

Difference, diversity and difficulty: problems in adult peace education in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

The peace process in Northern Ireland has been hailed, variously, as the successful resolution to one of the world's most intractable conflicts, and as a failed attempt to reconcile the conflicting claims of the two main ethnonationalist communities. At both these points, and at every other point along the continuum, recognition is given to the centrality of education. This article looks at the role played by adult learning, and contrasts two fundamentally different approaches. In one, enlightenment assumptions about the power of knowledge to dispel prejudice have run alongside attempts to create a world of shared values; in the other, a postmodern acceptance of different cultures has accompanied a peace process that builds upon ethnic distinctions. As with the Dayton Accord and with other peace agreements brokered with international assistance, the consociational model of governance has been chosen for Northern Ireland in order to create a political equilibrium between the unionists and nationalists. Such a political framework reverses the direction of previous integrationist educational policies in favour of a celebration of difference, an approach that is fraught with difficulties.

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The difficulties of working as an educationalist in a deeply conflicted society are only partly to do with how you set your ideological compass; they are just as much to do with the unintended consequences of your actions, and the ways in which the loops of cause and effect can slip beyond your control. One incident from my early career may serve to illustrate the point. In the early 1980s, I was working for the Workers' Educational Association in Belfast. The hunger strikes had closed down much of the normal social activity, including our evening class provision, and in their wake it was difficult to find sufficient numbers to make any course viable. I had

set up a welfare rights class in a West Belfast community centre, and the young solicitor from the Law Centre who was going to teach it called on the first day of the class to pick up a register. He asked what the minimum number would be. We both knew the answer, as we both had done this before.

The minimum number was 10. The real question though, given our shared commitment to welfare rights training, was how far I was prepared to bend our rules. If there are half a dozen, I said, we can live with that.

The next day he called in again. Do you know how many people turned up yesterday, he asked. The answer, which he quickly volunteered, defied belief. There were 95. Ninety-five people had turned up to a welfare rights class in West Belfast on a

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weekday afternoon. The crush of bodies in the room was so great that they had to make their way down the road to the indoor soccer hall to do the enrolments. Who were these people? Where did they come from? The answer was that they were all young men, mostly in their twenties, with free time during the day. They were signing up as part of a mass mobilization orchestrated by the republican movement. The huge street protests in support of Bobby Sands and his comrades had inspired Sinn Féin to re-invent itself as a mass political party, and this WEA class had been used as the vehicle for training the first cadre of activists as they set about establishing their local centres.

There are a number of lessons I would like to draw from this story. Firstly, as I have suggested, we found ourselves falling into the familiar pattern whereby, with the same certainty as the laws of physics, we can predict that the unintended consequences of educational initiatives always outweigh the intended. Secondly, it is a mistake to imagine that political education can ever be innocent. To be engaged is, in a Sartrean sense, to situate yourself somewhere within the force field, and when the situation is as highly charged as Northern Ireland was at the height of the troubles, the mutual antagonisms act like powerful magnets on iron filings, sucking in or repelling players who try to hold to the middle ground, but find themselves aligned with either pole. The third lesson was in a way the most difficult for young leftists like myself to absorb. All our hopes were invested in the belief that the bonds of class would one day create a sense of unity in a working class riven by sectarianism. The high tide of Thatcherism had produced, along with the record figures for unemployment, a range of oppositional strategies such as the creation of unemployed workers' centres. Welfare rights courses were just one small part of that attempt to build what we hoped would develop into a new socialist consciousness. Much of what we did was delusional. Although we had lived through years of communal strife, we continued to underestimate the depth of ethnic identifications, and, in a wishful thinking way, to overestimate the imperatives of class solidarity. We were late to learn the lesson that "the vertical category of nationalism has overtaken the horizontal category of class" (Connor, quoted in Moynihan, 1993, p. 125).

