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Converge or Diverge? One Island, Two Regimes

A RESPONSE TO ‘A NEW WELFARE IMAGINARY FOR THE
ISLAND OF IRELAND’, BY MARY P. MURPHY

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In her article for *Irish Studies in International Affairs: ARINS*, titled ‘A New Welfare Imaginary for the Island of Ireland’, Professor Mary Murphy has made a significant and courageous attempt to address welfare state convergence in Northern Ireland and Ireland. I would like to focus on the core issue of models in this brief response. Murphy argues that both welfare state models, Irish and Northern Irish, are ‘broadly neoliberal in character’. This is in my view fundamentally erroneous. The National Economic and Social Council in 2005 described the Irish welfare state as ‘complex and hybrid’. That is accurate.

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In Northern Ireland a variant of the British welfare state exists, marred by a history of endemic sectarianism in housing and employment up to 1970.

In Ireland the influence of the Catholic Church continues through control of almost 90% of primary schools. Despite an official target of 400 multi-denominational schools to be achieved 2030, progress in divestment has been very slow. Professor Emer O'Toole was led to conclude in a policy critique of the Irish divestment process, published in the *Guardian* (10 April 2019), 'Ireland's attempts to secularise its schools have turned to farce'. The *Irish Examiner* (23 December 2020) reported that only one school had been divested in 2020. Segregated education is a challenge on both sides of the Irish border, dividing minds and people. It will be a major challenge to change education systems in the interests of peace.

In healthcare, Northern Ireland is part of the universalist UK National Health Service (NHS). Ireland lacks a similar framework. Sláintecare is planned but has not been implemented. Instead the news is dominated by the church-state battle for ownership of the planned new National Maternity Hospital. Forty-five per cent of the Irish population is privately insured. Clearly, there is major divergence in this policy area. In housing there is also divergence. Ireland is experiencing a major housing shortage and a very disheartening homelessness problem. Housing in Northern Ireland is also in crisis, caused by geographic segregation of communities.

Professor Murphy finds evidence of a closer fit in social security arrangements. That will be helpful in finding a fit between welfare regimes, if the island is to find convergence in social policy.

Murphy envisages what she calls the 'mobilisation' of 'an island welfare imaginary'. This is a really significant idea. But Murphy is sober in judging its possibilities and constraints in her erudite and complex analysis, which delivers on its promise. This is a considerable intellectual achievement. She correctly points out at the start of her epistolary statement that 'neither welfare state offers a model to the other, but both offer points of departure for shared journeys of disruptive policy change that could lead to greater convergence'. The 'disruption' Murphy refers to is presumably the aggressive anti-welfare state policies, pursued by the Conservative government, which are designed to recommodify the UK polity and immiserate the working class in a return to a Dickensian society, polarised between rich and poor.

The core focus of Murphy's paper is to explore 'institutional fit' between the two states on the island of Ireland and their level of coherence 'broadly defined to include policy and culture'. As we have noted above, there are major

cultural issues, due to religious divergence and a weak secular tradition in both jurisdictions, involved in any potential convergence. Decommodification is also a challenge on the island of Ireland. Poverty is a major social problem in both jurisdictions.

Historically, the Beveridgian social reforms of the 1940s and '50s changed the direction of UK social policy, drawing Northern Ireland into a more progressive policy orbit. In Ireland there was also support for a Beveridge-style welfare state. However, an alliance of the Catholic Church and the medical profession formed around resistance to the universalist philosophy of the Mother and Child scheme and brought the Inter-Party Government down in 1951. In this conflicted policy environment, the Irish government moved in an incremental fashion towards social reform. The invisible development of the Irish welfare state has led to a robust debate about its existence.¹ In reality, the welfare state has many models and variants.² Murphy expertly navigates her way through this complexity on her 'journey' towards convergence.

¹ Peadar Kirby, *Celtic Tiger in collapse: explaining the weaknesses of the Irish model* (London, 2010), 130–31.

² Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The three worlds of welfare capitalism* (Cambridge, 1990).