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Research Update

Flying the Flag? An Update on attitudes to markers of identity in public space

Gráinne Kelly

A vote taken at Belfast City Council over the flying of the Union flag on 18 designated days (rather than every day) over the City Hall in December 2012 marked a new chapter in the thorny story of how communities in Northern Ireland express their identity on official buildings and in public spaces. Following months of protest and unrest by Loyalist communities, the Panel of Parties of the Northern Ireland Executive, chaired by Dr. Richard Haass and Professor Meghan O'Sullivan, were tasked with reaching agreement on three distinct issues which all speak to the challenges of living within a divided society, with a history of violence and mistrust: parades, flags and the past. Despite six months of fact-finding, promising negotiations and progress in some areas, the talks failed to deliver a comprehensive agreement by the deadline of the 31st of December 2013. It also indicated that, despite a range of options being proposed, no agreement was found in relation to flags and emblems either on public buildings or unofficially in public spaces.

It is timely, therefore, to explore attitudes to flags and other public displays of community identity, drawing on the data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. Before doing so, the overall context of community relations in 2013 is worth reporting on, given the significance of the most recent survey results.

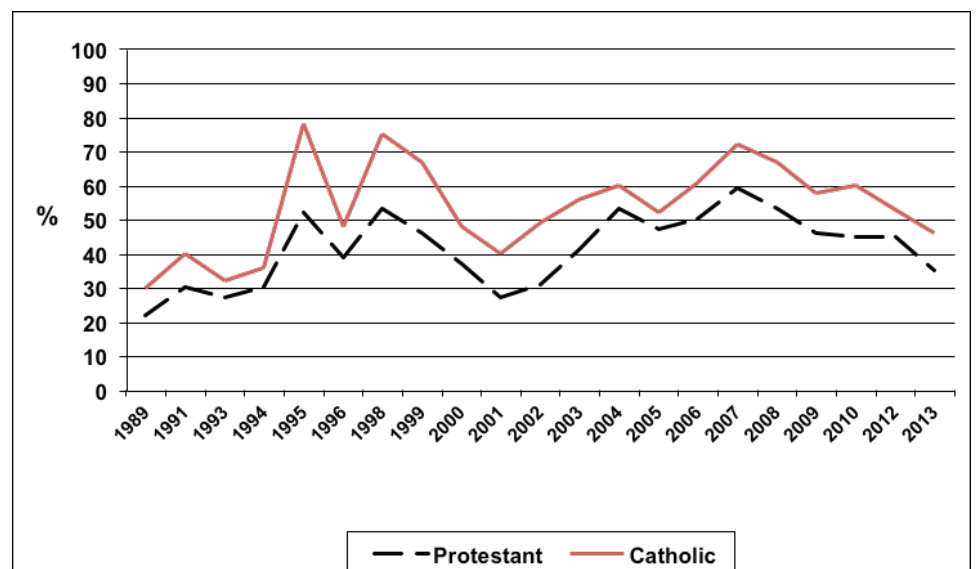
The state of community relations in 2013

There are a number of key indicators that have been used consistently to monitor public perception of the state of community relations, and results from the 2013 survey indicate that the perception that relations are better than five years ago has continued to fall. The proportion of respondents who believe that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than five years ago has fallen to 45 per cent. This figure has not been this low since 2003 and represents a drop of seven percentage points on the 2012 figure.

When looking towards the future, respondents are also less optimistic about community relations than in previous years (see Figure 1). While nearly two thirds of respondents in 2007 (64%) felt that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in five years' time, this figure fell to 48 per cent in 2012 and 40 per cent in 2013.

Since 2007, the proportion of respondents saying that community relations will get better in five years time has fallen 26 percentage points among Catholic respondents, 24 percentage points among Protestant respondents, and 25 percentage points among those with no religion. Only 35 per cent of Protestants in 2013 thought that relations would be better in five years' time. This overall

Figure 1: Percentage believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in 5 years time, by religion



pessimism is the context against which to explore public attitudes to flag flying and other public displays of community identity.

More, Less or the Same?

