

# Beyond Brexit:

## The Politics of Irish Unity

In Ireland, the Irish unity debate had become part of the political mainstream. Brexit means that change in the political relations between Britain and Ireland is now unavoidable and, while partition never had any democratic legitimacy, its continued imposition is no longer sustainable.

The partition of Ireland has run out of road. As such, British government policy towards Ireland must change.

By Declan Kearney

### Britain's Brexit Crisis

**A**fter the Brexit referendum in June 2016, I suggested that Brexit would detonate a constitutional and political crisis at the very core of the British state. Events since then have served to fulfil this prediction. Such events include the British government's failed and bad faith negotiations with the European Union (EU); the formalising of the British Tory government's alliance with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in June 2017 and its destabilising effect upon the political crisis in the north of Ireland; the unparalleled political and parliamentary chaos at Westminster since last year; and the resignation of British Prime Minister Theresa May. The only certainty about Brexit is that it is a product of an ideological civil war within the British Tory Party, which has destabilised that party since the British state joined the European Economic Community in 1973.

Theresa May's approach to handling the Brexit negotiations since she became British Prime Minister has been to try manage these divisions in order to maintain her leadership and a Tory government in power. Thus, outwardly, the British government's conduct of negotiations with the EU has been chaotic. It is impossible to predict what may happen next, as developments continue to unfold and a new withdrawal deadline of 31st October is set. Yet such vacillation has been about playing for time. In the context of the original 29th March 2019 withdrawal date set by the triggering of Article 50, it seems the clock was simply being run down. Ultimately, May appeared to be attempting brinkmanship with the Tory Brexit extremists and the Tory government's hard-line pro-Brexit allies in the DUP by presenting a zero-sum scenario in which the only alternative

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to supporting her Brexit option was potentially no agreement with the EU.

Then, the Tory party lost 1300 seats during British local council elections. In the more recent European Parliament election on 23rd May, support for the new Brexit party (led by Nigel Farage) exceeded the combined vote share of both the British Labour and Tory parties. These results presage even greater turbulence for the British political system, and more fracture and division within British society.

**Brexit ‘a catastrophe’ for Ireland**

Most economic forecasts suggest that Brexit will be bad for Britain. However, it will be catastrophic for Ireland’s island economy and the regional economic system in the north of Ireland. The entire political thrust of Brexit runs counter to the foundations of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), which represents the architecture of the Irish peace process. The GFA put in place a power-sharing system requiring cooperation between the biggest parties representing the north of Ireland’s two main community traditions – currently Sinn Féin and the DUP. The Agreement also includes strong all-island provisions in addition to protections for those who have an Irish national identity and aspire to the reunification of Ireland.

However, the DUP’s support for Brexit threatens to further weaken the already fragile political process in the northern state while guaranteeing a new border and further division in Ireland.

The imposition of Brexit by the British Tory government on the north of Ireland is inherently undemocratic in nature. It is contrary to the will of the people in the north of Ireland, which voted by a majority of 56% to remain in the EU during the 2016 Referendum. That democratic majority was reinforced when two pro ‘Remain’ MEPs were elected to the European Parliament from three

available seats in the north of Ireland. But it is also a direct by product of Ireland’s undemocratic and continued partition, enforced almost one hundred years ago, by British colonial policy.

This now deepening political crisis is further accentuated by systemic structural weaknesses in the regional economy of the north. The required investment in local public services and protection of workers’ rights are denied by a combination of Tory austerity and the imposition of Brexit. Pressures on public services are thus intensifying. The regional block grant, or public expenditure settlement allocated by the British government exchequer, has been reduced by 10.2% since 2010. In addition, real term cuts to public funding are now factored into future budget profiles alongside actual net cuts in take home pay for public and private sector workers, welfare cuts, and higher inflation and living costs. Moreover, 108,600 adults in working families are living in relative poverty. Average wages in the north remain lower than ten years ago and more than one in four employees are paid less than the real living wage. Workers’ rights and protections are being systematically reversed, in that precarious working conditions, zero hours’ contracts and the scam of bogus self-employment used by some employers are in common practice. Brexit is thus set to deepen an existing economic and social race to the bottom by further undermining the potential for economic growth and new investment. The Brexit agenda, together with Tory austerity, threatens jobs across all economic sectors, workers’ terms and conditions, and any potential for sustainable public services in the north.

**An all-island ‘perfect storm’**

The challenges of Brexit also extend into the south of Ireland, where the inequality divide continues to deepen, notwithstanding its supposed recovery since the financial crash that destroyed the southern economy. Huge pay disparities, precarious working conditions and labour unrest, together with a lack of investment and resultant endemic crises in health and housing, are apparent. Four thousand children are made to sleep in temporary accommodation each week due to the lack of affordable housing in the southern state. In addition, the all-island economic activity, which has greatly expanded as a result of the Irish peace

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process and has become a key driver for trade, investment and employment creation within the south, is now directly jeopardised by Brexit. Ireland, north and south, faces a perfect storm of adversity.

