

Caught in Crossfire¹: Library “Troubles” in Northern Ireland Exacerbate Ongoing Issues

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ABSTRACT: The Government of the United Kingdom (UK) has proposed a reduction in Arts & Humanities degrees in favour of STEMM disciplines. At the same time funding for Libraries in the UK continues to decline annually. This broader context of attack and decline is now being significantly exacerbated in Northern Ireland by an “Austerity Budget”. Libraries there will be severely hit by this budget and anticipate reduced opening hours and not purchasing any new books in the coming year. This punitive budget is designed to critically weaken services in an effort to force politicians in Northern Ireland back into a Power Sharing Government. Such an attack on libraries is inappropriate, unacceptable and will have negative long-term repercussions.

Keywords: Libraries, Funding, Northern Ireland, Politics



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Library services in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, Vol. 9 (2023) pp. 180-186. Published 11 November 2022.

been under threat for many years. Despite an increase in funding during the years Tony Blair was Prime Minister (1997-2007) as leader of the Labour Party, libraries subsequently experienced static and then declining funding (MacDonald, 2012). It is important to remember that even static funding represents a decline in real terms given inflationary pressures.

At one level, unfortunately, this subsequent decline in funding is no surprise. Although Tony Blair effectively moved the traditionally left-wing Labour Party to a much more Centrist position, it retained support for public libraries. The Conservative party that has largely ruled since, however, are ever-more right-wing, opposing taxation (other than to support the monarchy, police forces, the increasingly privatized prison service (Goodwin, 2023), and to a certain extent the military) and are extremely critical of the provision of public services such as libraries. During their period in office, both absolute and net funding of public libraries has declined significantly (Kemp-Habib, 2023). CILIP, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, the professional organization that represents most librarians in the UK, has called on the Conservative Government to end their policy of “Library Austerity”, pointing out that in the decade leading up to 2020 library funding had been cut by £243m per year in real terms since 2010 (Macdonald, 2020).

Although no longer led by Margaret Thatcher, the UK’s Conservative Party retains the neo-liberal philosophy that she so clearly articulated:

[...] you know, there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families (Thatcher, 2013)

The UK’s slide to the political right has continued under the current Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak. He and his wife, Akshata Murthy, are the richest ever couple to live at 10 Downing Street, the address of the Prime Minister of the UK (Smout, 2022). Sunak’s latest attacks on public education generally have been to target what he has termed ‘rip-off’ degrees that he states are of low value (Aldrich & Gillespie, 2023). Sunak strongly supports a focus on STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Medicine and Mathematics) subjects at university, as well as increased apprenticeships in trades subjects. His approach typifies the increasing neo-liberal instrumentalist approach to higher education evident in many countries (Harley et al., 2004; Apple, 2005; Todd, 2022; Dominelli & Hoogvelt, 1996; Holmwood & Servos, 2019; Neumann & Guthrie 2002; Clark, 1998), which is distinctly at odds with more humanist (e.g. Plato & Aristotle) or emancipatory approaches to education (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Sunak’s administration claims that they are targeting low quality courses with high dropout rates and poor employment prospects (Guardian Data Blog, 2016). However, critics see such statements as either an attack on the Arts and Humanities generally (Davies, 2023), or as little more than a smoke screen designed to divert and deflect attention away from ongoing underfunding of the higher education sector generally (Williams, 2023; Aldrich & Gillespie, 2023). Sunak appears unaware of the significant contribution of the arts to the UK economy, which is estimated to be in the region of £8.5 billion annually (€9.75 billion, US\$ 10.4 billion) (Centre for Economics and Business Research, 2017).

