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Irish Studies in International Affairs, Volume 32, Number 2, Analysing and Researching Ireland, North and South 2021, pp. 532-557 (Article)

Published by Royal Irish Academy

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/isia.2021.0063>



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A New Welfare Imaginary for the Island of Ireland¹

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ABSTRACT

Social imaginary is a sociological concept referring to the set of values, institutions, laws and symbols through which people imagine their social whole. This article unpacks what might be needed to develop an all-island welfare imaginary. Literature points to the importance of ‘institutional fit’, ‘policy opportunity’ and ‘learning processes’ as factors facilitating policy transfer between different jurisdictions. An absence of ‘institutional fit’ presents barriers to policy transfer, but even where there is institutional fit, effective policy transfer requires sufficient policy opportunity and effective policy

¹ Read a Response to this paper by Ciara Fitzpatrick and Charles O’Sullivan in *Irish Studies in International Affairs (ARINS)* 32 (2) (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3318/isia.2021.32b.46>.

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.3318/isia.2021.32b.45>

Irish Studies in International Affairs, Vol. 32, Issue 2, 532–557, *Analysing and Researching Ireland, North and South* © 2021 The Author(s). This is an open access article licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Open Access funding provided by IReL.



learning processes. We find potential for convergence between the Irish and Northern Irish welfare systems in that both are broadly neoliberal in character, with common features and challenges. However, recent reforms created divergence in their direction of travel, as is evidenced in social security responses to the pandemic. Looking to the future, labour market disruption and restructuring is likely as economies and societies cope with impacts of the pandemic, future automation and climate challenges, and possible constitutional changes across the UK. Negotiating these new social risks will require greater agility and navigational agency of citizens. Enabling institutions will be key, as will maximum social and economic participation and cohesion; these policy goals offer compass points to guide mutual travel for working age welfare and social security policy, north and south. This article promotes knowledge mobilisation towards an ‘island welfare imaginary’ that draws on Nordic social democratic and universal models of welfare states and seeks to maximise social and economic participation as a way of rooting solidarity and reciprocal citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

Welfare architecture, institutions and conditions shape experiences of relative inequality between genders, ethnicities and locations, and influence levels of poverty, unemployment and incomes. These, in turn, impact on whether and how people might vote in political elections and referendums. Arguably, given the impact of the welfare state on people’s daily lives, the future of welfare is one of the most significant questions of policy and public debate facing the island of Ireland, north and south. The Scottish government has articulated and communicated a counter-hegemonic welfare state imaginary² that feeds into future constitutional visions. Devolution has led to ‘laboratories of democracy’³ in social security policy in Scotland, and in Wales an agenda for social security devolution is now emerging.⁴ A north-south social

² Jay Wiggan, ‘Contesting the austerity and “welfare reform” narrative of the UK government: forging a social democratic imaginary in Scotland’, *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 37 (11–12) (2017), 639–54.

³ Mark Simpson, ‘The social security response to COVID-19: read the small print’, *Discover Society*, available at: <https://archive.discover society.org/2020/04/02/the-social-security-response-to-covid-19-read-the-small-print/> (5 August 2021).

⁴ ‘Benefits in Wales: opportunities and challenges for social security devolution’, webinar, 24 November 2020 (see: <https://www.slsa.ac.uk/index.php/news/events-news?id=373>).

security ‘laboratory of democracy’ is needed to feed collective welfare imaginaries and inform future constitutional debate on the island of Ireland.

Ironically, with notable exceptions,⁵ social security is rarely discussed in the context of north-south relations on the island of Ireland and remains under-researched. This paper seeks to complement a previously published ARINS contribution that focused on the legal and ideological basis for north-south collaboration, and comprehensively reviewed the Universal Credit (UC) reforms in Northern Ireland, as well as common challenges from the perspective of migration, cross-border working and the Common Travel Area.⁶ This article’s contribution focuses on recent institutional patterns of convergence and divergence between working age social security policy in the two regimes. It argues for active knowledge mobilisation to generate common understandings of opportunities and constraints on likely directions of future travel of the two welfare states. Policy learning is a prerequisite to maximising likely policy opportunity over the next decades.

Throughout the article the reader is alerted to the practical challenge of comparison and the historical absence of such comparison. The largest and most obvious difference between the regimes is their different rates of cash payments. While only one part of the welfare story in a marketised system, it is a large part of the welfare story that cannot be ignored when discussing north and south convergence. While both regimes appear similar ideologically, they occupy quite different places in the scale and role of cash payments. The different types of income support and apparent differences in generosity in rates of payment also have to be understood in the context of the relationship between income support and access to public services, which has also shifted over time but still sets an important context. The difference in approach is seen most recently in the very different income support responses to the pandemic, responses that may impact on future planning of income support, potentially leading to greater divergence between north and south. That aside, the key argument is that while there has been significant change over the past two decades, it is likely that given the nature of the challenges ahead the next two decades will herald an intensification of change in Ireland, north and south. Neither welfare state offers a model to the other, but

⁵ Anthony Heath, Richard Breen and Christopher Whelan (eds), *Ireland, north and south: perspectives from social science* (London, 1999).

⁶ Ciara Fitzpatrick and Charles O’Sullivan, ‘Comparing social security provision north and south of Ireland: past developments and future challenges’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs: ARINS* 32 (2) (2021), 283–313.

both offer points of departure for shared journeys of disruptive policy change that could lead towards greater convergence.⁷

Policy transfer literature points to the importance of ‘institutional fit’ and ‘learning processes’ to maximise ‘policy opportunities’.⁸ The core focus of this paper discusses institutional fit and the level of coherence between the two jurisdiction’s institutions, broadly defined to include policies and culture. The next section briefly outlines the basic working age welfare and social security architecture pointing to significant institutional fit between Ireland and Northern Ireland.⁹ The paper then sketches the historical working age social security regimes, highlighting how they relate to employment and the broader welfare and work nexus in the political economy. We then assess the degree of convergence in outcomes and degrees of modernisation, finding that both regimes have become more liberal and secular, albeit some key differences remain. The focus of the paper then shifts to the need to generate deeper social security ‘learning processes’ across the island. The last section addresses the theme of ‘policy opportunity’ and argues that the scale of future challenges associated with digitalisation and climate change means we can anticipate a significant scale and pace of disruptive reforms, north and south. The conclusion focuses on the motivation for common approaches to managing key challenges, argues democratic learning processes are necessary for this to happen, and maps some practical next steps.

COMPARING WELFARE STATE AND INSTITUTIONAL FIT

Policy transfer and convergence requires some level of ‘institutional fit’. Comparative social policy literature suggests a degree of existing convergence between Ireland’s north and south. Both regimes are relatively hybrid but are often located within the liberal classification of Esping Andersen’s 1990 world of welfare capitalism (see Figure 2 below).¹⁰ Having first located both regimes in international welfare state typologies, this section briefly sketches the historical trajectory of both welfare regimes, reviews how both regimes

⁷ ‘Benefits in Wales’ webinar.

⁸ Anne Daguerre and Peter Taylor-Gooby, ‘Neglecting Europe: explaining the predominance of American ideas in new labour’s welfare policies since 1997’, *Journal of European Social Policy* 14 (1) (2004), 25–39.

