

# Community Relations in Northern Ireland: The Long View<sup>1</sup>

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## Executive Summary

- Despite strong attention to the promotion of cultural, political and religious pluralism and to the equality agenda, there is evidence that Northern Ireland has become a more divided society since the Belfast Agreement. There is growing incidence of cross-community tension, hostility and intimidation which reflects a polarised political battlefield focused on starkly drawn identities and incompatible constitutional demands.
- Evidence from social attitudes surveys in Northern Ireland confirms this picture:
  - After initial optimism following the cease-fires in the mid-1990s, the percentage of those who think that relations between Catholics and Protestants are deteriorating has risen significantly over the last 2-3 years
  - In both communities there is decreased confidence about the future relations between Protestants and Catholics, though with Catholics tending to have slightly more confidence than Protestants. High expectations of future improvements have fallen away after peaking around the ceasefires and the conclusion of the Belfast Agreement.
  - Other indicators present a similar story. Numbers wishing to live in mixed neighbourhoods have fallen away since the mid-1990s, especially among Protestants. A similar pattern applies to mixed religion workplaces.
- The overall picture is one of (still partial, but nonetheless significant) retreat into single-identity environments after a short-lived period of greater optimism about community relations in the mid-1990s.

During the 1990s efforts by the British Government in Northern Ireland focused on tackling systemic problems of disadvantage, discrimination and inequality. The development of Fair Employment Legislation and initiatives such as Targeting Social Need and Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment Guidelines for government departments signalled an acknowledgement on the part of government that something should be

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<sup>1</sup> This paper includes extracts from Hughes, J. and Donnelly, C. (2000) 'Ten years of Social Attitudes to Community Relations in Northern Ireland' in A. Gray, K. Lloyd, P. Devine, G. Robinson and D. Heenan (eds) *Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland: the 8<sup>th</sup> Report* (Pluto Press: London).

done to address socio-economic disadvantages most acutely felt by the Catholic community. Moreover, community relations became a policy priority at the beginning of the 1990s. But the approach adopted at the time - concerned primarily with promoting greater cross-community contact - was criticised by those who believed that government was promoting an assimilationist/integrationist agenda that offered little more than a 'sticking plaster' solution to the conflict.

In the wake of political developments in the late 1990s, there are some signs that the community relations agenda has shifted from being 'symptom driven' to addressing root causes of conflict. Current practice is less concerned with promoting cross-community contact *per se* than with promoting cultural, religious and political pluralism, buttressed by a strong role for the equality agenda. Measured by outcomes such as greater understanding of cultural diversity, increased willingness to engage in shared working, and, in some cases, an ability to influence wider political processes, a growing body of evidence suggests that community relations initiatives are having some positive impact at grass roots level.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, and despite support for power sharing devolution and the principles of equality and equity (as evidenced by the 71 per cent who voted in favour of the Agreement at referendum) other research indicates that Northern Ireland has become a more divided society.

In housing, for example, longitudinal research has shown progressively higher levels of residential segregation with a majority of people choosing to live in polarised

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<sup>2</sup> See Knox, C., Hughes, J., Birrell, D., and McCready, S. (1994). *Community Relations and Local Government* (Coleraine: Centre for the Study of Conflict, University of Ulster); Deloitte and Touche (2001) *Evaluation of the Adult and Community Education Initiatives Final Report* (Belfast: Deloitte and Touche); Deloitte and Touche (2001b) *Evaluation of the Community Relations Council, Final Report* (Belfast: Deloitte and Touche).

districts.<sup>3</sup> To compound the problem, segregation has been accompanied over the last few years by an increase in 'chill factors': the demarcation of sectarian boundaries with graffiti, flags, kerb painting and other expressions of cultural/political identity and paramilitary association.<sup>4</sup> There has been increased polarisation in voting behaviour, with voting preferences drifting to the political extremes, with religion continuing to be the key determining factor. More recently, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin made substantial gains in the 2001 parliamentary and local council elections. The swing in the unionist vote from the pro-Agreement Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Alliance Party towards the anti-Agreement DUP party suggest growing Protestant disillusionment with political reforms.

In addition to these developments, and undoubtedly linked to them, the on-going parades dispute between the Orange Order and residents of Catholic/nationalist areas has continued to sour community relations. The latter have demanded re-routing of traditional Orange Order marches through nationalist districts, regarding them as triumphalist and inciting. An increase in Orange parades<sup>5</sup>, however, and the refusal of the Orange Order to take alternative routes has resulted in some of the worst periods of civil unrest and disruption seen in over 30 years of conflict.