The dawning political and economic reality is that Brexit has changed everything. It has exposed the negative role that the partition of Ireland continues to play in Irish affairs and the fundamentally anti-democratic nature of the union with Britain. At the same time, the British state has been pushed into its own unprecedented, existential political crisis. Brexit has thus created a defining moment for Ireland and Britain, as all the established constitutional, political and economic assumptions about the status quo in Ireland have been swept away. International attention has also been refocused upon the democratic case for Irish unity and new political discussions have begun about the future of Ireland, both north and south, and the relationship between Britain and Ireland. Significantly, a seismic shift has occurred in the ambition and expectations of republican, nationalist and other progressively minded citizens in the north of Ireland. A new generation is thus questioning partition, with many within Irish society, north and south, looking beyond Brexit towards the prospect of accelerated Irish reunification.

### **Political unionism and the denial of rights**

Partition is the central fault line at the heart of Irish society and politics. The country was partitioned in 1921 following the revolutionary years begun by the 1916 Easter Rising, which prompted a generation of Irishmen and women to demand national sovereignty and independence from Britain. Arising from a general election in 1918, Sinn Féin secured a landslide mandate in support of Irish national independence. Yet the British government, and a unionist minority in the north-eastern counties, refused to accept this democratic outcome. Consequently, Ireland was partitioned into two separate states made up of six counties in the north and twenty-six counties in the south.

Yet since its imposition, partition has been an abject failure. It was never designed to make the northern state a political or economic success. From the beginning, that state carried within it the conditions of inherent instability. It was built upon institutionalised and structural sectarianism, which

ensured that a substantial minority – specifically the Irish nationalist population – was destined never to be treated as equals. The Civil Rights Movement fifty years ago exposed the inability of the unionist state to treat the minority as equals. That belligerent opposition from powerful sections within political unionism against reform of the northern state persists today.

Such unionism is a political position that seeks to maintain the north of Ireland's constitutional status within Britain and comprises different components, including a form of broad-based civic unionism. However, the DUP represents the dominant force within unionism – and it has opposed implementation of the GFA and its promise of equality and rights since 1998. Refusal by the DUP to embrace a rights-based society and equality culminated in the collapse of the GFA political institutions – the north's regional government – in January 2017, and the associated political crisis that has continued since then. The nature of this crisis was clearly spelt out by Sinn Féin leader Martin McGuinness – who had held the position of Joint First Minister in the regional government since 2007 – in his resignation letter, in which he stated that,

The equality, mutual respect and all-Ireland approaches enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement have never been fully embraced by the DUP.

Apart from the negative attitude to nationalism and to the Irish identity and culture, there has been a shameful disrespect towards many other sections of our community. Women, the LGBT community and ethnic minorities have felt this prejudice. And for those who wish to live their lives through the medium of Irish, elements in the DUP have exhibited the most crude and crass bigotry.

In addition, during the preceding months it emerged that an ill-conceived green energy Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scheme was seriously mismanaged by departments within the regional government held by DUP ministers, including the DUP leader Arlene Foster. This revelation was the latest in a series of financial scandals implicating the DUP, following Red Sky and NAMA, and thus represented the last straw for many republicans and other progressively minded citizens. Indeed, as a consequence of RHI, £500 million may be lost to the north's budget and

vital public services. Serious allegations that the scheme was open to abuse and corruption are now the subject of a public inquiry established by the former Sinn Féin Minister for Finance. This scandal threatens to destabilise for decades the financial basis of regional public services due to serious mismanagement and the parallel allegations of insider trading, aggressive commercial exploitation and corruption.

Between March 2017 and February 2018, five phases of consecutive negotiations occurred to try and re-establish the political institutions. On 9 February 2018, Sinn Féin and the DUP arrived at an advanced draft agreement, which provided the basis for restoration of the regional government. Five days later, the DUP unilaterally stepped away from that agreement and since then have refused to restore the political institutions on the basis equality and rights. It is thus clear that those currently in charge of the DUP do not support proper power-sharing. The party brand has become indistinguishable from financial scandal and sharp practice in government. As a party, the DUP is permanently in conflict with all accepted democratic reforms, social modernity and standards in public office. Its project is negative and tactical and entirely focused upon slowing down and blocking progressive change while maintaining hegemony within the unionist constituency.

This party is in denial about how society in Ireland, and even Britain, views its sectarian, homophobic and toxic pact with the Tories. The overwhelming majority of republicans, nationalists and many others, including sections of civic unionism, have concluded that the DUP has had its chance and cannot now be trusted in government. They will not be giving the DUP permission to get back into power at the risk of allowing it to continue practicing discrimination, intimidation, bigotry, or sharp practice.

### **Irish reunification has moved centre stage**

British Tory government economic and political policy, supported by the DUP, has turned the north of Ireland into an economic and political backwater during the last ten years. The existing rights crisis is a direct by-product of these circumstances, to the extent that the GFA is now directly threatened by both the imposition of Brexit and the existence

of the British Tory government/DUP pact. Widespread discontent now exists within the broader nationalist constituency and other sections of progressive opinion.