⁹ More detail about specific social security reform can be found in the sister *ARINS* paper by Fitzpatrick and O’Sullivan, ‘Comparing social security provision north and south of Ireland’.

¹⁰ See discussion below for explanation.

shifted to a more conditional ‘work first’ form of activation policy, discusses contrasting experiences of social transfer responses during the pandemic, and ends by comparing key welfare state indicators and outcomes across Ireland and Northern Ireland.

System of working age income support

An important starting point is assessment of ‘fit’ in the institutional design of the policy architecture, north and south (see Figure 1). The working age income support system in both regimes was largely built around social insurance and social assistance payments (with some universal payments in childhood and old age). However, there has been path-breaking or disruptive reform of the original basic structure of payments in the UK, where, since 2013 (and 2016 in Northern Ireland), Universal Credit (UC) is now consolidated as the primary working age income support payment. UC is a single working-age benefit that brings together six ‘legacy’ benefits into one payment, and brought with it a significant extension of conditionality.¹¹ Irish reform tends to be more piecemeal; the Irish regime has maintained its original shape with incremental reforms following a largely path dependent regime that differentiates between contingencies or categories¹² of social insurance and means-tested payments. Consistent with Northern Ireland and the UK, Ireland has shifted proportionally towards means-tested payments,¹³ but is now signalling that consolidation of the social insurance system should be the basic foundation of social security.¹⁴ This is in marked contrast to the centrality of the now consolidated UC in the UK and how Northern Ireland remains under UK government pressure to end its funding of welfare assistance to slow the impact

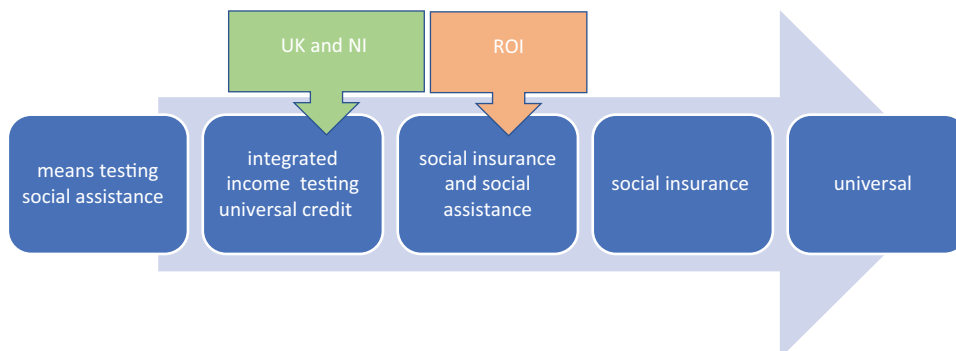
¹¹ Means-tested Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA); Child Tax Credit; Working Tax Credit; Housing Benefit; Income Support. A number of existing payments for working age claimants will remain, including contribution based JSA, contributory ESA, Attendance Allowance and Carer’s Allowance. Despite the language of universalism, the income testing element of UC along with ‘bedroom tax’ in England and dependence on food banks could be interpreted as a return to strict means-testing.

¹² Working age social insurance and means-tested categories include Jobseekers, Jobseeker’s Transition, Carers, One Parent Families, Disability, Illness, Invalidity, Blind, Farmers, Maternity, Supplementary Welfare and others.

¹³ Rod Hick and Mary P. Murphy, ‘Common stock, different paths? Comparing social policy responses to COVID-19 in the UK and Ireland’, *Social Policy and Administration* 55 (2) (2021), *Special Issue: Social policy in the Face of a Global Pandemic: Policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis*, doi: 10.1111/spol.12677.

¹⁴ National Economic and Social Council (NESC), *The Future of the Irish Social Welfare System: Participation and Protection* (2020), available at: <https://www.nesc.ie/publications/the-future-of-the-irish-social-welfare-system-participation-and-protection/> (5 August 2021); Department of Social Protection, *Pathways to Work 2021–2025*, available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1feaf-pathways-to-work-2021/> (5 August 2021)

Figure 1: Ireland (Northern Ireland and Ireland) position on a universal, social insurance, social assistance continuum



Source: Adapted from NESC, *The Future of the Irish Social Welfare System: Participation and Protection* (2020).¹⁷

of Conservative cuts.¹⁵ In contrast, the emergence of a pay-related Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) in Ireland has unexpectedly re-opened the possibility of income related unemployment benefits.¹⁶ Both dynamics pulling in different directions could lead to greater divergence between the two regimes.

Welfare regime typologies

While there is no ideal welfare model, the Nordic model and its underlying principles of equality, decommodification and universalism is often promoted as more effective and equitable than the conservative continental model and the English-speaking liberal regime.¹⁸ Figure 2 helps us contextualise Ireland, north and south, in a 2015 update of the original 1990 Esping Andersen welfare regime classification.¹⁹ Ireland is shaped by its colonial history, and despite its hybridity is often associated as part of the family of Anglo-Saxon or liberal welfare states of Europe and the liberal political economies in the

¹⁵ Mark Simpson and Ruth Patrick, *Universal Credit in Northern Ireland: interim report* (Belfast, 2019), available at: <https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/en/publications/universal-credit-in-northern-ireland-interim-report>.

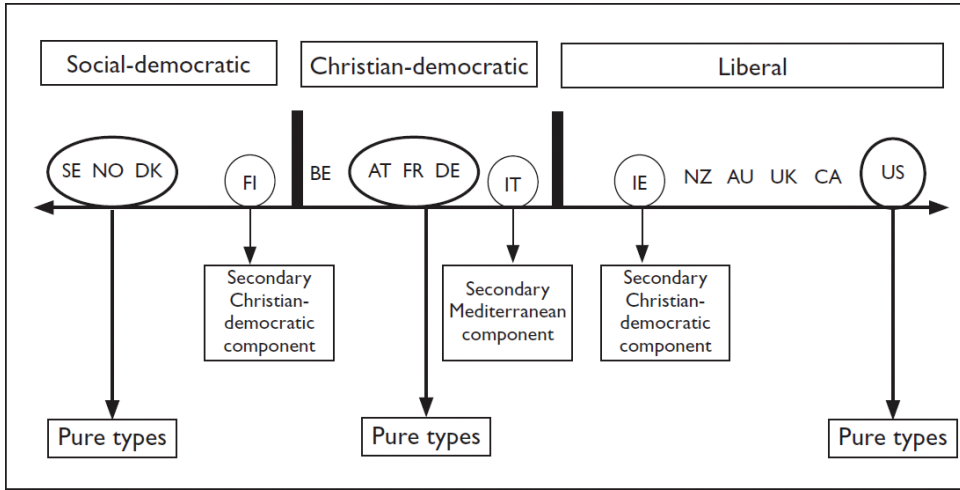
¹⁶ The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is discussed later.

¹⁷ NESC 2020 *The Future of the Irish Social Welfare System: Participation and Protection*.

¹⁸ Paula Saikkonen and Minna Ylikännö, 'Is there room for targeting within universalism? Finnish social assistance recipients as social citizens', *Social Inclusion* 8 (1) (2020), 145–54.

¹⁹ Emanuale Ferragina and Martin Seeleib-Kaiser, 'Welfare regime debate: past, present, futures?' *Policy and Politics* 39 (4) (2011), 583–611.

