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Remedying Horizontal Inequality: The Changing Impact of Reform in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

Northern Ireland is a case that lets us explore how people respond when deep-set horizontal inequality is substantively reduced. This article focusses on the reform of horizontal inequality in the cultural sphere and argues that it is likely to be contentious because units and measures are directly related to conflicting constructs of group identity, meaning, and value, and intertwined with conflict over state legitimacy. Northern Ireland shows when and how this becomes politically problematic. The article traces an uneven but largely successful process of economic and political reform, followed by a reversal in the second decade of the 21st century, when unionist unease with cultural equality was reframed into political opposition which at times threatened the stability of the settlement itself. The backlash came when it did because of a confluence of processes: a particularly inappropriate presentation of cultural equality, at a time when the momentum of the peace process was coming to an end, and other opportunities, in particular for the Protestant working class, were closing. The case suggests the need to develop a conception of cultural (in)equality that is attuned to the asymmetric and contested constructions of "groupness" well before backlash occurs.

Keywords

backlash; cultural inequality; group asymmetry; Northern Ireland

1. Introduction

Northern Ireland is a case that lets us explore how people respond when deep-set horizontal inequality is reformed. Horizontal inequality in Ireland was embedded, symbolically highly meaningful, consistent across political, military, economic, and cultural fields, part-constituted and reproduced by the structure of the British state and its embedded state-craft, and in unionist-governed Northern Ireland it deepened after partition.

It constituted opposing ethno-national groups at least as much as it was produced by them. It was highlighted by the Civil Rights Movement in 1968–1969, but it took two decades of ongoing civic struggle and armed conflict before it was seriously tackled by the British government, and three decades before provisions for remedying it were systematically laid out in the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998.

Initial moves towards reform met with strong unionist and Protestant opposition. But once horizontal inequality began effectively to be tackled, there was a rapid move towards political settlement, and Protestants and unionists soon came to terms with the new order. If they had not initially wanted to share, redistribution was less painful than they had expected and they were ready to "get on with it." The good news story changed in the second decade of the 21st century, when political and economic reforms were all but completed. Unionist unease with cultural equality was reframed into political opposition by loyalist activists, most prominently Jamie Bryson, who came to public and media prominence with the flags protest in 2012 and contested not just cultural equality but the settlement itself. The protest hardened public attitudes and changed political direction, and at times threatened the stability of settlement. Unionists, who had seemingly come to terms with the process of reform, changed tack.

This article asks why cultural inequality and its reform became a focus of attention and backlash. It argues that the cultural dimension of horizontal inequality is inherently intersubjective and dependent on the construction of groupness and the sense of legitimacy of the state. This means that conventional units and measures of cultural inequality may ascribe inappropriate symmetry to groups in ways that provoke resistance. Second, it traces the reversal of the political trajectory in Northern Ireland, showing that unionist discourse and declared motivation centred around cultural norms. Third, this leads to an explanation of the unionist backlash that focusses on the "groupist" concept of cultural (in)equality that was politically dominant at the time and that failed to recognise either the asymmetric forms of cultural identity, or the efforts and concerns of unionists in their adaptation to the new order. This explains the content, moral intensity, and direction of unionists' political trajectory, and thus adds to existing emphases on blocked economic prospects and opening political opportunity. Fourth, it raises questions for further comparative research about when reform of cultural inequality becomes politically polarising and suggests that policy needs to elaborate a notion of cultural (in)equality that is attuned to asymmetric and contested constructions of groupness well before backlash occurs.

2. Cultural Inequality

Langer and Brown (2008, p. 42) define cultural status inequality as "perceived or actual differences in the treatment, public recognition or status of different groups' cultural norms, practices, symbols and customs." They point out that it has a major impact on life chances, personal dignity, and the likelihood of conflict. The wider literature concurs: Relative cultural status is one of the powerful motivators of group solidarity and conflict (Horowitz, 2000); it affects ordinary people even more than elites (Stewart, 2008) and motivates ordinary people to go to extraordinary lengths to ensure respect (Lamont et al., 2016).

But if the gross elements of inequality are evident to all—the banning of a minority language or religion and the stereotyping and caricaturing of group practices in the public sphere—the relevant units and measures of cultural inequality are contestable between and within given groups. This is because cultural inequality is a matter of meaning and valuation, and intergroup relations and intra-group contest frequently generate

disputed perceptions of the meanings of different practices. This makes horizontal inequality in the cultural sphere complex and difficult to assess.

