



Sinn Fein's historic victory runs into Unionist veto

Bernie McAdam Sun, 29/05/2022 - 16:06

Bernie McAdam

Sinn Fein won a historic victory in the Northern Ireland Assembly election. The party that was the political wing of the Provisional IRA and banned from broadcasting for six years by the British government is now the largest party at Stormont. For the first time in the history of the 'Northern Ireland' state a pro united Ireland party has won more seats than the main Unionist party. After a hundred years of Unionist dominance in government, a nationalist party is now entitled to nominate the First Minister in the new power sharing Executive. However, entitled is not empowered!

In reality the largest Unionist party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), has refused to enter any such Executive thereby collapsing the key institution of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). The DUP want the Northern Ireland Protocol, the UK/EU agreement which has drawn an economic border down the Irish Sea, to be removed before it will join a new Executive or Assembly. The parties have up to 24 weeks to form a new Executive, failing that another election must be called.

UNIONIST INTRANSIGENCE

The DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson says he will accept the election result (sic) but even if he did not have the excuse of the Protocol to sabotage the Executive, the DUP would still have found it humiliating enough to accept a nationalist First Minister. It really does demonstrate the supremacist and bigoted nature of Unionism no less than the northern sectarian state which it has defended for over a century.

The northern state can only be understood by Britain's role in partitioning Ireland in 1921 and creating an arbitrary piece of land with a Unionist majority and calling it 'Northern Ireland'. The emerging state was built and designed to suppress its nationalist minority, with systematic discrimination and repression which resulted in the fight for Civil Rights in the late 60's.

Unionism resisted the cry for equal civil rights and responded with more repression with the backing of successive British governments. A full scale mass rebellion by the nationalist minority took place as defence against loyalist pogroms and state repression grew over into an armed struggle to drive out British troops and against partition. Sinn Fein and the IRA led that struggle and its support today is still a legacy of its involvement in that justified resistance.

The signing of the Good Friday Agreement was the crowning moment in the peace process which saw for the first time Unionism and Nationalism sharing political power. The DUP was dragged screaming to this exercise but actually they had little to lose, after all Sinn Fein/IRA had decommissioned its weapons and, contrary to Republican principles, had accepted a Unionist majority veto over a united Ireland. Even with such a climbdown it was still viewed by hardline Unionism as sharing power with the enemy.

Nonetheless, the DUP and Sinn Fein did share power. They both agreed on defending the state and the rule of law, they and their supporters were both beneficiaries of a sectarian allocation of funds, and they both, along with all the other main political parties, agreed to implement Westminster austerity policies which cut public services to the core. The Assembly/Executive became the main instrument of British rule in the north.

Because, from the signing of the GFA in 1998, the northern state became cosmetically adorned with a devolved parliament, with some of the more noxious forms of discrimination removed, it gave much hope to a war weary

population. But the much promised economic benefits of peace never materialised and there was no real progress on reducing sectarianism. In fact, every so often sectarian tensions would intensify, especially when the DUP found it necessary to whip up loyalist fervour. The DUP's role in the 'flag' riots in 2013 is a case in point.

Sinn Fein has committed itself to share power with the DUP, one of the most reactionary parties in Europe, a party that has intransigently opposed abortion rights, single sex marriage, Irish language rights, etc. The GFA is premised on a recognition of a Unionist veto on the border. A border which has from its inception in 1921 completely divided communities and economic hinterlands with accompanying levels of social deprivation.

Everyone, from the EU, US, Irish Republic and the British, to all the major northern political parties, swear by the GFA. They are all implicated in copper fastening partition, but the GFA cannot resolve the democratic deficit at the heart of the northern state. Power sharing is a clever way of concealing this, at least for a time. But the contradiction will always burst forth, the contradiction of having a British border in Ireland, a border which denies the right of the Irish people as a whole to decide their own future.

BREXIT

Next up was Brexit which duly exploited and exacerbated this contradiction of a British border on the island of Ireland. Brexit was overwhelmingly unpopular in Ireland. In the North, a majority voted against it, apart from a Unionist minority led by the DUP which now feels it has the 'democratic' right to veto the majority.

As fellow members of the EU, both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland had an open border and a common market. Brexit threatened a hard border between the two states with all the resulting cost and inconvenience to both sides. The Tories do not seem to have considered the implications of their plans for Ireland.

