

The Search for Equality: Race, Religion and Public Policy in Northern Ireland¹

Peter Geoghegan

On the campaign trail that preceded her election to the Stormont Assembly in 2007, Anna Lo said, ‘one of the things I want to do is hold the government to its recent promises about racial equality in Northern Ireland.’² Lo, who became the first politician from a minority ethnic background to be elected at a national level in Northern Ireland, and the first person born in South Asia to gain public office anywhere in the United Kingdom, had long been a vociferous campaigner on racial equality issues in Northern Ireland. As chief executive of the Chinese Welfare Association, Lo had long called for improvements in policy on racial discrimination and equality and doubtless her presence in Stormont has helped move these issues up the political agenda. But just how recent the ‘promises about racial equality’ that Lo mentions were made speaks volumes for the historic neglect of the rights for, and protection of, the North’s minorities.

Discrimination on the grounds of race was only outlawed in Northern Ireland in 1997. It is a startling fact, and one worth putting in context: Less than twelve months before the historic compromise between unionists and nationalists based on parity of esteem and equal recognition, it was perfectly legal for an employer in, say, Strabane, to turn down job applicants because they were Chinese, or a bartender in Belfast could refuse to serve someone on the legitimate grounds that they were a Traveller. The situation was very different in the rest of the UK, where discriminating against an individual based on their colour, race, and ethnicity has been illegal since the 1960s. The Race Relations Acts 1965 and 1968 were introduced primarily in response to racist attacks against British subjects who had migrated to England from the Caribbean after the second world war but have been the cornerstone of anti-discrimination legislation ever since. The original acts achieved limited success and, although they have been revised and updated many times since,

racism and discrimination still remains an issue in towns and cities from Aberdeen to Exeter. Nevertheless, the Race Relations acts have aided many minorities in Britain. The 1976 Act established the Commission for Racial Equality, a still powerful lobbying group, and successive acts, when not being undermined by Conservative governments, have provided individuals and groups with legal protection against discrimination. But if Race Relations legislation has existed in the rest of the UK since 1965, why was it not, like so many other policies, just adopted in Northern Ireland?

Race Relations policy in Northern Ireland

The removal of Northern Ireland from the Race Relations Act was not, to coin DP Moynihan's oft-repeated phrase, a case of benign neglect. The North was exempted from the act for a number of reasons, almost all of them tied in with sectarian concerns. When the original act was being drafted in Westminster the Protestant dominated Stormont government requested that Northern Ireland be excluded on the grounds that religion, rather than 'race', represented the most serious locus of discrimination. The public stance of the government at the time was that 'race' was not an issue worthy of legislative attention owing to the very low level of immigration and the absence of racist violence on anything like the scale witnessed in other parts of the UK. However, this argument tells only part of the story. Despite the claim that 'there was insufficient evidence of problems', the exemption of Northern Ireland from race relations legislation was not simply a reflection of a perceived absence of racial hatred in the region. Instead, at the time of the drafting of the Race Relations Act, there was a concern among many unionist politicians that Catholics might seek to claim the status of an ethnic group under the legislation. If that were to happen then Catholics could use the new acts to seek redress against, and potentially seriously destabilise, the myopic Stormont government.³

By the time the first revisions of the Race Relations Act were being made, in 1968, the first warning shots of the Troubles had already been fired. And, as Northern Ireland descended into chaos, what anti-discrimination legislation was drafted for the region was concerned with sectarian-based discrimination between Catholics and Protestants, rather than protecting the North's small, largely silent minority ethnic communities. From this time on, Northern Ireland did adopt many of Britain's policies and procedures, but adapted them for the local situation. So, where Britain had a Community Relations Commission established under the Race Relations Act 1968, the Northern Ireland Commission was set up in 1969 following the Community Relations

Act (Northern Ireland) and was charged with improving relations between Catholics and Protestants.⁴ Similarly, the Fair Employment Act (1976) in Northern Ireland outlawed workplace discrimination only on the grounds of religion. The Fair Employment Agency was set up to monitor this act, in the process taking on many of the functions of the ill-fated Northern Ireland Community Relations Commission.

