Deal to restore power sharing in Northern Ireland collapses

Steve James
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The latest attempt to revive power sharing in Northern Ireland collapsed last week, despite media reports that an agreement was imminent. Thirteen months after late Sinn Fein leader Martin McGuinness resigned from his position as deputy first minister of Northern Ireland, there is still no functioning government in Stormont.

Theresa May's divided and crisis-ridden Conservative government has been unable to impose terms on the party on which it relies to stay in power—Northern Ireland's pro-Brexit Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)—which is now demanding the reintroduction of direct rule from Westminster.

The prospective deal between the Irish nationalist Sinn Fein and the pro-British unionist DUP involved an Irish Language Act, an Ulster Scots Act and a Respecting Language and Diversity Act, as well as a proposed mechanism to prevent future collapsing of the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly. Sinn Fein was said to have agreed to DUP leader Arlene Foster remaining in office, dropping its previous demand for her removal.

Since 2006, Sinn Fein has been seeking legislation for Irish Gaelic to be available for use in courts, in the Assembly and by official bodies. An Irish language commissioner, designated *Gaelteacht* areas where Gaelic is the primary language, the right to education in Irish, and bilingual signage are also sought.

In 2014, the DUP's Gregory Campbell told the Assembly, "We will never agree to an Irish language Act at Stormont and we will treat their [Sinn Féin's] entire wish list as no more than toilet paper. They better get used to it." Campbell notoriously parodied the Irish "go raibh maith agat", which means "thank you, Speaker" and is frequently used by Sinn Fein speakers, with "curry my yoghurt". He was barred from the Assembly for a day.

By early this year, however, Campbell indicated that were Ulster Scots given the same status, a deal was possible. Other unionist voices did not agree. Lord Empey, former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, warned the DUP of the implications for unionism. "Sinn Fein," complained Empey, "want to transform the face of Northern Ireland to show that it is different from the rest of the UK. They want to put Irish in a superior position. This would only serve to destabilise Northern Ireland and further erode our position within the UK."

Traditional Unionist Voice leader Jim Allister complained hysterically that the campaign on language recognition had been "militarised."

Nevertheless, according to newly installed Sinn Fein President Mary Lou McDonald, a deal had all but been agreed. But, she said, "We advised the DUP leadership that the deal should be closed before those opposed to it could unpick what we had achieved."

In the event, the DUP was unable to persuade its own membership and unionist rivals that the language act was a price worth paying to allow the Assembly and Executive to be resuscitated. No sooner had the talks collapsed than former Northern Ireland First Minister and DUP leader Arlene Foster denied a deal had even been close.

Whatever the truth of the negotiations, the dispute between all the parties centres primarily at this stage on Brexit and the status of Northern Ireland's border with the Irish Republic, not on language. Brexit, or its consequences, underlay Sinn Fein's decision to walk out of the Executive in late 2016, when a long-running scandal over the shameless manipulation of a government heating scheme was seized on as the pretext for Sinn Fein's departure.

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Sinn Fein, along with 56 percent of Northern Ireland's voters, supported the Remain camp, but the DUP supported and continues to support a "hard" Brexit in which the UK leaves both the European Union's single market and customs union. Under such conditions, the Northern Ireland border becomes an external border of the EU. Brexit, moreover, particularly a "hard" Brexit, is likely to have a bigger impact on the Irish economy than on the British.

Seeking to offset this, all parties and governments have stated they oppose the construction of a "hard" border with customs posts. At the same time, the DUP has been able to extract from the British government pledges that there will no regulatory divergence between Northern Ireland and the UK. This is impossible unless both Northern Ireland and the UK remain in close alignment with the EU, but this is not a "hard Brexit". No one, least of all the May government, has yet been able to reconcile these entirely contradictory positions.

The issue was fudged in the agreement late last year between the EU and Britain to allow trade talks to open.

The DUP immediately seized upon on the collapse of the current round of talks to push for direct rule of Northern Ireland from Westminster. According to Foster, "It is now incumbent on Her Majesty's Government to set a budget and start making policy decisions about our schools, hospitals and infrastructure." DUP MP Sammy Wilson agreed, stating, "Call it whatever you want; direct rule, ministerial intervention, whatever."

Direct rule was also endorsed by former First Minister David Trimble, who as leader of the UUP was one of the architects of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement that initiated power sharing with Sinn Fein. Trimble, now a lord, told the *Daily Telegraph*, "I would prefer to see full-blown direct rule". This would "clarify the situation and mean the government could speak more effectively to Dublin and Brussels on these issues."

Direct rule would require Westminster to pass a law suspending the Northern Ireland Assembly, while control of policing, prisons, transport, housing and all areas of devolved responsibility would pass back to Westminster. Former Northern Ireland Secretary Theresa Villiers told *Sky News*, "It looks inevitable that there will need to be Westminster legislation to set a budget and sort out various other key issues because time has run out."

Direct rule, particularly over the period of Brexit implementation, would serve the DUP well, as it could avoid responsibility for budgetary cuts and blame London and the EU should a border actually emerge, while waving the Union Jack to its supporters.

The current incumbent Northern Ireland Secretary Karen Bradley has thus far declined to openly endorse this position. Speaking in Belfast, Bradley, forlornly, stated her intention to "deliver devolved government back at Stormont".

Sinn Fein immediately insisted that direct rule was not an option. From the first, Sinn Fein has seen Brexit as an opportunity to push for a referendum on Irish unification, a call reiterated by McDonald in her inaugural speech as Sinn Fein president.

McDonald also sought to present herself as a prospective coalition partner for ruling Fine Gael in Dublin. She told reporters on Saturday, "The Government in Dublin has been crystal clear on that. They have reiterated that position. Direct rule would be entirely unacceptable to us and nationalist opinion."

Irish Taoiseach [Prime Minister] Leo Varadkar ruled out a return to direct rule last November. Sinn Fein met with Varadkar Monday, for 90 minutes. Varadkar again opposed the introduction of direct rule, after speaking with McDonald and her deputy Michelle O'Neill, and stressing a united commitment to the Good Friday Agreement. Varadkar reportedly spoke to Theresa May on the phone following the meeting, speaking of his "firm position" that the Good Friday Agreement must be implemented in full.

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