

## TOWARDS A REFERENDUM FOR REUNIFICATION IN IRELAND?

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*The disastrous consequences of Brexit in Northern Ireland (NI) have brought forth an unprecedented climate of talk about new political and territorial arrangements for the whole island. The Good Friday Agreement provides for a referendum on reunification whenever the Secretary for NI sees that a majority would vote in favour. The fact that the Catholic community is now the majority has encouraged speculation that a referendum could be celebrated sooner rather than later, although surveys show that no such majority yet exists.*



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In its origins, Northern Ireland (NI) was not necessarily meant to be a permanent territorial entity. The Treaty that ended the Irish War of Independence provided for a Border Commission to revise the territorial settlement. Independent Ireland aspired from the beginning to reunify the island, while northern Unionism aspired to maintain the *status quo* of the union with Great Britain. Historically, after the conquest of Ireland, there was a kingdom of Great Britain and a separate kingdom of Ireland, under the same monarch, but with separate Parliaments. In 1798, Protestant landowners and Catholic small farmers united in a revolt for independence and sought the help of France. French help arrived too late, and the rebellion was quashed brutally.

However, the fear of a united opposition on the island of Ireland led to an Act of Union in 1800 that created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. It also inspired the deliberate promotion of a sectarian divide between Protestants and Catholics that would prevent any united opposition in the future. But, after 26 of Ireland's 32 counties became independent in 1921, the UK became the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The division of Ireland had neither historical precedents nor a geographical logic. It was a calculated decision that turned identity into the motor of northern Irish politics. Despite the official commitment to reunification, independent Ireland did little to achieve it, and the overwhelming unionist majority in NI did everything it could to maintain its union with the UK and to deprive northern nationalists of any possibility of determining their own fate.

Membership of the European Union diluted the role of national sovereignty among member states and the fact that both parts of Ireland belonged to the EU encouraged the development of an all-island economy. Two events

brought the partition of Ireland into question. The crisis of mad cow disease that began in Great Britain in the 1990s led to a blockade of British beef by the EU. There was no mad cow disease on the island of Ireland, so Ireland could continue to export beef to the rest of the EU. Northern Irish farmers assumed that they could do the same, because they were on the same island, but the UK government forbade them from doing so because they were part of the UK. For once, Partition was a prejudice to the northern economy. The second event was Ireland joining the Euro. The tourist trade in NI was suddenly faced with the incomprehension of EU tourists who crossed the border from the Republic into NI, expecting to use Euros and surprised by the need to change currencies. This led to the NI tourist industry proposing a dual currency, something the UK government vetoed (although it now exists *de facto*).

### **Brexit and identity politics**

The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998 facilitated North-South cooperation on the island, and the all-island economy grew – one example being the fact that many northern farmers processed their milk in the south. Northern haulers accessed France directly by ferries from the south. The logic of an all-island economy became evident. However, Brexit put a stop to that. Brexit played to identity politics because its promoters insisted that it had to do with sovereignty and to the maintenance of the British identity. This identity is the essence of Unionist thinking, and it trumped the logic of economics and geography. During the mad cow crisis, Irish farmers benefited from direct mediation by the Irish government in the European Commission, but northern Irish farmers had no such direct access to mediation and found themselves at a disadvantage.

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During all the discussions previous to Brexit referendum, the majority of elected representatives in NI and the business and farming communities wanted to maintain easy access to the EU Single Market, but Unionists were willing to sacrifice such access to ideological notions of sovereignty. Now, the disastrous consequences of Brexit for the UK are gradually becoming much clearer. But, the consequences for NI are worse. As a result, an unprecedented climate of talk about new political and territorial arrangements on the island of Ireland has begun to emerge. Old terminology like a 'United Ireland' is unacceptable to Unionists. The Irish government is promoting a process of discussion under the heading of a 'Shared Island'. Some unionist thinkers speak of a '**union of Ireland**'. Unionists objected viscerally to the 'Northern Ireland Protocol' agreed by the UK with the EU because it separated NI from the UK semantically.

So, the UK proposed an alternative ‘Windsor Framework’, combining semantically an all-UK context with a monarchical reference, although from the point of view of the EU, there is no substantial difference between the Protocol and the Framework. The same is basically true of the latest ‘Strengthening the Union’ package that has persuaded the Democratic Unionist Party to return to government in NI.

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NI is not a viable state from an economic point of view. Tax income is only 60% of administrative costs. It must be subsidised by the UK. The British government uses a formula to calculate the basic needs of NI and Wales in comparison to England that is based on **six variables**: the proportion of the population who are under 16, retired, on benefits, from an ethnic minority, in a settlement with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants and with a long-term illness. By these calculations, the official need for NI should be 121% of England’s needs, but as recently as 2019, it actually cost 140% of England’s needs. Any talk of a union of Ireland will have to take economics into consideration. For most of recent history, the Republic was much poorer than NI and offered inferior health services. This had been a cause for reluctance to unite the two parts of the island, even among the northern nationalist community. This has now changed radically. The Republic is wealthier and offers better services. But southern Irish voters may wonder what the cost will be for them to finance a reintegrated NI.

In fact, southern voters have yet to seriously consider what reintegration might entail. It cannot simply be the absorption of NI into existing structures and institutions. It could be federal or confederal. It could require a new Constitution. Would it have the same flag and national anthem (both closely associated with Republicanism and therefore anathema to unionists). Could citizens have dual nationality (Irish and British)? Should Ireland rejoin the Commonwealth of Nations? The *Irish Times* has begun an **in-depth study of attitudes north and south** on the implications of uniting the island. Both nationalists and unionists will have to profoundly rethink what a new Ireland would be.