Figure 2: Contextualising Ireland in comparative welfare regimes



Source: adapted by author from Emanuele Ferragina and Martin Seeleib-Kaiser, 'Welfare regime debate: past, present, futures?' *Policy and Politics* 39 (4) (2011), 583–611.

Varieties of Capitalism literature.²⁰ While the UK regime is a relatively pure liberal regime, Ireland, with its secondary Christian Democratic components, is not 'a pure type' welfare regime, but a hybrid,²¹ or a 'mongrel'.²² Speculating where Northern Ireland might be located in this typology, the recent mitigations of UC in Northern Ireland, easements of conditionality and the degree to which Irish and Northern Irish cultural values are nearer each other than the UK, might locate Northern Ireland in Figure 4 left of the UK and right of Ireland, more liberal than Ireland but less liberal than the UK.

Convergence or divergence?

In 1999 comparative assessments²³ of Ireland north-south found common characteristics or convergence, for example, relating to low levels of economic activity, but also some divergence, for example, relating to the degree to which male breadwinner features influenced female participation in the

²⁰ Paul Achterberg and Myra Yerkes, 'One welfare state emerging? Convergence versus divergence in 16 western countries', *Journal of Comparative Social Welfare* 25 (2009), 189–201

²¹ Mel Cousins, 'Ireland's place in the worlds of welfare capitalism', *Journal of European Social Policy* 7 (1997), 223–35.

²² Anthony McCashin, *Continuity and change in the welfare state: social security in the republic of Ireland* (Basingstoke, 2019).

²³ Health *et al.*, *Ireland, north and south*.

labour market. A later, 2003 comparative study found some divergence,²⁴ with Ireland and the UK transforming in significantly different ways. Later analysis concurred divergence intensified, with Ireland on an expansionary trajectory compared to the UK's pathway to retrenchment, and found politics a strong explanatory factor.²⁵ A 2015 comparative analysis of contractualisation found the Irish model more social democratic than the UK's more liberal marketisation,²⁶ however, Fiona Dukelow and Elke Hein²⁷ found old and new convergence, with both regimes firmly embedded in a liberal regime trajectory characterised by more centralised power. However, they note normative divergence between an explicit UK commitment to neoliberal reforms and a more muted, centrist and consensus-oriented Irish discourse.

Esping Andersen's 1990 analysis is critiqued for the absence of gender, care or family as variables of analysis.²⁸ Ireland is characterised as Catholic, liberal and familial; a more sectarian Northern Ireland is clearly characterised by a mix of Catholic and Protestant values but is also liberal and familial. Both Ireland and the UK have been classified as relatively strong male breadwinner states, and while reforms like UC continue the male breadwinner legacy in the UK, in other respects the UK has modified its male breadwinner model more quickly than Ireland. Northern Ireland's historical and contemporary resistance to equality suggests stronger male breadwinner attributes than the rest of the UK. Both jurisdictions are characterised by a weak care infrastructure, where care is sourced from private or familial rather than public spheres, leaving primarily female lone parents to experience a very high risk of poverty in both regimes.

Policy convergence is most likely when there is some institutional symmetry. Globalisation, regionalisation and marketisation are experienced in different ways in smaller more vulnerable political economies, and social security is an important automatic stabiliser in the context of volatility. Ireland is a small, highly centralised sovereign state, where policy implementation is

²⁴ Mary Daly and Nicola Yeates, 'Common origins, different paths: adaptation and change in social security in Britain and Ireland', *Policy & Politics* 31 (2003) (1), 85–97.

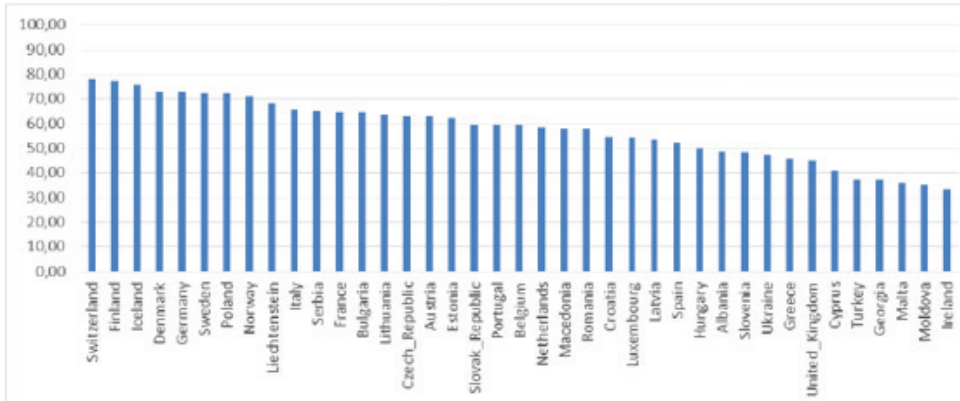
²⁵ Mary Murphy, 'Interests, institutions and ideas: explaining Irish social security policy', *Policy and Politics* 40 (2021), 347–65.

²⁶ Jay Wiggan, 'What variety of employment service quasi-market? Ireland's job path as a private power market', in Z. Irving, M. Fenger, & J. Hudson (eds), *Social Policy Review* 27 (2015), 151–68.

²⁷ Fiona Dukelow and Elke Heins, 'The Anglo-Saxon welfare states: still Europe's outlier—or trendsetter?' in Patricia Kennett and Noemi Lendvai-Bainton (eds), *Handbook of European Social Policy* (London, 2017), chapter 14.

²⁸ Camilla Devitt, 'Mothers or migrants? Labour supply policies in Ireland, 1997–2007', *Social Politics* 23 (2016), 214–38.

Figure 3: Local Autonomy Index



Source: Andreas Ladner *et al.*, *Self Rule Index for Local Government* (European Commission, 2015).

challenged by weak local government. Northern Ireland is a small statelet with devolved powers and is governed by a centralised state, albeit one that has decentralised more functional power.

The local autonomy index (Figure 3)²⁹ shows both Ireland and the UK (Northern Ireland) weak in terms of local autonomy, with strong limiting consequences for the potential role of local government and regional planning. While both benefit from strong vertical coordination (command-and-control departmental administrative systems), there is weak capacity for local horizontal coordination, making integrated delivery of social services more complex to achieve.³⁰

Policy choices are also contextualised by monetary and fiscal policy. Ireland remains a member of the EU and Eurozone, while Northern Ireland is a member of neither. In summer 2021, in the context of the UK withdrawal from the EU, Northern Ireland maintained a special trading status. The fiscal and monetary preconditions facing both countries differ in relation to borrowing and debt, with consequences for Ireland’s capacity to absorb extra social investment. Neither jurisdiction has a sustainable taxation base, both are relatively low revenue and low spending states. Similarly developed states

²⁹ Andreas Ladner, Nicholas Keuffer and Harald Baldersheim, *Self Rule Index for Local Government*, (European Commission, 2015).

³⁰ Agota Scharle, Nicola Duell, Renate Minas, Michael Fertig, Marton Csillag, ‘Study on integrated delivery of social services (IDSS) aiming at the activation of minimum income recipients in the labour market: success factors and reform pathways’ (European Commission, 2018).

meet social and economic goals through higher revenue and expenditure without imperilling economic performance.³¹ Both could increase equality by addressing tax expenditures, increasing employer's social security and finding new sources of revenue in areas such as digitalisation, environmental and wealth taxes.

