

Unionism loses its grip on Northern Ireland in March 2 election

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7 March 2017

The main beneficiary from the March 2 elections to the Northern Ireland assembly was the Irish bourgeois nationalist party, Sinn Fein. For the first time since Ireland was partitioned in 1921, in the aftermath of the Irish War of Independence, pro-British Ulster unionist parties have lost their combined absolute political majority in the regional government.

Although the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) led by Arlene Foster remains the largest party, with 28 seats, in the assembly based in Belfast's Stormont House, the party now only has one more seat than Sinn Fein.

Sinn Fein's total vote was only 1,186 short of the 225,413 won by the DUP out of a total number of votes cast of 812,783, on a relatively high turnout of nearly 65 percent—up by 10 percent on last year. The DUP's first preference votes were down 1.11 percent on last year's Assembly vote, with Sinn Fein's up 3.89 percent.

This means that together with the 10 seats won by the Ulster Unionist Party, one Traditional Unionist Voice seat and one independent unionist, the combined forces of pro-British unionism can only muster 40 seats in a reduced 90-seat assembly.

At the last elections, held less than a year ago, the combined unionist seats amounted to 55 of 108 then available.

On the nationalist side, Sinn Fein's 27 seats, added to the Social Democratic and Labour Party's 12, gives the Irish nationalists 39 seats. But these, combined with 8 seats won by the "cross community" advocates of economic liberalism, the Alliance Party, 2 for the Greens and 1 for the pseudo-left People Before Profit Alliance, mean that non-unionist forces amount to 50 seats.

Negotiations for a new power-sharing government

will therefore take place with Sinn Fein much strengthened. But the party has previously insisted that it would not re-enter government with the DUP led by First Minister Arlene Foster, pending the outcome of a public inquiry into the Renewable Heat Initiative (RHI) scandal, so-called cash for ash, and with outstanding Irish language and deeply contested "Troubles" legacy issues unresolved.

If a new arrangement between the two parties cannot be found, under the terms of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, another round of elections must be held or the Northern Ireland Secretary James Brokenshire can re-impose direct rule from London.

Brokenshire's predecessor, Theresa Villiers, has suggested that Westminster could legislate to give the Northern Ireland parties more time to come to terms. The Conservative government in London is seeking to avoid adding to its intractable problems in the aftermath of last year's referendum vote to leave the European Union (EU), by including direct rule of Northern Ireland among them.

The March 2 poll was triggered by the resignation of the deputy first minister, Sinn Fein's gravely ill Martin McGuinness. McGuinness's resignation and Sinn Fein's refusal to immediately nominate a successor meant that, under the complicated constitutional rules surrounding Northern Ireland's administration, new elections were obligatory.

In response, Foster promised a "brutal" election. Throughout her campaign, she warned hysterically of the dangers of a victory for Sinn Fein and its longtime leader and unionist bogeyman, Gerry Adams. She repeatedly presented McGuinness's eventual replacement, Michelle O'Neil, as "installed by Gerry Adams and...instructed by Gerry Adams."

As a consequence, the outcome, although marking a

shift towards Sinn Fein, is also deeply polarised. Despite being in government for 10 years, it is notable that the DUP vote did not collapse, but rather its rival (and self-proclaimed “moderate”), UUP, lost 5 of its 15 seats and will see a leadership contest next month after the resignation of Mike Nesbitt.

Foster’s aggressive rhetoric also tended to encourage nationalist voters to turn out for Sinn Fein; otherwise the party might have been expected to suffer from popular anger at the corruption and swindling that has characterised the assembly’s operations during Sinn Fein’s years in power with the DUP.

Overhanging the election was the steadily deepening crisis surrounding Britain’s departure from the EU. Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU by 55 to 45 percent, reflecting the fact that significant farming, infrastructural and cross-border subsidies have found their way from the EU’s coffers to Northern Ireland agricultural and business interests.

Brexit, besides disrupting the flow of subsidies, will transform the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic into an external boundary of the EU.

Imposed by the British Army and maintained by anti-Catholic pogroms in 1921, the border barricaded the wealthy Northern industrial heartlands of the Ulster Protestant capitalist class from the impoverished and turbulent Catholic south. During the twentieth century and particularly during the “Troubles”—the dirty war between the British Army and Irish republicans between 1969 and 1998—the border was heavily militarised.

The Good Friday Agreement mostly brought an end to armed conflict in the north by laying the basis for republicans to join the Stormont Assembly, under complex and sectarian power-sharing arrangements. These, reflecting the long-standing loss of influence by Ulster capitalists bound up with the destruction of heavy industry, amounted to a joint unionist and republican effort, overseen by the British and Irish governments, to attract global mobile investment—while relying on sectarian divisions to police the working class.

Today, the border is almost invisible, and is crossed daily by commuters, travelers and considerable amounts of commerce and trade. British, Irish and Northern Irish politicians of all stripes have insisted that border controls will be kept to a minimum under

Brexit, but no one has yet explained what this means or how it can be achieved. Proposals from both the Irish government and Northern politicians, including Sinn Fein, that some form of special status could be created to allow Northern Ireland to retain EU membership or single-market access have been proposed, but have been rejected by both the DUP and London.

The issue is becoming one of a lengthening list of disputes between powerful rival pro- and anti-Brexit factions of the ruling class, and between the pro-Brexit British government and the EU over the terms of Brexit.

The hard-right DUP is firmly in the Brexit camp and functioned as a conduit for funding from dubious sources for the “Leave” campaign across the UK. According to the pro-EU *OpenDemocracy* web site, the DUP accepted cash from the hitherto unknown Constitutional Research Council, fronted by a Scottish-based former Conservative party candidate, Richard Cook. Cook reportedly has links to former Saudi intelligence figures and royals seeking to benefit from a Brexit-induced fall in the value of sterling.

Sinn Fein, by contrast, sees the threat of Brexit as an argument for a “border poll” referendum on Irish unification, a provision for which is in the Good Friday Agreement, and a position that is gaining a hearing from the Irish government and the EU. Commenting on the election outcome, Irish *Taoiseach* Enda Kenny, fresh from talks with Michel Barnier, the EU’s chief Brexit negotiator, and EU President Donald Tusk, stated, “If the people by consent were to form a united Ireland, that could be a seamless transfer as happened in the case of East Germany and West Germany when the Berlin Wall came down.”

Kenny’s remarks were endorsed by EU Parliament President Antonio Tajani, who said, “Ireland must ensure that its economic links to the UK are protected,” and secondly, “...it must ensure that the terms of the Good Friday Agreement which has given peace in Northern Ireland are included in any future agreement between the UK and the EU.”



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