

UK: The crisis of Ulster Unionism deepens

Bernie McAdam, Red Flag Fri, 25/06/2021 - 11:28

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Ulster Unionism is experiencing a profound crisis right now. The largest Unionist party, the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP, is at war with itself after the brutal ousting of Arlene Foster and the election of a new leader, Edwin Poots. It took precisely three weeks for Poots to resign after losing the support of his DUP Assembly members.

Poots' decision to nominate his mate Paul Givan as the Executive's First Minister was the straw that broke the camel's back. This followed Sinn Fein's insistence that the renomination of Michelle O'Neill as deputy First Minister, a precondition for formation of the Executive, would only take place if Irish language legislation, already agreed in the New Decade, New Approach deal of 2020, was to be implemented later in the year.

Poots agreed on implementation but not on a time scale. Sinn Fein then asked the British government to introduce the laws at Westminster instead. Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis acceded to the request. Presumably Poots felt this absolved him of any responsibility for it and agreed to form a new Executive on that basis.

DUP representatives were outraged at this unilateral decision as much as they were scathing of Westminster interference. It demonstrated yet again the sectarian loathing of Unionism for anything Irish and any concession to it as a step on the slippery road to a united Ireland. The narrative that will be peddled now is that Lewis is in the pocket of Sinn Fein and Unionism is being left out in the cold. What is the point of devolution, indeed the Good Friday Agreement, GFA, itself, if Westminster rides roughshod over the Assembly?

The new leader, Geoffrey Donaldson, will have a mammoth job promoting Unionist unity. The DUP have already shed several councillors to their Ulster Unionist Party, UUP, rival. They have also been losing ground to the more hardline Traditional Unionist Voice, TUV, on the right and to the more liberal pro-EU Unionists of the Alliance Party.

If this trend were to continue at the next Assembly election, it would see Sinn Fein as the largest party and thus in line for First Minister in the new Executive. This would horrify a broad range of Unionist opinion as much as those who still can't get their heads around sharing power with nationalists.

If Donaldson continues with power sharing, itself not a certainty, then he will most definitely use the Good Friday Agreement, GFA, as a bargaining tool in his attempt to scrap the Northern Ireland Protocol. His key objective is scuppering the Protocol which he calls "the gravest challenge facing Unionism". He would be prepared to ditch the GFA and collapse the Assembly/Executive, most likely by refusing to adhere to North-South cooperation.

THE PROTOCOL

Irish language is one 'distasteful' thing for Unionism, but the Protocol is quite another. According to the Unionist narrative, the Northern Ireland Protocol fundamentally compromises the integrity of the United Kingdom by an Irish Sea border and brings a united Ireland closer. The stakes could not be higher for Unionists and the coming months will see how this pans out on the streets.

The Protocol, which is now international law, keeps Northern Ireland within the EU single market for goods. This avoids a hard land border, customs checks, etc between NI and the Republic of Ireland. It also means that NI manufacturers have better access to the EU market than those in Great Britain. Given the pro-Remain majority in the north, this would seem more beneficial, even taking into account the recent disruption that has occurred at NI ports regarding food products from GB. Obviously, there would be no problems of this order at all if Brexit had not happened, but it seems Unionists cannot quite understand that consequences will follow if you leave the single market!

The Protocol has been signed by the UK and the EU so a feeling of deep betrayal towards the Johnson government has spread amongst the Unionist/Loyalist community. Part of the DUP's problem is that they were willing accomplices in being shafted by Johnson. Attempts to offset this image will see them playing to the Loyalist gallery and cementing their longstanding links to Loyalist paramilitary groups.

The Loyalist Communities Council (UVF, UDA, etc) have already pulled their support for the GFA, not that they ever fully embraced it, and they provoked recent riots to protest the Irish Sea border. Those riots were not well supported but the current Orange marching season will be used to build their campaign. Two recent illegal marches of 800 in Portadown and around 3,000 on the Shankill Road will be followed by many more. If history is anything to go by, then inevitably Catholic/ nationalist areas will be the targets and self-defence of those areas will be vital. The next few months will be critical in seeing Unionist/Loyalist attempts to build a unified response to the Protocol on the streets.

The DUP may well have been shafted by Johnson, but he will nonetheless attempt to conciliate Unionism by appearing to drive a hard bargain with the EU on the Protocol. A bit late perhaps as it is already law but he has given notice that the grace period for incoming food products will be extended, presumably until after the Loyalist marching season is over and the threat of violence subsides.

This is a sticking plaster remedy. Either he respects Biden, EU and international law and faces down Loyalists or he risks a land border with far greater economic chaos ensuing and political opposition from Biden and the EU to more forceful actions on the border. Ideally, Johnson would want some cosmetic or technical improvements on present arrangements, an EU concession perhaps, that can quieten Unionism. But even that may be too late for the growing paranoia that afflicts Unionism.

GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

A key component of the 1998 GFA was the need for an open border on the island of Ireland. This was made easy as both states were in the EU and this common membership proved how futile the border was in Ireland. Brexit has changed all this at a stroke. Of course, Brexit was not designed with Ireland in mind and its disastrous economic impact is only just beginning.

Unionism's problem is that it jumped on the Brexit bandwagon despite business/farming interests (often Unionist themselves) wanting to remain. The only way they can detract from this is by playing the Orange Card, whipping up fears that the Union with Britain is under threat and rather more important than membership of the EU.

So, the implications for the open border meant that Brexit was always going to have an impact on the GFA.

The Border was right back into Irish politics again. The GFA was a power sharing compromise between pro and anti-border parties representing the two main communities. Even though it assured Unionists of a veto over a united Ireland, it meant that they could not rule unilaterally like they had since 1921. At first the DUP were utterly opposed to power sharing. Further climb downs by Sinn Fein shifted their stance.

Right now, a growing core of DUP and Loyalists seem intent on returning their state to direct rule from Westminster. The GFA is unravelling fast. Yet everyone, from Biden to Blair, from Sinn Fein to the Tories, swears by the peace deal. Brexit has exposed its limitations.

The intractable contradictions at the heart of the northern state have only been preserved by the GFA. The birth of the Northern Ireland state was an undemocratic affront to the people of Ireland as a whole. It became a prison house for a significant minority within the state itself. That injustice cannot be papered over by a deal which has, if anything, entrenched sectarianism, where the peace walls remain and where there has been no 'peace dividend' for the working class.

Sinn Fein will no doubt point out that the GFA has a provision for a border poll as well. Yes, it has, but this is entirely within the remit of the British government to call or not. And not is the likely answer. The future of Ireland as a united island cannot rely on the whim of British imperialism. Any transition to a united Ireland must be under the control of the Irish working class. It will be necessary to create organs of mass struggle to ensure that forces of capitalist reaction in the south no less than in the north are defeated and that any new Ireland is owned and controlled by the working class in a Workers' Republic.

Britain has a long history of oppression in Ireland. The British border is a continuation of this, it should go. The Irish people, as a whole, should determine their own future. Time for Britain to withdraw and let Unionism transition from its present chaos to its final death agony.

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