It could be argued that increased polarisation is a logical outcome of a pluralist agenda which promotes and embraces diversity and difference. This does not, however, adequately explain on-going inter-community tension, hostility and intimidation. Robin

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<sup>3</sup> Doherty, P. and Poole, M. (1997) 'Ethnic Residential Segregation in Belfast, Northern Ireland, 1971-1991', *The Geographical Review*, Vol. 87, No. 4, pp. 520--536.

<sup>4</sup> Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE). (1999) '*Community Relations and Community Safety*', Internal Report, (Belfast: NIHE).

Wilson for example, argues that the Good Friday Agreement, although affirming the 'consent principle' – that is, that there can be no change in the constitutional position of Northern Ireland, except by the consent of the majority – has left in place 'the polarised political battlefield' because the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom (UK) remains unchanged. On the one hand, unionists continue to defend their Britishness, upheld by the Agreement. On the other, nationalists contend that under the terms of the Agreement their 'Irishness' must be given due expression. Sectarian tension, manifest in the 'profusion of flags on the street' reflects the conflict of interests surrounding these positions.<sup>6</sup>

Focusing less on the Agreement *per se*, some have argued that increasing polarisation and sectarian tension, particularly with regard to the parades issue reflect a growing sense of alienation within the Protestant community. O'Neill argues that unionists feel particularly insecure about their position within the UK because they feel that nationalists will ultimately accept nothing less than 'political and cultural domination throughout Ireland'. This insecurity is intensified by British Government engagement with the Irish Government since the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985.<sup>7</sup> Concessions made to republicans during the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement have also exacerbated the problem. In particular, the British Government's

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<sup>5</sup> Statistics collected by the Royal Ulster Constabulary between 1985 and 1995 show that 'loyalist' parades have increased in number by 684 over the 10 year period <<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/parade/jarman.htm>>.

<sup>6</sup> Wilson, Robin (2000) *Flagging concern: the controversy over flags and emblems* (Belfast: Democratic Dialogue) <<http://www.democraticdialogue.org/working/flags.htm>>

<sup>7</sup> O' Neill, S (2000) 'Liberty, Equality and the Rights of Cultures: the Marching Controversy at Drumcree', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 27-28

continued willingness to accommodate the demands of republicans<sup>8</sup>, against the repeated failure of republican paramilitaries to deliver decommissioning within stipulated timeframes, has caused ructions at both political and grass roots levels within the Protestant community that threaten to destabilise the peace process.

## **Relations Between Protestants and Catholics**

Set against this background it is revealing to examine the ebb and flow of community relations in Northern Ireland from 1989 to 2001 using data from social attitude surveys carried out over that period. The following results are based on data derived from the Community Relations modules included in the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (NISA) surveys carried out between 1989 and 1996 and the 1999, 2000 and 2001 Life and Times surveys.

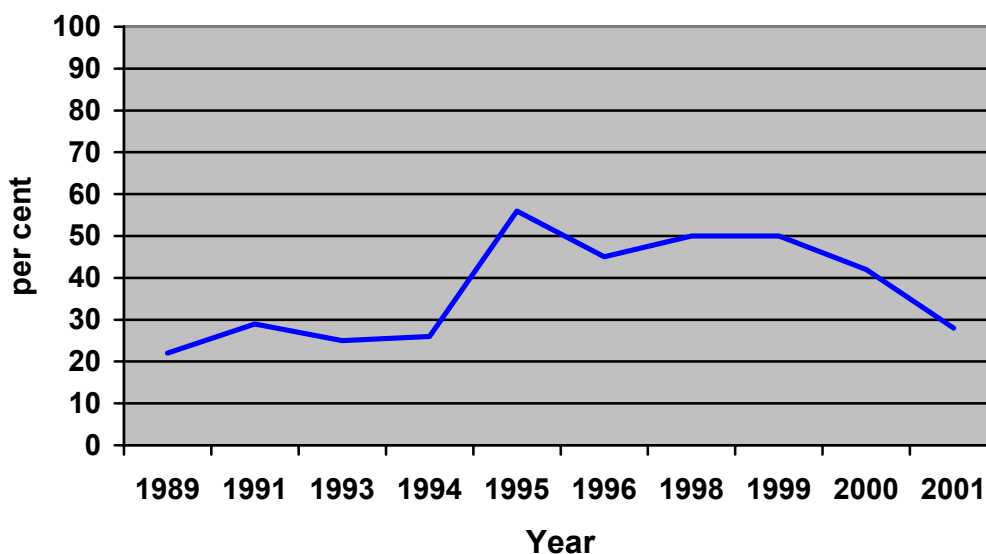
One standard survey question asked of all respondents is whether they think relations between Protestants and Catholics are better, worse or the same as they were five years ago (Figure 1). In the period 1989 to 1999 there was a general trend towards more optimism with a particular peak in 1995 following the ceasefires of the previous