The notion that Northern Ireland had neither minorities nor the need for any form of race-based anti-discrimination legislation remained the dominant position within the corridors of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1992, the Central Community Relations Unit in the NIO produced a consultative document entitled *Race Relations in Northern Ireland* that explored the possibility of bringing Northern Irish legislation in line with the rest of the UK. In the foreword, the then Secretary of State Patrick Mayhew, reflecting on the absence of legislation on 'race' in the North, said 'the main reason for this was that successive Governments believed that there was insufficient evidence of problems arising to warrant legislation equivalent to that in Great Britain.'⁵ However, by now a consensus that Northern Ireland did need some form of stand-alone legislation on 'race' was emerging. The influential Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights supported the introduction of legislation along the lines of that which existed in the rest of the UK at the time.⁶ Northern Irish civil society also began to mobilise around the cause. The Belfast-based human rights organisation the Commission on the Administration of Justice began to lobby vigorously for wider anti-discrimination legislation, as did the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities, an umbrella grouping of minority ethnic communities created in 1994. These groups petitioned not only the NIO and Westminster but also supranational bodies such as the European Union and the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination.

Eventually, in 1997, the Race Relations (NI) Order was passed into law, outlawing discrimination on the grounds of colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origin in Northern Ireland. This legislation certainly had been a long time in gestation but its adoption was in no sense inevitable. The election that year of a new Labour government committed to supporting race relations legislation across the UK was crucial in this respect, as was the significant movements that were being made in the peace process. The Agreement was not long off, unlikely as it seemed in 1997, and the case for maintaining Northern Ireland as an exceptional case for racial discrimination, or any other issues, could hardly be maintained. Although the numbers of migrants and minorities in the North were relatively low when the order came into force, it nevertheless represented an important move away from dualist imaginings of

Northern Irish society and towards some nascent awareness of diversity beyond the two traditions. This movement was to gather speed after the signing of the Agreement, the following year.

New Northern Ireland, New Public Policy

It may not have garnered the same headlines across the globe as the peaceful resolution of thirty years of conflict – or even the introduction of a new, and particularly complicated, form of parliamentary democracy - but the Agreement included some radical changes for public policy on diversity in Northern Ireland. Most notably, it introduced a robust equality agenda based on a commitment to equality in all spheres of public life. This policy was enshrined within the text negotiated at Castle Buildings at Easter 1998, which commits to ‘the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity’.⁷ Although primarily based on the notion that nationalists and unionists must be recognised equally in the public sphere, the Agreement’s focus on individual equality was not limited to bellicose Catholics and Protestants, it consciously included all of Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Act 1998, which passed the Agreement into law, placed a new, and potentially very significant, equality obligation on all statutory bodies – Section 75. According to article one of Section 75 all public bodies in Northern Ireland must ensure equality of opportunity ‘between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation’. Section 75 also marked the appearance of a new phrase in the Northern political lexicon, ‘good relations’. According to the second article of this new legislation, ‘a public authority shall in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group’.⁸ This first reference to good relations is notable: just one year after legislation preventing racial discrimination had been passed in Northern Ireland, the Act copper-fastening the historic Agreement between the two tribes is clearly addressing itself to other differences beyond just those defined in sectarian terms. As one policy officer put it to me, the notion of good relations enshrined in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 was ‘community relations plus race relations’.⁹

Racial Equality and Normalising Northern Ireland

To say Northern Ireland has had an image problem is something of an understatement. For the best part of forty years the rest of the world's picture of the place was gleaned from television news and Hollywood movies. Throughout this period Northern Ireland, with its bombs, bullets, and terrorists, was a country set apart from the rest of the Western world. A state where metal detectors were set up at the entrance to shops and trial by jury suspended and replaced by the notorious Diplock courts. Throughout the period from the outbreak of the Troubles to the early 1990s, British policy towards Northern Ireland was one of containment – keep the conflict at a manageable level and prevent further escalation.¹⁰ However, even before the signing of the Agreement, attempts were being made to portray Northern Ireland as a 'normal' place. Money was pumped into regeneration projects, the CastleCourt shopping centre was built in the centre of Belfast and hundreds of thousands of tourist board pounds were spent trying to coax some of the south's booming tourist trade north of the border.