EVOLUTION OF WORKING AGE WELFARE IN IRELAND, NORTH AND SOUTH

In this section we briefly historically sketch the basic parameters of the two working age welfare and social security regimes, and then highlight how both regimes relate to employment and the broader political economy. We use recent pandemic income support policy to illustrate how UC translated into quite divergent income support responses to the pandemic, but balance this with an overall assessment of convergence in welfare outcomes. More detail about specific social security reform can be found in the complementary ARINS paper published in 2021.³²

Historical evolution of the Northern Irish welfare state

The Northern Irish political settlement has shaped a uniquely Northern Irish welfare state. From the epochal 1949 Beveridge Report the contemporary welfare state emerged in the UK as a mixture of social assistance, social insurance and universal income supports, and a range of services. The system evolved as a male breadwinner model, which over three decades was gradually modified. While public services were a core feature of the UK welfare state including the UHS, the Northern Irish welfare state was characterised by distinctive local sectarian anomalies in the delivery of health, education and public housing. A 1926 'parity convention' required essentially the same social security provision and rates as Great Britain.³³ While the British welfare state originally delivered a relatively generous form of income support, the scale of

³¹ Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI), *Economic Trends and Outlook: April 2021 update: NERI Report Series No 6*, available at: <https://www.neriinstitute.net/research/economic-trends-and-outlook-april-2021-update-neri-report-series-no-6> (2021).

³² Fitzpatrick and O'Sullivan, 'Comparing social security provision north and south of Ireland'.

³³ Research and Information Service (2011); Féilim Ó hAdhmaill, 'Ireland and the global economic crisis: one island, two different experiences', in Mary P. Murphy and Fiona Dukelow *The Irish welfare state in the 21st century: challenges and changes* (Basingstoke, 2016).

the early 1980s Thatcher reforms led to a form of backward convergence with Ireland. Likewise, in the UK, previously strong universal approaches to public services withered as public housing was sold and education was privatised, albeit the National Health Service remained free at the point of access,³⁴ but even access has been rationed by waiting lists as a way to impose cuts. During this period, Northern Ireland, as part of the Conservative government strategy, maintained a regional distinctiveness as ‘a place apart’,³⁵ maintaining higher levels of public sector investment and services that shaped a specific Northern Irish political economy, characterised by relatively significant levels of public sector employment, and avoiding imposition of some negative policies, including a £10 GP visit fee.

The 2007 Stormont assembly and coalition partners embraced a relatively neoliberal UK policy context, which fed into an austerity regime as the new labour government was replaced in 2010 by a new, conservative-dominated coalition government that pursued public spending reductions and austerity, liberalisation of public services and intensification of ‘work first’ reforms to social security and employment services,³⁶ albeit Northern Ireland experienced less austerity than the UK or Ireland.³⁷ The 2016 Conservative party government reforms lead to a harsher welfare system; however, welfare mitigations somewhat lessened the impact in NI.³⁸ Since 2012, UK devolution policy weakened but did not erode traditional welfare parity arrangements. The UK government retains authority over working age employment related benefits, but the decentralisation of other benefits and employment ‘activation’ policy broke with a centralised hierarchical system of employment and social security governance. A quite constrained empowerment nonetheless facilitates local administrative variation.³⁹ Northern Ireland has had to manage the Conservative Party welfare reform agenda in the form of universal credit (UC), welfare caps and an erosion of many traditional income supports. The projected economic loss to Northern Ireland due to social security reforms

³⁴ Colin Coulter and Peter Shirlow, ‘From the ‘Long War’ to the ‘Long Peace’: an introduction to the special edition’, *Capital and Class* 43 (1) (2019), 3–21.

³⁵ Colin Coulter, ‘Northern Ireland’s elusive peace dividend: neoliberalism, austerity and the politics of class’, *Capital and Class* 43 (1) (2018), 123–38.

³⁶ Jay Wiggan, ‘Contesting the austerity’.

³⁷ Ó hAdhmaill, ‘Ireland and the global economic crisis’.

³⁸ Coulter and Shirlow, ‘From the ‘Long War’ to the ‘Long Peace’.

³⁹ Wiggan, ‘Contesting the austerity’.

was £650 per person per year, compared to £470 in Great Britain.⁴⁰ Northern Ireland's specific easements, alleviations or welfare mitigations, under the 2016 'Fresh Start' agreement, drew from £585 million to ensure a range of Universal Credit related reforms were less damaging to welfare claimants.⁴¹ These easements are due to expire in April 2022, but many measures are now irrelevant and do little to mitigate the impact of UC.⁴² The cost of the Northern Ireland executive welfare amelioration has arguably been at the cost of worsening health and higher education.

Historical evolution of the Irish welfare state

The Irish welfare state has grown over time from a relatively rudimentary welfare state dominated by Church-based provision of education and health, to the post-Second World War era incremental development of a 'Beveridge type' welfare state, albeit smaller in scope and scale than its UK comparator.⁴³ Public services never matched the breath of universal 'free at the point of access' services in the UK, and health and education were largely delivered by religious orders. Instead, the Irish welfare state focused more on cash income supports, a mixture of social assistance, social insurance and universal income supports, generating a more 'mixed', 'hybrid' or 'mongrel' welfare state,⁴⁴ where income support was originally less generous than the UK. Organised as a strong male breadwinner tax and welfare model,⁴⁵ the pressure associated with 1970s feminist mobilisation combined with reforms oriented at European Community membership to modify the male breadwinner system

⁴⁰ Ó hAdhmaill, 'Ireland and the global economic crisis'; Christina Beatty and Stephen Fothergill, *The impact of welfare reform on Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 2013), 20. Legislation to establish UC in Northern Ireland emerged in May 2016 (three years after Great Britain), with specific features which reflected resistance to aspects of UK government social security policy. The devolved system was used to address concerns, some of which were specific to Northern Ireland (higher levels of social housing under-occupancy, lack of smaller properties and an ethno-religious segregated stock, relatively high levels of disability, particularly in mental health, and higher levels of economic inactivity).

⁴¹ Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group (2016), *Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report* (Belfast, 2016), available at: <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofindfm/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report.pdf> (20 May 2021).

⁴² Fitzpatrick and O'Sullivan, 'Comparing social security provision north and south of Ireland'.

⁴³ Fiona Dukelow and Mary P. Murphy, 'Introduction', in Murphy and Dukelow, *The Irish welfare state in the 21st century: challenges and changes* (Basingstoke, 2016).

⁴⁴ NESC, *The Future of the Irish Social Welfare System* (2020).

⁴⁵ Mary P. Murphy, 'Ode to an invisible woman: the story of qualified adults and partners in Ireland', *Irish Journal of Sociology* 26 (1) (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0791603516629088>.

through a range of gender equality-oriented reforms. However, significant male breadwinner legacies remain in the Irish tax and welfare system.

