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North of Ireland

Context and challenges of Sinn Féin's unprecedented electoral victory in the Assembly elections

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On 5 May a series of elections took place in the United Kingdom. Scotland, Wales and England (i.e. Britain) renewed part of their local governments (about 150 assemblies out of a total of 400, or about 4,000 seats out of a total of 20,000). On the same day, Northern Ireland re-elected its autonomous parliament (Stormont) resulting from the process of “devolution” initiated by the Belfast Agreement of 1998 (also known as the “Good Friday Agreement”).

For the first time since the partition of Ireland and the creation of Northern Ireland 101 years ago, Sinn Féin, a left-wing, nationalist republican party in favour of the reunification of Ireland, came out on top in this election, with 29 per cent of the vote and 27 seats (in an assembly which has 90 seats).

These elections have major implications on a variety of levels, for Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland itself, for the post-Brexit UK and on the international level, beyond even Europe.

First and foremost, Sinn Féin's victory is significant insofar as the political structure of Northern Ireland, since its creation, aimed to make such an eventuality impossible: everything was designed, from the outset, to guarantee Protestant majorities in favour of maintaining the province in the United Kingdom. By becoming the first party in the mini-state, Sinn Féin signals a historic development that is all the more significant since only two years earlier, in 2020, the same party had become the main political force in the south, during the legislative elections in the Republic of Ireland; with nearly 25 per cent of the vote. Sinn Féin, led by Mary-Lou McDonald inflicted an unprecedented defeat, again, on the tandem of historical right-wing parties which have traditionally exercised power (Fianna Fail and Fine Gael) [1].

These results are themselves so many additional expressions of the profound changes that are going through Irish society in the south as well as in the north, concerning, for example, abortion and marriage for all (in the Republic of Ireland), in this culture that was for so long under the influence of a particularly powerful Roman Catholic conservatism. Also central in the sequence opened up by the Belfast Agreement, there is the fact that there exists in Ireland a generation which, although amply informed about the recent history of the island, has not known the circumstances and the suffering of thirty years of civil war. Sinn Féin's audience today cannot be completely unrelated to the passage of time, which now distances the party from its link to the IRA [2] and the context of the armed struggle.

These profound historical inflections have for some years encountered the context created by the 2016 referendum on leaving the EU. The Northern Irish election at the beginning of May takes on its full importance in view of this situation, marked by the chronic deadlock on the question of the status of Northern Ireland in this context.

A chain reaction

Let us summarize. Northern Ireland was supposed to leave the EU, its single market, its norms and standards, along with the rest of the United Kingdom. This implied, for reasons of regulations on trade, the establishment of a customs border on the island of Ireland between the north and the Republic, which is still part of the EU. But for political and constitutional reasons, the project of such a border is unthinkable: it would contravene the provisions of the Belfast Agreement and would potentially be a factor in a resurgence of violence that no one wants to see. A temporary solution has been negotiated between the EU and the government of Boris Johnson: the “Northern Ireland Protocol”.

Under this arrangement, Northern Ireland remains in the EU single market, and customs checks are carried out in the Irish Sea, between Great Britain and the island of Ireland and not on the island of Ireland, between the 'British' North and the South.

For the Unionist and Loyalist parties in Northern Ireland (which defend remaining in the United Kingdom and loyalty to the English crown), this protocol is an affront since it establishes an intermediate, or hybrid, status of the northern part of the island, outside the territory of the United Kingdom. In protest and to force the Johnson government to break the agreement with the EU, the leader of the main Unionist party [3], Jeffrey Donaldson, therefore decided to boycott the power-sharing structure (within the executive) instituted by the Belfast Agreement, which he has done since the beginning of February 2021. Donaldson has also practiced the policy of the empty chair within the framework of the interdepartmental meetings between the north and the south. In doing so, he has been blocking the operation of the autonomous Northern Irish executive for more than a year [4] and thus continues to prevent Michelle O'Neill from exercising her mandate as First Minister resulting from the election of May 5.

