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Challenges or Opportunities?

A RESPONSE TO ‘COMPARING SOCIAL SECURITY
PROVISION IN THE NORTH AND SOUTH OF IRELAND’
BY CIARA FITZPATRICK AND CHARLES O’SULLIVAN

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Over twenty years ago David Rottman described the ‘formidable’ challenges of doing comparative analysis between the north and south of Ireland.¹ In the intervening years that ‘formidability’ has grown, not least with the challenges and complexities of ongoing legacies of austerity and Brexit. In this context, Ciara Fitzpatrick and Charles O’Sullivan’s paper makes a very detailed and impressive contribution to charting the past developments and future challenges in comparing social security systems in both jurisdictions. As they note, there are commonalities in their trajectories, leading us to a point where neither system is a completely comfortable fit with the liberal

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¹ David Rottman, ‘Problems of, prospects for, comparing the two islands’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 98 (1999), 1–33.

welfare state model. However, it is perhaps the tensions both systems have with that model where not only challenges, but also future opportunities lie.

For sure, both systems are predominantly liberal, following their shared roots in liberal welfare developments in the UK. There is historical baggage to using the Beveridge Report as a benchmark, but over time it might be said that the UK has been saying its goodbyes to Beveridge, while in the Irish republic, developments have been characterised as a 'long hello'.² Both systems, however, still rely on a relatively minimal safety net approach with a predominance of means-tested benefits for working age adults in particular. As a consequence of that design, there is a strong propensity to demarcate 'deserving' from 'undeserving' recipients of welfare rather than focus on rights for all. Added to that, issues of poverty, inequality, low pay and precarity are particularly problematic outcomes of liberal welfare design. Issues of fiscal sustainability and the economic model underpinning both welfare states are also problematic.

Where does that leave us? As Fitzpatrick and O'Sullivan note, there is much that is left unanswered in their paper and there are many gaps that require detailed and necessary investigation beyond headline comparisons of rates of payment and entitlements in both systems. However, that is to limit comparison to a quite technical, social administrative approach. It brings us, as the authors point out, to speculative, and also risky questions of whether coming closer together would mean a levelling up or levelling down, triggering dynamics of winning and losing. For me, the normative questions raised, but unexplored, by Fitzpatrick and O'Sullivan's paper are also vital questions. They are less practical but essential in imagining and crafting a vision of a shared future. In that context we need to ask what is the role and potential of social security in that shared future? How does it foster a sense of solidarity? A sense of belonging? A sense of security? These are some of the fundamental questions of what social security is about and reflect often tacit and ambiguous norms and values that nevertheless are highly significant in shaping the nuts and bolts of a social security system, of what we owe and what we are due as citizens.

While, as suggested above, the liberal model prompts quite circumscribed answers to these questions, the fact that neither system is completely locked into the types of path dependencies suggested by the liberal model in recent

² Anthony McCashin, *Continuity and change in the welfare state: social security in the Republic of Ireland* (Palgrave, 2019).

years is an opportunity to explore how potential for a shared system could be different. There is also the fact that universalism is not a completely alien value within liberal systems.³ In that context it is notable that some developments and debates in the south are inching towards elements of greater universality and less conditionality. There is a basic income pilot in the pipeline; the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, while a temporary crisis arrangement, denotes the possibility of how a universal payment could be crafted; while the National Economic and Social Council,⁴ in its recent exploration of the future of the social protection system in the south, proposes a participation income, which would break some of the current conditionalities between work and welfare. Discussions of universal basic income and universal basic services are also being had in the UK and specifically in the north.⁵ None of these ideas are panaceas. Yet they do suggest opportunities for something more ambitious than trying to stitch two systems together in a shared island scenario. Arguably they might also have a better fit for purpose for the social, economic and environmental challenges that lie ahead.

³ Paul Spicker, 'Liberal welfare states', in Bent Greve (ed.), *The Routledge handbook of the welfare state* (Routledge, 2013), 193–201.

⁴ National Economic and Social Council, *The Future of the Irish Social Protection System: Participation and Protection* (NESC, 2020).

⁵ Belfast City Council, 'Universal Basic Income for Northern Ireland. Meeting of Remote Meeting, Council, Tuesday 1 September 2020 6.00pm (Item 9a)'. Available at: <https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=56487> (22 June 2021); T. McDonnell, 'Universal Basic Services: Debating UBS and the policy alternatives' (Nevin Economic Research Institute, 2020). Available at: <https://www.nerinstitute.net/research/universal-basic-services-debating-ubs-policy-alternatives> (22 June 2021).