Since 1998, this process of 'normalisation' has continued apace. Military installations have been taken down, the army are off the streets, checkpoints are a thing of the past. But putatively normal societies are not just those in which the army have not replaced the police and terrorism is no longer a daily occurrence. In the Western world, normal societies are also characterised by diversity, migration and the presence of visible difference on the streets of cities and towns. The hope that Northern Ireland is in the process of becoming such a society was expressed in *A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland*, which was launched after a couple of years of consultation in 2005. This policy was supposed to act as a roadmap for moving beyond sectarianism but was subsequently sidelined by both Sinn Féin and the DUP following the restoration of power-sharing in 2007. Nevertheless on page one *A Shared Future* looks forward to

[T]he establishment over time of a *normal*, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere and where all people are treated impartially (emphasis added).¹¹

Good relations, according to this quote, is partly a vehicle to facilitate the progress of Northern Ireland towards normality, however ill-defined this concept might be. Furthermore, it is only by both possessing cultural difference and recognising this difference in the public sphere that Northern

Ireland can move beyond the abnormality of the Troubles. Such an interpretation of normalisation was evident in a speech delivered by the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Hain to senior civil servants in OFMDFM, in September 2005:

The vision we all share for Northern Ireland is of a normal civic society in which all individuals are treated as equals. Problems are resolved through dialogue and the state is impartial between contending claims. A Northern Ireland where the community or church you come from, your political opinion, race, gender, sexuality, age or disability makes no difference to where you are wanting to go.¹²

Hain's speech reiterates many of the central tenets of *A Shared Future*, constructing an image of a future Northern Ireland based on equality and respect for difference. A prominent feature of this putatively normal society is good relations, or the acceptance of a diversity of 'political opinion, race, gender, sexuality, age or disability'. For Hain, the presence of cultural diversity and the building of a multicultural society is evidence that Northern Ireland is moving beyond the dark days of sectarian division.

The shift from a past of violence, intolerance and sectarianism to a normal future seems to be intrinsically linked to the presence of diversity. Indeed, in talking about the arrival of a group of Vietnamese refugees at the height of the Troubles, one community relations policy maker made clear the link between migration, multiculturalism and a normalised (and post-conflict) Northern Ireland:

When the first boatload of Vietnamese arrived, they refused get off the boat. They said, 'you must be joking, we are coming from war-torn Vietnam.' And so the first boatload went back to Liverpool. That is how bad it was. But now it is different. Now we are a growing society, becoming more normal, more multicultural. My view is that this is a sign of progress and peace.¹³

Migration and diversity is something that takes place within the bounds of – and indeed helps to define – a 'normal' society, and, as such, is seen as an integral part of the process of normalising Northern Ireland after the conflict.

Practising Equality in Awkward Institutional Structures

For a country of little over 1.5 million people Northern Ireland has a remarkable number of government departments and institutions of state. The devolved Executive alone has some thirteen departments, many with disarmingly similar titles: doubtless the difference between a department for rural development, one for regional development and another for social development is clear to a career civil servant in Castle Buildings but what about a member of the public looking for advice on renewal schemes in a county town. And then there are the non-departmental public bodies, not to mention the NIO and the non-devolved administration. This complex institutional structure was designed, at least in part, to help manage frayed relationships across the tribal divide and increase the chances that the peace forged by the Agreement would stick. However this same structure has also been called upon to manage a Northern Ireland that is becoming increasingly multicultural.