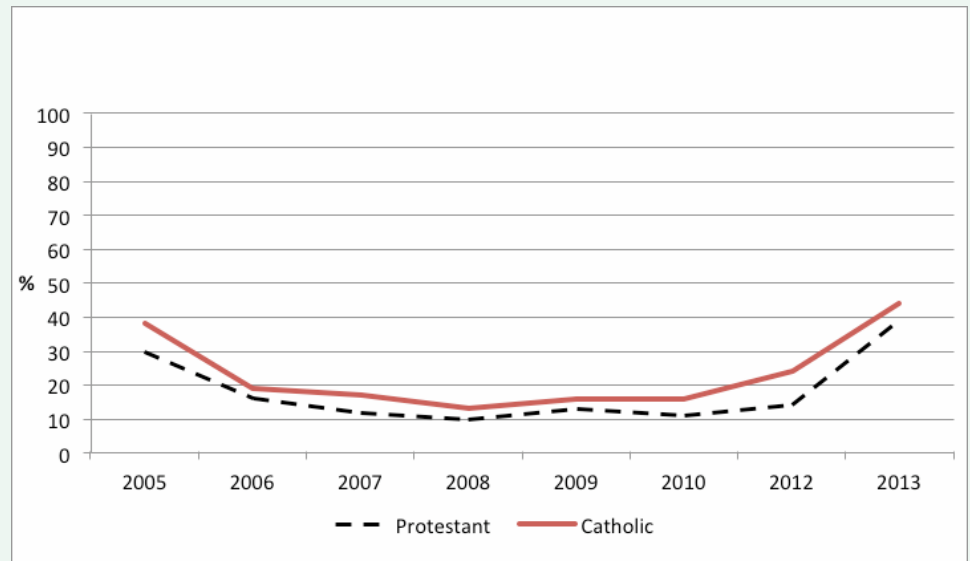
Since 2005, the NILT Survey has asked respondents whether they think there are more, less or about the same number of Republican or Loyalist murals and flags on display than there were five years previously. Looking first at the responses in relation to Republican murals or flags, the views of Protestant respondents remained steady during the years 2008 to 2012 (16% each year). However, that figure rose to 27 per cent in 2013. Catholic perceptions remained steady over the same period at around 10 per cent.

Looking at the figures for perceptions of the number of Loyalist murals and flags on display, in comparison to five years previously, there is a very steep upturn in 2013, with more than double the proportion of respondents indicating that there are more Loyalist markers (40% compared with 18% in 2012). This trend is consistent for both Protestant and Catholic respondents, with a 25 percentage point rise in Protestant responses between 2012 and 2013, and a 20 percentage point rise in Catholic responses between the same years.

Changing Times?

Since 2005, NILT has included a number of questions which focus on feelings towards murals, kerb painting and flags in the past year – three distinct markers of community identity or affiliation in Northern Ireland. In relation to Republican markers, overall respondents have been less likely to report being annoyed by republican murals, kerb painting and flags, with a high of 41 per cent in the 2005 results, falling to 22 per cent in both 2012 and 2013. Looking at the responses from Protestants, overall there was a

Figure 2: Percentage of people who think there are more Loyalist murals and flags on display than there were 5 years ago



downward trend, not rising above 30 per cent since 2005. However there is some recent evidence of annoyance within the Protestant community, perhaps reflecting some renewed awareness or resentment towards Republican markers of identity given the perceived restrictions placed on the Union flag by Belfast City Council in 2012 (up from 23% in 2010 to 30% in 2013).

More significant changes emerge in the proportion of people who report being annoyed by Loyalist murals, kerb paintings,

or flags. Figure 3 indicates that Catholic respondents show a clearer upturn in annoyance at Loyalist displays from 27% in 2010, to 33% in 2012, and 38% in 2013.

Not in my backyard?

Since 2006, survey respondents have been asked if, in general, they would, or do support flag flying on lampposts in their own neighbourhood. Overall, the majority of respondents do not support flag flying

Figure 3: Percentage of Protestants who have felt annoyed by Republican murals kerb painting and flags and Catholics who have felt annoyed by Loyalist murals, kerb painting and flags in the last year