In our defence, we were not alone. Before the break-up of the former Yugoslavia and the re-

emergence of Eastern European nationalisms in the 1988–92 period, the commonsense of the day was that class represented in the main fault line in what were then called "late capitalist" societies (the teleological undertow of this phrase suggesting imminent rupture and the arrival of another, presumably socialist order). In the late 1980s, Eric Hobsbawm delivered a series of lectures in Belfast (Wilson, 2001, p. 2) in which he provided the reassurance that "while nobody can possibly deny the growing and sometimes dramatic, impact of nationalist or ethnic politics. It is no longer a major vector of the historical development". He was not the only major thinker to point us in the wrong direction. In 1994, Anthony Giddens delivered a lecture in Belfast in which he worried about the "de-traditionalisation" of society and weakening of communal bonds. In the streets outside, there was little evidence of any such departure from community and tradition; the narrative of the Northern Ireland Troubles is, rather, to do with the solidification of two main ethnonationalist blocs and the crowding out of alternative political or cultural formations. At one point that seemed to place us in the rearguard of the historical march towards political enlightenment, a corner of Europe that in the latter half of the 20th century was still mystifyingly caught up in a seventeenth century religious war. To foreign observers "the myth of atavism" (Vincent, 1993) had an obvious and irresistible explanatory power.

It does not look like that now. Far from being on its own, Northern Ireland is seen to fit within the patterning of ethnonationalist conflict that has come to characterize the postmodern era. David Horowitz (1985, p. xi) describes how we began to fit within the jigsaw: "Connections among Biafra, Bangladesh and Burundi, Beirut, Brussels and Belfast were at first hesitantly made—isn't one "tribal", one "linguistic" and another "religious"?—but that time is no longer. Ethnicity has fought and bled and burned its way into public and scholarly consciousness". The centrality of ethnicity became even more apparent with the movement of the tectonic plates in the closing period of the twentieth century, and the new fissures that opened up exposed religious, cultural and linguistic differences as the main fault lines. Surveying the new, and still changing, landscape Rattansi and Westwood (1994, p. 1) comment: "The spectre that haunts the societies of the West is no longer communism but both within and outside their frontiers, a series of

racisms and other ethnonationalisms.” Some of these new movements have driven towards the creation of uni-ethnic states, an ambition not seen since the nineteenth century (Hobsbawm, 1990) and while they have not succeeded, the results, from Bosnia to Rwanda, have been blood-soaked. There were 127 civil wars fought in 1950–2000 half-century, killing nearly 17 million people (Laitin, 2004, p. 171). Even where full-scale civil war was avoided the battle to achieve ethnic dominance within spatial domains led to fragmentation such as that in the former Soviet republics where Mary Kaldor (1996) describes the emerging landscape as being made up of “new closed-in chaotic statelets with permanently contested borders dependent on continuing violence for survival”. The number of people living outside their country of birth or citizenship grew from 120 million in 1900 to approximately 190 million in 2000 (Banks, 2005, p. vii). Add to that the displacement of large population groups from the south to the north, and ethnic pluralism ceases to be a problem of distant states but one that is exploding, quite literally, on the streets of London, Madrid and Paris.

For educationalists, this problem has had a trial run in the great laboratory of ethnic relations, the United States of America. There, the multiculturalist paradigm began to break on the rocks of the curriculum in what are referred to as the “culture wars” of the 1990s. A key moment in the debate came with the attempt to create national history standards. Historical scholarship, in response to social movements within the United States, had extended its compass beyond Western civilization to take in world history, including African history, and the construction of the public debate in the media was so charged that by the time it reached the floor of the Senate, it had simplified into two mutually exclusive positions. In their book, *History on Trial* (1997), Nash, Crabtree and Dunn (1977) (who were themselves involved in writing the new standards) describe how on one side were the “militant monoculturalists of the right” who demanded that history promote “Ozzie and Harriet patriotism and exclusive celebration of the Western tradition” (p. 99). On the other side were “militant multiculturalists... (who had) romanticized the history of their particular group or region out of all recognition, and stigmatized Western civilization as the world’s oldest evil empire” (p. 99). Caricatures, perhaps, but not grossly so.

