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'Lost generations'? Taking the longer view on Northern Ireland migration

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Between 2004 and 2008, immigration to Northern Ireland rose to unprecedented numbers and the issue of how the newcomers could be accommodated became a 'struggle' for local authorities and featured prominently in the local media. Since then, however, immigration has declined significantly to the point where by mid-2012, Northern Ireland net migration figures were once again in the negative with the rapidly accelerating emigration of young middle class migrants prompting the news media to lament a 'lost generation'. In fact, apart from the recent short-term *immigration* anomaly, the predominant context for migration relating to Northern Ireland since 1921 has overwhelmingly been *emigration*; this largely driven by youth unemployment, labour market structure, lack of inward investment, and on-going sectarianism. Indeed, if today's youth constitute a 'lost generation' then by the same definition Northern Ireland has 'lost' at least three generations previously in its relatively short history: during the 1920s, the 1950s, and the 1970s. Nevertheless, examination of government documents and debates reveals that the Northern Ireland authorities showed little interest in or concern about emigration. Whereas in the 1920s, Unionist administrations cheerfully framed youth emigration as Northern Ireland's contribution to the Empire, by the 1950s record levels of emigration were dismissed in Stormont in comparison to even higher levels of emigration in the Republic, along with claims that the province would be saved by its high birth rate. By the 1970s, there was no Stormont parliament to respond at all. Thus, there has been little attempt since partition to challenge and address a political and economic infrastructure in Northern Ireland which has continually failed to provide incentives and opportunities for young people at home. The lack of a public discourse about migration has also resulted in little if any effort to benefit from its opportunities – to harness the goodwill, expertise and linkages provided by emigrants and immigrants that could be of enormous benefit to Northern Ireland society.

Northern Ireland: Migration summary

The first official census of Ireland was taken in 1821 and the total population recorded was 6,801,827 (Vaughan and Fitzpatrick 1978, 3). While the Ulster population amounted to 1,998,494, that of the six counties constituted as Northern Ireland (NI) since 1921 was at that time 1,380,451 or 69 per cent of the Ulster total. The highest population for the six counties recorded prior to the 2001 census was in 1841 at 1,648,945, after which due to high death and emigration rates during the great famine, its population declined sharply by 1851 to 1,442,517. Like the rest of Ireland, population decline, due in large part to low marriage and fertility rates coupled with high emigration, continued in the six county area until it reached a low point in 1891 at 1,236,056. Nevertheless, the fact that the six county population by then comprised over 80 per cent of the total Ulster population demonstrates that from the mid-nineteenth century the six counties lost proportionately less population than the remaining three Ulster counties and indeed the rest of Ireland generally. Between 1851 and 1920, emigration from all nine Ulster counties (largely to North America) numbering almost 1.25 million individuals comprised approximately 30 per cent of the total emigration from Ireland and the six counties that are now part of Northern Ireland accounted for just over 21 per cent of the total. Since 1891, there has been a steady increase in population in the six county area in each intercensal period; this driven primarily by birth rate since emigration remained significant until the 1990s.

Averaged per decade from 1921–2001, Northern Ireland had a greater outflow of people than inflow and it is estimated that over 500,000 people emigrated from Northern Ireland while some 1.5 million left independent Ireland (Delaney 2002, 1). The figure below provides a comparison of net migration rates for both Irish jurisdictions since partition. From the end of the Second World War the total outflow from Northern Ireland has been estimated at 300,000 more than the inflow. That the population has continued to grow (from 1.28 million in 1922 to 1.81 million in 2011) has been primarily due to birth rate. For Northern Ireland, two decades stand out, the 1920s and the 1970s, as periods of intense political turmoil and dismal economic conditions locally, though the 1970s must be viewed in the context of the significant net immigration in the Republic of Ireland (ROI); the first time that the 26–county area experienced a positive inflow since the British immigrations of the seventeenth century. The low out–migration in the 1930s and the high out–migration of the 1950s from both jurisdictions in Ireland reflect wider international conditions (the Great Depression and subsequent post–war boom) which affected British and European migration trends generally. By the turn of the twenty–first century, emigration slowed and immigration was on the rise although a slight increase in outflow from Northern Ireland for the years 1998–2001 may indicate that economic recovery as experienced in the ROI from 1996 was somewhat delayed in the North. Immigration became the dominant trend from 2004 coinciding with the accession into the European Union of EU8 countries of Eastern Europe, peaking in 2006–2007 with over 30,000 people arriving in each of those years and positive net–migration exceeding natural population growth in Northern Ireland for the first time in its history. However, due to the economic downturn which began in 2008, immigration has declined substantially while emigration, especially of young people, has increased to the extent that concern has been expressed about a ‘lost generation’. This trend looks likely to continue into the near future as youth unemployment rises.

