Northern Ireland Essay, Research Paper

Out of all the conflicts that have occurred in Western Europe since the Second World War, Northern Ireland has been one of the most bitter, long lasting and intractable. This conflict is based in the struggle of one side of the community for a unified independent Ireland and the opposition of the other part of the community to this aim and their desire for Northern Ireland to remain a part of the United Kingdom. Due to the hostility between these two sides issues of discrimination in areas such as housing, employment, electoral manipulations and religious histories have been rife. Northern Ireland is torn over the balance of power relations between communities and questions of governance. Suspicion has been prevalent between both communities in Northern Ireland for many centuries. With such differing background of the two communities a sense that their interests are incompatible has been established for a long time.

Employment has always been a major area of disharmony among Catholics and Protestants. Since 1921, the partition of Ireland, rates of employment have differed widely between the two groups. Under the unionist government of the 1920s the rate of unemployment for Protestants was 6.6% while for Catholics it was 17.3%. this discrepancy further widened the gap between the two groups leading into areas of housing poverty and education. With such a high rate of unemployment it was almost impossible for a Catholic to afford decent housing or schooling for their family. It was these issues that forced the Catholics to demand civil rights which in turn was a cause for conflict at the end of the 1960s. On paper things are improving. In August the Equality Commission published a report which shows that rates of Catholic employment have risen by 4.7% over the ten years between 1990 and 2000. Although this is good news there are many areas of employment which are still inadequate and unmonitored. The Policy of Appraisal and Fair Treatment and Targeting Social Need initiatives were intended to be set up in the 90’s to act as monitoring and job creation schemes. Neither of these reached the goals they were hoped to achieve. PAFT received no consideration and hopes for reparation for past discriminations came to nothing when its function became reduced to ‘equality’ and TSN was sidelined with no real aims. Neither monitor the religion or gender of staff.

The allocation of public housing has also been an area subject to accusations of discrimination. In the 1960’s civil rights movements began in protest against the lack of civil and housing rights of the Catholics of Northern Ireland. In June 1966, a nationalist councillor Austin Currie squatted in a house in the Tyrone village of Caledon to oppose the treatment the Irish people were receiving. Though it was meant to be a peaceful protest there was a violent reaction. In 1969 The Cameron Report examined the causes of the civil disorders which started on 5 October 1968 in Londonderry. They found that the discrimination in the allocation of housing, together with lack of housing provision was among the main grievances of the Catholic population. At the time, housing was an important political issue, in addition to being of great socio-economic importance – sub-tenants were not given a vote in local government elections. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive was established in 1971 in order to examine the accusations of discrimination and mismanagement surrounding the allocation of housing in Northern Ireland. Following the discovery in 1974 that 20% of the housing were inadequate for human habitation the NIHE were given the task of remedying this situation and ensuring a new system by which housing would be fairly allocated. A more recent survey puts the percentage of housing unsuitable for human habitation in Northern Ireland at 8%. A 1990 social attitudes survey states that 11% of Catholics in Northern Ireland are dissatisfied with their housing as opposed to 7% of Protestants. This figure indicates that housing, though still a matter for concern in the North, is a less urgent issue than it was in the 1970’s.

Another area of discrimination in Northern Ireland is that of education. According to a SCOPE report over half of the population of Northern Ireland is operating at the two lowest levels of literacy. It is unsurprising that Catholics have greater literacy problems than Protestants and that there is a close correlation between literacy and employment. The educational systems -like most systems in Northern Ireland- is sectarian, with almost all children attending single identity schools. The first integrated school for children from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds was opened in 1981. Today there are more than thirty of these schools in the North. There aim is to introduce children to each others cultural and religious difference earlier in life. By these means they intend to lessen the suspicion and hostility between the two groups in later generations. Although only 3% of children in the North attend these schools they have taken on an incredibly important role in renovating the current education system. Due to the influence of these new schools other segregated schools have been encouraged to set up integration programmes within their own curriculum and children have been educated in the way of life of those with which they would not necessarily otherwise associate. Due to the hard work and through the dedication of parents and teachers who wished to tackle the misunderstanding and rift between the two communities, programmes were set up within schools in order to increase understanding among children and young people. Amongst these were Cultural Heritage, Mutual Understanding and Contact programmes. These were a mandatory part of every schoolchild’s curriculum. Whereas before 1990 completely different versions of history were often taught in Catholic and Protestant schools, by 1990 there was a common history curriculum being taught in all schools in Northern Ireland. By 1994, a common religious curriculum was brought into the schools. By these means the schools introduced common ground between the school children and gave them the starting point from which to build relations which would be of benefit to each community.

John Hume, leader of the SDLP always says the following “..we are a divided people”. He is right. Remaining in the UK does not in itself solve the problem and joining the ROI does not solve it either. To solve the divisions in society we need agreement between the divided people and a subsequent healing process. Agreement between the people means coming to an arrangement to which both unionists and nationalists can agree. The low level of support for Irish unity indicates that division will not go away as a result of Irish unity.

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