In fact, reality has in some ways come to overtake the exaggerations: the “history standards” debate took place in 1994 under the first George Bush; under the second George Bush the encroachments on the curriculum have become even more daring, with creationism and other forms of anti-science receiving tacit, and sometimes explicit, endorsement from state authorities. And, on the other side of the battle lines, the “radical particularists”—to borrow a phrase from George Walzer (1983)—have extended the list of oppressed groups whose individual histories and cultures must be accommodated within the curriculum. Iris Marion Young (Young, 1993) suggests the following as a tentative indication of who might be included in such a list: “women, blacks, native Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and other Spanish-speaking Americans, Asian Americans, gay men, lesbians, working-class people, poor people, old people, and mentally and physically disabled people.” One is tempted to begin to add the other “others” who didn’t make it onto this list and who might with some justification resent their exclusion: Haitians, transsexuals, single parents, prisoners and countless other social sub-groups who might wish to self-organize if resources and entitlements were channeled on this basis. Such a situation actually obtained in the experimental form of governance developed by the Greater London Council under the patronage of Ken Livingstone in the 1970s and 1980s (Phillips, 1993, pp. 155–6). There a commissar class of “advocates” for subordinated groups (no voting system existed for representation of such constituencies) competed with each other for grant aid. The mobilization of grievances in such a polity is part of the same postmodern disorder that allows for ethnic mobilizations within contested states, and with it the threat of racial and religious intergroup rivalries and antagonisms.

There is a deep irony in the way that the forces of left and right have aligned themselves in the culture wars. Historically, it had always been the left that has identified with enlightenment abstractions such as equality and justice, while counter-Enlightenment thinkers like Edmund Burke and Johann Herder had argued for respect for embedded cultures and practices. It was Herder’s view that culture or civilization was not singular, that there was a diversity of cultures which were each the product of different *Volksgeist*, and that this diversity must not be subject to the totalizing powers of the state. The reversal of these positions, with the left now

identifying with the claims of the new particularisms has worried some, like Brian Barry (2001) and the Spanish educationalist Ramon Flecha (Flecha, 1999) who expresses the fear that the new anti-racist movements are in fact themselves no more than a pernicious form of racism. He distinguishes between the older forms of racism which operated through a discourse based upon notions of superiority and inferiority, and the new “postmodern racism” which builds upon difference and rejects enlightenment assumptions about shared public space. The solipsisms of each culture are endorsed and underpinned, Flecha argues, by the epigoni of Foucault and Derrida and the cultural relativism that has crept into public policy throughout Europe. In opposition to this, Flecha goes back to Freirean notions of dialogue to argue for intercultural exchanges and understandings. His worry is that adult educationalists “do not have the intellectual and educational tools” to equip themselves for the task. One workshop where such tools have been forged has been Northern Ireland, where three decades of civil strife have allowed for the testing of a range of educational responses to the problems of a divided society.

1. Northern Ireland—integration or segregation

Northern Ireland is, famously, not one community but two. Even the Good Friday Agreement which begins by speaking of the people of Northern Ireland as a single people, quickly slips into the language of the “two communities”: indeed, as we shall see, the architecture of the political structures that build upon the agreement take these communal identities as the foundation blocks. Education has been complicit with this sectarian divide almost since the foundation of the state. The first approach of the Stormont Parliament in 1921 was to attempt a system of integrated education, but it quickly conceded power over education to the churches. The effect of this has been that successive generations have been educated in either Catholic schools, known as “maintained schools”, or else in state schools known as “controlled schools”, which are to all intents and purposes Protestant schools. This form of segregation is both the cause and consequence of sectarianism. Attempts by some parents to break out of the self-reinforcing loop have led to the creation of some integrated schools but these still account for no more than 5% of the total school population. Religion is not the only division

of importance. Since the Stormont Parliament used its devolved powers in 1947 to opt out of the comprehensive school movement, selection into grammar and secondary modern schools still continues with the result that Northern Ireland’s children are dually segregated – both by religion and class.