Of course the concept of horizontal inequality, even in its economic guise, has also been contested on the grounds that the ascribed categories in terms of which inequality is measured (in Northern Ireland, Protestant or Catholic by community background) do not fit self-identifications (Finlay, 2011, 2015). However, allowing for a few cases difficult to classify, there are generally ways to assign most people to one or another category. (For Northern Ireland see Equality Commission, 2011, which requires that each employer monitors the religious community background of employees. Where this is not stated in answer to a direct question, indirect evidence already supplied by the employee [name, place of residence, school, sports, etc.] is used, and the employee is informed and invited to point out any "material inaccuracy.") Notwithstanding the serious moral concerns raised by Finlay (2014), such ascription of community background is a normal part of life in Northern Ireland. In my research, the assigned labels were worn lightly even by those who didn't identify with the communities: Out of 150 respondents in open-ended interviews conducted with long-term residents in Northern Ireland between 2003–2022, only a tiny handful did not volunteer community background, although most highly qualified its meaning and relevance. Only three (all children of mixed-marriage families) actively argued against categorisation. The measures of economic inequality—including employment, poverty, presence in the civil service and security services, educational opportunities and achievement—are internationally used and clearly defined, and in some cases (for example, poverty) have been refined to better capture over-time variation in socially important characteristics (Stewart, 2008). The contentious issues *in practice* are not the measures or units of inequality, but its causes, justification, and consequences.

Cultural inequality in contrast is contentious not simply in terms of its causes and justifications, but in its very units and measures. The units of comparison are the group-specific practices in which members of a group wish to participate. Some cultural fields are socially core—language, religion, the name of the group—such that it is almost inconceivable that each group would not participate in some way. Thus discrimination by the state in, for example, banning one religion and incorporating another into its own rituals, may simply be identified. But in other areas cultural practices are asymmetric: It is not a matter of the state discriminating in its treatment of the same practice, but of its treatment of *different* cultural practices, differentially valued by different groups. Adding to the complexity, each such practice already embodies cultural meaning and group resonances which may be contested, and which may change as the group repositions. The field, in short, is diverse and moving. In Northern Ireland, for example, a local authority's treatment of a local largely Catholic handball team may be compared not with a "Protestant" sport (there may not be any equivalent) but rather with the treatment of a local Protestant flute band. The diversity of practices raises perennial moral questions about the limits of tolerance in cultural practices: When are they to be protected and when are they to be constrained as harmful to others (Dobbernack & Modood, 2013)? It also introduces contentious intra- and intergroup interpretations of the practices—whether particular practices of marching are authentic expressions of group culture, or practices in which group members happen contingently to engage, or expressions of opposition to another group (Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition, 2021). And there is intra- and intergroup dispute about which areas of practice are most important for group cultural identity and which require explicit recognition: There may be disputes on how to balance recognition of "small" items of one group's culture (choice of personal names) with recognition of "big" items of another group's culture (their nationality as Irish or British), making measurement of actual status inequality problematic and inviting contention over relative smallness, bigness, and balance.

Moreover, inequality in the cultural sphere is not simply regulated by the state and its laws, but also as Langer and Brown (2008, p. 48) note, part-constituted by it:

> The state's recognition of, and support for, the cultural practices of different groups is another important aspect of cultural status inequality. Also important in this respect are the ethnocultural practices and customs employed in the functioning of the state itself.

Where the legitimacy of the state is itself contested, so too will be judgements of the extent to which its practices are even-handed (even if accepted and internalised only by some groups of citizens and not others) or ethnically biased.

Public symbolism, discourse, official historical narratives, formal laws, and political self-presentation directly and indirectly impact the status and cultural capacity of different groups. Such state-frames constitute the socio-cultural value of different group characteristics, so that inequality of cultural condition is based in part on the political-constitutional structure of the state. The form of the state confirms or undermines informal hierarchies of respect or contempt; it facilitates or precludes public action and argument to counter low status. Thus issues of cultural inequality do not remain self-contained but easily spread into debates over the meanings and legitimacy of the state, and open the symbolic meaning and legitimacy of group practices to challenge. The debates are potentially polarizing because they foreground foundational constitutional issues and foundational ontological issues of groupness.

When moves to cultural equality become politically polarizing needs to be investigated empirically. There are examples of successful reform of cultural inequality (for example in South Africa) which changed both state and group norms to allow reciprocal acceptability (Guelke, 2023, pp. 102–122). In situations of conflict and group contest over the nature of the state, it is likely that the ground rules of reform require careful, creative, and iterative negotiation which takes account of ongoing changes in group understandings and prioritisations. In Northern Ireland this process was hardly begun.

3. Northern Ireland: Context and Process

Horizontal inequality was long embedded in the industrial economy of the North-east of Ireland. Protestant demographic, economic, and military dominance were crucial factors in the very foundation of Northern Ireland in 1921, for they gave unionists a de facto veto on British policy and a key role in the negotiations over partition. Their demographic dominance in the new Northern Ireland ensured them political power which they used to augment still further their economic, political, and cultural advantage over the Catholic and nationalist minority (Ruane & Todd, 1996). By 1971, fifty years after the foundation of the state, Protestant political power, economic position, and cultural status relative to Catholics had increased still further.

The Catholic minority—who opposed the very foundation of Northern Ireland—also opposed the multiplex inequality they faced within it. However, their political opposition to inequality was often subordinated to their demand for constitutional change, which would change the demographic balance with immediate implications for political power and cultural status. Thus inequality was only intermittently prioritised by Catholics and nationalists.

This changed in the 1960s. Traditional nationalist politics had had no impact, and a new generation of leaders seized the opportunity for civil rights agitation. The foregrounding of inequality in voting, housing, public employment, and security forces by the Civil Rights Movement from 1968–1972 provoked intense loyalist counter-mobilisation and violence, which divided the Protestant population, radically weakened the unionist government, and provoked republican reorganisation and armed struggle, British Direct Rule and a quarter century of violent conflict (Bosi, 2006).

