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Learning from Tackling Sectarianism in Scotland?

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Roots of Sectarianism in Scotland.

Modern sectarianism in Scotland is the product of the interaction of religious differences with other factors like exclusion and prejudice, industrialization and immigration, racism and poverty and had differing implications for the development of community life through education, leisure and marriage, for men and women and in different places. Among the contributory factors are:

1. Religious sectarianism in Scotland reflects developments in broader European Christianity. Divisions into Catholic and Protestant often with violent political and theological dimensions took on a 'dualistic' character, as sides defined their cause as a stand for good against evil where violence to defeat the enemy was necessary in the face of a satanic enemy.
2. Sectarianism in Ireland and Scotland emerged within the British political context, where militant Protestantism was in the ascendancy, justifying internal hostility to Catholics. When the last Protestant Stuart monarch, Anne, died without children, the English Parliament ensured a Protestant Succession by passing the Act of Settlement, extended to Scotland in 1705. Political discrimination against Catholics only ended in 1829, when the Roman Catholic Relief Act permitted Catholics to "elect and be elected members to serve in Parliament for Scotland..."
3. Modern sectarianism in Scotland was shaped by specifically Scottish economic and social developments. Between January and April 1848, 43,000 Irish economic migrants arrived in Glasgow and in large numbers thereafter. Catholics later arrived from Italy and Poland. Scotland also attracted Protestants from Ireland, where sectarianism was often deep-rooted. Hostility towards and between migrants based on differences of religion structured everyday life in Scottish cities and towns.

While sectarianism connects the West of Scotland to the North of Ireland, it also has a specific Scottish character in Scotland. This distinctiveness increased during the twentieth century as Scottish and Irish history evolved along distinct political paths.

Changing public policy to address Sectarianism in Scotland

Before devolution, government in Scotland showed no appetite to address its consequences. The rise of the welfare state eliminated many of the most extreme features of discrimination, while the development of new industries to replace industries associated with more overt discrimination and the emergence of a more multi-cultural society reduced the pressure to act and established a preference for informal management.

The establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1998 resulted in more active attention, triggered by evidence of sectarian behaviour associated with Scottish football. In 2002, the Scottish Executive moved to establish a “Cross-Party Working Group on Possible Legislation to Tackle Religious Hatred in Scotland.” Ultimately the group concluded that further legislation might be necessary but that this “should not overshadow the need for changes in practice, culture and attitudes to combat religious prejudice on a wider front.” A further Review of Marches and Parades (Orr Report) in 2003 established the responsibility of local authorities to manage and regulate contentious parades. In 2005, the First Minister called a Summit on Sectarianism to press for further action, especially from football clubs. A year later, the Scottish Executive published an action plan introducing Football Banning Orders, establishing small-scale funding for community interventions and, later, creating a legislative role for Local Authorities in regulating marches and parades via the Police, Public Order and Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act.

A series of high-profile incidents in 2011 associated with rivalry between Rangers and Celtic resulted in public pressure for further action. Despite opposition from other parties, the SNP government passed the Offensive Behaviour and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act in 2012 giving the police the right to prosecute. Amidst concerns about potential infringement of rights, and direct opposition from some groups such as Fans Against Criminalisation, the government agreed to monitor and review the working of the Act on an annual basis.

The Government supplemented specific legislation by opening up a parallel community-based pathway, spending £9m over three years through community and voluntary organisations and establishing an independent Advisory Group on Tackling Sectarianism (AGOTS) drawn from civic and academic life to advise the government on funding and to explore two fundamental questions: “What is Sectarianism in modern Scotland?” and “What should be done to eliminate it?”

What was the approach?

Evidence base: The Advisory group made clear their desire to move the debate away from either silence or emotive exchange of allegations by promoting an evidence-based approach. The group worked with the government to set in place a robust evidence trail through research. Questions relating to attitudes toward and experience of sectarianism were inserted into the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey while the Scottish Government published an ‘Examination of the Evidence of Sectarianism in Scotland’ updating a previous report from 2004. Aware that sectarianism was part of a complex fabric of community experience, the Advisory Group worked with the government to commission qualitative research from university teams on the Community Impact of Public Processions and the variety of Community Experiences of Sectarianism.

Relationship to Government: The integrity of the relationship of government, opposition politics, community and civil society was crucial. The Government underlined the independence of the Advisory Group on the basis of an agreed Terms of Reference and clear values. The Group was encouraged to openly engage with all political parties. The role of government as sponsor, resource and respondent was crucial to setting values and direction and creating a public policy framework, as was the role of civil society in establishing a non-partisan space in which to assess evidence and identify responsibility for change.

Building Capacity: The government was persuaded that sectarianism needed to be addressed where it had the most significant impact. Over 40 community projects were established, spread geographically from the Northeast to the Southwest and thematically across many issues.