Policy on racial equality is being enacted within both the devolved and non-devolved administrations. Although all devolved departments are subject to the equality and good relations duties contained in Section 75 and the Race Relations (NI) Order the main responsibility for this policy rests with the key ministry of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). In 2000, the Race Unit, the first governmental institution specifically focused on issues of race in Northern Ireland, was formed in OFMDFM 'to reduce social exclusion amongst minority ethnic people'.¹⁴ Since renamed the Racial Equality Unit, this unit works with minority ethnic communities, voluntary groups and statutory bodies and was also responsible for producing the policy document *A Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland*. Working alongside the REU in the Equality Directorate of OFMDFM is the Community Relations Unit. Although the CRU is primarily concerned with relations between Catholics and Protestants, *A Shared Future* commits the CRU to addressing both sectarianism and racism. While the REU, and to a lesser extent the CRU, are supposed to be the policy drivers for racial equality in Northern Ireland, this policy does not carryover into the non-devolved administration. The Northern Ireland Office is not subject to devolved policy; instead its institutions are subject to official Home Office policy. Alongside these government institutions a number of non-governmental public bodies such as the Community Relations Council, the Equality Commission and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, have particular, though often overlapping, remits around issues of racial equality and difference.

The sheer number of different government departments and statutory bodies involved in producing and affecting policy can have practical problems, as an interviewee from the Community Safety Unit in the NIO outlined in discussing responses to racist attacks in Belfast:

Race hate crime really does need a joined up approach, because it is a complex issue. It's about prevention, support, protection. So all of these things have to be connected. But the problem that we face in Northern Ireland is that the (institutional) landscape is completely fragmented. Northern Ireland is a very bad place for things to be connected. We have so many silos, so many government departments, so many councils. I used to work in Liverpool, I don't know how much you know about Merseyside but it has got roughly the same population as Northern Ireland. But if you compare the structures on Merseyside: they have five councils, not twenty-six.¹⁵

Alongside its commitment to tackling anti-social behaviour and sectarian hate crime, the Community Safety Unit is charged with trying to reduce racist attacks and manifestations of racism. However, the lack of effective connections between the vast array of institutions involved in governing Northern Ireland makes it particularly difficult for the unit to fulfil this function. In 2005, Peter Hain launched a review of public administration that recommended that the number of district councils be reduced from twenty-six to seven. However, in 2007, Arlene Foster, the new DUP minister with responsibility for local government announced that the review's decisions would themselves be put under review. At present the district council structure remains unaltered.

The existence of – and separation between – the distinct devolved and non-devolved administrations also undermines effective cross-departmental initiatives, as a senior civil servant in the devolved Department of Social Development explained:

There is a Chinese wall, if you like, between the NIO and the devolved administration in practical matters. If I access my computer, the devolved administration is all on one computer network, NIO is a separate one. I can log onto a dial system, which will give me a telephone number of anybody here [devolved administration] but not there [NIO]¹⁶

The separate computer systems and telephone directories attest to the sense of disconnection, of a 'Chinese wall', between the parallel administrations. This separation is not just cumbersome and inconvenient; it has important implications for managing modern, multicultural Northern Ireland, as is evidenced in the area of race relations policy. While individuals from devolved and non-devolved departments might work together on particular forums and committees such as the Racial Equality Forum, the separate telephone networks are symptomatic of the lack of opportunities for everyday interaction between practitioners working in the two administrations. Also, initiatives like the Racial Equality Forum have been dogged by the infrequency of meetings (there were none in 2009). Consequently policy initiatives and advances made in one administration may not be carried over into the other, hindering attempts to promote best practice across the board.

This fragmentation and separation causes very real problems on the ground. In 2006, a coalition of statutory bodies, business interests and voluntary groups formed to address the issue of racism in South Belfast carried out a mapping exercise to find out what relevant initiatives existed in their area. This analysis found that many projects were being funded by government but conducted almost in isolation; coordination and information flow were generally very poor and, in some cases, services were being replicated while other issues were not being addressed at all. Another area where the difficulties caused by institutional fragmentation can be clearly seen is planning. In the North, planning is, in general, under the control of the Department for the Environment and the onus is on them to consult with the various groups covered under equality legislation. However, the department's preferred option is to outsource the consultation. Consequently, planners within the department do not consult with affected groups directly, and little or no institutional learning takes place. So, despite the existence of an advanced equality agenda, the culture within government does not change.