As Nelson (1975) and Rose (1971, p. 272) have shown, discrimination was barely even acknowledged by Protestants and unionists before and during the Civil Rights Movement. Unionist resistance even to mild reform thereafter has been well documented. The Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act of 1976 had neither teeth nor impact, and it met with bitter unionist protest (Doyle, 1994; Smith & Chambers, 1991). But, in any case, the British government was slow to intervene in a meaningful way to reform the economic or security spheres: They insisted on political power-sharing in 1973, while letting the Protestant community retain decisive economic power to bring it down—for example the almost wholly Protestant workforce in the electricity industry enabled a strike that shut down the whole society. Harold Wilson considered British withdrawal from Northern Ireland in 1974–1975, but not reconstruction of it as a more equal society. Only after a decade of failed political initiatives and little effective reform did Mrs. Thatcher explore alternative paths through partnership with the Irish state, culminating in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. This signalled an important symbolic and cultural shift, although significantly less than the symbolic equality that even moderate nationalists desired; but it had longer-term effects in a set of reforms and a new mode of intergovernmental management of conflict (Todd, 2011). The most important reform that followed was the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act of 1989 which—by the early 1990s—was bringing substantial improvement in employment ratios (McCrudden, 1999; Ruane & Todd, 1996, pp. 166–170).

The swift improvement of communal inequality in employment in Northern Ireland added to nationalist and republican confidence that the British state was able to achieve incremental change that might in the future give a path to a united Ireland. This encouraged republicans to engage in a peace process which would later lead to the GFA of 1998 and further strengthen the equality regime by bringing not just power-sharing, but a frame for reform of policing and security, a broadening of the economic equality measures to cover a range of categories, not just religion (Collins & Crowley, 2023), and promises of significant new investment in disadvantaged areas. By 2010, political, policing, and security measures were fully implemented and employment equality achieved (Nolan, 2013, pp. 95–96), national borders opened and the legitimacy of Irish identity and aspirations recognised; equality of educational funding for schools had been in place since the 1990s and the longstanding Protestant/Catholic unemployment differential was very substantially reduced with only "small differentials" remaining in 2011 (Rowland et al., 2022, p. 5). Horizontal inequality in employment still exists in the police service and security employment where the Catholic presence has not reached parity (Gray et al., 2018, pp. 114–116; Nolan, 2013, p. 111). Other lags included the failure to achieve the proposed bill of rights, and the fact that cultural equality ("parity of esteem") was never codified by British or British and Irish governments, or the Northern Ireland executive. Nonetheless—and notwithstanding further negotiations through the 2010s over victims, "the past," and intrinsically non-communalist economic issues like welfare provision and corporation tax (see O'Leary, 2019, pp. 269–282)—the achievement by 2010 was impressive.

Nationalist voters were reasonably satisfied with the new order. In 1968, 74% of Catholics reported feeling that they were discriminated against or treated unfairly (Rose, 1971, p. 272); in 2010, it was only 6%

(Supplementary File, Section 1). By 2010, a plurality of Catholics preferred the new Northern Ireland to the prospects of a united Ireland, and only a tiny handful of those who wanted a united Ireland said they would find it almost impossible to accept remaining in the UK (Supplementary File, Sections 3 and 4).

The unionist public came to terms with the new equality regime more quickly than might have been expected. By the mid-1990s, they accepted and even saw potential benefits in the new fair employment legislation (Miller, 1996). The issues in contention in the early years after the GFA were not primarily power-sharing or economic equality but IRA decommissioning of weapons, the absence of which led unionists serially to withdraw from the executive, reform of policing, significantly the symbolism of the reform involving a new name and uniform (Godson, 2004, p. 472), and, for nationalists and republicans, the slow and grudging engagement by the unionist parties.

Even the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) came to see the GFA as less bad than they had expected and participated in the power-sharing executive before it was suspended in 2002. By 2003, the DUP became the majority unionist party and, once decommissioning eventually occurred in 2005, they became open to more serious negotiations: Given the alternatives (a form of direct rule in which the Irish government had a key role) even Rev. Ian Paisley came to accept the need for a return to power-sharing in the St. Andrews Agreement of 2006/7.

Protestants found the cultural content of the GFA hard to accept. It was not simply that they believed that nationalists had benefitted more than unionists—they did (Supplementary File, Section 5) but they were willing to put up with that. Their worry about the new cultural ethos in Northern Ireland was more diffuse (McCall, 2003): Peter Weir spoke of the application of the "dimmer switch to Britishness" ("Barristers win case," 2000) and Protestants lacked confidence that their culture was protected (Supplementary File, Section 6). But the cultural changes meant that Catholics and nationalists were increasingly content to remain in the UK. As one young nationalist teacher said: "Now I'm much more confident about saying I'm Irish and…proud to say I'm Irish…because there seems to be less attack on that notion of Irishness." And while he himself would like a united Ireland, he had no wish to impose it while unionists did not want it (Todd, 2018, p. 129). Once decommissioning began, Protestants relaxed and unionists became more accepting of change, prepared to make their way in a now peaceful and more communally egalitarian society. In the dozens of interviews we conducted with Protestants in Northern Ireland in the mid-2000s, most accepted equality and welcomed the new order. For example, one young tradesman from a strong unionist background decided to "go with the flow" after the GFA:

> My father or my family's generation, they'd be more into standing up for you know, like Protestant and British and all. I know I say I'm British and all but…times have changed and people have to move on, you know what I mean. (Todd, 2018, 111)

Their unease was not about economic unfairness, power-sharing, or even cultural changes, but about lack of respect in everyday interactions. One man who had radically moderated his own politics (from DUP to Alliance) felt hurt by the republican lack of respect for the British state and the police and army, and one working-class woman noted caustically that they were being told to "express your identity and enjoy it" when their traditional modes of expressing identity in flags and marches were regulated or banned. Our respondents did not linger on these points. Some veterans and victims were bitter that they were no longer able to express their experience as victims of terrorism (Donnan & Simpson, 2007), but these people felt, and increasingly

were, marginal both socially and politically. The predominant attitude amongst the unionist population through the 2000s was to "get on with it." Progressives within the new loyalist parties were looking at forms of social democracy, and loyalist complaints were about austerity and the lack of a peace dividend, rather than about power-sharing (Edwards, 2023, pp. 216, 219). The Protestant population was becoming comfortable with the reforms. Even the threat of a united Ireland weighed less heavily on them: While in 1968 half of Protestants were willing to fight to keep Northern Ireland Protestant (and by extension British), by 2004 only 14% of pro-Union Protestants would find a united Ireland "almost impossible to accept" (see Figure 1).

By 2007, then, as a power-sharing executive was formed, there was wide convergence in support for the new post-GFA political and social order. The two main parties, the DUP and Sinn Féin, presided over a sort of competitive communalism, where each fought for resources for "its side" while keeping competition constrained for neither party had an interest in disrupting this equilibrium. The dominant ideology was one of affirming the given identity and traditions of each group and reaching pluralist coexistence. This was clearly expressed in the *Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration*, an executive consultation document that was launched by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in July 2010 after much deliberation between the parties in government. It affirmed "mutual accommodation" (OFMDFM, 2010, para. 7.1) between the different interacting "cultures and communities" (para. 2.6) and the need to express "pride in who we are and confidence in our different cultural identities" (para. 2.3). After considerable criticism of the static concepts of "cultures and communities," the consultation document was withdrawn, but it gave a clear expression of the official views of the time (Ruane & Todd, 2011).

By 2010 when responsibility for now-reformed policing was devolved to Northern Ireland, the main provisions of the GFA in security, justice, Northern Ireland, North-South and East-West political institutions, and strong employment equality legislation had been implemented and the Irish constitutional claim to jurisdiction over the whole island had been changed to express an aspiration (a "firm will") for unification by consent. There was still no bill of rights, no codification of cultural parity of esteem, and victims' issues had not been tackled. But there had, already in 2007, been a commitment from the British government that the issue of Irish language provision would be resolved in the coming years. As O'Leary (2019, pp. 253, 264–265) shows, however, this commitment was far from water-tight since it left the initiative with the Northern Ireland parties. Politics began to focus on economic and other issues that in principle cross-cut the sectarian divide, for example, welfare reform and corporation tax; studies showed that party polarization decreased; there was effective accountability in policy making through the role of Assembly committees; attempts to mobilize unionist resistance failed; there was increased sharing of public space; and, despite continuing tensions, there was a commitment on the part of the two main parties to make the institutions work (Conley, 2013; Garry et al., 2017; McEvoy, 2015, pp. 103–104; Mitchell et al., 2009; Nagle, 2009; Tilley et al., 2008; Whiting & Bauchowitz, 2020). At the same time, there was a widespread public distancing from the political blocs, shown in a fall-off in voting (from 70% in the Assembly elections in 1998 to 55.7% in 2011) and a public focus on an ongoing sex scandal in the DUP rather than on constitutional issues. Among the mass public, there was majority support for the agreement—very strong in the Catholic and nationalist population and more marginal but still clear amongst Protestants and unionists. In 2007, well over half of Protestants thought the GFA a good thing, and in 2010 a clear majority of Protestants believed the Northern Ireland Assembly had made at least some achievements (Supplementary File, Sections 7 and 8). Despite the multiple political crises before and after, the measures to ensure power sharing and horizontal economic equality did not form a major area of conflict. By 2010, the political trajectory was positive and it

was widely believed that a period of stability had been achieved. Reflecting this public mood, the leader of the DUP, Peter Robinson, in a series of speeches in 2011–2012, argued that unionism had to move beyond its traditional Protestant base and reach out to the new pro-union constituency of Catholic background in order to stabilise the union. For these reasons, events at the end of 2012 were highly unexpected.