Direct Engagement: The Advisory Group initiated dialogue with representatives of local government, parading and cultural organisations, police, funded groups, football clubs and authorities, educationalists, Equalities and Human Rights organisations and politicians. This was supplemented by organised events, invited dialogues and meetings for organisations working in communities. Over 30 months this developed into one of the most sustained public conversations on any equalities issue anywhere in Britain and Ireland.

What were the primary outcomes?

1. Research

- Analysis of census data appears to demonstrate that stark economic differences have declined in Scotland in recent decades. While there are pockets of residual deprivation, this appears to be associated with educational attainment, gender and locality more than with religion.
- The Scottish Social Attitudes survey revealed that 88% thought sectarianism was a live problem. Far fewer (8% of Protestants and 9% of Catholics) reported personal experience of sectarian incidents. 14% reported having experienced religious prejudice. This gap is consistent with the conclusions of previous research and persistence of fear of sectarianism remains a research priority.
- Sectarianism was strongly associated in the popular mind with visible manifestations of violence rather than discrimination. 88% of respondents to the Social Attitudes Survey associated it with Football, more than 70% associated with Orange and republican parades, with smaller proportions naming schools, social media and churches. The importance of football in modern non-religious manifestations of hostility was a persistent issue in Scotland giving rise to questions of the responsibilities of football authorities for change.
- Social Integration appears to be improving in Scotland. 30% of Catholics reported having a family member who is Protestant and 18% of Protestants have a family member who is Catholic. Furthermore over 75% reported having at least one close friend from across this division.
- Work on communities suggests that sectarianism is associated with specific geographies, often in the west of Scotland. Evidence suggests that sectarianism is a more acute concern for Catholics in the West of Scotland, with a residual sense that Scotland is institutionally biased against Catholic advancement. While there is no doubt that anti-Catholicism has left a specific and unequal residue in a number of institutions, the Hate Crime statistics and work conducted in support of the Offensive Behaviour Act suggest that violence and social media aggression operates in both directions in local communities.
- The work of the Advisory Group took place during the referendum on Scottish independence and during a period of turmoil for the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Scotland over Equal Marriage legislation. Research suggests that religion played only a marginal role in preferences in the referendum, and fears of sectarian polarization did not materialize. A more marked phenomenon was the emergence of a 'loyalist' working class more distinct from the secular and Protestant mainstream

of Scottish society than Catholics. In the case of changes in civil marriage, surveys identified this as an issue for a particular part of the Catholic community rather than for all those identifying as Catholic.

- There are still gaps in the research base on sectarianism. In particular qualitative research is required to establish the ways in which sectarian prejudice continues to interact with other factors including gender and social media, as well as research on the economic impact of sectarianism.

2. What is Sectarianism in Scotland and Why does it matter?

Having consulted widely, the Advisory Group concluded that:

“Sectarianism in Scotland is a mixture of perceptions, attitudes, actions, and structures that involves overlooking, excluding, discriminating against or being abusive or violent towards others on the basis of their perceived Christian denominational background. This perception is always mixed with other factors such as, but not confined to, politics, football allegiance and national identity.”

The group proposed that commitments to fair treatment (equity), pluralism (diversity) and inclusion (interdependence) should frame approaches to this as to all equalities issues and that evidence should be reviewed in three primary areas where the impact of sectarianism had its most negative potential impact:

- Equality and Discrimination (Glass Ceilings)
- Violence and Threat (Glass Bottles)
- Social Cohesion and Integration (Glass Curtains)

3. What should be done about sectarianism?

- Political leadership is crucial in creating public ‘permission’ to address and take action against sectarianism, specifically by establishing an evidence base, setting public values and providing resources to develop practice. A cross-party approach is essential to prevent equalities issues being used for further division.
- Sectarianism in Scotland has often been treated as too difficult for public policy or, alternatively, its impact was denied. Establishing an evidence base in relation to equality, violence and social cohesion is a critical vehicle to ‘normalise’ this issue as an area for legitimate action.
- Sectarianism should be actively addressed through existing legislation. Equality and Human Rights legislation to prevent any discrimination on a religious, ethnic or political basis and support freedom of expression, religion, and assembly should be actively applied and monitored. In addition, there is legislation to tackle offensive behavior at football and behavior at marches and parades which should remain under review.
- Monitoring of the Offensive Behaviour Act suggests that 83% of Scots now support legislation to tackle offensive behaviour at football. Research on fans attitudes found that 90% regarded songs which glorify or celebrate the loss of life or serious injury offensive, 82% found songs in support of terrorist organisations offensive, 85% found songs, chants and shouting about people’s religious background or beliefs offensive. The Advisory Group noted that clubs were ‘strictly liable’ for acting against emergent racism on the terraces and suggested that, failing more vigorous action by clubs, this approach might have to be applied to sectarian activity.