Like in the UK, recession in the late 1970s and early 1980s led to deep cuts in already poor provision of health and social housing. While less embroiled in early Thatcher ideology and cuts, the 1992 budget retrenched entitlement and eligibility conditions for social assistance and insurance payments, marking a deterioration of the difference between insurance and assistance payments and, as occurred in the UK, a shift to a more mixed system with more means testing. The ‘Celtic Tiger’ period of the late 1990s and early 2000s was one of catch up, with new policies on benchmarking and indexation leading to significant increases in the generosity of payments, where the once underdeveloped Irish welfare state outperformed the UK welfare state in welfare generosity. This was abruptly interrupted in 2008 by the global financial crisis and subsequent austerity regime, under which eligibility and entitlement were again eroded and adult and child payments were cut in real terms.⁴⁶ A core challenge is managing the distributive outcomes of Ireland’s model of welfare capitalism and high levels of market income inequality in the Irish labour market. Post-austerity, recovery saw some (re)investment in public services and some welfare cut reversals to child-related income supports. However, the long-term underdevelopment of public services leads to a combination of costly subsidies and tax reliefs to enable the purchase of private market services (in pensions, care, housing, education and health), with Micheal Collins⁴⁷ estimating in 2020 that the state spent €15.8bn a year on such ‘discretionary’ tax expenditures. This is not only costly and inefficient, but the absence of public services also creates structural barriers for those transitioning from welfare to work.

The political economy of welfare and work, north and south

Policy transfer and convergence is easiest in the context of ‘institutional fit’. Both the Irish and UK welfare regimes’ working age social rights have always been contingent on conditionality to seek and accept reasonable offers of employment, but historically such conditions were administered in relatively passive fashion.⁴⁸ The administrations have also experienced low levels of

⁴⁶ Murphy and Dukelow, ‘Introduction’.

⁴⁷ *Irish Times*, ‘State spends €15.8bn a year on “discretionary” tax expenditures’, 24 June 2021.

⁴⁸ Mike Tomlinson, ‘Risking peace in the “war against the poor”? Social exclusion and the legacies of the Northern Ireland conflict’, *Critical Social Policy* 36 (1) (2016), 104–23.

employment, while long-term unemployment has been a stubborn feature, and above the EU average in Northern Ireland (particularly amongst males, and associated with a low level of educational attainment).⁴⁹ Both jurisdictions struggled with high levels of youth unemployment after the economic crisis, and youth unemployment will again be a significant post-pandemic challenge.⁵⁰

From the 1980s, high levels of unemployment and ideological shifts promoted a new focus on active labour market policy. By the 2000s there was a strong consensus within the EU and OECD that income support should support labour market participation and macro-objectives of high levels of employment (70–80 per cent). Both jurisdictions have followed broadly similar activation strategies, merging income supports and public employment services, introducing a wider range of job-seeking conditions and marketising services for the unemployed. However, where the UK lead with early and strong versions of marketised ‘work-first’ reforms, Ireland followed with later and lesser versions of the work-first model, tending towards a more supportive version of conditionality, with less implementation of sanctions. Northern Ireland also differs from the UK, with less focus on sanctions and conditionality,⁵¹ and a stronger ‘culture of supporting people’ in Northern Ireland than the rest of the UK; a welfare culture and politics that perhaps resonates more with Ireland than the UK. While the UK evolved a ‘provider-directed’ activation market, the activation market structure in Northern Ireland, up to late 2014, was better characterised as ‘state directed’, albeit it has more recently reconfigured into a modified convergence on the UK’s approach.⁵² Ireland is still predominantly state directed, albeit it is procuring more and more public employment services.⁵³

The Northern Irish political economy is characterised by a high percentage of public sector employment alongside a high degree of low-paid employment. The structural architecture of the Northern Ireland welfare state, and its intersection with the lowest paid regional labour market in the UK, mirrors

⁴⁹ NERI, *Quarterly Economic Observer Winter 2015: Tax credits and the National Living Wage in Northern Ireland*, available at: <https://www.nerinstitute.net/research/quarterly-economic-observer-winter-2015-tax-credits-and-national-living-wage-northern> (5 August 2021).

⁵⁰ Department of Social Protection, *Pathways to Work 2021–2025*.

⁵¹ Scope NI, ‘Welfare sanctions in NI: the facts’, available at: <https://scopeni.nicva.org/article/welfare-sanctions-in-ni-the-facts> (5 August 2021).

⁵² Jay Wiggan, ‘Varieties of marketisation in the UK: examining divergence in activation markets between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 2008–2014’, *Policy Studies* 36 (2) (2015), 115–32.

⁵³ Department of Social Protection, *Pathways to Work 2021–2025*.

strong geographical internal patterns of material deprivation, where 16 of the 20 most deprived areas are found in nationalist areas, including north and west Belfast, but where some loyalist dominated areas are also characterised by acute deprivation. Consequently, both early austerity and the post-2016 Conservative party-led era of welfare reforms had a particular geographical pattern,⁵⁴ hitting hardest amongst marginalised working-class populations across the sectarian divide, including women, particularly lone parents.⁵⁵ There has been little decline in the region's level of employment participation, with Northern Ireland characterised by high levels of 'economic inactivity' and/or disability. This, rather than unemployment, characterised much of Northern Ireland's poverty, with a strong legacy of physical and mental illness (with almost 10% registered as disabled for social security purposes, compared to 5% in the rest of the UK).⁵⁶ Those registered unemployed are likely to have poorer educational levels (particularly acute among Protestant men) and low skills, as well as poor employment prospects in a low waged economy. In this context, 10% earned less than the minimum wage of £8.50 per hour and one in four earned less than the living wage of £9.50 per hour.⁵⁷ So, while Northern Ireland had very low formal unemployment pre-COVID, over 25% of working aged people were on benefits, with these benefits often subsidising low wages.

An austerity legacy in Ireland saw a shift in 2012 to a labour market activation policy, *Pathways to Work*,⁵⁸ which included a series of institutional reforms that anchored a (relatively modest) Irish version of conditionality, alongside cuts to a range of welfare payments which, reflecting a similar UK policy shift in the late 1980s, halved job-seekers' payment for under 25-year olds and imposed more labour market obligations on lone parents.⁵⁹ The new activation regime⁶⁰ increasingly marketised employment services. Activation was 'careless', mirroring the male breadwinner regime. Under *Pathways to Work*, activation policy, unlike in the UK, has not been extended to all

⁵⁴ Northern Ireland Audit Office, *Welfare Reforms in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 2019).

⁵⁵ NICVA, 'Cliff Edge NI Coalition Submission to the Joint Inquiry into Welfare Policy in Northern Ireland: what are the main points?' (2019).

⁵⁶ Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), *Welfare Reforms in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 2019), 1.

⁵⁷ NERI, *NERI Report Series No 3: The Coronavirus Economy and Response* (2020).

⁵⁸ Department of Social Protection, *Pathways to Work 2016–2020*, available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/5b410e-pathways-to-work-2016/> (5 August 2021).

⁵⁹ Jay Wiggan, 'What variety of employment service quasi-market?'

⁶⁰ Micheal L. Collins and Mary. P. Murphy, 'Activation for what? Employment or a low-pay economy', in Murphy and Dukelow (eds), *The Irish welfare state in the 21st century*.

working-aged claimants. Carers, some lone parents and people with disabilities remain largely protected from conditionality, but also largely excluded from related active labour market supports.

