

THE TIME HAS COME TO RE-THINK “NORTHERN IRELAND”

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Sinn Féin was the winner in votes and seats at the local elections held on 18 May 2023 in Northern Ireland. But, as important as the fact that Catholics have become the majority population, is the spectacular growth of a representation that is neither Nationalist nor Unionist, reflected in the rise of the Alliance Party. The Good Friday Agreement requires that the First Minister and Deputy First Minister be named by the most-voted Unionist and Nationalist parties. It does not envisage the possibility that the first or second most-voted party be “other”. Geography, demography, and the economy increasingly reinforce the tendency to rethink the status of the “shared island” of Ireland.



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A century ago, the island of Ireland was partitioned artificially to guarantee a Protestant majority in the section that stayed in the United Kingdom when the rest of Ireland became independent. The Catholic minority was meant to be permanent as well, with no chance of ever governing. A century later, the ground has shifted. Catholics are now the majority population. “Protestant” tended to be synonymous with “Unionist” while “Catholic” tended to be synonymous with “Nationalist”. Ideologically, the former wanted union with Great Britain while the latter wanted union with the rest of Ireland.

In 1934, James Craig, the Unionist Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, said “**we are a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant State**”, and added, “It would be rather interesting for historians of the future to compare a Catholic State launched in the South with a Protestant State launched in the North and to see which gets on the better and prospers the more”. It has indeed become interesting to see which gets on better and prospers more today. In 1972, after more than half a century of sectarian policies that led to political violence, the UK intervened and suspended devolved government. Class also played a role in defining ideology and identity. Middle class and professional Protestants made the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) their majority party; the Catholic equivalent did the same for the Social Democrat and Labour Party (SDLP). Lower middle- and working-class Protestants supported the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), while the Catholic equivalent supported Sinn Féin (SF). Peace only became possible twenty-five years ago when the radicals reached an agreement, and the DUP and SF accepted the Good Friday Agreement (GFA).

To avoid sectarian political control, the GFA enforced power-sharing, the obligatory inclusion of both communities in government and the ability of either community to veto legislation. This meant identifying political parties as either Unionist or Nationalist, with a small remainder called “Other”. Demographic and economic changes have altered the political landscape. As important as the fact that Catholics are now the majority population, is the spectacular growth of a representation that is neither Nationalist nor Unionist. In the local elections held on 18 May 2023, SF won the most votes and seats, followed by the DUP. The Alliance Party (AP), neither Unionist nor Nationalist, was the third most voted party, ahead of the UUP and the SDLP. The Good Friday Agreement requires that the First Minister and Deputy First Minister be named by the most-voted Unionist and Nationalist parties. It does not envisage the possibility that the first or second most-voted party be Other. The rise of the Alliance Party reflects disenchantment with traditional identity politics and leaves both the Unionists and the Nationalists in minority, with about 40% support for each block, and may require revision of the GFA political arrangements.

The Democratic Unionist Party claims that they are defending the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, but the perception of the majority Catholic community is that the DUP cannot tolerate being Deputy to a Catholic First Minister. This has motivated greater voter turnout among Catholics to insure a majority for Sinn Féin.

Since 1998, when there has been a working government in NI, the First Minister has come from the DUP, the Deputy from SF. This is a single office exercised by both people. Last year, SF was the most-voted party in elections for the legislative assembly in NI and their leader Michelle O’Neill should have become First Minister, but the DUP, led by Jeffrey Donaldson, boycotted the process, and refused to allow that to happen. The reason they gave was their disagreement with the NI Protocol, an international treaty negotiated and agreed by the UK government and Parliament as part of Brexit that maintains NI within the EU’s single market to avoid imposing a hard border between NI, part of the UK, and the Republic of Ireland, member of the EU. Inevitably, this requires some customs control over goods from Great Britain entering NI that might cross the border into the Republic, and thus into the EU single market. The DUP refused to accept the Protocol, alleging that it altered NI’s constitutional status within the UK because NI was being treated differently from the rest. Every legal appeal against the Protocol taken by the DUP was rejected by UK courts. Leaked documents have shown that while the DUP publicly rejected the inclusion of NI in the single market it secretly called upon the UK government to protect that very inclusion. Almost 60% of NI voters rejected Brexit. Some 70% of NI voters in the recent elections defend the Protocol, as do NI business and farming associations. Economic growth

in NI is greater than in the rest of the UK precisely because it has access to both the EU single market and the UK domestic market, a situation the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) has repeatedly demanded for Scotland, where voters also rejected Brexit.

The DUP claims that they are defending the constitutional status of NI, but the perception of the majority Catholic community is that the DUP cannot tolerate being Deputy to a Catholic First Minister. This has motivated greater voter turnout among Catholics to insure a majority for SF. Besides, even if the DUP is the hegemonic party among unionists, not all unionists share its stance. The UUP is in favour of the Protocol and of forming a government in NI, recognising SF's right to name the First Minister. It is hard not to see the DUP stance as an atavistic refusal to accept the changing realities of NI, if not an outright sectarian refusal to do so and a lower turnout among unionist voters suggests growing disenchantment with DUP policies.

British prime minister Rishi Sunak has negotiated the “Windsor Framework”, —a “replacement” for the Protocol, according to the UK, or a clarification of the agreed mechanisms, according to the EU—, which was meant to assuage Unionist concerns. However, the DUP has rejected the Framework as well, sticking to their ideological guns in the hope of holding on to their votes. It is still not clear whether they will accept the will of the electorate, reinforced by the results of the local elections, and allow government to be restored in NI.

Geography, demography and the economy increasingly reinforce the tendency to rethink the status of the “shared island” of Ireland. In the past, even the Catholic community perceived membership of the UK to be more beneficial economically and in terms of social services than membership of the Republic. Tax revenues in NI only cover 60% of costs, so the UK must subsidise the rest. The Republic was historically poorer and less attractive. This has changed as well. The Irish economy is booming and generating a major tax surplus, an important consideration to keep in mind if it had to take over that UK subsidy. Surveys show that the population of Great Britain does not identify NI with the UK. The Framework shows that Great Britain will not sacrifice its own interests to satisfy DUP identity politics. The time has not yet come for a referendum on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, but the time has come for Unionism to begin to consider its options in the new circumstances, and for the Republic to begin to take seriously the implications of a new arrangement of the island that gets on better and prospers more.