Educational divides in Northern Ireland are reinforced by patterns of residential and occupational segregation. There is a tendency for members of both communities to live and to work in places where they feel safe, and while the period immediately after the 1994 ceasefires saw an increased confidence in the idea of mixed housing, there has more recently been a retrenchment of attitudes. The number of people who expressed the belief that relations between Protestants and Catholics were improving shot up from 30% to over 60% in the period after the announcement of the IRA ceasefire in 1994, and then fell back steadily to 35% as faith in the peace process was chipped away by subsequent events (Life and Times Survey, 2004). It has, in the period from 2002 to 2006, begun to climb slowly back up, but survey responses in Northern Ireland have to be treated cautiously because of the tendency of respondents to conceal their more sectarian attitudes. Certainly a more pessimistic reading of the state of community relations is to be found in the election results which, since the time of the Good Friday Agreement have seen the extreme parties achieve dominance within their respective communities: Sinn Fein, which has been linked historically with the IRA, has increased its vote from 18% in the 1998 Assembly elections to 24.3% in the Westminster elections of 2005, while the form of political Protestantism represented by the Rev Ian Paisley increased its share from 18.14% to 33.7%. Yeats’s line, “the centre cannot hold”, has become the quotation most often pressed into service by the political pundits.

In such a situation, government has two options: it can either strain constantly towards building in the middle ground or, if this proves too swampy to support viable structures, it can recognize the reality of communal separation and build structures that allow Catholics and Protestants to govern themselves with a minimal need for contact and co-operation (Boyle and Hadden, 1994). This would not be so exceptional: there are formal structures for communal autonomy in other divided societies: Belgium, Canada and Switzerland are among the countries which have devolved responsibilities down

to communal bodies whose function is to look after the interests of, or provide services to, particular groups bound by linguistic or religious ties. The Good Friday Agreement, which has commonly been misperceived by outsiders as the crowning moment of a reconciliation process, is in fact a pact that recognizes and builds upon difference within a cultural diversity paradigm which may stop short of the Belgian, Canadian or Swiss segregation models, but which still trades on the assumption of fixed, immutable identities (Finlay, 2004).

Education in Northern Ireland has had to face similar choices, and the narrative line that traces the history of educational interventions parallels the political process over the last 30 years. The early years of the troubles saw the British government attempt to magnetise the political centre, while educationalists ran a parallel campaign—to draw people into shared or common understandings of the world. The failure of these attempts has resulted in a recognition, rather than a negation, of difference: the political structures of the Good Friday Agreement are, as Andrew Finlay argues (Finlay, 2004, pp. 131–147), the crowning achievement of an essentialist form of pluralism that builds upon fixed, communalist identities. In educational terms, the same cultural diversity model has been applied with the same acceptance of the validity of the two communities' cultural norms, and a new cause-and-effect spiral is created in which education, culture and politics act to reinforce each other.

2. Trying for unity

If, as I have argued, the ethnonationalist conflict in Northern Ireland is a part of the postmodern chaos of identity wars, then it should also be recognized that this analysis was not always available. Indeed, in the late 1960s when the Northern Ireland conflict first exploded onto the streets, its curiosity value was that this was a *pre-modern* conflict, a seventeenth century religious war being fought out on twentieth century housing estates. The obvious solution was a heavy dose of enlightenment values, of tolerance and understanding. That was what had happened historically in every other part of Europe, where ancient hatreds and religious passions had been tamed by education and the power of reason. At schooling level emphasis was placed upon the importance of creating a shared understanding of history and on forging some cross-community links. Early ad hoc projects

such as the Schools Community Relations Project (1970) and the Schools Cultural Studies Unit (1974) were replaced by the larger-scale Education for Mutual Understanding in 1983, and in 1989, the most prescriptive intervention from government came in 1989 with The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order. It established a Northern Ireland curriculum which is compulsory in all schools. There are six compulsory cross-curricular themes, two of which relate to the goal of engineering better community relations—Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage.