The political economy of work and welfare in Ireland has dramatically changed over recent decades, with periods of high unemployment and full employment, albeit with relatively low levels of employment participation. The most deprived and affluent electoral divisions have been set out on a county-by-county basis in Pobal's deprivation index.⁶¹ Affluence disparities continue to be most stark in large urban areas, with the greatest gap in Dublin. Beyond urban cities, the extremes are less pronounced but the poorest areas in many counties are around rural towns of between 1,000 and 5,000 people. Alongside a well-paid international exporting economy and a public sector economy we see a low-paid small-to-medium domestic services economy with up to one quarter of full-time workers and one third of all workers low paid, with women, migrants and young people being particularly vulnerable in this regard. Ireland, however, has seen considerable shifts in both the sectoral composition of the workforce and in the institutional architecture underpinning the labour market. We see occupational upgrading alongside low pay, low-learning traps⁶² and continued segregation in dual labour markets. This has particularly gendered impacts: women, and increasingly migrant women, shoulder the burden of care.

Both Ireland and Northern Ireland appear equally challenged in different ways to tackle the reality of embedded labour market polarisation associated with low pay and low skills.⁶³ In turn associated with underinvestment in targeted groups, including young people (NEETS)⁶⁴ and lone parents, this reflects limited success in addressing class-based educational inequality and spatial concentrations of poverty and inequality.⁶⁵ In both Ireland and Northern Ireland, a key challenge for social cohesion is addressing low learning, low pay, precarity traps⁶⁶ and high unemployment rates in certain areas and communities (reaching 80 per cent for the Traveller community). Strong domestic institutions, national and local, with capacity for policy

⁶¹ *Irish Times*, 'Heightened rural poverty around small towns laid bare', 9 November 2017.

⁶² Seán Ó Riain, 'Ireland's low learning trap', *Administration* 65 (4) (2017), 31–38.

⁶³ Gunsen Russell, Chris Murray and Ian Williamson, *The skills system in Northern Ireland: challenges and opportunities* (Edinburgh, 2018).

⁶⁴ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Poverty in Northern Ireland 2018* (York, 2018).

⁶⁵ Gabi Kent, 'Shattering the silence: the power of "purposeful storytelling" in challenging social security policy discourses of "blame and shame" in Northern Ireland', *Critical Social Policy* 36 (1) (2016), 124–41.

⁶⁶ Alicja Bobek, Sinead Pembroke and James Wickham, *Living with Uncertainty: The Social Implications of Precarious Work* (FEPS [Brussels] and TASC [Dublin] 2018).

coordination and learning, are needed in the face of constant change. A strong Public Employment Service is needed to increase the productive capacity of the indigenous sector. A clear compass point is needed for policies to address male breadwinner legacies and develop a ‘careful’ rather than a ‘careless’ welfare state,⁶⁷ in particular, support for lone parents. Re-imagining income support, conditionality and care may offer a point of creative convergence for Northern Ireland and Ireland, and could focus knowledge mobilisation concerning future political economy challenges, north and south.

Pandemic divergence

The UK and Ireland both responded to the early onset of the pandemic by supporting incomes but placed emphasis on different types of policy instruments to both support job retention and to deliver job loss income supports. Examining the role of UC in the UK’s pandemic income support response usefully illustrates this key point of divergence between the two regimes, where the UK’s majoritarian culture and stronger political commitment to neoliberalism is reflected in UK pandemic-related income support policy choices, while Ireland’s more consensus-oriented political culture innovated a more generous income support response.⁶⁸

The UK introduced the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (‘furlough’), a relatively generous instrument paying 80% of employee wages up to £2,500 per month (95,000 people in Northern Ireland utilised this payment). However, those not furloughed had to rely on the less generous UC (enhanced by £20 per week to £96 per week). Ireland created a new individualised €350 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) for those who lost work as a result of lockdown; this compared to €203 per week core welfare rates. The equivalent of the UK furlough scheme to retain workers was Ireland’s Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, paying between 70 and 80% of the previous income. Both countries aimed to be more generous to middle-income workers for whom existing flat-rate payments were deemed inadequate, but their different approaches reflect differences in the policy legacies and political institutions in Ireland and the UK. UC, already part of the Northern Ireland and UK pre-pandemic regime, was the preferred but inadequate social security instrument,⁶⁹ while Ireland responded to the inadequacy of

⁶⁷ Mary P. Murphy, *Careless to Careful Activation: Making Activation Work for Women* (Dublin, National Women’s Council of Ireland, 2012).

⁶⁸ Hick and Murphy, ‘Common stock, different paths?’

⁶⁹ Simpson ‘The social security response to COVID-19’.

mainstream welfare by introducing the PUP, a more generous rate and with more administrative ease. Seen negatively, this comparison highlights the difficulty of convergence in a context of the strong path dependency of welfare architecture. On the other hand, the pandemic experience highlights how, in the context of disruption, new approaches can be quickly designed and implemented. Such rapid innovation suggests that disruptive or innovative forms of policy change are feasible features of public sector reform in both regimes.

COMPARING WELFARE POLICY—DECISIONS AND OUTCOMES

The welfare state in Ireland, north and south, has experienced significant convergence, not so much in terms of policy changes but in terms of outcomes and degrees of modernisation, as both became more liberal and secular. There are obvious convergence gaps in welfare generosity and headline adult welfare rates (£76 per week versus €203 per week) and in the forms of conditionality attached to cash transfers, albeit the mitigation in Northern Ireland means welfare generosity is (relatively) more reasonable than in the UK. While UK legislation concerning conditionality is essentially the same in Northern Ireland, there is a ‘lighter touch’ approach in terms of the application of benefit sanctions. The welfare state in the two parts of Ireland evolved historically under different political administrations and had different experiences of common events like the great financial crisis, austerity and marketisation.⁷⁰ Northern Ireland, for example, suffered less austerity than Ireland in the early years of the economic crisis, but then suffered more under the 2012 austerity agenda⁷¹ and the 2016 conservative regime welfare reform agenda.⁷²

Ireland has traditionally over-invested in cash transfers and under-invested in public services, and while rectifying this underinvestment is recognised as a core objective in Irish policy, public services remain limited.⁷³ These differences make it difficult to compare and assess the varied outcomes citizens experience in the different regimes, and even harder to make an assessment of whether

⁷⁰ Ó hAdhmaill, ‘Ireland and the global economic crisis’.

⁷¹ For example, new disability payments were less generous than the previous while mitigations only applied to existing but not new claimants.

⁷² Ó hAdhmaill, ‘Ireland and the global economic crisis’; Chris Gilligan, ‘Austerity and consociational government in Northern Ireland,’ *Irish Studies Review* 24 (1) (2016), 35–48.

⁷³ NESCC, *The Future of the Irish Social Welfare System* (2020).

Table 1: Key indicative macro indicators, Ireland, north and south

Indicator	Northern Ireland	Ireland
Employment rate (2021)	69%	63%
Child poverty (2020)	23%	21.1%
Gender pay gap (2018)	8.7	14.2
Inflation (2021)	1.4	.88
Basic adult payment (2021) Pandemic adult payment (2021)	£76 (€88) Upgraded UC £96 (€111)	€203 (£175.16) PuP €350 (£301)
Non pandemic unemployment (2021)	4.6	5.8
Long-term unemployment as % total unemployment (2021)	34.1%	26%
Youth unemployment (2021)	11.2%	13.85%
Minimum wage (2021)	£8.72 (€10.11)	€10.20 (£8.80)
Relative Poverty (2018)	20%	15.7%
% food poverty (2018)	16%	10%
Gini co-efficient (2018)	25	31.5
Lone parents (2021)	21.3%	25.4%

citizens might be better or worse off in one welfare state or another.⁷⁴ A significant deficit in relevant data specific to Northern Ireland hampers comparative work across Ireland and Northern Ireland / the UK, leading to significant gaps in policy learning and cross-policy fertilisation. Based on available data, Table 1 includes a range of comparative indicators, north and south.