Other critics have pointed out that any move against such courses will clearly disproportionately negatively impact students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds may struggle to both get onto university courses and may be more likely to struggle to complete them. However, cutting courses that support and facilitate access to a broader cross-section of the population is a short-sighted measure that will only serve to reinforce and exacerbate existing inequalities. Evidence demonstrates how some more modern universities that have a strong track record in widening access are crucial facilitators in supporting social mobility (Aldrich & Gillespie, 2023). These universities may have higher dropout rates, but in part this is a feature of widening access. Many students accessing courses in such universities are at the intersection of multiple dimensions of disadvantage and may be without the resources to weather storms that more advantaged students can overcome. Inequalities in accessing higher education by socio-economic status in the UK continue to rise inexorably (Department for Education, 2023).

As if these attacks on arts, libraries and education were not enough, the ongoing political situation in Northern Ireland is exacerbating problems for public libraries there. In UK terms the population of Northern Ireland is relatively small. Although the population of the UK is 67 million people, the population of Northern Ireland is just 1.9 million, which makes it almost identical to that of Idaho. The crucial issue in relation to Northern Ireland is the intense division which exists there along religious, political and national identity lines.

It is difficult to give a clear and easy to interpret history of the complex situation in Northern Ireland. However, Box One gives a simplified, albeit undoubtedly partial and subjective, description of Northern Ireland that hopefully covers key elements of its longer-term history.

Box One: An Overly Brief & Undoubtedly Subjective Overview of the Northern Ireland “Troubles”

Northern Ireland consists of six of the nine counties of the Irish Province of Ulster and currently remains part of the United Kingdom (UK). The rest of Ireland, comprised of the remaining 26 counties, broke free from the UK in 1922 following a war of independence.

The politics of Northern Ireland are largely based along the lines of religion and identity. On the one hand, for roughly 100 years the State has been dominated by its larger Protestant Christian population who are often described as Unionist or Loyalist and generally strongly support both the link with the UK and the monarchy. Many people from this ethno-religious group see themselves as loyal British citizens. The existence of this large Protestant Christian group in Northern Ireland can largely be traced back to deliberate efforts by the English throne from the late 1500s onwards to subdue and secure Ireland as one of its nearest neighbours following the reformation, England’s break with Rome, and the establishment of a Protestant Christian church with the monarch as its head.

Historically the minority population of Catholics in Northern Ireland are often referred to as (Irish) Nationalist or Republican (in the sense of Ireland being a Republic and having no monarchy). Many from this group support Northern Ireland leaving the UK and creating a united Ireland. This ethno- religious group can be traced back to the native Irish Catholic population living in Ireland before Protestant Christian plantations were established which killed, displaced and subjugated many.

From the late 1960s onwards, a civil rights movement emerged to challenge the intense sectarian inequalities and discrimination faced by Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland. This movement was harshly and publicly repressed by the full force of Northern Ireland's police and state paramilitary forces. This repression further galvanized public opinion amongst the Irish Republican/ Nationalist community leading to the formation of many paramilitary organizations and splinter groups, the most well-known of which was the Provisional Irish Republican Army. Loyalist paramilitary groups also emerged as tit-for-tat tactics of terror and counter-terror escalated.

This was the beginning of a low-level civil conflict often referred to as the "Troubles", which resulted in approximately 3,500 deaths over about 30 years. It is estimated that 60% of these deaths were attributable to Republican paramilitary groups, 30% to Loyalist paramilitary groups, and 10% to State security forces. During this period, Northern Ireland became increasingly militarized, non-State jobs declined, and the economy stagnated and declined.

Various attempts at a peaceful settlement culminated in the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 which largely ended paramilitary activity amongst both Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups. However, cooperation between the leading political parties on each side of the sectarian divide is tenuous at best and the devolved Northern Irish Government has repeatedly collapsed for extended periods (Herman & Burrell, 2022). This Government is based on a Power-Sharing model guaranteeing both major traditions roles and say in the governing of Northern Ireland. However, to date this Government has been non-functioning due to its collapse for approximately 40% of its existence.