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<sup>8</sup> Arthur Aughey lists the concessions the British Government made to republicans in an effort to secure the latter would engage in 'exclusively democratic' processes: the continued early release of prisoners, the reduction of troop levels (despite continued paramilitary involvement in punishment beatings and intimidation), an agreement to meet a long-standing republican demand for an inquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday, the acceptance of the central recommendations of the Patten Report on police reforms (which were lambasted by unionists), permission, against the advice of the Speaker, that Sinn Féin MPs should be allowed access the facilities of the House of Commons, without having taken an oath of allegiance, and, crucially, the persuasion of David Trimble that he should recommend his party share power with Sinn Féin. This was based on an understanding that the IRA would co-operate with an Independent International Commission on Decommissioning and that there would be some gesture on arms to satisfy unionist sceptics. Neither happened, but devolved government went 'live' in November 1999. See Aughey, A. (2001) 'British Policy in Northern Ireland' in S. P. Savage and R. Atkinson (eds) *Public Policy Under Blair*, (Hampshire: Palgrave) p. 217.

year. Overall there was an increase of 28 percentage points over the period in the proportion of people who believed that relations between Protestants and Catholics had improved. This level of optimism remained steady in 1999 but between 1999 and 2001 began to fall again and had dropped a massive 22 percentage points by 2001.

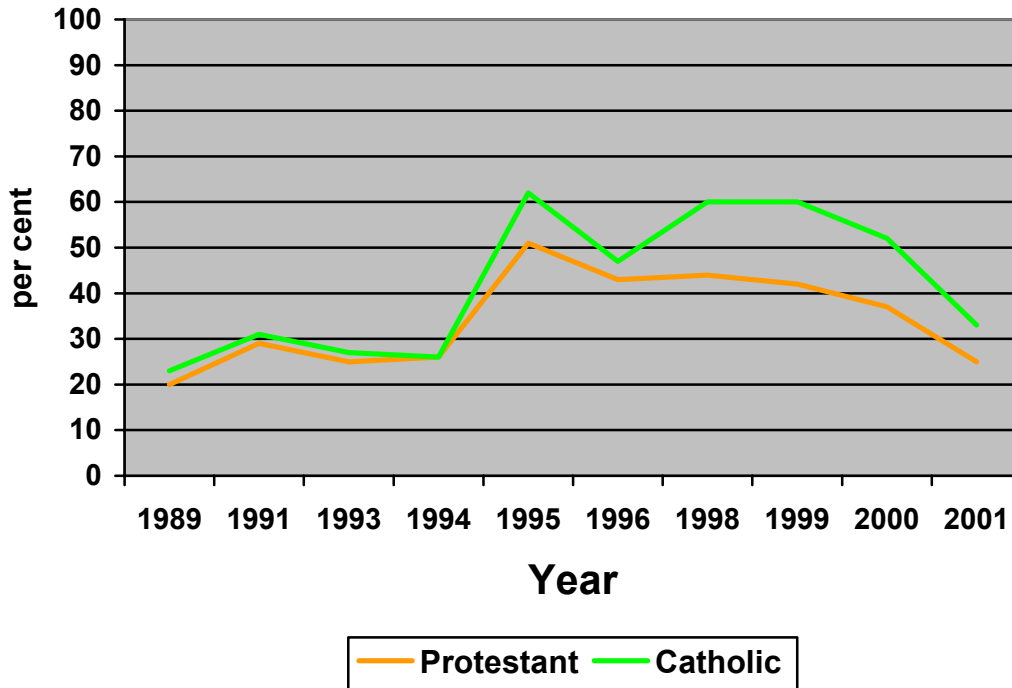
**Figure 1: % believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than 5 years ago**