4. Mapping the Reversal: How Cultural Concerns Fed Into and Informed Loyalist Backlash

The flags protest which began in December 2012 had a lasting and serious impact on politics in Northern Ireland. Both republicans and loyalists recognised that it reversed the trajectory of political cooperation (Deeney, 2022; McGuinness, 2014). It began with grassroots unionist resistance, focussed on a decision by Belfast City Council to fly the British flag over Belfast City Hall on a limited number of days only, equivalent to the practice in Great Britain and in some Northern Ireland local councils (see Nolan et al., 2014). Despite some initial actions by the DUP and UUP, who had targeted the Alliance seat in East Belfast by criticising their policy on flags, the real dynamism came from the grassroots who went out to protest day after day (Nolan et al., 2014, pp. 80–81). The protestors included women and young people as well as men, working class and farmers, and those who had tried to compromise and had been involved in cross-community work, not just those who had always resisted such compromise (Nolan et al., 2014, pp. 36, 132).

After some weeks, the DUP followed the protestors. The following three years saw the DUP pull back on agreed policies that had already gained European funding—for example, a heritage centre at the Maze/Long Kesh prison—and refuse to support an Irish language bill. In addition, issues of "legacy" and historical commemoration became newly politically contentious (O'Leary, 2019, pp. 264–274, 280–281). None of these issues concerned horizontal inequality between the communities in the economic or political fields: Welfare was a political and class issue not one of horizontal inequality. Almost all of them were of high symbolic importance and relevant to horizontal inequality in the cultural field. The power-sharing government remained in place but there was a stalemate, with few new policies and pull back on older ones. Much-delayed intervention by British and Irish governments was ineffective (for a detailed discussion see O'Leary, 2019, pp. 264–282), and the institutions drifted on, losing credibility by the week. In the absence of political direction, clientelism and corruption came to a head in a "cash-for-ash" scandal. In 2016, 60% of Protestants and 70% of DUP supporters voted for Brexit, despite warnings of its destabilizing effect in Northern Ireland; and Brexit, when it came, made political relations in Northern Ireland much worse. But that Brexit won such support in Northern Ireland was a function of the unionist sovereigntist turn already underway since 2013. The executive fell in January 2017—brought down by Sinn Féin explicitly because of the corruption scandal but reflecting their frustration at what they perceived as a unionist lack of cooperation on policy issues. It was not restored until January 2020, to fall again in 2022, this time a result of the out-workings of Brexit.

Cultural (in)equality was at the centre of the flags protest. That protest marked a step-change for it transformed unionist concerns into a statement of Protestant, loyalist, and British identity and pride. The flags protest of December 2012 was presented as "ordinary people simply expressing their cultural identity" (Nolan et al., 2014, p. 73) against those who were "trying to take away our Britishness" (McAuley, 2016, 145). Jamie Bryson, who came to public prominence as a spokesperson at this period, said: "It went beyond a flag. For me it epitomised the ultimate trajectory of the peace process. Little by little, every vestige of Protestant-unionist-loyalist culture is being stripped from this country" (Rutherford, 2015).

Only a minority protested (Nolan et al., 2014), supporters of power-sharing remained in the majority among Protestants (Garry et al., 2023), and many DUP voters remained pragmatic and moderate. But the protests tapped into discontent and impacted public attitudes as well as unionist political discourse and direction. In Bryson's perception, before the protests "the vast majority of unionism and loyalism was pro-agreement, it was supportive of the institutions, and it was in a bit of a slumber" (Deeney, 2022). Afterwards, the moderates and pragmatists were no longer in the driving seat of unionism.

Die-hards increased amongst pro-union Protestants—those who found it almost impossible to accept a united Ireland jumped from 18% in 2010 to 25% in 2012, to 32% in 2014, and to 41% in 2019 (Figure 1). For a key period through the 2010s, the once marginalised position moved into the unionist mainstream. Reflecting the worsening political climate, the percentage of both Catholics and Protestants who thought their community was treated unequally increased significantly (Supplementary File, Section 2). Fall-off from identification with the unionist and nationalist blocs continued through the 2010s, but Figure 2 shows that even while the self-defined unionist bloc contracted relative to the population as a whole, the percentage of strong unionists held steady. If the hardening process was temporary (Leahy, 2023), it was significant and politically impactful. There was no corresponding hardening of nationalism, although it began to increase in strength after Brexit.

