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4 November 1983

The Secretary
The New Ireland Forum
53 Merrion Square
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Dear Sir

Would you please present to the New Ireland Forum the enclosed manuscript about the religious composition of the population of Northern Ireland in 1981. It represents a careful appraisal of the position and is part of a paper that will be read at a conference organised by the British Psychological Society on Health and Vulnerability in Northern Ireland, at Q.U.B. on 1st December 1983

Yours faithfully

Paul A. Compton

Dr P A Compton

Enc.

Religious Composition

The trends in the religious composition of the population can be reliably charted from census data up to 1961. These show the proportion of Roman Catholics falling quite sharply during the last third of the 19th century and the first two decades of this century, but bottoming out at 33.5 per cent in 1926 and 1937 - i.e. The Catholic proportion may never have been quite as low as a proverbial one third of the total (table) Since 1937 the direction of the trend has changed. Initially the subsequent rise in the Catholic proportion was quite slow and the proportion was still less than 35 per cent of the total in 1961, but over the following decade a sharp acceleration in the relative rate of change occurred and by 1971 the Catholic proportion had reached an estimated 36.8 per cent.

The term estimated is used quite intentionally because the 1971 value has been arrived at by apportioning the 9 per cent of the population who refused to answer the question on religion to one or other of the main persuasions. The pattern of variation in the non-response rate was, however, such that the apportionment could be undertaken with some confidence and the estimate is considered reliable. The sharp rise in the proportion between 1961 and 1971 came about because Roman Catholic numbers grew at about twice the rate of the non-Roman Catholic population mainly due to the very high Catholic birthrate and rate of natural increase of the 1960s.

The position in 1981 with regard to non-response was much more serious. and some 275,000 individuals refused to state their denomination, that is 18.5 per cent of the enumerated population.

In addition, there is the even more problematic question of the size of the non-enumerated population together with their denomination. For an

Table

The Population of Northern Ireland by Religious
Composition 1861-1981

Year	Roman Catholics		Non-Roman Catholics	
	Number	Per Cent	Number	Per Cent
1861	571,690	40.9	824,763	59.1
1881	495,559	38.0	809,257	62.0
1901	430,390	34.8	806,562	65.2
1911	430,161	34.4	820,370	65.6
1926	420,428	33.5	836,133	66.5
1937	428,290	33.5	851,455	66.5
1951	471,460	34.4	899,461	65.6
1961	497,547	34.9	927,495	65.1
1971*	562,000	36.8	965,000	63.2
1981**	583,000	38.0	951,000	62.0

* Confident estimate

** Estimate

appraisal of the situation in 1981 let us start with the population enumerated at the 1981 census broken down by religious persuasion as follows :

Roman Catholics	414,532
Non-Roman Catholics	792,843
Not stated	274,584
Others	6,118
	<hr/>
	1,488,077
	<hr/>

Explain

Unlike 1971, it is clear from the 1981 pattern of non-response, that at least as many Protestants refused to record their denomination as Roman Catholics. If we further assume that the entire non-enumerated population were Roman Catholic and that the best estimate of the non-enumerated population is 45,000 it follows that the Roman Catholic population in 1981 numbered around 595,000 or 38.9 per cent of the total. But since it is unlikely that all the non-enumerated population were Roman Catholics this value very probably overstates the true proportion.

? 57,000
+ 19,000
= 76,000

A second way of estimating the religious breakdown in 1981 is to approach the question via the population dynamics of the 1970s, and for this we need denominational estimates of natural increase and net emigration. Natural increase for 1971-81 can be fairly reliably established. The denominational birth rates can be obtained by combining the evidence from Catholic baptismal records with extrapolation forward from the 1960s. The number of deaths is best determined by assuming identical age specific death rates for Protestants and Roman Catholics applying these to the respective age distributions in 1971, and adjusting the values as to equal the total number of deaths occurring in Northern Ireland from 1971

to 1981. The most likely error engendered by this procedure is an understatement of the number of deaths to Roman Catholics because of their somewhat lower aggregate social class structure. Studies from Great Britain have shown that a strong inverse relationship exists between mortality and social class which we would expect also to hold in Northern Ireland. However, we do not have data from which to determine the magnitude of any mortality differential by religion - hence the assumption of identical age specific death rates.