Of particular significance however is the growing disparity in attitudes between Protestants and Catholics (Figure 2). Over the years between 1989 and 1994 Catholic and Protestant views about the state of community relations was virtually identical. 1995 and the post-cease fire period saw a greater surge of optimism among Catholics than Protestants though both had come together quite closely by 1996. However Catholic optimism surged again following the Good Friday Agreement and only began to fall during 2000 and 2001. Protestants appeared to reserve judgment immediately following the Belfast Agreement but optimism began to drop off as early as 1999 and

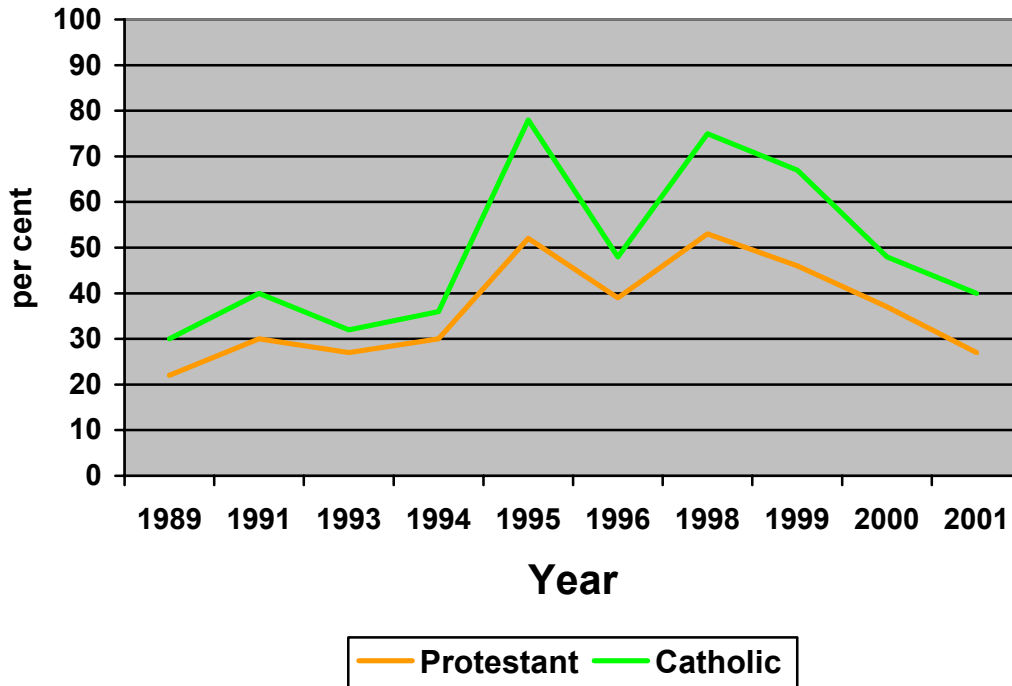
has continued to fall since then. Most notable is the fact that since 1996 considerably fewer Protestants than Catholics believe that relations are better.

**Figure 2: % believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than 5 years ago (by religion)**



When asked whether relations between Protestants and Catholics would be better, worse or the same in five years time (Figure 3) the pattern is similar. Protestants are consistently more pessimistic than Catholics about the future, nonetheless the results indicate a peak in optimism in 1995 and 1998 followed by a fairly swift drop in confidence among both communities post 1998.

**Figure 3: % believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in 5 years time (by religion)**



The growing disparity between the Protestant and Catholic responses is perhaps a reflection of a Catholic community growing in confidence and a Protestant community feeling increasingly marginalised by wider political developments. It has been argued that in the most recent elections the key deciding factors for those who changed their vote from UUP to DUP were the failure of the Good Friday Agreement to deliver decommissioning and the reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC).<sup>9</sup> Attempts to generate a political culture based on equality and fair treatment have been interpreted by the Protestant community as undermining their interests. This is likely to influence attitudes to, and relations with, the Catholic community.