Reflecting on attempts to tackle social exclusion through planning policy, Geraint Ellis suggests that it is 'somewhat ironic that the political climate of the peace process that has allowed these issues to emerge on the policy agenda has also necessitated an administrative structure that frustrates the process of implementation.'¹⁷ Ellis' point is equally valid when looking at multicultural policy and its institutional implications in post-Agreement Northern Ireland. The institutional set-up – which, of course, was specifically built to foster stability – is so complex and institutional name changes so frequent that it is hardly surprising that the head of the Equality Directorate in OFMDFM, when we spoke, was unable to remember the title of one of the units in his

directorate. While the peace process provided an opportunity for Northern Ireland to become more socially and culturally diverse, effective public policy is often stymied by the high level of fragmentation and confusion within the new institutions. These structures were set up to manage sectarianism, and, as such, their fragmentation is directly linked to the deep divisions in Northern Irish society, divisions that have not gone away despite the ending of the armed conflict.

New Northern Ireland, Old Identities

On 13 March 2007, the seven Alliance Party Members of the Local Assembly (MLAs) returned in the previous week's Assembly election as well Green Party MLA Brian Wilson and Independent Dr Kieran Deeny announced that they would be sitting in the house under a new banner, 'United Community'. With only nine seats out of a grand total of 108, the new grouping was not in any position to form the next government of Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the formation of United Community, following an election characterised by realpolitik in which both the DUP and Sinn Fein made significant gains, was less about gaining power than highlighting how power is carved up in the Assembly. On election to the house all MLAs designate themselves as 'Nationalist', 'Unionist' or 'Other'. Under the procedures laid down in the Northern Ireland Act (1998), if at least thirty MLAs make a 'petition of concern' to the Speaker, then a vote must receive cross-community support to be passed – it needs to receive a weighted majority (60 per cent) of members voting and at least 40 per cent of each of the Nationalist and Unionist designations voting. This privileging of sectarian identities in the Agreement's institutional structure is more than just symbolic, it has a number of important practical effects: first, if one community can agree to oppose a measure then it will not be able to pass through the house (as has happened on numerous occasions since devolution); secondly, there is little or no reason for parties to attempt to bridge the tribal divide as power comes from being in one sectarian bloc or other; finally, those designated 'Other' – or United Community, or any other name – have no real power to influence the decision making process on key votes. No matter how great their number, parties who are ambivalent on the national question, such as Alliance or the Greens, will never wield power in the North's Assembly as it currently stands.

Of course, one could argue that with barely ten per cent of the votes in most recent elections, the non-sectarian 'Others' are not likely to be forming the next government anytime soon. And this is certainly true. But if the

Agreement and the subsequent Acts that passed it into law were designed to help move the North beyond sectarianism, they use perverse methods. Northern Irish society's religious division is also replicated in the devolved Executive. Northern Ireland is roughly divided between Protestants and Catholics in a 6:5 ratio – and, remarkably, has an Executive made up of eleven departments. The complex d'Hondt method – or highest average method – is used to allocate ministerial positions in the Assembly. It is not written into the Agreement that ministerial portfolios should be divided in a 6:5 ratio between unionists and nationalists but in practice this division will occur as long as voters continue to overwhelmingly support nationalist and unionist political parties. The Agreement provided a negotiated end to the conflict and established a new system of government for Northern Ireland but in attempting to recognise and accommodate sectarian political identities it has, somewhat paradoxically, ended up reproducing the very divisions it sought to ameliorate.