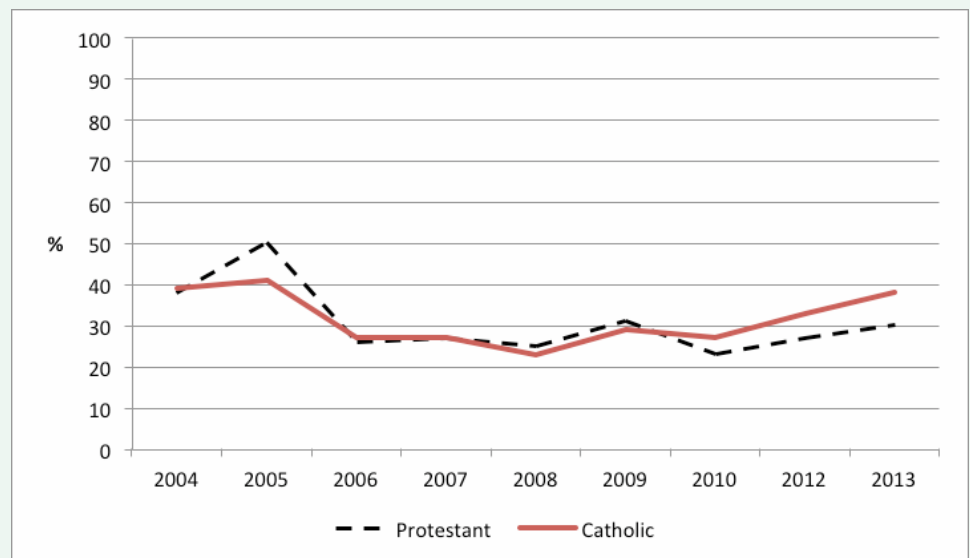
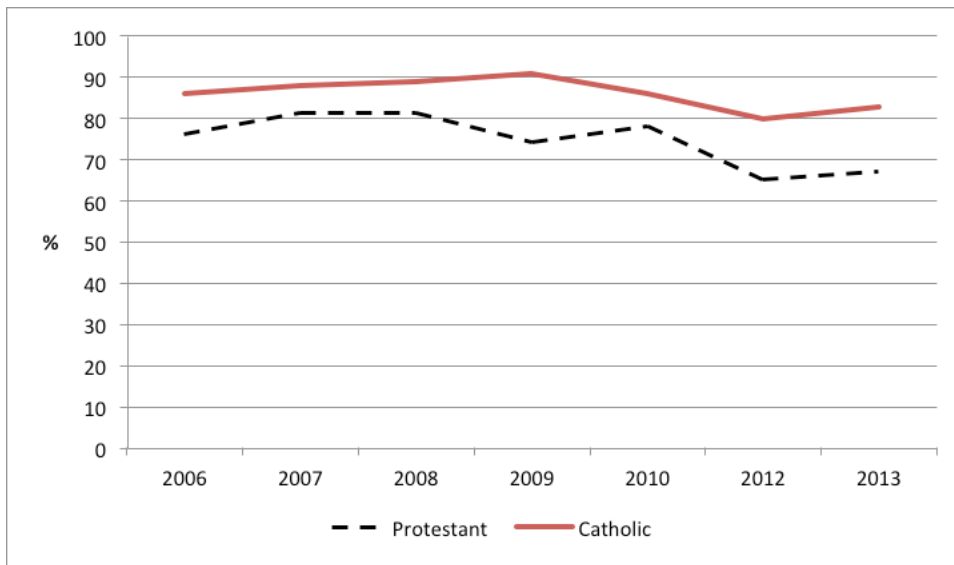


Figure 4: Percentage who *do not* support flag flying from lampposts in own neighbourhood



in their neighbourhoods. However, this figure dropped in 2012 and 2013 (see Figure 4) with a small increase in those indicating that they do support flag flying in their neighbourhood. Attitudes have become more ambivalent in 2012 and 2013 led by Protestant respondents and may well reflect the changing context of the ongoing flags dispute and the increased number of flags being erected in public spaces.

Flags and public buildings

Insofar as the debate over flags on public buildings is concerned, the most popular view among both Protestants (48%) and Catholics (59%) is that the Union flag should be flown on designated days only from all public buildings. Hence there is an overall majority of 53% for this course of action among the Northern Ireland population (see Table 1). Twenty eight per cent of Catholics feel that the Union flag should not be flown at all from any public building and only 3% of Protestants agree with this.

However while there is an overall majority in favour of flying the Union flag on designated days only, there is nonetheless a significant minority of Protestants (44%) who feel that the Union flag should be flown all the time. Further exploration

shows that there is clearly a depth of feeling on this issue that runs through the Protestant community. Table 2 shows the proportion of Protestant respondents from different demographic groups who believe that the flag should be flown all the time.