This emphasis was also picked up by adult education, with again a focus on Irish history and on the possibilities of cross-community contact. The challenges were, from the outset, formidable: adult education everywhere has to pick up the tab for deficits within the schooling system, and in a situation the vast bulk of the population only experienced their fellow citizens as the “other” through inter-school exchanges—often of a competitive sporting nature—the emphasis had to fall on *un-learning* more than learning. It was not a task that the traditional forms of adult learning were designed to address, and the disillusionment experienced by those trying to work within orthodox curricula is expressed in this passage written by a group of academics (Morrow et al., 1993, p. 9) at the University of Ulster who were attempting to bring peace education out into the community:

Many models of conflict resolution rely upon a linear, or Cartesian, view of the world. Peace making is a “skill” to be learnt like woodwork or knitting or Ancient Greek. Likewise, “peace” is a matter of rational understanding, of rational control, of learning. It is our contention that this view of human beings is fundamentally flawed. For us, conflict is not primarily an intellectual question. Indeed, time after time people talk about their feelings “coming from their guts”, about anger, fear and hatred which flare up unexpectedly in response to a given situation or person.

Two examples may serve to illustrate how the type of affective learning described by Morrow, Wilson and Wright functions in practice. The first is a WEA course entitled “Us and Them” which, as the title suggests, takes participants into an exploration of the cultural differences that divide Protestants and Catholics. The course format is that of a

traditional adult education class: 10 weekly sessions lasting 2 hours each with a facilitator and a group of 8–15 participants. The course runs in community centres and often involves ex-paramilitary prisoners, sometimes with an ex-prisoner acting as group facilitator to bridge the gap between the belief systems of the course participants and the moderate, anti-sectarian aims of the WEA programme. Working from a course resource pack the group begins with a consideration of fluid identities (music choices, hobbies, possessions) before entering more controversial territory with the consideration of essentialist identities and how they are constructed. There are sessions on religious labels, borders and nationalities, political identities, and stereotyping. The aim of the course is not to move people out of their existing identities, but to encourage a degree of self-reflexivity, and an acceptance of the validity of other perspectives.

The second example comes from a training programme organized by Counteract, an anti-sectarian training organization set up by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. The given scenario is as follows. Northlands Ltd. is a multinational tyre company with a plant in the predominantly nationalist north-west of Northern Ireland. They employ 150 workers, 95% of whom are Catholic. Throughout the Troubles, the small minority of Protestants has enjoyed good, if wary, relations with their Catholic workmates, and in an area where there are scarce opportunities for male manual workers, the stability of the workplace is prized by all. The Tyre Workers Union employs one full-time shop steward who is upset to learn that a long-term Protestant worker has been receiving farewell messages in his locker. The worker and the shop steward both interpret the messages as a form of sectarian intimidation. The role of Counteract is to help the workforce think through responses to this type of situation. In this particular case, the salient questions are seen to be: Should management be approached? Should the whole workforce be informed? Should the union make a direct approach to those suspected of sending the messages?

The learning involved in these types of situation is non-algorithmic: that is to say, the pathway to the solution is not specified in advance; rather there is a hermeneutic process whereby participants struggle towards a deeper understanding of their own circumstance. There are particular examples where Counteract can show how its methods resolved an incipient crisis, or where trade unions used the

training to put in place the procedures that helped prevent such outbreaks ever occurring. The WEA, likewise can show successful evaluations from students on its cross-community programmes, as can the other providers who work from this “contact” model. And for some organizations, like the residential Corrymeela Centre in north Antrim, it is not just a part of their provision but is in fact, their entire *raison d’être*.

Despite the obvious virtues of this approach, it has been subject to a sustained critique, and is no longer the dominant model of provision. The critique takes three forms: first there is a questioning of the efficacy of contact approaches at both local and at international level. The original “contact hypothesis” (Allport, 1954), first developed in the United States in the 1950s to address race relations, has now been tested for 50 years in many different conflict situations, and a number of literature reviews have been conducted which place some order on an extremely heterogeneous field. Gaertner et al. (1996) see the developments in the field as social science’s major contribution to conflict resolution. Kadushin and Levert (2002, pp. 117–127) draw attention to the increasingly sophisticated ways in which Allport’s original model has been refined, arguing that the conditions required for success are almost impossible to introduce into real life situations. The most recent and thoroughgoing review is the meta-analysis produced by Tausch et al. (2005). It is unrealistic, they conclude, to expect a reduction in group hostility and conflict just because of contact between individuals; on the other hand, it is unwarranted to dismiss the real achievements recorded in particular places at particular times. They close their study by pointing to Varshney’s (2002) study of Hindu–Muslim relations in India, which were improved by a police-led initiative which put together neighbourhood committees and assisted them in working together over years to combat sectarian incidents. If this is an example of the success of contact work, there are other cases where, despite the best efforts of all the virtuous spiral fails to materialize. Northern Ireland may be a case in point. There is clear evidence that contact between Catholics and Protestants can encourage a reduction of prejudice and even allow sustainable personal friendships to develop across the sectarian divide, but according to Trew’s (1976, pp. 104–5) analysis of a range of short-term and long-term initiatives, these micro developments do not ever achieve the critical mass