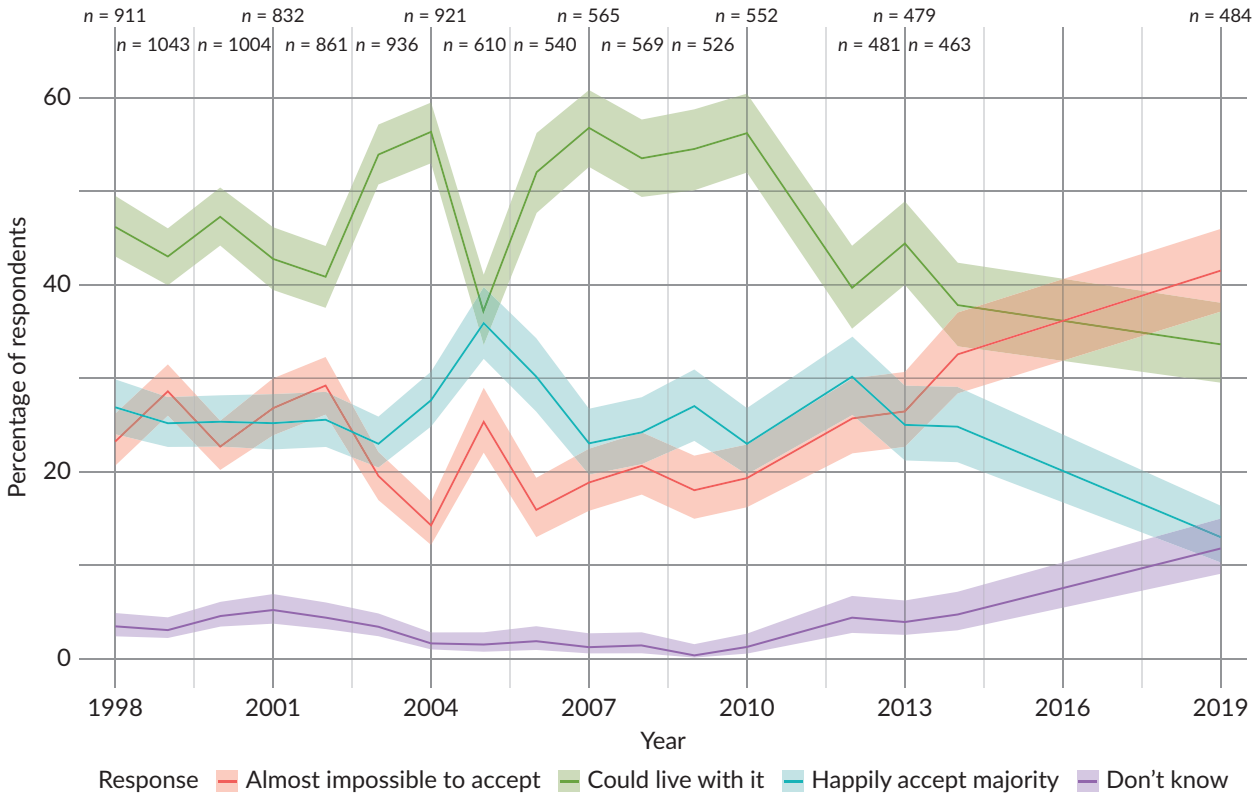

Figure 1. Attitude to a united Ireland amongst Protestants whose preference is to stay in the UK. Source: NILT (1998–2019).

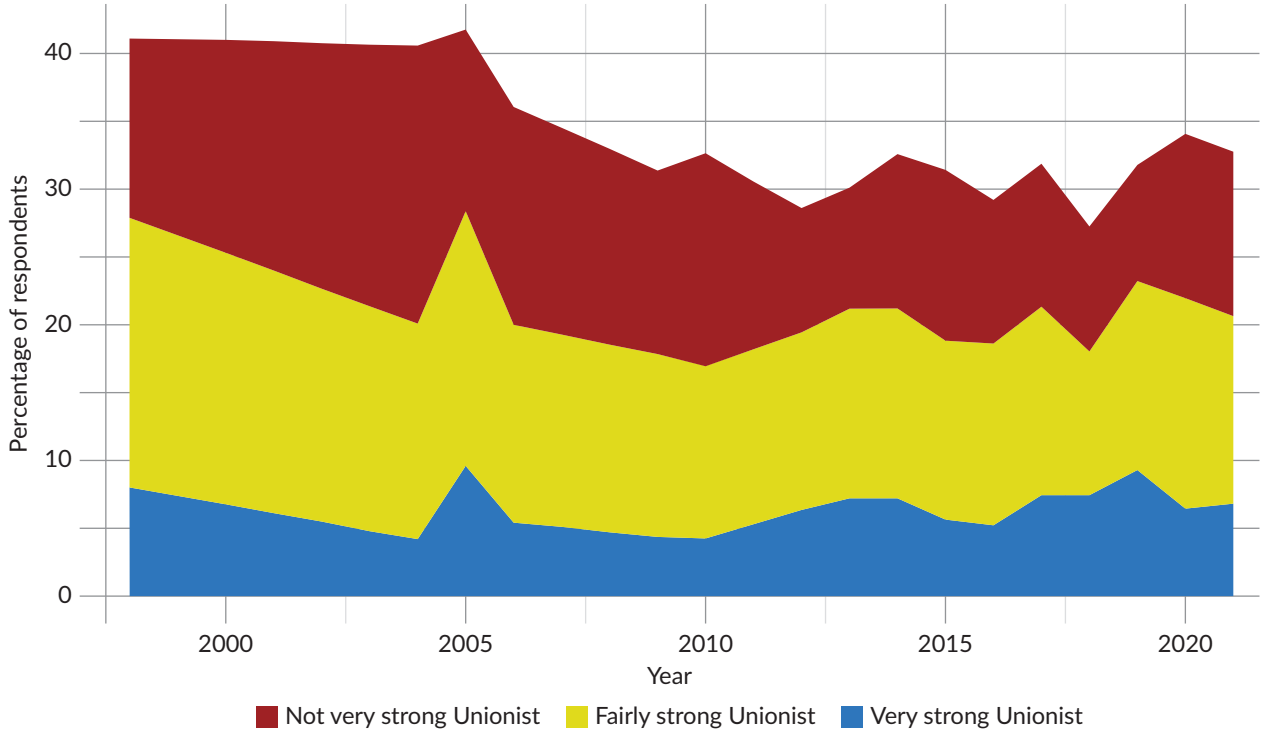

Figure 2. Strength of unionist identification as proportion of whole population. Source: NILT (1998–2022).