The United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union, often referred to as Brexit (essentially Britain's Exit) has provided renewed difficulties for Northern Ireland's tenuous devolved Government, known as the Northern Ireland Executive. Much of the highly visible militarization of Northern Ireland, including armed watch towers and border crossings, has been dismantled and removed after the Good Friday Agreement, as free movement of people and goods is a cornerstone of the common internal market of the European Union.

Despite delays, the UK eventually left the EU on 31st January 2020. This has caused significant problems for both the EU and the UK Government. Neither the British nor the Irish Government nor the EU wish to see a return to border posts which would undoubtedly trigger further conflict and bloodshed. And yet both the EU and the UK have a problematic border issue. Unrestricted goods and people could potentially travel in either or both directions through the permeable Irish-

Northern Irish border. This causes problems across a range of areas including basic health and safety standards and certification as the UK and EU systems uncouple and diverge.

The latest collapse in Northern Ireland's Government, the Northern Ireland Executive, relates to Brexit and how to effectively police goods and people traveling between Britain, which has now left the EU, and Ireland, which remains part of the European Union (Black, 2022). In order to avoid what is termed a "hard border" between Northern Ireland and Ireland, the UK Government effectively created a sea border between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The legislation creating this situation is known as the Northern Ireland Protocol.

In the eyes of many Unionists/ Loyalists in Northern Ireland this de facto border in the Irish Sea threatened both the territorial integrity of the UK and violated the UK internal market. Significant civil disturbances ensued with rioting among Loyalists. The main Protestant/Unionist political party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), has subsequently refused to participate in forming a new power sharing Government since the summer of 2022. In the meantime, Northern Ireland has been governed by its unelected government administration (known in the UK as the civil service). Ongoing negotiations and Repeated attempts to establish a new Government there have to date failed.

In response, a so-called "punishment budget" has been set by the UK appointed Northern Secretary who is effectively in charge of Northern Ireland in the absence of a functioning devolved parliament (Macaulay, 2023). It is felt by many that This deliberately constrained budget is designed to force the DUP back into negotiations and support for a devolved government. The DUP are refusing to do so until the Northern Ireland Protocol and the Sea Border are revoked.

The impact of this punishment budget on libraries is severe. For example, Northern Ireland's 96 public libraries currently usually spend approximately £3.5 million (€4.03 million, US\$4.28 million) a year on 350,000 new titles. Instead, this year they have been allocated a mere £260,000 (€299,228, US\$318,210), which will be entirely used up funding newspapers and periodicals. Libraries are also set to operate reduced opening hours to manage the budget reduction (Creamer, 2023).

The use of funding in this manner is wholly unacceptable. The negative impacts on equality, particularly in relation to children have been the subject of a recent rapid review (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023), the findings of which are a significant cause of alarm, rather than just concern. These events are occurring at a time of both increasing inequalities in the UK (Gilbert et al., 2018) and in the context of a literary crisis in the UK (Finch, 2017). It is crucial to remember that a recent survey indicates that one in 15 children and young people aged eight to 18 in the UK do not have a book of their own at home (Cole et al., 2022).

The use of public expenditure on basic social and educational services as a political weapon is wholly unacceptable. To decimate library funding in the context of growing inequalities and an ongoing literacy crisis is immoral. The concerns raised have long term implications. The Covid-19 pandemic led to whole-scale closures of many
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services, including libraries. The forthcoming reduced library hours and increasing out of date selections of books due to financial cuts will compound the difficulties in attempts at instilling a culture of literacy and the habit of library use. Well-stocked, accessible libraries are vital for equity. Even if a resolution is reached at some indeterminate point in the future, it is highly unlikely that the fiscally restrained Conservative UK government will increase funding at that point to remediate the current deficit. The damage being done now will be significant and far reaching.

Notes

¹ The title of this commentary borrows from a well-known book by the late Prof. Ed Cairns (1987) whose text *Caught in Crossfire* examined the impact of the Northern Ireland conflict on children.

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