The Brexiteer DUP hypocritically railed against a hard border but why vote to leave the EU then? What do you expect when you leave a free trade zone? The Protocol was agreed by the Tories and the EU to get over the adverse effects of a hard border. Instead of inspections on the Irish border, the only land border between UK and the EU, there would be checks between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with NI agreeing to follow EU rules on product standards.

The DUP and Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) consider this Irish Sea border as unacceptable as it undermines NI's place in the UK, therefore the Protocol must go. The fact that NI business is benefitting from remaining in the EU market is deliberately overlooked. So, despite the new Assembly having a pro Protocol majority, the DUP/TUV will use their Unionist veto to scupper the results of the election which Donaldson said he had accepted!

This demonstrates once more the paranoid fear of a united Ireland determining their every move, even at the cost of a hard border between NI and the EU. The reaction to this partly accounts for the rapid growth of the Alliance Party to become the third biggest party. The development of this middle class, liberal, business friendly and pro EU party may well seduce NI business away from its traditional Unionist loyalty but the Alliance's pro UK Union credentials are not up for grabs.

Boris Johnson's continuing Brexit dilemma is how to modify the Protocol in such a way that satisfies the DUP and the EU. No doubt he will do this with his characteristic lies and deceit in the weeks ahead, already legislation to override the Protocol is to be considered by Parliament. He has already been warned by the EU and the US against taking such unilateral action, putting in jeopardy a trade deal with the US. It would also increase the chances of a trade war with the EU just at a time when the economy is faced with a looming recession.

So how far Johnson can placate the Unionists will be an interesting conundrum. What is becoming abundantly clear though is that Brexit was always going to be a disaster for Ireland, north and south. The Protocol has been designed to modify the impact to some extent, but Unionist intransigence will only increase the chances of a hard border.

A NEW ERA?

Sinn Fein's leader in the north, Michelle O'Neill, says the victory 'ushers in a new era' for Northern Ireland. It will enhance their gathering political momentum south of the border, too. But does it bring Sinn Fein's vision of a united Ireland any closer? Certainly, the debate around a united Ireland has increased since Brexit but its realisation is not remotely near at hand.

Sinn Fein strategy lies in wielding political power in both the northern and southern governments, not an unlikely scenario, to put pressure on Britain to call a border poll. They are quick to point out that under the terms of the GFA, Britain is entitled to call a border poll providing there is a likelihood of a majority in favour of a united Ireland. Their leader Mary Lou McDonald is looking at a 5 to 10 year timeframe.

However, it is not down to Sinn Fein, it is a decision that only the British Secretary of State can make, and this is based on what the British government thinks is likely to happen in a referendum. There is no mechanism compelling the government to act. The Irish people have no say in this!

Unsurprisingly, Johnson has already ruled it out 'for a very, very long time to come' and Labour's Keir Starmer is no better as he believes a referendum is not in sight and even if there were one, he would campaign against a united Ireland. So, Sinn Fein are guilty of creating the illusion that the border poll is close at hand and if held would gain a majority, not inevitable if opinion polls are anything to go by.

Another illusion exists that somehow Britain as a neutral disinterested player would facilitate unity and in good faith implement all the provisions of the GFA. But British presence is the main problem. Not for nothing have successive British governments invested in a 30 year war against those who would have abolished the border. Whilst Britain could in principle warm to a united capitalist Ireland it would be on British terms, but remains most unlikely in the near future.

There can be no reliance on the GFA, which is unravelling now anyway, or the demand for a border poll to unite Ireland. The fact that one northern poll followed by a southern poll would have to take place is a travesty of what should happen. The consistent democratic position is for an all-Ireland election to an all-Ireland Assembly in which the Irish people as a whole determine their future of the North.

Socialists should be arguing for self-determination as part of a strategy to build a Workers' Republic. Partition has divided the working class for too long in Ireland. As the levels of destitution and deprivation shoot up in the current climate, it is essential that a militant labour movement is built to defend the working class throughout Ireland. A mass movement on the streets and taking direct action is the way to progress working class interests and to wrest control from the imperialist state north of the border no less than the capitalist state in the south.

Capitalism is determined to offload the cost of its many crises onto the working class. Workers must respond by industrial action and building democratic workers' councils which can defend themselves and which can ultimately break up capitalism. A revolutionary party needs to be built in Ireland which can fight for that strategy - a strategy based on Permanent Revolution in which the working class resolves the age-old national question through the fight for a Workers' Republic.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/sinn-feins-historic-victory-runs-unionist-veto>