necessary to effect change at the macro level: “...there is no empirical evidence or theoretical rationale to suggest that contact per se will either influence salient political beliefs or have any impact on sectarianism in the society”.

A second criticism of those models that consciously set out to build unity is that they only operate on the margins of the conflict. According to a survey conducted by the University of Ulster (Eyben, Morrow and Wilson, 1997), the low public esteem for community relations work is related to the fact that its field of practice is seen to exist in the outlying areas of community development, education and youth work—far away from the hard core of the problem, and indeed a distraction from the tough issues of social justice and human rights. The *Journal of Community Relations*, published by the Community Relations Council, frequently published pained accounts by those working in the field who chafe at what they see to be an out of date perception of their work as ineffectual, middle-class do-goodery, and there is no doubt that the field practice of many of these workers is more attuned to frontline realities than is generally acknowledged. Even that does not shield community relations from the third, and most damaging accusation, that it fails to treat the real causes of the conflict which lie, not in interpersonal relationships, but in political structures. For many republicans, community relations work is, at best, a misdiagnosis of the problem; at worst, a conscious attempt by the British state to mask the true nature of sectarianism. As one community activist put it:

The “one side’s as bad as the other” approach is a blatantly inappropriate attempt to impose sameness where there is none. ...Despite the dominance of this kind of approach in anti-sectarian work, sectarianism carries with it asymmetries of power that are just as stark as those involved in racism or sectarianism. Sectarianism is institutionalized by the nature of the state in Northern Ireland, and as such it empowers Protestants and disempowers Catholics. Catholics may be sectarian in a whole range of ways but, by and large, these are not sectarian. (McVeigh, 1998)

There are many who would argue that this view is, in its own way, lop-sided, but the point is that from the late 1980s onwards the attempt to create a middle ground based on community reconciliation was being eclipsed by the idea that communalist

identities, seen for so long as constituting the core of the problem, would have in future to become the pillars of the solution. In political terms this, led towards the Good Friday Agreement; in educational terms it led to an embrace of the cultural diversity model.

3. Working with diversity

The Good Friday Agreement is a pact of the sort described by political scientists as “consociationalist”, and is most associated with the University of California political scientist Arend Lijphart. Lijphart starts from the position that, in deeply divided societies, attempts to use educational or cultural developments to break down barriers are in all likelihood doomed. In putting forward this analysis, he offered Northern Ireland as a case in point: “The integration of a deeply divided society may not be possible at all and certainly cannot be achieved in a reasonably short time” (Lijphart, 1975). Normal democratic forms cannot resolve the tension because, where there are majority and minority communities as in Northern Ireland, majoritarian forms of voting will result in “ethnic lock-in”. Consociationalism offers a chance of stable and fair government by creating a power-sharing grand coalition that offers accommodation for both identities. The Good Friday Agreement is built on this model: nationalists and unionists are each guaranteed a place in government and no opposition is required. It is doubtful if those voting for the Agreement—as they did overwhelmingly in the two referenda held in both parts of Ireland in 1998—saw all the ramifications of this novel form of political structure. Whatever design faults it might have had, the Agreement was seen as a serious attempt to find a final compromise between unionism and nationalism, and a war-weary population wished to applaud a compromise that had the appearance of transcendence. As Robin Wilson describes it, there was even the hope that a new political fault-line emerging, “of cross-sectarian supporters of the Agreement versus fundamentalist opponents...as “yes”/“no” replaced Orange/Green” (Wilson, 2005, p. 1). The moment passed, and trust between the parties collapsed. So too did the faith of the unionist community in the new dispensation. The poetry somehow turned to prose, and the familiar wrangling for advantage began again. While no political scientist can see a solution emerging that moves far outside the framework of the Good Friday

Agreement, there is also a reassessment of what this model brings in its wake.

