

Border issues and Brexit dominate Northern Ireland elections

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The March 2 elections for the 90 seats of the Northern Ireland Assembly will take place in conditions of mounting political turmoil.

The Brexit crisis, followed by the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency, has greatly exacerbated divisions between Europe and America and is provoking open conflict between the UK government and the European Union (EU). In addition, the British ruling class and all its political parties are split between Brexit supporters and those whose interests are entangled with continued British membership of the EU.

Whatever the outcome of the election, the power-sharing arrangements between pro-British unionist and Irish nationalist parties are coming unstuck.

The election was triggered by the resignation of Northern Ireland Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness and Sinn Fein's refusal to immediately nominate a replacement. Sinn Fein seized on the long-running Renewable Heat Initiative (RHI) scandal as an opportunity to attack their unionist rivals and partners in power, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

Sinn Fein has stated they will not re-enter government with the DUP under leader Arlene Foster until the conclusion of a public inquiry into RHI. Party spokesman, West Belfast MLA Pat Sheehan, insisted there would be no revival of the assembly, housed in Belfast's Stormont Palace, without an Irish language act, a bill of rights and agreement on how to deal with the "legacy issues" of "the Troubles".

Between 1969 and 1998, Northern Ireland was torn apart by an extended low-level war between the British Army and forces loyal to the Protestant-dominated Ulster (Northern Ireland) government on the one hand and Irish republican forces dominated by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) on the

other.

The conflict resulted in thousands of deaths and was brought to an end under the auspices of Tony Blair's Labour government, when, backed by the EU and the US, a deal was put together which opened the door PIRA's political wing, Sinn Fein, to share power in the Northern Ireland government with the pro-British unionists. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement and subsequent deals allowed the British military presence to be vastly reduced, the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish republic to be de-militarised and facilitated a considerable flow of EU funds and global investment into the formerly investment-starved north.

Political life, as codified in the agreement, remained divided on sectarian and "community" lines, with parties being required to identify themselves as Unionist or Nationalist. The vicious anti-Catholic discrimination which characterised Northern Ireland from its founding in 1921 at the conclusion of the Irish War of Independence morphed into a new form of institutionalised sectarianism, which served and serves to divide the working class.

Since 2007, Sinn Fein and their former arch enemies, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and then later the DUP have run Northern Ireland in the mutual interests of rival cliques of the upper middle class seeking to fill their pockets while jointly imposing austerity measures.

Deepening social inequality and a host of ever more egregious corruption scandals have exposed both ruling parties and the institutions they uphold as hostile to the interests of the working class.

In addition, the British decision to leave the EU is generating enormous alarm in both parts of the island. While factions of the ruling elite in the north see departure from the EU as offering new opportunities to slash taxes and drive down living standards, the

dominant faction in the south and a significant section of the northern bourgeoisie extending beyond Sinn Fein's normal constituency see Brexit as undermining both trade with Britain and Ireland's position in transatlantic transactions between the US and the EU.

Concerns are centred on the border, which 20 years ago was marked with heavily fortified military and police checkpoints and patrolled by British Army helicopters but which is now almost invisible. Today over 200 crossing points carry around 177,000 lorries, 208,000 vans and 1.85 million cars every month. Any disruption to this flow of goods, commuters and travelers threatens an economic collapse on both sides. Theresa May's Conservative government have, however, made clear they intend to leave the EU's customs union, thereby making the 1921 partition line an external EU border.

The British and Irish governments have repeatedly insisted that no border checks will be imposed, but no one has yet come up with a means to explain how this can be done. Instead, the border and even the status of Northern Ireland are becoming one of many bargaining chips in the high stakes struggle between Britain and the EU over the terms of the country's departure.

Following recent talks between Irish Prime Minister (Taoiseach) Enda Kenny, and the President of the European Commission, Jean Claude Juncker, Kenny and Juncker announced their shared aim that, according to Kenny, "the language of what is contained in the Good Friday Agreement will also be contained in the negotiations outcome"—referring to the a final deal between the EU and Britain. "In other words, if at some future time, whenever that might be if it were to occur, that Northern Ireland would have ease of access to join as a member of the European Union again."

Northern Ireland voted by 56 to 44 percent to remain in the EU, but the DUP campaigned for a "leave" vote and even served as a conduit for pro-Brexit cash to be funnelled into "leave" adverts in London, thereby avoiding limits on referendum expenditure.

Deep divisions between the EU and the US that have emerged in recent years over Ireland's status as a low tax haven for US tech and chemical companies are further complicated by the election of Trump.

The EU has demanded the Irish government collect €13 billion in taxes from, among others, the US-based Apple Corporation. There is widespread speculation as

to the impact of Trump's "America First" agenda in exacerbating these tensions and the impact this will have on Ireland.

Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole questioned whether post-Brexit Britain securing a quick and unfavourable trade deal with the US would mean that the Northern Ireland border would become a geopolitical fault line not only between Britain and the EU but between European and US-dominated power blocs.

This is the context of Sinn Fein's decision to effectively shut down the Northern Ireland government, at least for the duration of the RHI enquiry and pending full implementation of outstanding issues from the Good Friday Agreement. Direct rule from London, something the British government is keen to avoid, will necessarily be imposed instead. Sinn Fein's aim would seem to be to marginalise Stormont during the Brexit negotiations, while pushing forward their case for a new "border poll" on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Sinn Fein is the only all Ireland party and has been mooted as a coalition partner for both the main bourgeois parties in the south, Fine Gael and Fianna Fail.

Foster's DUP warned in response of a "brutal" election, which can only mean a savagely sectarian campaign harking back to the days of the Protestant hegemony. This month, the DUP voted, like the vast majority of MPs, to trigger Article 50 in the House of Commons. It also voted against an amendment put forward by Northern Ireland's nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) to preserve rights for the "people of Northern Ireland" contained in the Good Friday Agreement and upheld by the EU. Foster has reiterated her intention to cut the corporate tax rate to 12.5 percent in line with the Republic of Ireland, or even as low as 10 percent.



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