Tax and welfare policy in Ireland is more effective in mitigating household poverty risk than in Northern Ireland / the UK. While the proportion of individuals in households at risk of poverty is high in Ireland before taxes and transfers, the efficacy of the Irish welfare model means the tax and transfer system reduces high levels of market inequality.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, 15.7% of households were experiencing deprivation in 2020 and there were ongoing deficiencies in a

⁷⁴ Nicola Yeates and Grace Kelly, 'Social security in Ireland, north and south', in *Northern Ireland Department for Social Development* (Belfast, 2002), 1–45.

⁷⁵ NESCS, *The Future of the Irish Social Welfare System* (2020).

number of areas, for example, childcare costs, chronic undersupply of housing, and spiralling rental costs.⁷⁶ Ireland's rates of poverty risk fall substantially below those of Northern Ireland after taxes and transfers have been taken into account. With a 60% poverty line, 15.9% of individuals in Ireland are at risk of relative poverty, compared to 23.8% in Northern Ireland (8.9% and 14.3% on a 50% threshold). Less generous welfare rates in Northern Ireland / the UK do not necessarily mean greater poverty in Northern Ireland over Ireland, because historically they may be compensated by public service provision. However, even in the pre-cuts era, Northern Ireland / UK welfare system rates were very low, NHS provision was marred by waiting lists, and housing provision was poor.

In practical terms, the risk of poverty (relative poverty) is higher in Northern Ireland than Ireland. A key deprivation indicator, food poverty, is almost 50 per cent higher in Northern Ireland than Ireland, leading to more frequent presence and normalisation of use of food banks in the UK system, including in Northern Ireland, where they are becoming a normal expectation for all benefit recipients and low-paid workers, an experience that diverges from practice in Ireland. At the same time, Northern Ireland is above both Ireland and the UK in terms of the indicator for income inequality, the Gini-co-efficient, largely because fewer 'super earners' live in Northern Ireland. There are substantial outcome gaps in a number of areas between Ireland and Northern Ireland, including living standards, poverty risk and opportunities for advancement through education and life-long learning, with imbalances generally favouring Ireland.⁷⁷ Northern Ireland has relatively higher rates of educational disengagement between the ages of 15 to 19, which contributes to lower rates of third-level attainment, pre-school education and life-long learning access/take-up, as well as twice the rate of early school leaving in 2018.⁷⁸

LEARNING PROCESSES

Policy transfer literature points to the importance of both 'institutional fit' and 'learning processes' as key to realising policy opportunities. Having

⁷⁶ NERI, *Economic Trends and Outlook: April 2021 update*.

⁷⁷ Adele Bergin and Seamus McGuinness, 'Who is better off? Measuring cross-border differences in living standards, opportunities and quality of life on the island of Ireland' *Irish Studies in International Affairs: ARINS* 32 (2) (2021), 143–60.

⁷⁸ Mike Tomlinson, 'How active can we get? Activation policies and labour market trends, Ireland north and south', paper to DSP/DSD Social Welfare Summer School, August 2008.

satisfied ourselves that there is sufficient institutional fit as a basis to imagine and map a new welfare imaginary or architecture, we now ask about the other two requirements for transfer and convergence; ‘learning processes’ and ‘policy opportunity’. The former we examine in this section, the latter in the last section.

While some social security scholars in Ireland see social security policy in Northern Ireland (as opposed to the UK more generally) as mostly irrelevant to larger political economy issues in a European context, others see the potential relevance of thinking about social security across the island of Ireland. There has been historical ‘social psychological resistance’⁷⁹ to joint knowledge mobilisation on the island. David Rottmann, in his 1999 review, outlines formidable obstacles to comparing problems and perspectives across the two Irelands, and a general failure to advance analysis through north/south comparison. Despite obvious potential, since 1999, with notable exceptions, there is little recent cross jurisdictional work to draw from. Mary Corcoran observes many academic networks are all-island networks, however, this has not to date been a catalyst for comparative research.⁸⁰ The complicated nature of social security, where ‘the devil is in the detail’, and where there is a lack of specific Northern Irish social security data, means we should avoid focusing learning on processes of comparative analysis that trap us in the narcissism of small differences. Rather, the focus should be on the big picture and the political economy.

Anthony Heath, Richard Breen and Christopher Whelan argue the focus of joint analysis is not academic but is about the prospects for Ireland’s future. The job of knowledge creation is, they argue, not to offer detailed blueprints for the future, but some understanding of the context and constraints within which decisions will be made.⁸¹ The key for lesson drawing, they argue, is to find frameworks for developing complementary forms of income support and progressive tax systems that enable collective sustainability.⁸²

⁷⁹ David Rottmann, ‘Problems of and prospects for comparing the two Irelands’, in Heath *et al.*, *Ireland, north and south*, 20.

⁸⁰ Mary P. Corcoran, ‘Sociology in Ireland: some random reflections’, *Irish Journal of Sociology*, published online 5 July 2021, doi: 10.1177/07916035211029842.

⁸¹ Heath *et al.*, *Ireland, north and south*.

⁸² Mary P. Murphy and Michael McGann, ‘Reconfiguring welfare in an eco-social state: participation income and universal services’, *Social Europe*, 29 May 2020, available at: <https://www.socialeurope.eu/reconfiguring-welfare-in-an-eco-social-state-participation-income-and-universal-services> (5 August 2021).

Promoting convergence in welfare policy will require considerable societal and political entrepreneurship and creative use of new participative and deliberative institutions and processes that widen and deepen democracy. Knowledge mobilisation necessitates dialogical interaction and knowledge linkage exchange whereby knowledge creators and consumers interact to transform knowledge in both research and practice.⁸³ A clear necessary objective of knowledge mobilisation is to identify a direction of travel of the island of Ireland that leads towards a sustainable future, one which values and enables maximum social and economic participation, and leaves no one behind. A focus should be on key welfare institutions and how universal basic services can be augmented with forms of income support (social security, tax and transfers) that reward reciprocal forms of participation and care, and provide a basis for a new reciprocal citizenship.

While social security is not a formal 1998 cross-border theme, there has been administrative cross-border collaboration between administrative departments, and between some GFI institutions, for example in human rights (IHREC and NIHRC)⁸⁴ and equality (IHREC and NIEA). Since 2000 a north/south Social Welfare Summer School has hosted parallel cohorts of mid-grade civil servants from relevant social security departments and provided a forum for more senior policy-oriented civil servants to informally meet and reflect on common policy challenges in both jurisdictions. A commonwealth social security working group also provides a focal point for English speaking social security policy discussion (including Irish participation), while institutional spaces have evolved through the OECD and the International Social Security Association, and up to recently the European Union. An all-island welfare research programme could establish a common agenda between the two jurisdictions and also enable policy transfer opportunity and learning. Various models exist, including the long-established Institute for Public Health. The Irish government's NESC report on the *Future of Social Welfare in Ireland* includes individualisation, social insurance and participation income as well as investment in public services as vehicles to address future challenges. While there is no equivalent Northern Irish policy document, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) *Cumulative Impact Assessment*

⁸³ Nicolas Andersen, Dorte Caswell and Fleming Larsen, 'A new approach to helping the hard-to-place unemployed: the promise of developing new knowledge in an interactive and collaborative process', *European Journal of Social Security* 19 (4) (2017), 335–52.