Lijpart had never seen his model as offering any real hope of reconciliation. That is not what consociationalism is about: in fact, it does not matter if power-sharing arrangements shore up and strengthen divisions between communities, what matters is they find the balance necessary for stable government, and for the equitable ways sharing out of resources. (Phillips, 1993) The intensification of sectarian identities may well assist the coherence of the project: in terms of *realpolitik*, this translates into a bicultural model that locks the people of Northern Ireland into two essentialist communalist models. The voting system in the Stormont Assembly followed this binary model by requiring “parallel consent from the two communities on the two key issues”. Members of the Assembly had to designate themselves unionist or nationalist, and while a third category of “others” was also created, the balancing mechanism prioritized the historical identities. In one crucial vote, in 2001, the first minister, David Trimble only survived in post when the two centre parties, Alliance and the Women’s Coalition, temporarily re-designated themselves as unionists in order to shore up support. The designation issue does not end with political parties. The 2001 census figures showed that a substantial section of the population, 13.9%, self-identified as being neither Protestant nor Catholic. The Census Office, acting with dubious legality, went systematically through these figures and using names and other badges of identity, reduced this figure down to an irreducible core of 3.5%. The “two tribes” view of Northern Ireland society is no longer seen as the problem, but as the basic architecture of the future.

Developments of this kind do not happen in a vacuum. Consociationalism, like the GLC and other forms of governance that build upon the “politics of identity” are the political expression of the part of the same general movement of thought that includes cultural diversity and multiculturalism. It is, as Auden said of Freudianism, less a theory and more a whole climate of opinion. When Natanah Glazer says however “We are all multiculturalists now” (Glazer, 1997) he means that in most western countries public policy has been constructed on the basis that the polity must be based on the accommodation of different cultures and ethnicities, and that this must extend into all branches of government, particularly education and

culture. Certainly, the shaping of educational and cultural policies in Northern Ireland now follows the contours of a two traditions paradigm (Crozier, 1998) and with it comes the concomitant belief that culture, which has previously been seen to be part of the problem, must now be seen as part of the solution.

The educational programmes that flow from this are of an interesting kind. The Good Friday Agreement endorsed integrated schools (part of the integrative approach to communal division) while also placing a statutory duty on the Department of Education to provide comparable support for Irish language medium education (part of the cultural diversity approach). Minority culture schools are now of two kinds: those that deliver all their teaching through the Irish language, and those independent schools that are organised in accordance with the fundamentalist religious values of the Free Presbyterian Church. There are now 44 Irish language nursery schools, 31 primary schools and three secondary schools. The development of Free Presbyterian schooling is at an earlier stage—there are at present only five but already have strained the limits of liberal pluralism, by wishing to insist on the right to impose corporal punishment on the pupils. As the Reverend Ivan Foster explained it to the BBC: “When my child persistently does wrong then I must show that pain will follow disobedience” (BBC Online, 2000).

In adult education, the new model means support for programmes that celebrate particularisms. That translates into government support for those cultural expressions that are prized within the nationalist community like the Irish language or traditional music, while within the unionist community funds are channelled into cultural expressions such as Burns, nights or pipe bands, and now even the Orange Order, which because of its avowed anti-Catholicism was always seen to be a sectarian organization, finds its activities eligible for government support. This “balanced sectarianism” (Butler, 1991) carries with it a further twist. The liberal pluralist idea of “parity of esteem” carries with it a notion of equivalence, a policy that can produce some incongruous results. For example, the fact that the Irish language receives such generous funding has spurred unionists into the creation of an Ulster–Scots language, a contrivance that has found little support amongst linguists, but plenty from the coffers of government programmes established to help cultural traditions.