Peter Shirlow and Brendan Murtagh suggest that, '[t]he Agreement shifted the presentation and volume of ethno-sectarian competition but did not challenge the basis upon which it was founded and reproduced.'¹⁸ There are many cases that illustrate this point, such as the procedures that surrounded the 2001 Northern Ireland census. The census is a powerful social scientific tool, which helps politicians and policy makers, in particular, to understand the make-up of society. But in ethnically divided societies, where a demographic decline in one group may directly result in another's growth, the census can become a heavily politicised exercise.¹⁹ In Northern Ireland, sectarian head counting has been integral to the governing of the state since its foundation. When the North was created in 1920, its borders were drawn in such a way as to ensure a roughly two-thirds Protestant and one-third Catholic demographic balance in the new state. Here the census provided a very important method for measuring the changing strengths of religious groups and, by extension, rival political aspirations. Since 1861 the census has asked what religion the respondent followed, and over time the choices available have changed to reflect shifts in the religious composition of Northern Ireland – in 2001, ninety-four other Christian denominations that had ten or more adherents were recorded.²⁰

The census in Northern Ireland was always contentious but it only really became an overtly politicised issue when, at the start of the Troubles, Sinn Féin called on republicans to boycott the process. Consequently, the underenumeration in many Catholic areas was so significant that the 1971, 1981 and 1991 censuses were generally considered unrepresentative of the total Catholic population.²¹ Despite these weaknesses, possessing an accurate

picture of the Catholic/Protestant demographic breakdown has been important for two main reasons. First, under Fair Employment legislation all medium- and large-scale employers have to match the religious denomination of their work force with the religious breakdown of the local area. Second, as there is assumed to be a strong correlation between religious affiliation and political identities, numerical strength is often used as a proxy measure for support of alternative Nationalist/Unionist political visions.²²

The 2001 Northern Ireland census was even more politicised than in previous years. It was the first headcount since the Agreement and the first census in which Sinn Fein urged republicans to participate. The possibility that it would show an increasing Catholic population, or even an outright majority, became something of an obsession in the weeks leading up to the census. Unionist politicians claimed the census would demonstrate the strength of Protestant numerical superiority, nationalists suggested it would show population changes that would see a Catholic majority in Northern Ireland in the coming decades. All the while the media dedicated endless column inches and hours of TV and radio to the debate.²³ However, there was a problem – the census might not be able to give an exact picture of the religious composition of Northern Ireland. Since 1971, respondents had shown much less willingness to commit themselves to a religious identity. In the 1991 census, the number of respondents who either refused to answer the religious question or stated that they had ‘no religion’ rose from 9.4 per cent in 1971 to 11 per cent of the total.²⁴ This caused a significant headache for the census compilers – if over one in ten respondents were not stating their religious identity, how would they know the relative sizes of the Protestant and Catholic communities?

Faced with the possibility that the census would fail to give a clear picture of the North’s sectarian demographics the Northern Ireland Statistical Research Agency took the decision to re-specify those who failed to state a religion (some 14 per cent of 2001’s total) into Catholic and Protestant blocs. They did this using two statistical manipulations. First, a supplementary question was added to the 2001 census that asked the religious background the respondent was *brought up in*. This new variable, known as ‘community background’, was based on either the respondent’s professed religion or their childhood religion. Respondents who had either selected ‘No Religion’ or not stated a religious affiliation but who also had indicated they were raised as Catholic or Protestant were reassigned back into the appropriate community category. This statistical manipulation reduced the proportion of Northern Ireland’s population in the ‘No Religion/Not-Stated’ category from 13.9 per cent to 7.5 per cent. Those that remained in the ‘No Religion/Not-Stated’

category were then reassigned as Protestant or Catholic using a computerised matching process known as donor imputation. This process drew on a range of factors such as the respondents' geographical proximity to someone who did state their religion or community background. As a result, a total of 127,000 respondents who refused a religious identity were reassigned as Protestants and 59,000 as Catholics (Table 1). Although only 45.6 per cent and 40.3 per cent of respondents had directly identified themselves as Protestants and Catholics, respectively, after reallocation the percentage of Catholics in Northern Ireland stood at 43.8 per cent, Protestants made up 53.1 per cent and the None/Not-stated category stood at just 2.7 per cent (see Table 1).

Table 1 Reallocation of 'non-religious' respondents into sectarian blocs in 2001 Northern Ireland census.