⁸⁴ Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), *Cumulative Impact Assessment (CIA) of NI Tax and Social Security* (Belfast, 2019).

(CIA) of Northern Irish Tax and Social Security (2019), and its equivalent 2018 UK report,⁸⁵ focus on how to mitigate impacts of the 2012 UC reform and the 2016 Welfare Reform agenda, offering reform signposts.

In defining a learning agenda, both regimes can anticipate significant labour market restructuring, as economies and societies adjust to not only the impact of the pandemic but also future automation and climate related changes.⁸⁶ Negotiating these new social risks will require that the state facilitates the greater agility and agency of all citizens. Enabling institutions will be key, as will policies that enable maximum social and economic participation and cohesion across the island. These challenges set the compass on a mutual direction of travel for working age activation and social security policy, north and south. Solidarity and political or ecological sustainability will not be built on a welfare state for the poor, but one that offers a shared point or the ‘roots’ of citizenship.⁸⁷

WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

Finally, we examine windows of opportunity beyond those related to constitutional change in Northern Ireland. One overlooked consequence of Brexit will be the anomalous position of Ireland as the only Anglo-Saxon or English-speaking welfare regime in the EU. This offers a theoretical and practical opportunity to re-imagine Ireland’s welfare regime and to build on its hybridity, using this as an advantage and repositioning itself near the Nordic model. Northern Ireland is a jurisdiction in flux.⁸⁸ The post-Brexit environment offers a particular context or policy opportunity with potential implications for British devolution and constitutional questions about the future direction of

⁸⁵ Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), *Cumulative Impact Assessment (CIA) of tax and welfare reforms* (London, 2018).

⁸⁶ Shared Island Dialogues, ‘Environment and Climate: addressing shared challenges on the island’, see: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3eb3c-shared-island-dialogues/#environment-and-climate-addressing-shared-challenges-on-the-island> (5 November 2021).

⁸⁷ Simon Duffy, ‘The need for roots’, in John O’Brien and Simon Duffy (eds), *Citizenship and the Welfare State* (Sheffield Centre for Welfare Reform, 2016), see: <https://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/uploads/attachment/487/citizenship-and-the-welfare-state.pdf>; Fiona Dukelow, ‘From social exclusion to social inclusion? Tracing the historical development of social citizenship in the north and south of Ireland’, *Administration* 50 (2) (2002), 41–66.

⁸⁸ Colin Coulter, ‘Under which constitutional arrangement would you still prefer to be unemployed? Neoliberalism, the peace process, and the politics of class in Northern Ireland’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37 (9) (2014), 763–76.

the island of Ireland. In this context, there is already debate and action concerning devolved welfare policy choices facing Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland,⁸⁹ and these challenges remain regardless of constitutional opinions or developments on the island or in the wider United Kingdom.

A future challenge to the sustainability and capacity of Ireland's welfare regime, Northern Ireland and Ireland, lies in the changing nature of work in the context of both the digital economy and climate justice. This will require disruptive transition, adaptation and carbon reduction mitigation policies. This scale of transformation may well offer opportunity for convergence.⁹⁰ New forms of work, including new forms of remote work, and particularly digital work, fudge distinctions between paid and unpaid work, bringing new social risks but also possibilities for supporting and valuing new and existing forms of participation outside the formal paid labour market, while using social security income to support such participation. The most formidable challenge facing both Irish and Northern Irish welfare regimes is the climate crisis. A welfare imaginary could visualise a future trajectory, where the best path for sustainable welfare policy focuses on underlying universal basic (public) services and a more enabling income support—in the form of a guaranteed basic income, for example a Participation Income.⁹¹

CONCLUSION

While there has been significant change over the past two decades, it is likely that given the nature of the challenges ahead, the next two decades will herald an intensification of change in Ireland, north and south. Neither state offers a model to the other, but both offer points of departure for the shared journey of disruptive policy change that may lead towards greater convergence. A shared research pathway can advance debate on options for welfare reform and convergence, including research on underlying values, gender and care. A particular focus, in the context of sustainable development goals, could be on

⁸⁹ Wiggan, 'Contesting the austerity'.

⁹⁰ NERI, *Economic Trends and Outlook: April 2021 update*.

⁹¹ Mary P. Murphy and Michael McGann, 'Reconfiguring welfare in an eco-social state: participation income and universal services', *Social Europe*, 29 May 2020, available at: <https://www.socialeurope.eu/reconfiguring-welfare-in-an-eco-social-state-participation-income-and-universal-services> (5 August 2021). In 2020 the National Economic and Social Council recommend a Participation Income pilot and the 2002 Programme for Government commits to a Universal Basic Income pilot. A 2021 pilot income guarantee pilot for artists and cultural workers may prove to be a disruptive reform.

‘leaving no one behind’ with special attention on, for example, Travellers and lone parents. Policy evolution will require policy transfer in both directions, but while there are challenges of ‘institutional fit’ there also mismatches. To take advantage of ‘policy opportunities’, it is crucial to develop ‘learning processes’ that do not seek to emulate liberal welfare policy but, like Scotland, look towards Nordic social democratic and universal models of welfare states. The process of such exploration is important. Democratic conversations offer opportunity for communicative discourse associated with more transformative change. The author’s hope is this paper contributes to our collective learning, where an all-island social security ‘laboratory of democracy’⁹² could feed our political welfare imaginaries with progressive policy ideas.

This comparative assessment is hampered by data limitations; nonetheless, we finish with some tentative conclusions. Notwithstanding obvious and more hidden differences, there is a significant institutional fit that is close enough to allow for policy convergence. The context of Northern Irish devolution gives some scope for manoeuvre and could allow for a similar vision and approach to welfare reform and imaginary as has happened in Scotland and is beginning to emerge in Wales. The policy planning systems, including social dialogue mechanisms in Ireland, could begin to automatically include north/south comparisons in their analysis, so that a north/south dimension to policy planning could be embedded in Irish policy thinking, and vice versa. The starting point should build on the Irish NESC report on the *Future of Social Welfare in Ireland* and the recent *Pathways to Work 2021–2025*, and the analysis of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) *Cumulative Impact Assessment (CIA) of Northern Irish Tax and Social Security* (2019). All offer reform signposts to determine what should come next.

The constitutional future of the island is not the only window of opportunity, there are also likely shifts in social policy as a result of political economy challenges including automation; indeed climate change is already the focus of discussion in key forums, north and south. The welfare regime offers a core anchoring institution and mechanism to realise an inclusive citizenship. Strong institutions can support norms of equality and reinforce social contracts based on solidarity, while shared public services can offer crucial unifying points of experience. Knowledge mobilisation can ensure welfare institutions contribute to a dynamic where communities lead the way towards

⁹² Simpson ‘The social security response to COVID-19’.

local, political, financial and ecological sustainability. Enabling institutions need to capacitate citizens to navigate new and old social risks, and to maximise their opportunity to live flourishing lives. Negotiating this change will be challenging but mutual compass points exist and offer a way forward that nurtures the underlying political solidarity of society.