

Resignation of Sinn Fein's McGuinness throws Northern Ireland into crisis

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The sudden January 9 resignation of Martin McGuinness, Sinn Fein leader and Northern Ireland's Deputy First Minister, has provoked a political crisis. If he is not replaced, then his Unionist counterpart is forced from office as well, the result of a power-sharing stipulation set by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

Sinn Fein has made clear it will not nominate a replacement for the suddenly ailing McGuinness. Northern Ireland is therefore set, at the very least, for weeks of direct British rule and a new general election that has been described by outgoing First Minister Arlene Foster of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) as likely to be "brutal."

In his resignation letter to the speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly in Stormont, McGuinness bitterly complained of the DUP's "crude and crass bigotry" and the British government's refusal to "honour agreements" or to "resolve the issues of the part while imposing austerity and Brexit against the wishes and best interests of people here."

This was the backdrop, McGuinness continued, against which the "current scandal over the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) has emerged," which "has led to enormously damaging pressure on our public finances and a crisis of confidence in the political institutions."

Foster, who is at the centre of the RHI scandal, has, according to McGuinness, refused to "recognise public anger or to exhibit any humility," which was "inflicting enormous damage on the Executive, the Assembly and the entire politic."

RHI is a British government scheme under which enterprises switching to bio-mass fuel sources can claim subsidies on their fuel bills for up to 20 years. In Northern Ireland, the scheme was rolled out, when Foster was in charge of the Department for Enterprise Trade and Investment, with none of the cost limits in force in mainland Britain. As a consequence, RHI in Northern

Ireland has become an enormous boondoggle for farms and businesses.

Nearly £500 million appears to have been handed out before the project was exposed by a whistle blower. Thereafter, the DUP has been attempting to cover its tracks over what, according to Colum Eastwood, the leader of the opposition Social Democratic and Labour Party, is "the biggest finance scandal in the history of devolution."

The DUP has been accused of delaying closure of the scheme, has refused to allow a list of its major donors to be reconciled with beneficiaries of the scheme, and has refused a public inquiry.

The RHI scandal is only the latest in a string of corruption scandals around the DUP, the hardline unionist party founded by the late Protestant evangelical demagogue, the Reverend Ian Paisley, and which has been sharing power in Northern Ireland with Sinn Fein since 2007.

In 2010, Paisley's replacement, then First Minister Peter Robinson, temporarily stood down while allegations surrounding his wife Iris were investigated. In 2012, Robinson was accused of protecting a now defunct housing outfit, Red Sky, over a maintenance contract. Robinson finally stepped aside in 2015 with allegations swirling around him over so-called "Namagate," concerning sale of a vast property portfolio held by the Irish government's "bad bank," the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA), set up in the aftermath of the 2008 financial collapse.

Over this entire period, Sinn Fein, and McGuinness in particular, has doggedly defended power-sharing and their relationship with the DUP, for whom they have systemically covered.

Despite their mildly left rhetoric in the South, in the North, the bourgeois nationalists of Sinn Fein have been at great pains to present themselves as a responsible party

of capitalist government whose greatest concern is to ensure the political stability necessary to attract investment capital. In coalition with the bigots of the DUP, Sinn Fein has imposed one austerity measure after another on the working class, with both parties ignoring the stack of unresolved murders, allegations and deep suspicions of 30 years of the “Troubles” to manipulate and inflame tensions as and when required.

This time around, Sinn Fein again did their best to prop up Foster until the last possible moment, prevaricating on the need for an independent inquiry into “cash for ash” and refusing to call for her resignation when she defied assembly rules in attempting to cover her tracks. Foster was even opposed from within the DUP, when former Stormont Minister Jonathan Bell accused the DUP of attempting to “cleanse the record” regarding their efforts to keep RHI going.

Two factors, besides what appears to be a very rapid decline in McGuinness’ health, have made it impossible for Sinn Fein to carry on as before.

First is the growth of social inequality. Northern Ireland remains significantly poorer than the rest of the UK, and as everywhere else in both Britain and Ireland, inequality is sharply deepening. In 2013-14, according the Northern Ireland government’s own figures, over one year the poorest 20 percent of the population saw their income fall by 6 percent, while the richest 20 percent got richer by the same amount. Some 101,000 children of a population of only 1.8 million are living in poverty, as are 63,000 pensioners. In 2014, 22 percent of the total population, 395,100, were in poverty, an increase of one percent in one year.

This has led to an erosion of support for all of the leading parties. The leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, displaced by the DUP as the leading unionist party in the aftermath of power sharing, Mike Nesbitt, complained in the *Belfast Telegraph*, “Stormont is held in contempt by a large part of our population.”

Nesbitt pointed to a steady decline in the proportion of eligible voters casting ballots, from 70 percent in 1998 to 55 percent last year. “Cash for ash does not sit well with ever lengthening NHS waiting lists, Troubles victims seeking pensions to compensate for lost life opportunities and the elderly facing the winter dilemma of ‘heat or eat,’” he said.

This has particularly impacted Sinn Fein, who have been losing support to the pseudo-left People Before Profit alliance. Since 2016 the alliance have had two members in the Northern Ireland Assembly, led by

Eamonn McCann of the Socialist Workers Party.

Looming over events is Brexit, which is likely to dominate any election. Northern Ireland, which voted to remain in the European Union, is likely to be badly hit by the economic impact of Brexit, which the DUP and People Before Profit support and which all the other parties, including the UUP, oppose.

As the recipient of considerable EU regional subsidies, and sharing a border with the Republic of Ireland, which will remain in the EU, Northern Ireland faces a long period of uncertainty, a loss of funding and, despite all the protestations from the British government and the DUP, an economically problematic border of some form with the South. The impact will be all the greater if, as seems increasingly likely, the Westminster government is forced into a “hard Brexit” involving exit from the Single Market, or even a complete collapse of relations with whatever remains of the EU.

Sinn Fein’s decision to force an election about the time when the British government triggers the Article 50 process to leave the EU appears therefore to be a gamble, in conditions of deep class tensions, on utilising the Brexit and RHI crises to strengthen its own position on both sides of the border—possibly even paving the way for a referendum on unification as provided for under the Good Friday Agreement.

It is in this context that the *Irish Times* reported that an unnamed senior Sinn Fein source suggested that the party could live without Stormont because the “cash for ash” crisis will serve the party’s all-Ireland ambitions.

In line with this, just before McGuinness’ resignation, the minority Irish government’s chief whip, Fine Gael’s Regina Doherty, broke ranks with her party by publicly stating she was open to forming a coalition with Sinn Fein. For his part, right-wing, pro-austerity Irish *Taoiseach*, Fine Gael’s Enda Kenny, has repeatedly stated that Brexit offers an “uncomplicated route” to Irish unification.



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