Establishing a New Laboratory: A Response to 'A New Welfare Imaginary for the Island of Ireland' by Mary P. Murphy

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A RESPONSE TO 'A NEW WELFARE IMAGINARY FOR THE ISLAND OF IRELAND' BY MARY P. MURPHY[1]

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As Fiona Dukelow notes elsewhere in this special issue, drawing direct comparisons between the different welfare states operating north and south of the border is a difficult task.[2] This is not only because of the different evolutionary paths taken in both jurisdictions, which render such comparisons potentially unhelpful if not counter-productive,[3] but also because of the lack of historic analysis in this specific area.

In both respects, Mary Murphy's contribution openly acknowledges these challenges, yet notes that the significance of any shared future means that this task is a necessary precursor to plotting out a new, and potentially shared, course for welfare provision on the island of Ireland.

The challenge of drawing more direct parallels within the contribution is tackled from various angles. Rather than attempting to merely place broadly comparable payments side by side, Murphy begins with the ideological underpinnings of both the Irish and Northern Irish welfare states, identifying both as falling broadly within Gøsta Esping-Anderson's 'liberal' model but noting that neither fits precisely within this; they instead arguably exist along a kind of continuum. This can then be seen in the broad evolution of both welfare states, primarily in the regressions implemented over time to make benefit receipt more conditional and restrictive, with a drive towards activation into paid employment. The Irish system, although developing over time, never experienced the kind of 'big bang' expansions as in the UK, but recessionary pressures and other policy considerations have occurred in both jurisdictions with not wholly dissimilar results.

Although at some points the Irish system may seem more generous than that of Northern Ireland, this is not always represented in terms of after-effect, in large part due to a comparable lack of investment in the south in public services and an emphasis on monetary transfers. Even focusing on and examining individual payments—such as those created or adapted to deal with the onset and subsequent fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic—is fraught with issues.[4] Thus, the decision by Murphy to examine rates of employment, child poverty, youth unemployment and other broader social trends is welcome, and paints a more complete—albeit still imperfect—picture of both jurisdictions.

Murphy argues that the present changing nature of work and the economic futures of north and south represent a window of opportunity to disrupt the existing status quo, and to move towards a new 'welfare imaginary' that would highlight a form of shared citizenship.[5] Although the author notes this is not simply built upon the existence of a more robust and responsive welfare state, it is clear that the kind of citizenship envisaged has a firmly embedded social component.

[4] Rod Hick and Mary Murphy, 'Common shock, different paths? Comparing social policy responses to Covid-19 in the UK and Ireland', *Social Policy & Administration* 55 (2) (2021), 312–25.

[5] 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.

What this particular vision would look like in a material sense is not examined in detail. Murphy refers to a potential 'laboratory of democracy' being established, as has been executed in Scotland. This calls to mind the work of Mark Simpson and others[6] who have evaluated the unique processes operating there, which diverge from the austerity narrative popularised by the Coalition and Conservative governments in the rest of the UK. The ongoing Scottish experiment also exists within the unique context of devolution, meaning that there might be an even greater opportunity for experimentation in the Irish context due to the greater legislative freedom provided to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Conversely, experimentation across two distinct jurisdictions would pose its own challenges if this were to be a joint venture.

However, Murphy is clear from the outset that providing such a roadmap is not a stated objective, and instead intends to highlight the necessity for these discussions to take place, to be more firmly embedded in discussions concerning any shared vision for the future of the island as a whole, as well as the opportunity to adopt a strongly-evidence based approach through which this could be realised. The ARINS project has allowed welfare state scholars to reflect on the challenges ahead, and to begin these discussions in earnest. That is why together, we are forming an All-Island Social Security Network (AISSN) to ensure that a socially inclusive 'welfare imaginary' is prioritised in the event of a new constitutional settlement on the island.

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[6] Mark Simpson, Gráinne McKeever and Ann Gray, 'From principles to practice: social security in the Scottish laboratory of democracy', *Journal of Social Security Law* 26 (1) (2019), 13–31.