

Exploding the North's employment myths

THIS book provides an illuminating, intelligent and integrated collection of essays, for which the editors deserve commendation. The book incorporates such topics as the development of fair employment legislation since 1976; the occupational profile (past and present) of Catholics and Protestants; a critical assault on the thesis that Catholics' differential employment disadvantages can be explained by demographic variables; and the politics and policy-making behind the passage of the 1989 Fair Employment Act.

There is, in addition, an essay by lawyers comparing anti-discrimination law in Northern Ireland with that in Britain. Appleby and Ellis maintain that the performance of the Fair Employment Agency compares favourably with that of the Commission for Racial Equality and the Equal Opportunities Commission. However, this is damnation by faint praise indeed.

Finally, there are contributions from Northern Ireland public officials on the impact of training

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programmes and the personal practices of the Northern Ireland civil service. The latter not only refute the stereotype of innumerate civil servants but also are refreshingly free of the inhibitions normally displayed by employed bureaucrats in print.

In Northern Ireland "it is still apparently considered respectable, even for members of the academic community, to absolve government and the majority community from blame for the condition of the minority population; and to infer that their troubles are of their own making". Thus writes David Eversley, addressing "Demography and Unemployment in Northern Ireland". He neatly refutes some of the cruder and more "sophisticated" arguments which "blame

ments which 'blame the victim'.

His chapter is bolstered by the editors' contributions, which summarise research, including their own, on the scale and causes of employment disparities between the two communities. They substantially endorse the findings of the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights and the Policy Studies Institute investigation of 1987, which attributed much of the differential unemployment between Protestants and Catholics to direct and indirect discrimination.

However, they maintain that differences in educational qualifications between Catholics and Protestants are more important in explaining differential employment opportunities than the Policy Studies Institute allowed, and that they may become even more important in future as jobs demanding science-based skills become an ever more significant component of the labour markets of the future.

These arguments are not used, as one might expect, to suggest that Catholic schools are to

blame; rather Osborne, McCormack and Gallagher maintain that Catholic schools have suffered through not receiving full capital funding, as they do in other liberal democracies, notably in the Canadian province of Ontario, and nearer to home in Scotland.

Moreover, they observe that a significant proportion of jobs in the labour market "do not require the possession of academic or academic-related qualifications for access" and that "it must be a major goal of the new fair employment legislation to ensure that those who secure academic credentials are equally able to translate those achievements into labour market success".

The most politically fascinating essay is by Christopher McCrudden, who examines the passage of the Fair Employment Act of 1989 through the Westminster parliament. The leading legal anti-discrimination specialist in the UK provides a withering criticism of the original draft of the Bill and points to serious defects in the legislation eventually passed.

However, he observes that the Act was considerably improved both through the efforts of the Labour opposition in Westminster and of the Irish government operating through the Anglo-Irish Agreement. But the key test of the new legislation will lie in whether it effectively and justly redistributes employment opportunities and positions in employment between the two communities.

The novel notion of "fair participation" — as opposed to "representative employment" — which is embedded in the Act may yet provide loopholes for recalcitrant employers, and opportunities for lawyers to make money. Let us hope that the newly forged Fair Employment Commission does not allow itself to become a paper tiger. While the gun is out on the Act and the IFG, those genuinely interested in public policy in Northern Ireland can be safely advised to start their reading here.

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