As well as playing negatively into the ongoing political crisis caused by the denial of citizens' rights and financial scandals in the north, Brexit has also moved the focus upon Irish reunification centre stage. Ireland's Future is an emerging rights-based pressure group that has sought to highlight the scale of political crisis in the north and also press the Irish government to fulfil its obligations under the GFA. It held a huge convention in Belfast in January this year and then another very significant event in May in Newry, County Down. The mood of this latest event was one of deep impatience and a feeling that the denial of citizens' rights must end in the north. Notably, it also evidenced how the popular discourse has moved towards a discussion about the need to design a rights-based framework within a new constitutional Irish national democracy. This impatience for change among northern nationalists is unprecedented, who are increasingly viewing the dynamic for meaningful change and delivery on democratic rights as beyond the northern state.

Brexit has thus changed everything. Not only has it unleashed constitutional and political flux in Ireland, this momentum is impacting in other parts of the British state. Brexit has taken a wrecking ball to the traditional make-up of the British state as previously defined and the political centre of gravity in Britain has been unanchored. For instance, the rise of narrow English nationalism has not abated and is responsible for injecting a new destabilising impetus. Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister in the Scottish Executive and leader of the Scottish National Party, has renewed her calls for another Scottish independence referendum. Indeed, Scottish independence is now set to re-emerge as a new dynamic. Similarly, previously unseen political change may also now be happening in Wales. A rally for Welsh national independence took place recently in Cardiff and was attended by many thousands. It was described by the organisers as the first such march in Welsh history. All these changes initiated by Brexit were thus given concrete expression in the recent European Parliamentary elections in Scotland and Wales.

## Britain's border in Ireland has become an issue for the EU

The fallout from Brexit has also significantly influenced political discourse within the EU itself.

Indeed, Britain's border in Ireland has now become an EU issue and the level of interest in, and support for, constitutional change in Ireland is at an all-time high across the EU. The European Parliament and EU institutions have become strategically important arenas within which to promote the democratic aim of a united Ireland and to encourage international support for an Irish unity referendum.

Sinn Féin will continue lobbying and influencing to make the objective of Irish reunification a priority for the progressive left and other strands of democratic opinion represented in the European Parliament. All this comes at a time when Europe itself is at a crossroad. The political direction, policy orientation and increasing need for reform of the EU, paralleled with, and often fuelling the rise of extreme right-wing forces, present a serious threat to the principles of the progressive left. Social democracy has all but collapsed both politically and electorally across Europe. There is thus an urgent need to build a progressive left alternative throughout Europe and to popularise a new political narrative, based upon the vision of a social Europe, which is grounded upon economic democracy, human rights, climate safety, respect and equality.

## Towards a New Ireland

In Ireland, the Irish unity debate had become part of the political mainstream. During the European Parliament election in the south of Ireland, RTE (the South's main broadcasting company) carried out an extensive exit poll, which reported that 77% of respondents said they would favour a united Ireland in an Irish unity referendum. Irish reunification has thus become the defining issue in Irish politics. Moreover, Brexit means that change in the political relations between Britain and Ireland is now unavoidable and, while partition never had any democratic legitimacy, its continued imposition is no longer sustainable. The partition of Ireland has run out of road.

As such, British government policy towards Ireland must change. Negative mismanagement of the Irish peace process and the GFA by

successive British governments, and the particular pro-unionist bias of the Tory government since 2010, must be replaced with a recognition that the transition towards Irish unity should begin. Initially, that should take the form of preparing for an Irish unity referendum and by engaging in a new political discussion with the Irish government and all political parties in Ireland in relation to reunification.

For many in the British establishment, this will be an anathema. For those in the Tory Party leadership who have tied their electoral survival to an alliance with the DUP, this prospect may be unthinkable. However, it is time for historic, decisive and brave leadership to be shown by the British state. In parallel, the Irish government needs to begin to prepare for the constitutional, political and economic transition towards Irish unity.

As such, Green Paper on Irish unity should be published detailing the constitutional, political, fiscal and economic measures for a successful transition to a united Ireland. A joint Oireachtas (the two houses of the Irish parliament), all-party committee on Irish unity should be established. The Irish government should also commence discussions with the EU Commission and institutions to explore their practical role and support in facilitating an efficient process of reunification.

It should facilitate an open and inclusive national conversation on Irish unity involving all citizens, political parties, social partners and civic society. This dialogue about our collective future in Ireland should address all the concerns, accommodations and compromises relevant to negotiating a new, all-Ireland, pluralist, constitutional democracy. Within this context, the wider international community also has an important role to play by forging a progressive, strategic axis that both endorses the need for an Irish unity referendum and commits to supporting the successful completion of Irish reunification and national self-determination for the Irish people. ■



### Declan Kearney

Declan Kearney is Sinn Féin National Chairperson and Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for South Antrim in the North of Ireland.