Three factors contribute to weakening the historically hegemonic position of the Unionists. The first is due to the constitutional order resulting from the Belfast Agreement and which imposes, among other things, the principle of power sharing. But it should also be borne in mind that more recently, in 2016, a clear majority of Northern Irish people (56 per cent) voted to stay in the EU when the Unionists defended a Johnson-style exit. And thirdly, unlike Theresa May, whose survival depended on ten Unionist MPs after her collapse in the 2017 general election in the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson does not need a single Unionist parliamentarian in the Westminster parliament to ensure his absolute majority. . In other words, the Unionists cannot exert any pressure on the Johnson government in London where the English Tories (much more English than British) have been in the vast majority since December 2019. Hence the recourse to this other lever, namely the boycott and the pronged blockage of the Northern Irish executive.

Sinn Féin is strengthened

If Michelle O'Neill and Sinn Féin are now still prevented from governing, the dividends for them seem quite obvious: in the face of the DUP, defeated in the elections, which demands that the agreements made with the EU be trampled on, and which refuses to submit to the most elementary democratic rule, Sinn Féin has every opportunity to appear as a reasonable organization, respectful of – and fully in phase with – the popular will expressed at the ballot box (whether during the referendum on the EU or following the last legislative elections), anxious to make the institutions work well and to comply with the constitutional framework that is reputed to have made it possible to put an end to decades of carnage.

Furthermore, Sinn Féin, now the main political force in both the North and the South, can not only rely on the economic reunification established de facto by the protocol, and finally sees itself as being fully legitimate in demanding the implementation of the key provision of the Belfast agreement, namely, a referendum on the formal reunification of Ireland (but it should be noted that according to the 1998 agreement, it is still up to the British government to judge the advisability of such a consultation). This could mark the end of the former British colonial stranglehold on the north of the island. For the President of Sinn Féin, Mary-Lou MacDonald, this objective is intended to be achieved within five to ten years, since it is necessary, she explains, to proceed in an orderly manner, with the most skilful possible respect for deep-rooted identities (“British”, Protestant Unionists and Loyalists) which must be recognized and included, far from any spirit of revenge, in a singular regional multiculturalist nationalism (which could however lead to a pure and simple renewal of historical sectarianism, that terrible obstacle to any kind of class solidarity).

These possibilities are imminent, but as we can easily guess, nothing is obvious in this case. In the days following

that election, Johnson's foreign secretary, Liz Truss, made it known that the government in London had “no choice” but to get rid of various provisions of the protocol negotiated with the EU, since it was now a question of preserving nothing less than “internal peace”.

In the event of such a gross denial of democracy, and such a flagrant betrayal of the rules agreed both with the EU and within the framework of the Belfast Agreement, it is rather difficult to see how the recourse to violence – certainly always regrettable –, could not be posed. This is what could happen when the liberal democratic order commits the atrocity of serving interests other than those of the old colonial power and its most indefectible defenders.

We see here how the protracted Brexit crisis brings out the limits of the 1998 agreement which had, however, in its time, so well enabled the Anglo-American imperialist axis to pose as a skilful and benevolent mediator of ancestral and apparently insoluble conflicts – this, only five years after the Oslo agreements, the limits of which appeared incomparably more quickly, it is true. Having said that, it remains true that the situation remains largely dependent on what the American attitude could be in response to the breaches of contract envisaged (at the time of writing) by the British government [5]. Already, last September, Joe Biden let it be known in the clearest terms that he was “particularly attached” to the provisions concerning Ireland and Northern Ireland and that, both from his own point of view and that of his Republican colleagues, there could be no question of going back on it.

If things were not complicated enough like that, two additional indirect, but important, components must be added to this configuration of power relations.

Towards a qualitative weakening of the power of London

The first relates to the fact that, as everyone knows, the question of the reunification of Ireland (and the end of the United Kingdom, the only real solution to the Brexit crisis) is not the only national question posed to the government in London. The other comes from Scotland where the nationalist party (SNP) strengthened its hegemony a little more during the local elections at the beginning of May. Here too, the priority question is that of a new referendum on independence (after that of 2014, at a time when the Scots, overwhelmingly pro-EU, did not yet know that an English vote would impose a forced withdrawal into the historical imperial space of London's power). We can certainly count on these two national and nationalist dynamics, Irish and Scottish, to stimulate and reinforce each other.