Based on J. Coakley (2007, p. 578) and T. Hadden (2003, p. 6)

	Pre-allocation Census Distribution		Reallocated Census Distribution	
	N	%	N	%
Catholics	678,500	40.3	737,450	43.8
Protestants	767,900	45.6	895,400	53.1
Other religions	5,500	0.3	7,100	0.4
None/Not Stated	233,900	13.9	45,850	2.7
Total	1,685,800	100	1,685,800	100

At the time, commentators argued that the 2001 census data was manipulated to soothe unionist fears that Northern Ireland was moving quickly towards a demographic profile that was dominated by Catholics.²⁵ However, it is highly unlikely that rising Catholic birth rates will see an end to partition in the near future. First, Catholic birth rates appear to be levelling off, to the extent that Catholics will almost certainly not make-up a majority in the North within the next couple of generations. Second, there is evidence that a small but significant number of Catholics would, in any case, vote to retain the Union, and that this number is much greater than those Protestants who would support Irish unity. These arguments could have been marshalled to allay Unionist fears instead of resorting to the gerrymandering of census data in such a way that those who actively refuse to state their religion were re-appropriated into sectarian blocs. The process of reallocating all those who expressed a clear preference for avoiding religious identities 'institutionalises

the Northern Irish truism that there are only Catholic and Protestant atheists'.²⁶ The 2001 census showed that sectarianism remains active in the social practice of political institutions, 'distorting politics and marginalising non-sectarian factors and concerns' and undermining the desire to normalise social relations.²⁷ The dangers inherent in this process was flagged by Belfast-based policy analyst Robin Wilson:

The communal registration process has militated against the emergence of a strong political centre that might engender stability in the institutions. Indeed, on the contrary, it has reinforced 'groupist' stereotyping characteristic of media reporting of Northern Ireland, where actual Protestant and Catholic individuals are constantly hovered up into ethnonationalist 'communities' belying the pluralism of real social life.²⁸

The practice of communal registration is evidence that, in some locations, there is a continuation and even a *strengthening* of sectarianism occurring within the very same institutional structures and practices that are supposed to help Northern Ireland move beyond sectarian division. It seems fair to ask, given the focus on normalisation described earlier, whether practices like the reallocation of census responses could be considered as characteristic of 'normal' liberal-democratic societies. Despite the commitment to good relations between *all groups* – and the introduction of race relations legislation and racial equality policy – the preoccupation with sectarian identities in Northern Ireland's institutions remains. That racial discrimination is now illegal in Northern Ireland is a positive sign. But even as the North is becoming increasingly diverse, institutional structures and practices are still stuck in a two traditions mindset.

Conclusion

In 1997, race relations legislation was finally introduced into Northern Ireland. In the decade that followed the signing of the Agreement racial equality certainly emerged as a hitherto unacknowledged policy concern. But have these changes in legislation and policy actually benefitted minority ethnic people living in Northern Ireland? Or are they just yet more pieces of paper and fine words from Stormont that have been backed up by little action on the ground?

It is difficult to estimate accurately the effect that the institutional problems and continuing obsession with sectarian difference have had on attempts to

manage multicultural Northern Ireland, but certainly the gains that were being predicted back in 2005, when *A Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland* was launched, do not seem to have been made. Speaking towards the end of 2009, about both the attacks on the Roma and the general situation facing minorities, Patrick Yu, executive director of the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities, complained about government inactivity in the area of racial equality and human rights for migrants. The time has come, Yu said, for ‘mainstreaming race into Government policy and practice and the positive duty of the State to ensure that fundamental rights are guaranteed without discrimination and distinction.’²⁹ However, progress in the area of racial equality has been slow and piecemeal. *A Shared Future* is on ice; OFMDFM’s policy on racial equality does exist, but the implementation plans envisaged by it have largely fallen by the way side. The Racial Equality Forum, established under this policy, was under review for two years and the forum’s meetings have been far less frequent than originally envisaged. The pernicious attacks on the Roma that Yu referred to showed Belfast, and indeed the whole of Northern Ireland, in a very bad light. But they also attested to the slow pace of change around issues of racial equality since devolution. The time has come to translate the many good words spoken over the last decade into action – but making this transition requires thinking that is genuinely outside the tribal box.