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Decade	Ireland (per 000)	Northern Ireland (per 000)
1921–31	–10.9	–8.0
1931–41	–3.1	–1.9
1941–51	–9.3	–3.6
1951–61	–14.1	–6.5
1961–71	–4.5	–4.5
1971–81	+3.2	–7.3
1981–91	–5.6	–4.4
1991–01	+3.3	–0.2
2001–11	+8.1	+2.2

Northern Ireland and Diaspora

After partition, substantial migration between Northern Ireland and Empire / Commonwealth destinations in the interwar years continued to sustain expatriate communities abroad while bolstering burgeoning ideologies of statehood at home. The contribution of Northern Ireland to the war effort and the subsequent return of Commonwealth migration in the post-war years through the 1960s prolonged this trend. Links established through migration were underpinned by official visits of Northern Ireland senior statesmen such as Prime Ministers James Craig and Sir Basil Brooke to destinations of the Commonwealth and the United States where they were enthusiastically welcomed by their expatriate countrymen and women. Thus, we can observe early recognition by the Northern Ireland government of its 'diaspora'; conscious of the importance of these connections in securing its own place within the greater imperial family.

However, with the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the outbreak of conflict came international media exposure of the Northern Ireland government's discriminatory policies and an increasing outflow of migrants dissatisfied with conditions at home – a 'reluctant diaspora' (Trew, 2010) that could no longer be relied upon to support the existence of the state. Coupled with the imposition of direct rule in 1972, this contributed to the avoidance of discourse on migration and diaspora. That there has been evident reluctance on the part of administrations in Northern Ireland to acknowledge the potential of migration to affect the welfare or the religious and ethnic composition of the resident population may be due to several reasons: 1) Northern Ireland does not control its own borders, migration or foreign policy so politicians and bureaucrats have been able at least publicly to maintain a 'hands off' stance; 2) since partition Catholics have represented the majority of emigrants (60%) due in large part to discriminatory policies in employment, education and housing, therefore any focus on migration would highlight institutional inequality and sectarianism; 3) increasing Protestant 'brain drain' emigration since the late 1980s and majority Catholic immigration since 2004 are contributory factors in shifting the majority / minority denominational balance and unwanted attention might destabilise the fragile peace and trigger sectarian incidents against minorities; and 4) the suspicion that emigrants, especially those that left during the 'Troubles', could not be relied upon 'in diaspora' to support the goals of a pro-union administration.

Even in light of the recent wave of immigration since 2004, the prevailing view has been fixed firmly inward on the 'problem' of integrating incomers to local 'norms' rather than consideration of how they may connect Northern Ireland to the wider world (Chan, 2006; Chiba, 2010; Gilligan et