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- Tackling Sectarianism will be unsuccessful if it is confined to political rhetoric and legislation. The Advisory Group commended the development of community capacity and the production of curricular resources as an important development in addressing social cohesion issues in society. Change can only be sustained, however, if practice is actively integrated into the mainstream responsibilities of relevant organisations. The group identified local government, education and policing as areas of immediate importance. While the Advisory Group agreed that sectarianism should not be blamed on separate schools, all schools should act to address the consequences and perpetuation of sectarianism in the classroom and between schools as a priority.
- Sectarianism is particularly associated with football, schools and young people, marches and parades and churches. While continuing to emphasise voluntary action over legislative force, the group made suggestions for progress in each area to be monitored and reviewed by parliament.

Has this work any relevance to Northern Ireland?

Sectarianism has evolved differently in the north of Ireland. The association of division with religious/cultural dimensions with political contention, political violence, territorial segregation, embedded discrimination and paramilitarism create a much more extreme context where efforts to tackle sectarianism in Scotland cannot be simply copied. Nonetheless the emergence in Scotland of a broadly based political and social consensus that sectarianism should be eliminated where it is identified and proactively addressed through public policy has the potential to suggest avenues for possible action, especially in the light of commitments by the Northern Ireland Executive in *Together: Building a United Community* (TBUC).

Scottish experience suggests that significant progress depends on:

1. Clarity on values, including the primacy of the rule of law and the withdrawal of all remaining implicit or tacit permission for violence in pursuit of any end which could be identified as sectarian or of discrimination against a citizen on the basis of sectarian concerns.
2. The areas for legitimate action by public authorities in a democracy can be identified, and attempts made both to identify issues and measure progress. In this case, the Scottish approach to tackling sectarianism identified equality, violence and threat and social cohesion as the critical measure of health. Within this framework, the Scottish experience suggests that there is widespread agreement that legislative approaches to 'offence' can be further clarified, and that these relate to threats of violence or implications that the other should be denied full citizenship.
3. The goal of policy should be to treat sectarianism as an issue with clear parallels and links to other equalities issues. Success is measured by the degree to which it is neither emphasized nor denied but addressed in a sustained and matter of fact manner. Commitment beyond the electoral cycle, including resources.
4. Pilot projects, community initiatives and gestures are not enough. Greater thought has to be put into the integration of developmental work and mainstream activity, and to the engagement of senior leadership in partner institutions.
5. Changing attitudes and behaviour on a contentious social issue take time and persistence. The engagement approach of the Scottish Advisory Group suggests that the creation of a constituency for action may be a fruitful role for civic contribution. Furthermore, change will require commitments beyond short term political cycle. In this context, the identification of indicators and milestones may be as important as agreement on long-term goals.

Four Lessons from Scotland?

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1. **A comprehensive policy community:** Successful public policy to address deep –rooted issues associated with violence, discrimination and social hostility requires active participation at the level of politics, civil society and public institutions. Action by any one of these elements alone is likely to be partial and undermined by the inaction of another element. Properly conceived, politics and civil society are essential partners not rivals in addressing this issue.
2. **Long term planning and action:** Change in deeply rooted issues is necessarily slow and complex. The Scottish Advisory Group took 30 months to come to recommendations based on engagement and dialogue. This process of engagement itself created a new openness to consider a contentious and difficult issue and to create a community of interest for future implementation.
3. **Independent Assessment and Evidence Base:** In a context of social contention, where emotion and vested interest prevail, creating a shared and less emotive basis for engagement is critical. While politics must create the conditions for this and be seen to be open to change, the Scottish experience suggests that civil society, appointed for a limited time, may be better placed to explore and recommend change. Once sufficient consensus is established to enable progress, research evidence can provide a vital mechanism to build confidence that progress is based on addressing agreed problems rather blame or partisanship.
4. **Social Change:** Legislation and political leadership are necessary but insufficient instruments. The Scottish experience suggests that community engagement, the development of models of practice and the translation of those models into new mainstream actions are vital tools for change in equalities issues. This requires a policy stance open to learning and pro-active willingness to translate this development into institutional practice. It remains to be seen whether long term progress will require further legislative intervention.

Further Reading

'Tackling Sectarianism and its consequences in Scotland' Final Report of Advisory Group on Tackling Sectarianism (2015): <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0047/00477619.pdf>

'Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2014: Public Attitudes to Sectarianism in Scotland' (2015): <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/02/5330>

'Community Experiences of Sectarianism' (2015): <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/02/9920>

'Community Impact of Public Processions': <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/02/3769>

'An Examination of the Evidence on Sectarianism in Scotland' (2013): <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/06/8109>

'Religious Discrimination Sectarianism in Scotland: A Brief Review of Evidence (2002 - 2004)' (2005): <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2005/01/20553/50497>

'Advisory Group On Tackling Sectarianism in Scotland 2013 Interim report'(2013): <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/12/6197>

Census 2011: Key results on Population, Ethnicity, Identity, Language, Religion, Health, Housing and Accommodation in Scotland, Part 1 (2014): <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2014/10/8378>

Census 2011: Key results on Population, Ethnicity, Identity, Language, Religion, Health, Housing and Accommodation in Scotland, Part 2 (2015): <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/03/8716>

