

POLITICIANS AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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This research project gives an account of the perspectives of Northern Ireland's politicians on community relations (CR) and communal division. It is also concerned with understanding the role of politicians in the broad task of building good relations, and assessing the range of political opinion on community relations work.

Methods

A project survey was mailed to 621 politicians (all MLAs and District Councillors) in March 2004 and 190 completed questionnaires were returned, with responses from across the political spectrum. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 34 individuals (20 politicians and 14 community relations, community and public sector representatives) between May and July. A focus group for District Council Community Relations Officers was held on 1 June and

a 'Politicians' Seminar' was arranged at Parliament Buildings, Stormont, on 23 June to discuss the preliminary findings of the project. The findings were presented at a conference, Politicians and Community Relations in Northern Ireland, held at the Waterfront Hall, Belfast on 9 September 2004. INCORE Research Associate for this project, Frank Foley, presented the findings of this report to the approximately seventy participants who attended this conference.

Findings

• *Varying understandings of CR:*

A review of politicians' understanding of the term, 'community relations', confirmed the various approaches. Definitions range from 'toleration of difference' to an emphasis on the 'quality of interaction' between people from different backgrounds. There were different views on where the problem of poor community relations lies.



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'INCORE's vision is of a world with an increased understanding of the causes of conflict; improved methods of resolving conflict without recourse to violent means; and advanced reconciliation processes'

- **Varying objectives of CR:**

Eighty two percent of politicians agreed that the objective of community relations policy should be 'to encourage a more shared and integrated society, whilst also promoting respect for cultural diversity'. In interviews, most politicians took a sceptical or gradualist approach to policy changes that support this objective. Some elected representatives favour sharing-oriented policy reforms in education, housing and public service provision.

- **Varying evaluations of CR:**

A significant degree of ambivalence was found amongst politicians regarding 'community relations' work. Considerable dissatisfaction was shown with the management of CR policy and programmes by the Government and, to a lesser extent, the Community Relations Council (CRC). However, large majorities of elected representatives acknowledged the importance of cultural exchanges designed to promote respect for diversity and interface work. While a significant minority expressed deep dissatisfaction with the current approach, over two-thirds of politicians supported CR work.

- **Varying evaluations of the community and voluntary sector:**

In interviews, politicians' reactions to the community and voluntary sector ranged from enthusiastic to withering. The project survey indicated that a majority of politicians are broadly supportive of the community sector's CR work, with a significant minority showing a neutral or sceptical attitude. Community sector and elected representatives agreed that good

working relationships have been built between them in Local Strategy Partnerships.

Fundamental research question

The fundamental question addressed in the research is: what is politicians' level of commitment to improving community relations?

Commitment to community relations

Elected representatives' participation in the project survey and willingness to be interviewed indicates political interest in community relations. Yet, the assessments of CR and community sector interviewees ranged from those who were sympathetic to politicians' dilemmas regarding reconciliation to those who focused on political neglect of community relations issues and the failure to challenge highly segregated living patterns. Whether supportive or critical of politicians, the common thread running through all assessments was that building good relations and a shared society does not feature highly on most politicians' priorities. Indeed, half of the elected representatives surveyed recognise that politicians themselves are not doing enough to support the development of better community relations.

Political priorities

The research reflects on how unionism's and nationalism's political priorities interplay with their perspectives on

community relations. Issues such as inequality, paramilitarism, constitutional uncertainty and the role of the state were identified by politicians as impacting on their attitudes to community relations. While concerns about these issues led some politicians to question the point of improving relations, others believed that progress was crucial to the task of building good relations. Some argued that divisive political issues should be a core subject of dialogue and exchange in community relations work.

Should there be greater involvement of elected representatives in CR programmes?

Project participants saw both dangers and opportunities in party political proposals for greater involvement of elected representatives in CR programmes. A large majority of politicians agreed that elected representatives should be given a greater role in public bodies tasked with the management of CR work, although many acknowledged the need for safeguards to avoid a politicisation of community relations programmes.

• Arguments in favour of greater involvement:

Arguments made at regional level were the desirability of greater democratic accountability and financial prudence and the opportunity for elected representatives to take greater responsibility for community relations. Similar arguments were made in favour of the proposal that district councils should be given an enhanced role in CR decision-making and funding allocation.

• Cautions with involvement:

People working in the area of community relations gave a mixed reaction to these proposals on the administration of CR programmes. They are cautious about giving a greater role to district councils and do not agree that politicians should exercise majority control over the CRC. Reasons for caution include a fear that political disagreement or instability could be transferred to CR programmes, misgivings about the potential for clientelism and a belief that some MLAs and councillors lack understanding of the nature of CR work.

• Potential benefit in such involvement:

Community relations and community sector workers see potential benefit in the appointment of some more politicians to the board of the CRC. This includes the idea, made by some politicians, that a greater involvement of elected representatives in CR administration could increase their knowledge of the issues and encourage them to take greater political responsibility for community relations.

The 'bigger picture' of politicians and community relations.

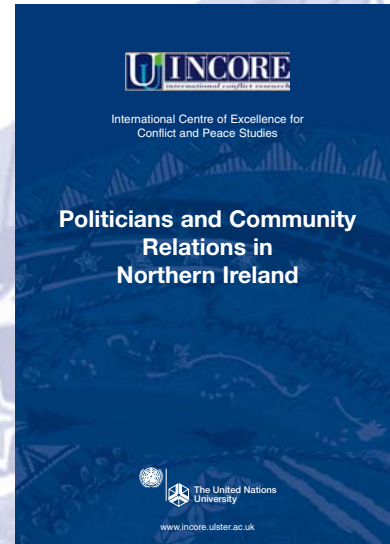
- 1) It reflects first, the argument that politicians' primary responsibility on this issue is to 'become Government' and implement a cross-departmental strategy that would build community relations considerations into every public policy decision.
- 2) Second, political and community/public sector interviewees made suggestions concerning the less clearly defined issue of how elected representatives can best

provide civic leadership. Interviewees called for more trust-building work, as well as compacts between politicians regarding their public behaviour and involvement in disputes.

Some conclusions

- Some politicians and CR/community sector representatives highlighted the need for more regular and better quality communication between elected representatives and those working in the field of community relations.
- Many politicians want a greater say in the management of CR programmes.
- The question posed by people working in the field of community relations is valid, that is, whether politicians are prepared to make a greater commitment to the concomitant role of providing civic leadership.
- If political parties want a greater role in peace-building policy and work, they need to demonstrate that community relations can be as high a priority as equality, security or political development.
- The roles of civic leadership and political involvement in CR programmes could complement each other to the benefit of funding recipients and the wider society

The full *Politicians and Community Relations in Northern Ireland* report can be accessed on the INCORE website - <http://www.incore.ulster.ac.uk>.



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