## **Continuing Segregation in Housing, Employment and Education?**

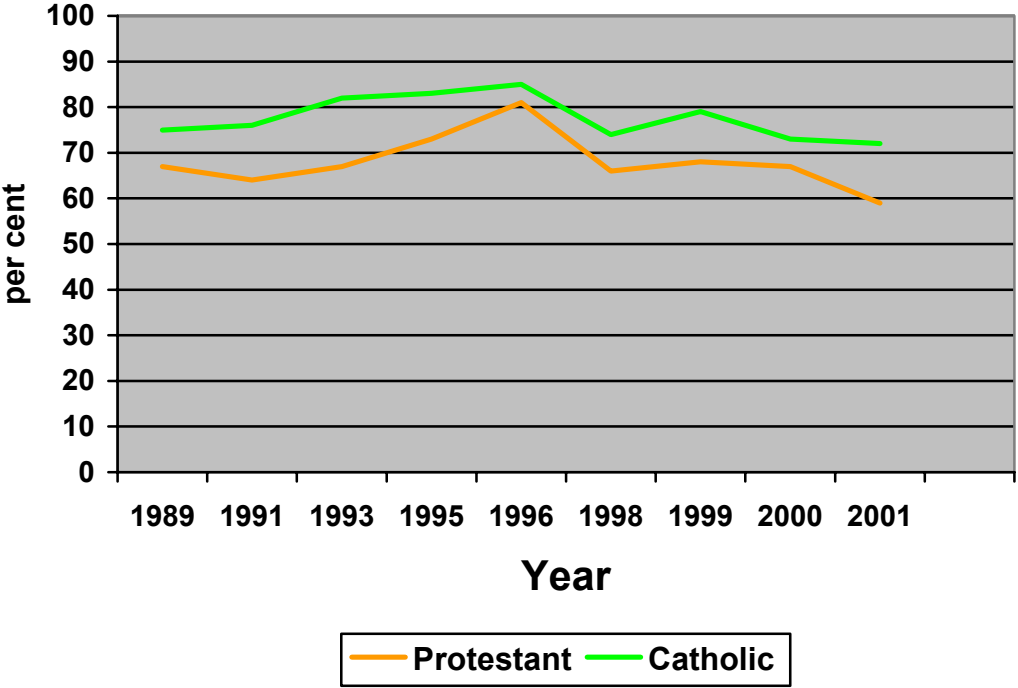
Although questions about relations between Protestants and Catholics may be relatively superficial because they are impressionistic, a series of questions that aim to gauge behaviour have also been included over the years. These refer to residential, workplace and educational segregation and the willingness of respondents to engage with the other community.

Across the years, the proportion of people wishing to live in mixed-religion neighbourhoods has always been in the majority and, for Catholic respondents, considerably in the majority. Nonetheless certain patterns suggesting a deterioration of community relations are repeated in the results for this question (Figure 4). Between 1989 and 1996 the proportion of Protestants wishing to live in mixed neighbourhoods rose fourteen percentage points from 67% in 1989 to an all time high of 81% in 1996. But support fell between 1996 and 2001 as confidence whittled away and by 2001 only 59% of Protestants expressed a wish to live in mixed neighbourhoods. For Catholics the pattern was similar (albeit that levels of support are consistently higher than those for Protestants). While in 1989 75% of Catholics expressed a desire to live in mixed neighbourhoods, this rose to all all time high of 85% in 1996 and then dropped back to 72% in 2001. By 2001 the desire among both communities to live in mixed religion neighbourhoods had reached an all time low, particularly marked within the Protestant community.

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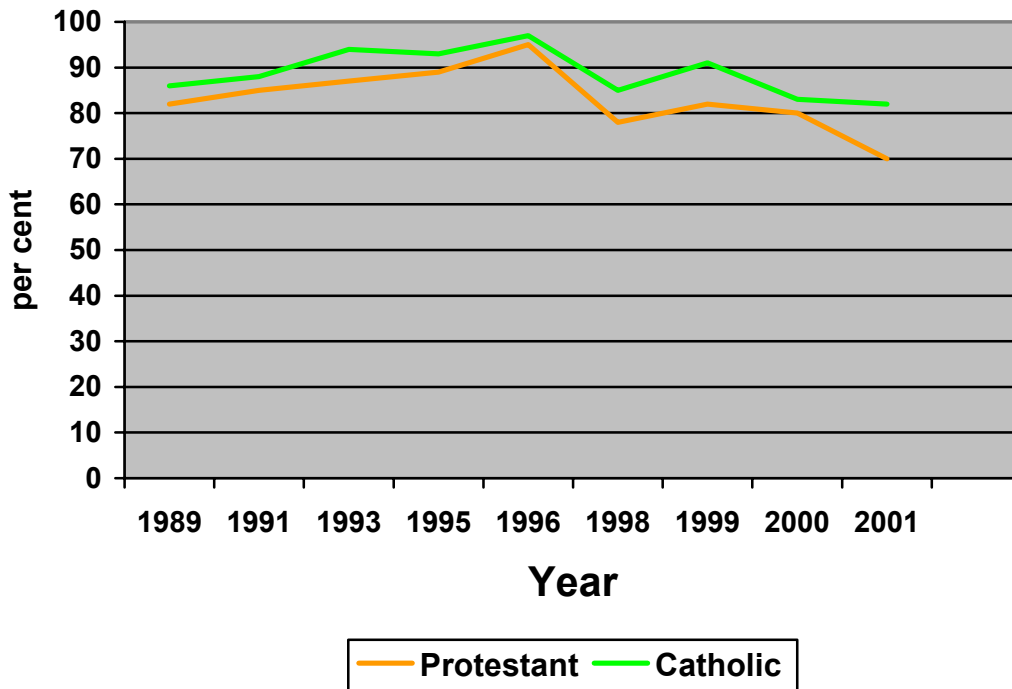
<sup>9</sup> Belfast Telegraph (2001) *‘Leader Column’*, 9th June 2001.