Changing unionist attitudes coincided with a new hardened political discourse that contrasts sharply with the openness of Robinson's speeches in 2011–2012. It converted the previously dominant cultural pluralism—which framed cultural equality in terms of existing identities—to hard-line unionist purposes. It spoke of the need to protect and respect unionist identity, which was said to be demeaned by any erosion of British public culture in Northern Ireland. This principle—respect our identity by respecting our state and its symbolism—gave unionists a new ideological weapon and won widespread Protestant support, crystallizing the unease of large sections of the unionist public, accentuating their moral disillusion with the GFA, using consociational norms of respect for identity to fight against equality of cultural status in the public sphere, and effectively marginalizing internal unionist and non-aligned opposition.

It was politically impactful. Unionism throughout the UK has had many faces (Keating, 2021) and the DUP's assertion of unqualified British sovereignty and symbolism brought it into line with the robust sovereigntist unionism now becoming dominant within the English Conservative Party (Keating, 2021; Kenny & Sheldon, 2021). It later allowed Brexit to be used as a symbol of unionism even though close to 40% of Protestants voted against it. In a Lucid Talk poll in 2018, Coakley (2020) points out that 70% of unionists supported Brexit "even if this were to damage the peace process." This view was not sustained (Garry et al., 2023) but the fact that it was a plausible response even for a short time shows how much the cultural ethos had changed.

The change in ethos was also clear in qualitative research. In 2018–2019, moderates whom I interviewed came back again and again to highly contested claims of cultural commensurability. One unionist—who had already come to terms with Irish language signs—was irked that Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) sports shirts were so widely worn, while Glasgow Rangers sports shirts were seen as sectarian:

> For me that's still one of the things that niggles me because if you run around in a Rangers top everybody looks at you and judges you. People run around in GAA tops. In my sight, it's as bad as running around in a Rangers top. It's the same.

One moderate nationalist mused about the unfairness that the poppy (the British symbol of commemoration of the war dead) was worn widely while he would be fired from his job if he wore the Easter lily (in commemoration of the republican Easter Rising of 1916): "I don't see why it's okay for someone to wear a poppy and not okay for someone to wear an Easter Lily because the both of them are about memories." In short, contention over cultural inequality had permeated everyday life.

5. Explaining the Political Reversal

Five factors have been put forward to explain the reversal in Northern Ireland. Without discounting their proximate impact, I argue that the underlying problem lay in the conceptualisation of horizontal cultural inequality and its reform: this problem became intense in the early 2010s for conjunctural reasons—in part because the conceptualisation was highlighted politically by the new executive, at a time when the settlement-momentum was slowing and other reform processes were grinding to a halt, in part because of other factors which accentuated grievance and opportunity.

5.1. Unionist Resistance to Equality

Nationalists sometimes explain the unionist stance in terms of a deep-set resistance to equality: "Unionists," it is said, "can't stomach a Catholic around the place." Of course there were and are extreme unionists ready to resist any move towards greater communal equality. But they had been marginalised in the late 1990s and 2000s. The reversal happened a full decade and a half after the GFA, when most of the economic and political reforms had already been implemented, and it was cultural and symbolic change that provoked protests and contention in the name of accommodation and equality for unionists.

5.2. Working Class Disadvantage and Resentment

The less well-educated and the "left behind" were overrepresented both among the "die-hard" Protestants who would find a united Ireland almost impossible to accept and among Brexit voters (see Garry, 2017). This may be explained by the unevenness of the reform process which disproportionately benefitted the educated and upwardly mobile clusters of the Catholic population, and least benefitted sections of the working class, including the Protestant men whose access to traditional heavy industrial jobs had been closed off with deindustrialisation. The Peace Monitoring Reports show that predominantly Catholic areas made up 16 of the 20 most deprived wards (Nolan, 2013, pp. 89–95). Still, Protestants had less hope: In education, urban working-class Protestant boys had by far the worst examination results and progression to third level education (Nolan, 2013, pp. 105–109; Purvis & Working Group on Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class, 2011). Protestant working-class grievances were accentuated by the recession and the Conservative government's resistance to giving additional funding to Northern Ireland. Once the protest began, sections of the Protestant working class took a lead role, repeating their traditional repertoire by which street mobilisation, and only such mobilisation, gets them influence and impact on the "middle class" unionist parties.

5.3. Unionist Insecurity in Response to Changing Demography

In the 2021 census, for the first time, the percentage of the population who were Catholics by background (45.7%) overtook the percentage who were Protestants and other Christians by background (43.48%). In fact this had been expected since the 1990s, and the change was slower and less decisive than unionists had feared. Most important of all, in the crucial period around 2011 when the census showed the two communities of about equal size, demography no longer carried with it definite constitutional implications. Catholics had become less nationalist, preferring that Northern Ireland remain within the UK with its present devolved institutions to a united Ireland. Indeed loyalists and unionists sometimes mentioned their new minority status, but it is hard to see this as a decisive change that explains their mobilisation.