Notes

- 1 This paper is based on research conducted for a PhD in human geography that was awarded in 2008. This research also forms the basis for *A Difficult Difference: Race, Religion and the new Northern Ireland*, which will be published in Summer 2010 by the Irish Academic Press. The author thanks the Community Relations Council for their generous contribution towards the cost of this publication.
- 2 ‘Chinese candidate defies racist abuse’, *The Observer*, 11 February 2007.
- 3 A. Dickey, ‘Anti-incitement legislation in Britain and Northern Ireland’ in *New Community* 1, 2 (1972), pp. 133-138.
- 4 H. Griffiths, ‘The Northern Ireland Community Relations Commission’, in *New Community* 1, 2 (1972), pp. 128-132.
- 5 Central Community Relations Unit *Race Relations in Northern Ireland*. Available at <http://www.ccruni.gov.uk/equality/docs/race.htm>. Last accessed 28th June 2007.

- 6 Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights (1990), *Second Report: Religious and Political Discrimination and Equality of Opportunity in Northern Ireland*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- 7 *The Belfast Agreement*, Available at <http://ofmdfmi.gov.uk/publications/ba.htm>. Last accessed 23 June 2009.
- 8 Northern Ireland Act 1998.
- 9 Interview with head of policy, Equality Commission, conducted 1 November 2005.
- 10 C. Gilligan, 'The Irish Question and the concept "identity" in the 1980s' in *Nations and Nationalism* 14, 4(2007), pp. 599-617.
- 11 Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (2005), *A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland*, (p.7) Belfast: OFMDFM.
- 12 Speech delivered at Stormont Castle to senior representatives of Northern Ireland Civil Service, 21 September 2005.
- 13 Interview with policymaker, Community Relations Council, 14 October 2005.
- 14 Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Proposal for a Race Equality Branch within OFMDFM*. (Internal memo, circulated 2000).
- 15 Interview with director of Community Safety Unit, Belfast, 9 February 2006.
- 16 Interview with director of Central Policy and Coordination, Department of Social Development, 2 February 2006.
- 17 G. Ellis, 'Social exclusion, equality and the Good Friday Peace Agreement: The implications for land use planning' in *Policy and Politics* 29, 4 (2001), pp. 393-411.
- 18 P. Shirlow and B. Murtagh (2006), *Belfast: Segregation, Violence and the City*, London: Pluto Press, p. 32.
- 19 D. Horowitz (1985), *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California.
- 20 J. Coakley, 'National identity in Northern Ireland: Stability or change?' in *Nations and Nationalism* 13, 4 (2007), pp. 573-597.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 578.

- 22 J. A. Anderson and I. Shuttleworth, 'Sectarian readings of sectarianism: Interpreting the Northern Ireland census' in *The Irish Review* 16, (1994), pp. 74-93 and J.A. Anderson, I. Shuttleworth, C. Lloyd and O. McEldowney, *End of award report: Political demography: The Northern Ireland census, discourse and territoriality*. Available at <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/>. Last accessed 4 July 2007.
- 23 J.A. Anderson, I. Shuttleworth, C. Lloyd and O. McEldowney, *End of award report: Political demography: The Northern Ireland census, discourse and territoriality*.
- 24 J. Coakley, 'National identity in Northern Ireland: Stability or change?', p 578.
- 25 N. Alexander, 'Count me out – the Northern Ireland census' in *The Vacuum* 6 (2002).
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 J.A. Anderson, I. Shuttleworth, C. Lloyd and O. McEldowney, *End of award report: Political demography: The Northern Ireland census, discourse and territoriality*, p. 1.
- 28 R. Wilson (2003), *Northern Ireland: What's Going Wrong?* London: Constitutional Unit, p. 15, cited in P. Shirlow and B. Murtagh, op.cit., p. 34.
- 29 Ethnic minorities 'new Northern Ireland victims' in *Belfast Telegraph*, 22 December 2009.