

A CHANGE OF REGIME IN NORTHERN IRELAND?

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Devolved government has returned to Northern Ireland exactly two years after the political party Sinn Féin won a majority of votes and a majority of seats in the NI Assembly but were blocked from taking office by a Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) boycott. It was the first time that a Nationalist party had won the election. Unionists want to maintain the constitutional status of NI in the United Kingdom. Nationalists want to unite NI with the Republic of Ireland.

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What is today the Republic of Ireland became independent of the UK after a War of Independence that lasted from 1918-1921, after the original Sinn Féin (SF) party won 83% of the votes in Ireland in a UK general election on a promise not to take possession of their seats in Westminster but to constitute instead the government of the Irish Republic that had been proclaimed in an abortive uprising in 1916. The remaining 17% of the vote, concentrated in the northeast of Ireland, wanted to maintain the union with Great Britain (the union of England, Scotland and Wales). The government of the UK created Northern Ireland (NI) in 1920, during the War, thereby denying the newly independent Irish government rule over the entire island and guaranteeing the interests of unionists.

Historically, Ireland served as a laboratory for British colonial strategy and tactics, and the creation of NI was no exception. Ireland was partitioned. Partition as a tactic created many major postcolonial conflicts in the Near and Middle East and in South, Southeast and East Asia, some of which are still provoking wars or the threat of it. It did not resolve pre-existing conflicts in any way. On the contrary, it often exacerbated them and generally kept them simmering near the boiling point. NI was an artificial creation. It did not correspond to the traditional territorial division of the island into provinces, the northernmost being Ulster and consisting of nine counties. However, NI comprised only six of the nine counties. Had it included all nine, the population would have been evenly divided between Catholic Nationalists and Protestant Unionists. By excluding three counties, a permanent Protestant Unionist majority was guaranteed, two thirds Protestant to one third Catholic. Only four of the six had a unionist majority, but four was considered to be too small to be a viable state, so two with a nationalist majority were marooned in NI.

James Craig, the then first Prime Minister of NI, said he was 'carrying on a Protestant Government for a Protestant people', and NI became a sectarian state until it was intervened by the British government in 1972.

NI has alternated between direct rule, semi-direct rule and devolved government ever since. For a century, the Catholic minority had no chance of governing. However, the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) that ended thirty years of urban guerrilla warfare provided for a form of power-sharing. It divided the electorate into two camps, Nationalist and Unionist, and awarded the post of First Minister to the Nationalist or Unionist party with the most seats. It also provided the post of Deputy First Minister to the party of the opposite community with the most seats. Demography has changed in NI, and the Catholic community has become the majority community. For the first time in history the First Minister of NI is a nationalist. The power-sharing arrangement means that the post is dual; the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister must act in unison. Power-sharing also means that any major legislation must meet the approval of a majority of deputies from each community. By default, this gives either community a veto over legislation, a veto used repeatedly by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), although it was originally meant to protect Nationalist interests. By refusing to participate in the government for the past two years, the DUP prevented Michelle O'Neill from becoming First Minister.

The major symbolic difference is that after the 5 May 2022 election to the Northern Ireland Assembly, for the first time, the DUP is the minor partner in government. Two years after Sinn Féin's win, the leader of Northern Ireland nationalists, Michelle O'Neill, makes history becoming First Minister.

At the end of January 2024, the DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson brokered a deal with the British government to lighten the impact of Brexit on NI from a unionist point of view. Out of respect for the GFA, an international treaty, the UK-EU Brexit accords eliminated the need for a border between the EU single market of which the Republic is a member whereas NI is part of the UK. The solution was the best of both worlds for NI. It still belongs to the single market, but it also has unfettered access to the market of GB. But for Unionists the need to control goods entering NI from GB that could cross into the Republic and thus into the Single Market creates a *de facto* border between NI and GB, thus altering the constitutional status of NI in the UK, and subjecting NI to EU legislation over which NI has no control.

Almost 60% of NI voters rejected Brexit in the UK referendum and 60% of the elected representatives of the NI Assembly are in favour of NI being part of the Single Market, as are the business and farming communities. Unionists currently represent 40% of the voters but Nationalists also represent only 40% of the voters. The rest do not define themselves as unionist or nationalist. Given that the GFA did not envisage the emergence of a block of voters who were neither one nor the other, the growth of this third block may require changes to the power-sharing arrangements, because it could happen that the first or second most voted party is neither unionist nor nationalist.

Power-sharing did not begin until the two extremes of the two dominant communities, the DUP and Sinn Féin, reached an agreement, and these two parties have had to share government when it did exist. The major symbolic difference is that after the 5 May 2022 election to the Northern Ireland Assembly, for the first time, the DUP is the minor partner in government. Two years after Sinn Féin's win, the leader of Northern Ireland nationalists, Michelle O'Neill, trained in social work and having served as Minister and as Deputy First Minister, makes history becoming First Minister. Her extended family have strong ties to Republicanism, the more radical form of nationalism, and her father was imprisoned as a member of the IRA. Jeffrey Donaldson, chose to keep his seat in Westminster, and relegated his seat in the NI Assembly to the new Deputy First Minister, Emma Little-Pengelly, who is a barrister and also has experience in politics as an elected representative. Her family have ties to loyalism, the more radical form of unionism; her father was imprisoned for brokering a South-African arms deal for loyalist paramilitaries. In this sense, both represent the extremes, as did former IRA commandant Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley, surprisingly, the most successful pair in the NI executive in the past. It remains to be seen how successful the new partnership will be.