So, no more Northern Ireland, no more United Kingdom; no more Scotland, no more Britain. And incidentally, Welsh separatism, admittedly less strong, does not however follow far behind, as the exit from the EU and the end of the structural fund programmes dispossess Wales too, financially and politically, of a large part of the sovereignty it thought it had acquired. For London, such dislocation and loss of regional control (over the three “small” nations of the United Kingdom) would mean an ultimate corrosion of the reputation of a strong state and of global imperial power. It is hard to see how the Tory supporters (followed by an increasingly right-wing Labour) of the “renaissance” of a “global” post-Brexit Britain, reaffirming its place in the world, could put up with such a rout in their own backyard [6].

Finally, there is one last component, the Republic of Ireland itself. Do we really want a reunification there which, in order to offer the necessary inclusive framework, would undoubtedly have to give up its aggressive capitalism, between the explosion of inequalities again, a catastrophic housing crisis and official tax havens? One can count on the Irish bourgeoisie – like any other – to be more concerned with the “stability” of the business environment than with national emancipation. Many of its intellectuals and columnists, over the years, have not failed to express their “liberal” rejection and condemnation of “extremism” and terrorism in the north, of Sinn Féin and the IRA [7].

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Is the contemporary Sinn Féin, the first political force in the south and north of the island, feminized, rejuvenated, led by high-profile female leaders [8], able to produce the terms of a renewed emancipatory and progressive nationalism? Its recent political dynamics deserve attention and solidarity. It remains to be seen what its increased participation and legitimization in the existing institutional order in the north and in the south will make of this political force: will it be the relay of the emancipatory aspirations and social movements of a new generation confronted with the extreme brutality of a largely subordinate Irish capitalism? Will it be able to put itself at the service of the resurgence already in progress of progressive aims for the whole of the island, against corrupt, decayed political and religious institutions, hostile for a long time to the upheavals that an effective reunification would entail, and therefore always determined to keep control no matter what? Or will Sinn Féin get bogged down in the swamps of normalization which would already agree to a federal reunification, from above, which would leave intact the autonomy of the North, would cajole its reactionary monarchist bigots in the name of respect for cultural diversity, and would be careful not to spoil the feast of the rich and their tailor-made political order in the south?

The “new era”, sometimes announced a little too quickly, is not for now. But Sinn Féin's advance is helping to outline its contours.

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[1] Sinn Féin, for the record, obtained 2.5 and 2.6 per cent of the votes in the general elections in the Republic of Ireland in 1998 and 2002 respectively. In the most recent (2016), it reached 13.8 per cent.

[2] A link that its political adversaries keep reminding it of, of course (but without however managing to arouse the fear that they hoped for)

[3] The DUP, for Democratic Unionist Party, openly pro-Trump, to get a quick and simple idea of its general orientation.

[4] The executive was already in deep trouble thanks to his predecessors, Arlene Foster (linked to a scandal that cost the Northern Irish government finances half a billion) and the creationist Paul Givan. Both were pushed out by their own party.

[5] It is not believed, however, that China intends to cruise its Navy in the Irish Sea in order to show its support for a “rules-based” international system, as the Johnson government had the great and noble idea of doing in the China Sea during the summer of 2021.

[6] I take up here a theme very well developed by Kieran Allen in his *32 Counties : the Failure of Partition and the Case for a United Ireland*, Pluto Press, 2021, p.58-62.

[7] Ibid. p.134-141. Thanks to Clemence Saintmarie for making me read this book.

[8] The contrast with Britain's leading political personnel, so sordid that it is not so far from being amusing, is very remarkable. It should also be noted that among all the main national political formations in Europe, Sinn Féin is probably the one that expresses the most rigorous and exemplary positions on the Israeli-Palestinian question, still often perceived, it is true, as a mirror held up to the colonial history of Ireland itself.