If at times all of this appears out of step with the direction of policy in other parts of the UK, it may be that once again that, regressive as some of these policies may be, they are the shape of the future. Linguistic diversity is now a key category of governance throughout the world: the constitution of the new South Africa, for example, gives official recognition to eleven different languages. Faith schools are another case in point: while the evidence from Northern Ireland would seem to present a fairly clear warning about the danger of deepening existing divisions, the British government is determined to sail into the same choppy waters. Or, to take another example, when, in the wake of the July 2005 bombings in London, Trevor Phillips, the Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality made his now famous speech about “sleepwalking into segregation” (Phillips, 2005) he may not have known it, but he was echoing a warning given by the Director of the Community Relations Council in Northern Ireland, Dr Duncan Morrow, who had sounded a similar warning about the danger of “continuing to fund community development along unchallenged single-identity lines is a bottomless pit, in which a segregated and sectarianized society endlessly reproduces itself” (Morrow, 2005). The Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori puts it well in his warning about the management of conflict in a divided society: “If you reward divisions and divisiveness...you increase and eventually heighten divisions and divisiveness” (Sartori, 1997, p. 72).

4. Finding what works

The bombs that exploded in London in July 2005 forced multiculturalism back onto the political agenda. There was a good deal of panicky reaction (reminiscent of the hysteria that followed 9/11), and in effort to get rid of the bathwater, there were those who were prepared to sacrifice whatever it took, up to and including the proverbial baby. Criticism of multiculturalism is of course not new, but what distinguished the critiques that began to fill the columns of *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Observer* was that this time the attack came from the pluralistic centre-left (Modood, 2005). For those feeling that old-fashioned integrationism provided a better model a further shock was in store. In November 2005 Muslim communities set fire to France’s colour-blind brand of integrationism, putting paid to the idea that identity can only

be constructed around individual citizens. The third model, the American accommodation of hyphenated communities, that combine an attachment to American citizenship with the freedom to mobilize politically and culturally on an ethnic basis, also emerged looking more threadbare after Hurricane Katrina tore away the covers that had shielded poor, Southern black communities from view.

If it is the case that there is no successful template for multiculturalism, it is equally true that there is no return to monoculturalism. We live in multi-ethnic societies. That simple fact requires us to devise and revise the difficult task of living with difference. In Northern Ireland, we have not made a very good job of that. Education has not helped in its complicity with segregated schooling, and its support for cultural pluralism can shade into the magnification of difference. The will to learn, however, is a sturdy plant that will force itself through any surface to find the light. Community educationalists know this, and perhaps one of the less understood truths is that liberation and empowerment, those buzz words of radical adult education, are actually most frequently found in traditional forms of adult learning. That may not be the intention, but as the opening anecdote demonstrated, not all results are planned results.

A second story may help illustrate how the unintended consequences may finally create the virtuous spiral. On 18 March 2005, four working-class women from Belfast were engaged in an extraordinary meeting in Washington. The McCartney sisters from the Short Strand area of Belfast were meeting with the President of the United States and other distinguished political leaders, including Senator Ted Kennedy. The meetings were part of their campaign to get justice in the case of their murdered brother Robert, who had been killed by members of the IRA. Their refusal to accept the right of the IRA to enforce its own brand of justice had set in motion a sequence of events that combined with other pressures to eventually force the IRA to announce the final end to its 30 year campaign. The McCartneys were given many national and international awards for their courage; they were also subjected to a spiteful whispering campaign in the nationalist areas of Belfast. The two reactions to their sudden fame hung on the same question: how could a group of working-class women achieve so much? Some answers are obvious: the need for justice is a powerful driving force, and the bonds of family secured them in their

mission. One fact that was not considered—or not considered important—was the role of adult learning. Paula, the eldest sister, is in fact a mature student doing a degree at Queen's University. Claire is a trainee teacher. Gemma is a qualified nurse, and Catherine had joined a women's studies course, and subsequently went on to be a tutor in the community-based project Women Into Politics project which encourages the participation of women in the male-dominated structures of political life in Northern Ireland. It was a message that she and her sisters were to live. The drama for which they have become famous is, in every sense, an unintended consequence but their triumph is one that can give hope to adult educationalists everywhere.

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