The net migration assumption is that the denominational pattern of net outflow observed during the 1960s continued unchanged up to 1981. This means apportioning the net out migration of 109,000 associated with out estimate of total population of 1,533,000 for 1981 in the ratio 60 per cent Roman Catholic (i.e. 165,000) and 40 per cent non-Roman Catholic (ie 44,000). There are a number of reasons for thinking this to be a realistic assumption. Firstly, the bulk of out migration between 1971 and 1981 occurred before 1976, and in considerable part was stimulated by the Troubles. Secondly, there is strong circumstantial evidence of a significant net movement of people from Northern Ireland to the Irish Republic.¹ Thirdly, the first half of the 1970s was a period when labour migration was still comparatively easy. All three factors are considered to have been greater generators of Catholic than Protestant out-movement. In addition, a higher proportion of the Catholic population lies within the age range when geographical mobility is most likely to occur. In more recent years the proportion of Protestants within the net outmigration stream fringe maywell have risen, but because these have also been years of substantially lower rates of net outflow, we do not regard this as a reason to change our judgement as to the overall balance of net out migration

1. Labour force surveys in the Irish Republic suggest that this flow was of the order of 20-25,000 between 1971 and 1981. (Figure quoted in 'Forum report sets out costs of violence in North', Irish Times, November 4th, 1983).

during the last intercensal period as a whole. The calculation based on the above values of natural increase and net migration is as follows.

	<u>Roman Catholics</u>	<u>non-Roman Catholics</u>
1971 estimate	562,000	965,000
Natural increase 1971-81	78,000	30,000
Net migration 1971-81	-36,000 -65,000	-35,000 -44,000
1981 estimate	575,000	951,000
Others	-	7,000
Per cent breakdown 1981	37.5	62.5

The two separate calculations yield figures that are reasonably close to each other and would seem to point to a value of around 38 per cent as the best estimate of the Roman Catholics proportion of the Northern Ireland population at the time of the 1981 census. This value is of course, only as good as the assumptions on which it rests and may need revision if additional evidence becomes available suggesting modification of the net migration assumptions, or modification of the apportionment of the non-respondents to the question of religion, or modification of our estimate of the Northern Ireland population in 1981.

We are aware that the Catholic proportion in 1981 has been placed as high as 42.5 per cent in some quarters. These higher values are based on Roman Catholic diocesan records of Church membership which purport to show a Roman Catholic population of 620 - 640,000.

To our knowledge, however, the reliability of these records has not been established. Problems clearly arise from the fact that dioceses and

130,000
 57,000
 73,000

even parishes straddle the border between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. Migration both within and outside Northern Ireland could also lead to individuals being on the records of more than one diocese or parish at any given time. Moreover, the dynamics associated with an estimate of 42.5 per cent Catholics in 1981 produce such highly implausible net migration values that on this ground alone justify its rejection - i.e. a net inflow of 12,000 Catholics to Northern Ireland and net out migration of 114,000 Protestants viz.

602,000
 57,000
 659,000
 102
 73
 27

1995
 44
 881

652
 881
 1523
 1478

	Roman Catholics	non-Roman Catholic	
1971 estimate	562,000	965,000	603,000
Natural increase 1971-81	78,000	30,000	959,000
Net migration	12,000	-114,000	1562,000
1981 estimate	652,000	881,000	1603
per cent	42.5	57.5	= 38.6%

Say migration split evenly
 73,000
 estimate

-37,000
 603,000

-36,000
 959,000

There is no evidence of a mass exodus of Protestants during the 1970s, and certainly no evidence of an influx of Roman Catholics. Even an estimate that 40 per cent of the Northern Ireland population in 1981 was made up of Roman Catholics, produces what seems a suspiciously low and high level of Catholic and non-Catholic out migration respectively viz.

	Roman Catholics	non-Roman Catholic	
1971 estimate	562,000	965,000	
Natural increase 1971-81	78,000	30,000	
Net migration 1971-81	-27,000	-75,000	= 102,000
1981 estimate	613,000	920,000	1562
per cent	40.0	60.0	39.4%

Say 73,000 split 2:1 Prot-Cath

-25,000

-48,000

102,000
 1562 high

In conclusion, the various strands of reasonably reliable evidence all point to the Northern Ireland population being made up of circa 38 per cent Roman Catholics and circa 62 per cent non-Roman Catholics in 1981. But at the same time, because of a higher ratio of under 18 year olds, the Roman Catholic proportion of the Northern Ireland electorate probably amounts to no more than 34-35 per cent of the total. If the post-Second World War trend is maintained, a Roman Catholic majority would eventually emerge but not until well into the next century. The time scale involved is so long, however, that this outcome is far from inevitable. Movement in the Catholic birth rate is the crucial factor here and if it falls to the general level displayed by other European Catholic Countries, as seems highly likely, a Roman Catholic majority may never emerge in Northern Ireland.