

Ulster says 'Remain' Brexit and the Northern Irish election result

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The Northern Irish Assembly election on 2 March resulted in a fundamental shift in Northern Ireland's political landscape. For the first time since the partition of Ireland in 1921, the Assembly does not contain a Unionist majority i.e. those who expressly want to maintain Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom (UK). While a diverse range of reasons have been given to explain this shift, Brexit lay at the heart of an election result which has wider implications for the unity of the UK.

Until this recent election the largest Unionist party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), had been in a power-sharing executive with Sinn Féin, the largest Irish Nationalist/Republican party. Power-sharing at the Assembly, as envisaged by the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement in 1998, necessitates representation of both communities by the two largest parties in the Assembly. Sinn Féin withdrew from that agreement on the basis of the Renewable Heating Incentive ('Cash-for-Ash') scandal which was a green energy grant initiative that had been overseen by a DUP Minister, Arlene Foster. The scheme was grossly mismanaged. While the scandal precipitated the election, Brexit was a deep underlying fissure between the uneasy coalition partners – the DUP and Sinn Féin.

Foster was elected leader of the DUP in December 2015 and led that party to victory in the May 2016 Assembly elections before going on to lead the 'Leave' charge in Northern Ireland during the Brexit referendum in June of last year. The DUP was the only mainstream party in Northern Ireland to back a 'Leave' vote. 56% of the Northern Irish electorate voted 'Remain.'

In a land which often finds it difficult to look beyond its own internal power struggle, the prospect of controls being reinstated along Northern Ireland's 500 km land border has been a rare unifying factor. There have been protests on both sides of the border where people from both communities in Northern Ireland have been expressing their discontent at the thought of anything less than the current free movement. The border is highly symbolic and border controls are very much associated with the violence of Northern Ireland's recent past.

The rhetoric emerging from London has changed over time in the context of Northern Ireland. At first, the objective in negotiating the UK's exit from the EU was said to be ensuring the continuation of complete free movement with the Republic of Ireland. However, Theresa May's keynote speech in January confirmed her pursuit of a 'hard' Brexit. Now, May is set to pursue what she has called "as seamless and frictionless a border as possible." The worst fears of the Northern Irish public have thus been confirmed as some controls along the border now seem inevitable.

The turnout for the Assembly elections in May 2016 was 55%. The Brexit referendum was seen as having a very strong turnout with 63% casting their vote. The recent Assembly elections saw 65% of the electorate fill their ballots, the largest participation since the election following the Good Friday Agreement. Political stakes have most certainly been raised by Brexit.

The most significant result of the election was the loss experienced by the DUP who dropped from 38 seats to 28. Sinn Féin finished just behind the DUP, with 27 seats. The surge in Sinn Féin's vote mainly reflects its success in

increasing voter turnout in Nationalist/Republican areas. That increase in turnout can, to a certain degree, be put down to its vehement opposition to Brexit. Sinn Féin has been campaigning for special status for Northern Ireland inside the EU post-Brexit.

By contrast, the DUP underestimated the depth of anti-Brexit feeling. Still dogged by the 'Cash-for-Ash' scandal, Arlene Foster's media appearances often reverted into petty attacks on Sinn Féin and stoked Unionist fears that Sinn Féin could become the largest party post-election. This gamble on fear mongering failed. Unionist voters showed their apathy to this approach and underlined the DUP's abject failure to assuage concerns among the considerable number of Unionists who voted 'Remain.'

The DUP's unwillingness or inability to grasp the challenges posed by Brexit also led to the strong performance of the Alliance Party which has historically been a minor player. This party is not strictly affiliated to either tradition but is regarded as appealing to more moderate Unionists. The Alliance Party increased its voter share significantly in an election where its anti-Brexit stance clearly resonated with disaffected Unionist voters.

Being returned again as the two largest parties, the onus is on the DUP and Sinn Féin to re-enter into power-sharing with a three-week deadline to make a deal. However, there is no guarantee that these two most bitter of rivals can set aside their differences in order to form a government. As things stand it seems likely that the impasse between the DUP and Sinn Féin will continue. If no arrangement can be made then fresh elections can be called but any such re-run will not resolve the underlying vitriolic relationship between these uneasy partners. If power-sharing is not resumed, the Northern Irish Assembly will be dissolved and direct rule from London will be implemented.

In a month where Article 50 is supposed to be triggered, this election represents a stark message for Theresa May that the people of Northern Ireland have no appetite for any kind of border on the island of Ireland without a guarantee of free movement across it. However, the inability of the DUP and Sinn Féin to reach a compromise may lead to the people of Northern Ireland having no tangible voice just when they need it most. This may indeed make the triggering of Article 50 and the beginning of negotiations somewhat more straightforward for Theresa May as it will be much easier for her government to simply ignore Northern Ireland and its overwhelming opposition to the imposition of any border controls.

The election result will also embolden Sinn Féin in its objective of securing a border poll on the reunification of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland and comes just days after the Republic of Ireland's Taoiseach (prime minister), Enda Kenny, demanded inclusion of a special provision in the Brexit deal which would allow Northern Ireland to easily re-join the EU should it unite with the Republic of Ireland in the future.

Brexit has now become the unlikely engine for the break-down of one union which was seemingly set in stone (the UK) and the unity of another which until very recently seemed like being only a remote possibility (Irish reunification).

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