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al., 2011; Hickman et al., 2008; Jarman, 2006, etc.). However, a truly intercultural approach would require negotiation between host society and immigrants in seeking reasonable accommodation (Taylor, 1992). Although some sectors (libraries, churches, schools) in Northern Ireland have made considerable efforts to accommodate newcomers, the onus tends to be placed on the immigrants who are expected to conform as soon as possible after arrival to Northern Ireland norms (see the recent critique by McDermott, 2011). Although attracting foreign direct investment has long been a strategy of the Northern Ireland government, there is little information available about how Northern Ireland emigrants might be contributing to international commercial relations; rather the concern has been with 'brain drain'. To date there has been no coherent approach to evaluating migration in view of the current and future economic development of Northern Ireland (Jarman, 2005; 2006; Jarman and Martynowicz, 2009). Accordingly, two key issues addressed in this presentation are that relative silence about migration and diaspora in Northern Ireland has to date largely suited pro-union administrations, and that public spending and policy development in Northern Ireland have nonetheless had a direct bearing on migration, especially emigration.

'Whose diaspora, whose migration, whose identity?' (Mac Éinrí and Lambkin, 2002) remain uncomfortable questions in 21st century Ireland. The evident uneasiness in Northern Ireland about the discourse of diaspora emanating from south of the border is apparent in the lack of support on the part of the Northern Ireland government for recent Irish government sponsored diaspora conferences and 'homecoming' initiatives. For in spite of recent progress towards a more diverse and inclusive conceptualisation of the Irish diaspora little attention has been paid to its relation to the contested space of Northern Ireland (unresolved by the Good Friday / Belfast Agreement) with very real disputed boundaries, political structures and identities. Relative silence on Northern Catholic disaffection and the lack of probing of key questions relating to the territory or 'homeland' of Ulster – 'north of the Black Pig's dyke' – in official diaspora discourse have contributed to the occlusion of counter narratives of the Unionist and Nationalist North. Indeed, several scholars have argued that Ireland's persistently monocultural image repeatedly invokes old boundaries and traditions – an Irish, Catholic, green and scenic island homeland – not inclusive of difference; political, ethnic, religious, or other. Despite former President Mary Robinson 'cherishing' the 'Irish abroad' and advocating the de-territorialisation of 'Irishness' outside national boundaries in the newly recast Article 2 of the Irish Constitution, the disputed border and territory of Northern Ireland remain 'the elephant in the room', so to speak. Emigrants and the 'discursively conceived diaspora' continue nonetheless to be 'official objects of governance' of the Republic of Ireland (ROI) which maintains consular services and support for emigrant agencies.

The study of migration and the relationship between homeland and diaspora is critical also to understanding the formation of the majority / minority dichotomy within Northern Ireland. To begin with, migration is often a fundamental cause of ethnonational conflict. 'Who was here first?' is the 'space-time' conundrum that often underlies conflict; 'the vertical and horizontal dimensions of being in the world' (Soja, 1989, 11). While the origin of ethnonational conflicts almost always involves migration, it is vital to recognise that the diaspora may play an important role in reigniting or perpetuating conflict or aiding with conflict resolution. Indeed, the existence of an expatriate population established around the world, especially throughout the British Commonwealth and in the United States has produced real benefits for Northern Ireland, evident in the contribution of the 'diaspora' to political and economic normalisation and even as demonstrated by recent passenger data, in the predominance of travellers whose reason for coming to Northern Ireland is 'visiting friends and relatives' (VFR). Taking the year 2006 as a typical example shows that the VFR passenger flow was especially high among those travelling from Canada (over 75%), Australia (over 65%), South Africa (62%) and the United States (53%), while Western Europeans featured most notably as business travellers. The prominence of Poland in the VFR flow indicates the recent significance of Northern Ireland as a site of the Polish diaspora.¹

¹ DETINI, 'Results from the 2011 Northern Ireland Passenger Survey', 22 March 2012, at: www.detini.gov.uk/2011_annual_nips.pdf (accessed: 6 Jan. 2013).

For more information and sources relating to the above, please consult the monograph:

Trew, Johanne Devlin (2013) *Leaving the North: Migration and Memory, Northern Ireland, 1921-2011*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, xvi, 348 p., illus. ISBN: 978-1-84631-940-2.