

A Lesson from Fair Employment

Experience gained in advancing fairness and equity in the workplace could be more widely applicable in Northern Ireland to counter the effects of division and promote mutual understanding, respect and, ultimately a greater sense of common ownership of the North.

The creation of many more shared and more balanced, in terms of Catholic and Protestant representation, workforces is one of the most significant achievements of the campaign for fair employment over the past thirty years. As a result shared workplaces are now a common experience for tens of thousands of people in both the public and private sectors.

The number of private sector companies with highly segregated workforces is in decline as firms increase the representation of the community previously underrepresented. There is still a distance to go before more balanced workforces are the norm. But the important thing is that the trend is in the right direction and shows no sign of going into reverse.

In the public sector overall representation for both Catholics and Protestants is almost in balance with the population. While there are particular pockets of imbalance, some quite large, the present situation means that for thousands of public servants a shared and balanced workplace is increasingly more likely than not.

The creation of shared workplaces is a product of several factors, not just of the fair employment initiatives. The decline of the old industries, many predominantly male and Protestant, their replacement with new enterprises requiring different skills, a growth in the public sector, better educational opportunities for the Catholic community, have all contributed to labour market changes. So too has a trade union movement determined to keep sectarianism out of the workplace.

Fair employment legislation contributed with legally enforceable recruitment and appointment procedures; with close monitoring of workforce composition to identify imbalance and trigger affirmative action; with an investigative and judicial process for dealing with cases of alleged discrimination and with employer agreements setting out commitments to implementing fair employment practices.

Fair employment legislation also extended itself to practices affecting conditions in workplaces such as the display of flags and other emblems peculiar to one tradition or the other. Workers could not be deemed to enjoy equality if they were to feel 'outsiders' because other workers were permitted to freely display emblems of their political affiliation. The 'neutrality' of the workplace came to be seen as an essential to guaranteeing fair employment opportunities. Otherwise some workers could feel intimidated, leave or not even apply – situations that frequently persisted in the past.

The emergence of shared workplaces is in marked contrast to the ghettoisation evident in so many other aspects of life in Northern Ireland. It is this contrast which prompts the question about the lessons to be learned.

Residential segregation, for example, is increasing. At constituency level where I have more than twenty-five years of experience, villages and distinct parts of towns have become, or are becoming, more and more mono-cultural, i.e. almost exclusively Catholic or Protestant. While residential segregation has been evident in the North for many generations, its intensification was not expected in the years since the ceasefires.

Such segregation reinforces those other factors that keep people in Northern Ireland apart – education, religion, politics, and recreation. The inevitable result is the parallel worlds in which many people live, worlds where stereotypes are more likely than not to be reinforced.

Breaking down the cumulative and negative effects of these parallel worlds has taxed many minds over the past thirty years. But notwithstanding the initiatives taken division persists, sectarianism and, more recently, racism continue to find expression.

What lessons can be drawn from the emergence of shared and, for the most part, peaceful workplaces

It is that more balanced workforces mean that workplaces are now the most important shared space for individuals from our two main communities. At a time when in so many other respects there are tendencies keeping Protestant and Catholic apart - where we choose to live, our choice of recreational activities, the schools in which we are educated, the professionals we choose for the services we need - doctors, lawyers etc.- shared workplaces are critical to our future if we want to develop any sense of shared ownership of Northern Ireland, the North or whatever we choose to call this place.

Indeed, not only do many people experience institutional forms of segregation but they frequently further mark this division by the professional services sought. The doctors, the dentists, the lawyers, the undertakers etc. are often chosen not just because of the quality of service they provide, but also because they are 'our own'.

Some of the newspapers read in these parallel worlds do little more than mirror those, highlighting what is 'good' about the world of their readerships and what is 'bad' about the other.