A full 61% of Protestants aged under 35 believe that the Union flag should be flown all year round. The group least supportive of this view are graduates and even then 27% of Protestant graduates believe that the Union flag should be flown all year round. Of Protestants who do not support flag flying in their own neighbourhood, 31% believe that the Union flag should be flown all year round as do 37% of those who have been personally annoyed by Loyalist murals, kerb paintings or flags in last 12 months.

Table 1: Which of these statements about flags on public buildings in Northern Ireland comes closest to your own view?

	Protestant	Catholic	All
	%	%	%
The Union flag should be flown from all public buildings <u>all the time</u>	44	5	24
The Union flag should be flown <u>on designated days only</u> from all public buildings	48	59	53
The Union flag should <u>not be flown at all</u> from any public building	3	28	16
Don't know	5	8	8

Table 2: Attitudes to flying the Union flag on public buildings all year round among Protestant respondents

% of Protestant respondents saying that flag should be flown all the time	
Age	
18-34	61
35-54	49
55+	35
Highest educational qualification	
Higher education level	27
A level	41
GCSE A-C or equivalent	57
GCSE D-G or equivalent	63
No qualifications	54
Has felt annoyed by Loyalist murals, kerb paintings or flags in last 12 months	37
Does not support flag flying on lamp posts in own neighbourhood	31

Discussion

The NILT survey results for community relations since 2013 do not make for easy reading. The deterioration in respondents' optimism for the future of relations between Catholics and Protestants is cause for serious concern. While unwise to make direct correlations between attitudes and events, it appears clear that the impact of the motion passed at Belfast City Council, and the subsequent flag protests and widespread unrest, has had a negative impact far beyond people's attitudes to, and tolerance of, markers of identity of the 'other' community.

The survey results indicate that the majority of respondents (75%) do not support the flying of flags within their own neighbourhoods. However, 53% would support the flying of the Union flag from public buildings on designated days. These figures suggest that there is a certain level of tolerance or acceptance

of the importance which some place on the symbolic nature of flag flying within society.

The current Northern Ireland Executive Strategy document 'Together: Building a United Community' also recognises the negative impact that unregulated flag-flying can have on community relations, noting that 'Flags and symbols that are used in a way to cause intimidation, or to glorify violence, hate or prejudice can present a barrier to the development of truly shared public spaces across our community' (OFMDFM, 2013: 56). While the 2013 Strategy proposed the establishment of the All Party Group to make recommendations on this issue, the failure of the Haass talks means that the issue remains unresolved and festering. In 2013, a sizeable number of Protestants (44%) expressed their belief that the Union flag should be flown from all public buildings, all the time. Twenty eight per

cent of Catholics felt that the same flag should not be flown at all, from any public building. The next twelve months will see fundamental changes being made to local government, with the introduction of eleven new 'super councils' with increased decision making powers. Northern Ireland Assembly elections will take place in 2016. Within this context, it remains to be seen how these polarised positions can be reconciled without having a detrimental effect on relationships both within the debating chambers and out on the street.

References

Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (2013) *Together: Building a United Community*. Available online at www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/together-building-a-united-community-strategy.pdf

Key points

- The proportion of respondents who believe that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than five years ago has fallen from 62% in 2010 to 45% in 2013.
- In 2013, 27% of Protestant respondents thought there were more Republican murals and flags on display than there were five years ago. This figure is up eleven percentage points on 2012.
- Two out of five respondents (40%) thought there were more Loyalist murals and flags on display than five years previously. This figure has more than doubled since 2012.
- There is some evidence of increased annoyance towards Republican markers of identity within the Protestant community in 2012 and 2013.
- There is clear evidence of increased annoyance towards Loyalist displays of identity within the Catholic community, from 27% in 2011, to 33% in 2012, and 38% in 2013.
- The most popular view among both Protestants (48%) and Catholics (59%) is that the Union flag should be flown on designated days only from all public buildings.
- Forty four per cent of Protestants believe that the Union flag should be flown year round and although this is a minority view it runs consistently through demographic groups.
- Sixty one per cent of young Protestants believe that the Union flag should be flown year round.

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The **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** (NILT) is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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