
Northern Ireland Multiculturalism : Party Political Approach to Diversity and Social Changes

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Résumé

The Northern Irish government launched a new community relations strategy in May 2013 under the banner of *Together: Building a United Community*. However, whilst this document acknowledges that, "significant inward immigration has led to the creation of a diverse, multicultural society" the strategy itself is focused on attempts to dismantle physical and psychological barriers between nationalists and unionists. Meanwhile policies explicitly devoted to matters of ethnic diversity have mostly been concerned with tackling only overt racism and hate crime. This paper draws on qualitative interviews with politicians representing unionist, nationalist and non-communal parties and forms an exploration of party elite approaches and assumptions about the potential for explicitly multicultural policy frameworks in Northern Ireland. We argue that although politicians are largely positive about the potential contribution that new arrivals to Northern Ireland can make, their progress on the formulation of agreed multicultural policies has so far been limited. This is in part due to the lack of sophisticated and durable multicultural policy frameworks on offer in the rest of the UK or in the Republic of Ireland which means that politicians in this relatively new institution have to negotiate this complex area of social change without useful evidence-based policy models that they could adapt. However, it is also because party political competition is still fuelled by ethnic valence voting behaviour and located within an explicitly bi-national settlement. This means that politicians find it hard to envisage the needs of a population re-shaped by immigration as they still view political activism through the prism of strong community defence. We will argue that this current impasse does not have to be permanent and will outline positive aspects of political elite understandings of diversity and the potential change generated by a growing sense of Northern Irishness and multi-layered understandings of identity.

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