas. Another possibility is that resistance to the policy here has dissipated (less so amongst Unionists than Nationalists) as the policy has 'bedded-in'.

On the question of immigration restrictions, we find that the elected representatives from all of the political parties are more liberal than their party supporters. In the case of the UUP and DUP, however, there is very little divergence between the views of elected representatives and their party supporters. The two Nationalist parties – Sinn Féin and the SDLP – are the parties for which the views of elected representatives and their party supporters diverge most. On the question of restrictions on immigration, we find a significant difference between Nationalists and Unionists. On this question Alliance supporters are the most liberal, but elected representatives from the Alliance Party occupy a position between the Nationalist and Unionist parties (see Table 6).

	NILT 2006, %	Elected Representatives, %	'Divergence'
Alliance	31	55	+24
Sinn Féin	30	63	+33
SDLP	26	63	+37
UUP	14	18	+4
DUP	9	11	+2

Table 6: Elected representatives and party supporters who agree with the UK Government's decision not to place restrictions on immigration from A8 countries in 2004

Conclusions

When we compare responses to questions which were asked in our survey of elected representatives with those from the NILT survey of the general public, there is evidence of a significant divergence in the responses given in each survey. In most instances, the divergence is in the same direction. This situation suggests two possibilities. One possibility is that the difference is due to *differences in the two groups* of respondents. It could be that on the particular topic in question elected representatives in general are different from the general public; i.e. that there is something about the role of acting as an elected representative which helps to explain the difference. For example, the fact that elected representatives are less likely than their party supporters to say that they are prejudiced against ethnic minorities may be because they are better educated and more enlightened individuals. Another possibility, however, is that they are more aware of the public profile of their party and are more reluctant to admit to prejudice because of how this might reflect on their party's image. A third possibility is that the divergence is a consequence of the *time-lag* between the two surveys, and that if the two surveys had been carried out simultaneously we would have found less divergence between elected representatives and their party supporters. For instance, this scenario is certainly a possibility as regards the question of perceptions of whether there is more racism in Northern Ireland now than there was five years ago.

There are only a few instances in which the divergence is in different directions (i.e. + for some parties and - for others). In these instances the differences are unlikely to be due to general differences between elected representatives and their party supporters or between the two time periods, but are probably due to more specific factors. These specific factors could be: differences in the ideological outlooks of different parties; shifts in the

position of a particular party (or parties); or the differential impact of the particular issue on particular parties. The lack of a divergence, for example, between the opinions of the two main Unionist parties and their supporters on the question of controls on immigration, where there was a significant divergence for the other parties, suggests a difference in ideological outlook on this question. Differences in ideological outlook, however, are unlikely to be confined to a Nationalist/Unionist axis. On the question of participation in public life, for example, supporters of the DUP and Sinn Féin were more likely than supporters of other parties to believe that people from minority ethnic backgrounds are best to participate in public life through their own organisations. Elected representatives from those two parties were more likely than representatives from the other parties to believe that people from minority ethnic backgrounds are best to participate in public life through both their own organisations and existing organisations. In conclusion, this short article has possibly raised as many questions as answers. But arguably this is no bad thing. The issues touched on here – such as prejudice, policy, and integration⁸ – are complex and important ones for a divided and transitional society, i.e. important for the (shared) future of Northern Ireland.

Notes

- 1 Bell, Jarman and Lefebvre, 2004.
- 2 Jarman, 2002; Jarman and Monaghan, 2003; McVeigh, 2006; Rolston, 2004.
- 3 Borooh and Mangan, 2007; Connolly and Keenan, 2000. The annual Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey has asked questions regarding minority ethnic communities at several points since 1998; see the NILT website at: www.ark.ac.uk/nilt
- 4 Lewis, 2005, p.83; see also Hainsworth, 1998.
- 5 McGarry, Hainsworth and Gilligan, 2008.
- 6 We recognise that this contradicts our previous claim, but that is in the nature of survey data. Contrary to common perception statistics do not prove everything *and* anything: they can help us to describe and analyse phenomena, but that is not the same as proving something. For a useful basic guide on using statistics see Andrew, 2001.
- 7 Gilligan, 2006; emphasis added.
- 8 See Parekh, 1998.

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