**Figure 4: % who would prefer to live in a mixed religion neighbourhood ( by religion)**



When asked ‘if you were working and had to change your job, would you prefer a workplace with people of only your own religion, or a mixed-religion workplace?’, the pattern of responses across the period is almost identical to that above (Figure 5). Support for mixed-religion workplaces (always high) rose still further between 1989 and 1996 and then rapidly fell off, dropping by a staggering 25 percentage points among the Protestant community and 15 percentage points among the Catholic community.

**Figure 5: % who would prefer a mixed religion workplace (by religion)**



While it is clear that a large majority of the population does prefer mixed religion neighbourhoods and mixed religion workplaces (two-thirds and three-quarters respectively in 2001) it is equally clear that support has been significantly dented in recent years, particularly among the Protestant community. In 1996 the marked increase in preference for living and working in mixed-religion environments could be explained by the more congenial and sanguine atmosphere inspired by the 1994 ceasefires and the low level of violence in the inter-ceasefire period. However, an increase in other forms of sectarianism since the ceasefires, such as intimidation and harassment, may underpin current preferences for residential and workplace segregation.

## Conclusion

The indicators reported here suggest a marked deterioration in community relations and a distinct retreat towards single-identity environments among both communities since 1996. Moreover the survey evidence also indicates that, since 1996, the Catholic and Protestant communities have developed markedly different attitudes on a range of issues. In general, Catholics seem more amenable to efforts to promote cross-community contact as demonstrated by their greater willingness to integrate. The general optimism inherent in Catholic responses is, however, tempered by a growing sense of distrust and unease within the Protestant community. Protestants expressed less enthusiasm for inter-religious mixing, a pattern which becomes more pronounced after 1996. Taken together with evidence from the 1999 survey,<sup>10</sup> where Protestant respondents were less confident than Catholics that their rights and cultural traditions will be protected, it is reasonable to assume that Protestants are experiencing greater difficulty than Catholics with the changes in politics and the constitution. Hence, although the intention of the Good Friday Agreement is to create an inclusive society, the survey findings provide little evidence to suggest that this what most Protestants think they have.

The survey evidence, taken in conjunction with greater electoral polarisation underlines the inherent tensions and dilemmas of a pluralist model of government. At present the Protestant community's dissatisfaction appears to be related to its interpretation of the pluralist arrangements for government. Protestants seem to see a skewed rather than a *pluralist* agenda at work in the sense that the state is negotiating

and according greater legitimacy and recognition to the Catholic community than the Protestant community. In any pluralist society the loss of social cohesion and the alienation of particular sections of interests becomes inevitable unless particular efforts are made to engender confidence that the state will protect the interests of *all* groups. Many Protestants, it would seem, do not believe that their rights and culture have been accorded the same degree of legitimacy as the Catholic community. This argument was put rather starkly by the newly elected DUP MP for East Londonderry, Gregory Campbell:

The Unionist community have given concession after concession to nationalists and Republicans ... now we're in the queue now we're going to the Prime Minister to say that we want equality and we want legitimacy for our cause.<sup>11</sup>

The pluralist model of developing community relations arguably represents a more realistic interpretation of the community relations problem. However, its success inevitably depends on the confidence of participating groups that the wider political and constitutional environment will protect their interests.

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<sup>10</sup> Hughes, J. and Donnelly, C. (2000) 'Ten years of Social Attitudes to Community Relations in Northern Ireland' in A. Gray, K. Lloyd, P. Devine, G. Robinson and D. Heenan (eds) *Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland: the 8<sup>th</sup> Report* (Pluto Press: London).

<sup>11</sup> Belfast Telegraph (2001) 'Campbell says result reflects mood of people', 9th June 2001.

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