5.4. Unionist response to exogenous opportunity (British-Irish absence and British Conservative Party dominance)

Was the unionist turn simply opportunistic? It began as the British and Irish governments withdrew from intervening in Northern Ireland (Todd, 2017). It converged with a more robust unionism within British Conservatism. The opportunity proffered by British-Irish inaction, and the potential alliance with the party in power in the UK gave added weight to the hard-line unionist position. Brexit and the contention surrounding it massively increased the opportunities for hard-line unionists to find allies in London. But that the hardliners triumphed in Northern Ireland required support from others within unionism, both political elites and grass-roots. It required them to transform what before had been slight unease into game-changing hard-line politics, despite the danger that this would destroy the hard-won peace and stability that up to so recently they had supported. They did so before Brexit, and their change of tack made the unionist vote for Brexit more likely.

5.5. The Impact of Consociation

Some have argued that consociational power-sharing highlights and hardens ascribed identity oppositions that do not reflect self-conceptions, and thus induces continued group opposition and disempowers alternative political movements. While it is true that the bloc categories do not fit everyone equally, the fact remains that power-sharing never became seriously problematic for the mass of the population and was welcomed by a majority of Protestants. Moreover, it requires explanation that identity issues became more politically problematic in 2012–2013 than in 1999 or 2007.

5.6. Cultural Rationale

If the proximate conditions for the turnaround are given by recession, Conservative party policy, and working-class lack of opportunity, the rationale lies elsewhere, in the outright rejection of the pluralist norms that informed this phase of power-sharing. As outlined above, unionists were always uneasy about the cultural egalitarianism that informed the GFA. This cultural egalitarianism was particularly clearly—some would argue crudely—expressed after 2007, in terms of "mutual accommodation" of existing "cultures and communities." Unionists were acutely aware of the contradictions in the claim to respect each culture when their culture—centred on the practices surrounding the British state and its institutions—had to change as the state itself changed to accommodate nationalists and republicans. They could put up with it as long as a

peace momentum was underway and the norms were flexibly stated and pragmatically applied. But the momentum ceased: With the devolution of policing, the settlement process was seen as complete and economic recession prevented any further economic peace dividend. Meanwhile, the executive presented cultural equality in a way that highlighted the contradictions. The moral vacuum was filled by the flags protest which articulated unionist unease, legitimated resistance, empowered working-class loyalists, resonated with British conservatives, and put nationalists on the back foot. It also upset the competitive communal equilibrium and drove nationalists back to nationalism.

Multiple factors are causally relevant to the reversal—the new unionism of the British Conservative elite, the lack of opportunity for the Protestant working class especially in the recession, and the long-standing Protestant working class repertoire of gaining influence over political unionism by street protest. But the executive's framing of cultural (in)equality, without overarching values and without negotiation on the form and limits of stateness and groupness, made the achievement of significant cultural equality all but impossible. It was not power-sharing per se that caused the problem but the ideology that—at this time at least—informed it, and that affirmed equal respect for existing group identities even while the cultural reforms undermined one of those group identities. As the political and economic reform process wound down, culture came back into focus and the contradictions became apparent. A way forward was provided by a hard-line unionism that used the tropes of identity politics to undermine the very basis of the GFA compromise. This might have been pre-empted by earlier negotiation of the parameters of cultural equality that allowed a morally coherent way forward for nationalists, unionists, and others.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that there was an endogenous group dynamic whereby undoing horizontal inequality in the political and economic spheres lessened group antagonism and closure in Northern Ireland, but policies to undo horizontal inequality in the cultural sphere had contradictory aspects, highlighting incommensurable constructions of groupness and stateness and giving rise to unease which came sharply into focus as other aspects of reform were completed. Unionist activists took advantage of the ideological vacuum and the political opportunities offered by the new Conservative government, making it all the more difficult to deal with the problems generated in Northern Ireland by Brexit.

The unionist political reversal was driven neither by inequality, insecurity nor by supremacism, but rather by a perception that the norms around cultural reform disrespected their identity. The discourse of mutual accommodation and confidence in existing "cultural identities" failed to recognise the asymmetry of these identities or to respect the cultural changes that unionists had already made. It created a constituency open to backlash. The ensuing events set back political progress for a decade. Whether similar cultural dynamics exist in other cases, when they become politically polarising, and how they are overcome are important questions for further research.

In Northern Ireland, the framing and context of cultural reforms were crucial, and little public deliberation or negotiation of an agreed framework for change was undertaken. To articulate more appropriate and reciprocally acceptable cultural norms sensitive to group asymmetries is a crucial task. It would require iterative negotiation and deliberation which would at once reconstitutionalise the polity while recognising and respecting the necessity of group change. The GFA might have been developed as such a project:

Whether this is renewed in a new phase of devolution or whether the emergent discussion about a united Ireland could develop into such a project remain open questions.

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Supplementary Material

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