

Northern Ireland elections delayed by a British ruling class in crisis

Steve James**4 November 2022**

New elections will now not take place in Northern Ireland until next year at the earliest. Conservative government Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris stated Friday morning, “I can now confirm that no assembly election will take place in December, or ahead of the festive season. Current legislation requires me to name a date for an election to take place within 12 weeks of 28 October, and next week I will make a statement in parliament to lay out my next steps.”

The delay points to British imperialism’s serious pursuit of a new agreement with the European Union (EU) over the provisions of the Brexit treaty dealing with Northern Ireland. According to the *Guardian*, “It is understood that the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office had pushed for the delay to give talks over the Northern Ireland protocol a chance.”

The assembly has been suspended since February 2022, when Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) First Minister Paul Givan resigned in protest against the protocol. The hard-right loyalist DUP are fiercely opposed to its introducing partial trade barriers and documentation checks between Britain and Northern Ireland for undermining the place of the six counties in the UK economy and their own political position.

Elections in May this year resolved nothing. Although the republican Sinn Fein became the largest party, under the terms of the 1998 power-sharing Good Friday Agreement a new executive can only be formed if the largest nationalist and unionist parties both nominate a First and Deputy First Minister. The DUP lost some ground but remained by far the largest unionist party. They refused to nominate a Deputy First Minister, halting the assembly and ruling executive.

Under the terms of the “New Decade, New Approach” deal of 2020 between the British and Irish governments, which restarted the assembly after its previous suspension between 2017 and 2020, another round of elections must be called if the assembly has been suspended for 24 weeks—this October 28.

The grossly undemocratic character of the power sharing

executive, a mandatory coalition of the largest nationalist and unionist parties, designed under the Good Friday Agreement to maintain and rest on sectarian divisions, means that the DUP is in a position to prevent a government being formed indefinitely. It has made clear it intends to do so until the protocol is abandoned.

Boris Johnson’s government (2019-2022) lent its support to the DUP’s ultimatums. Its Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, giving Westminster the power to abandon the protocol and break the EU Withdrawal agreement, is currently making its way through the House of Lords. But the severe economic disruption and divisions this has provoked with the EU and the United States as a result of Brexit are prompting a reversal, under conditions in which the UK and world economy are confronted with recession and the US is seeking to hold together an anti-Russian war camp.

The US opposed Brexit as a threat to US influence in the EU and opposed the British government’s moves to abandon the protocol as a threat to US investments in Ireland, which depend on political stability. Johnson tried to square the circle by proving himself Washington’s most loyal ally in the NATO war against Russia but was repeatedly scolded by Biden and other US officials over Northern Ireland.

Johnson’s replacement Liz Truss continued the effort, holding a 75-minute call with Biden, part of which was devoted to reducing tensions over the protocol.

But mending relations has become all the more important as part of new Tory party Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s task of stabilizing British capitalism after months of chaos in Westminster and with the Bank of England predicting a two-year recession.

One of Sunak’s first calls was to Irish Taoiseach, Micheál Martin. Both Sunak and Martin stressed the importance of Irish support for NATO’s war against Ukraine, while a spokesman for Martin noted, “both agreed on the importance of EU-UK engagement to find agreed solutions to the issues around the Northern Ireland Protocol, and they discussed ongoing developments in Northern Ireland.”

Truss and Sunak's Foreign Secretary James Cleverly has had several calls with EU Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovič, which both sides also reported favourably.

A proposal by the nationalists Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour Party, the cross-community Alliance Party, and the Irish government to institute some form of “joint authority” between London and Dublin over Northern Ireland was not instantly rebuffed by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). It told the *Belfast Newsletter* the government intended to “carefully consider what other steps may need to be taken in the absence of an Executive to ensure that it delivers on its responsibilities to the people of Northern Ireland.”

All wings of unionism erupted in fury at the suggestion. DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson warned, “If the Irish Government thinks that by threatening me or my party with joint authority that that will help us to get to a solution that it will move us forward on the basis of mutual respect and understanding then I’m afraid the Irish Government is deluded.”

Unionist peer Reg Empey of the Ulster Unionist Party complained that this was “a very high-risk strategy and very dangerous. I don’t think the NIO has the institutional memory of where we came from over the post Troubles period.”

The Loyalist Communities Council, representing the paramilitaries, warned of “dire consequences” if there was no movement on the protocol and that the “presence of Irish Government ministers visiting ‘sanitised audiences’ in Northern Ireland continues to inflame anger and tension in loyalist communities.”

On October 30, the *Belfast Telegraph* reported that an alleged loyalist attack, details unspecified, in the Republic of Ireland was called off hours before being put into action.

Following talks with Irish Foreign Affairs Minister Simon Coveney, Heaton-Harris distanced the government from the “joint authority” proposal. He announced, “The Belfast [Good Friday] Agreement clearly sets out that the consent principle governs the constitutional position of Northern Ireland. The UK Government will not countenance any arrangements that are inconsistent with that principle such as joint authority.”

However, relations between Westminster and the DUP are fractious. Even arch-Brexiteer Steve Baker, made a Northern Ireland minister by Truss and kept in position by Sunak, has drawn the party’s ire. After urging unionists to “find it within themselves to choke down” their refusal to join the Northern Ireland executive and help “the aim of reaching an agreed outcome with the EU which does work for everyone,” he was told by DUP MP Sammy Wilson to “spend less time preaching”.

Whether the British ruling class succeeds in reaching a new agreement with the EU, and whatever the response of the DUP, the task which falls to the working class in Ireland is to do away with the whole rotten framework.

The Good Friday Agreement brought the decades of the British Army’s dirty war against Irish republicans to an end by bringing Sinn Féin into the British-controlled Northern Ireland government along with its unionist rivals. Brokered by the US, and underpinned by the EU, a new era of “peace and prosperity” based on investment was promised. The new political structures of the assembly and executive maintained the sectarian division of political life to control the working class and stabilize capitalist rule and maintain Britain’s grip on its oldest colonial possession.

A quarter of a century later, living standards in both parts of the island are collapsing. In the North, the non-functioning devolved government has a £600 million black hole in its finances. Health and social services face unrelenting pressure. Workers have launched a series of strikes in local authorities and private industry, alongside workers in Britain. In the low-tax South, living costs, particularly housing, are intolerable, with successive cost-of-living protests held while transnational finance and production operations extract daily fortunes from the working class.

Meanwhile, the island remains partitioned along the lines established a century ago by British imperialism and the then Ulster Tories. Although the last 25 years have seen the border dismantled and a high level of economic integration achieved, the logic of Brexit and the DUP’s position on the protocol threaten to throw this violently into reverse.

The working class must find a way to confront the filthy maneuvers of British imperialism and the unionists in Northern Ireland, without adapting either to rival imperialists or the Irish bourgeoisie. Workers, Protestant and Catholic, North and South, need a means to unify their struggles and safeguard their political independence from all other class forces. Rank-and-file committees organized in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and an Irish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, tasked with leading the struggle for socialism in a unified Ireland as part of the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe, are urgently required.



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