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Welfare: A Reply to Fred Powell and to Charles O'Sullivan
and Ciara Fitzpatrick

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A Reply¹

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Thank you for both your responses, your respectful engagement with the paper and positive comments on its significance. Professor Fred Powell claims I have made a courageous attempt to address welfare state convergence in Northern Ireland and Ireland, but that my assessment of the core models as ‘broadly neoliberal in character’ is fundamentally erroneous. My assessment of some convergence (albeit with obvious divergence) is limited to an assessment of social security arrangements—the focus of my paper and of Ciara Fitzpatrick and Charles O’Sullivan’s recent ARINS paper.² I fully accept in assessing broader welfare regimes that much social policy literature (including the National Economic and Social Council [NESC] in 2005 and again in

¹ This paper is written in reply to Fred Powell, ‘Converge or Diverge? One Island, Two Regimes’ and to Charles O’Sullivan and Ciara Fitzpatrick, ‘Establishing a New Laboratory’ both ‘responses’ to Mary P. Murphy, ‘A new welfare imaginary for the island of Ireland’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs: ARINS* 32 (2) (2021).

² Ciara Fitzpatrick and Charles O’Sullivan, ‘Comparing social security provision north and south of Ireland: past developments and future challenges’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs: ARINS* 32 (2) (2021), 283–313.

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2020), describes the Irish welfare state as ‘complex and hybrid’, ‘mongrel’ or in Mel Cousins’ memorable words, ‘a moveable feast’.

Powell’s reference to a degree of divergence and the subsequent challenges of convergence in other aspects of welfare provision, including education, health and housing, is indeed accurate but not the focus of my paper. Powell concludes that evidence of a closer fit in social security arrangements would be helpful and necessary if the island is to find convergence in social policy. Any evidence of such convergence needs to be tempered with obvious deep divergence in, for example, the trajectory of UK reform in the 2013 Universal Credit, or in more recent divergent income support responses to the pandemic. As Fred Powell suggests, in reality the welfare state has many models and variants and navigating through this complexity is challenging. I am grateful for his assessment that my analysis is both sober, erudite and complex, and that it delivers on its promise. Powell recognises as a ‘really significant idea’ the ‘mobilisation’ of ‘an island welfare imaginary’. Crucially, he agrees ‘neither welfare state offers a model to the other’, but that there are points of departure for shared journeys of disruptive policy change. Digitalisation, automation and climate transition will be common future causes of disruption.

For those interested in or motivated by an all-island framework or convergence in social policy there are many challenges. As Charles O’Sullivan and Ciara Fitzpatrick argue in their response to my ARINS article, a north-south social security ‘laboratory of democracy’, informed by the work of an All-Island Social Security Network (ASSIN), could identify and address gaps in data and analysis concerning social security provision north and south of the border, and create new collaborations for comparative contributions. While the UK will likely remain the primary jurisdiction for comparison with Ireland, where possible and relevant Northern Ireland should be included in the analysis, pushing the boundaries of our collective knowledge about social security payments. This will be limited in scope, as O’Sullivan and Fitzpatrick rightly observe. Examining individual payments is fraught with issues and in Northern Ireland disaggregated data simply does not exist.³ The proposal to establish AISSN should set up a conversation between academics and people working and living at the coalface with significant challenges underpinned

³ 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.

by poverty and disadvantage, where, despite the mantra, people are being left behind. Post-pandemic recovery and post-Brexit adaption will occur while also facing into processes of automation and climate change. In this context, a uniting theme could be to address the strategic socio-economic challenges faced by people and governments, north and south.