Is a united Ireland inevitable?

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A United Ireland is inevitable. Or at least that appears to be the consensus from a string of commentators, keen to outdo each other with predictions about the post-Brexit era. Even those who do not tout the inevitability of a United Ireland, suggest that we should at least prepare for its potentiality. Indeed, this was this basis of a surprising intervention by the former DUP leader Peter Robinson on the subject. Speaking recently at the MacGill Summer School, in County Donegal, Robinson stated: *"I don't believe Northern Ireland will want to leave the United Kingdom, but if it does happen we would be in a terrible fix because we would be in the same situation as leaving the EU where nothing was negotiated or decided about what was going to happen after."* Robinson suggested, following this, that Unionists should engage in a discussion as to what a post united Ireland might look like. *"I don't expect my own house to burn down, "* he told his audience, *"but I still insure it."*

Certainly Robinson's intervention might have as much to do with the internal dynamics of a fractious DUP, as it does with the future make-up of a united Ireland. Arlene Foster has been a sitting duck as leader since Stormont was engulfed by the RHI scandal, and all manner of manoeuvres both public and private are at work. Nor can Robinson claim to speak for the rest of the DUP, with his speech being met with a general hostility from former party colleagues. DUP MP Sammy Wilson led the charge, describing the comments as *"dangerous and demoralising,"* before proffering his own analogous description of the juncture; *"I don't prepare to go to the moon in Richard Branson's space shuttle because I have no intention of ending up there."* Other unionists replied in a similar vein; former Ulster Unionist Party leader Reg Empey accused Robinson of *"becoming a Sinn Féin echo chamber,"* while Traditional Unionist Voice leader Jim Allister said Robinson was feeding *"the republican myth of the inevitability of Irish unity"*.

Still, for a former leader of the DUP—who for many years was the strong-arm sidekick of Ian Paisley—to pronounce his willingness to prepare for a United Ireland, something significant must be occurring. And the polls would appear to confirm his assumption, given the rising support for a united Ireland. One recent survey conducted by Lucid Talk for the BBC, for example, found that 45% of people in the North wanted to remain as part of the UK, while 42.1% said they would like to join the Republic of Ireland. 12.7% said they didn't know. Whether this poll is accurate or not is hard to judge. And it is true that other surveys have put the margin much more in favour of remaining in the UK, with one survey by Queens University suggesting support for unity could be as low as 21%. Whatever the precise margin of difference, however, all of the polls are consistent that support for a united Ireland is on the rise. That much we can be certain of.

This should be welcome news to socialists and progressives across Ireland. Partition is a thoroughly reactionary device, arising from a counter-revolutionary movement supported by British imperialism in order to set up a 'carnival of reaction', that has copper fastened two rotten states over the last century. And it is not just the physical divide between North and South that matters. Sectarianism exists, and is perpetually recreated, precisely because of the way that partition guarantees the maintenance of a sectarian state, that shapes every political question in a communal manner. We are opposed to sectarianism, then, but we also understand that sectarianism can only be overcome as part of a simultaneous challenge to the structures that enshrine it. This includes partition. And in the South partition has been

key to maintaining the rule of the 'civil war parties'—Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil—and the golden circle of class corruption that their state is built upon. Furthermore, partition is used by the ruling class as a means to assist in the neo liberal transformation of Ireland. Just look at how the border is used to justify lowering corporation tax, or to keep wages low in order to ensure 'competitiveness' between the North and the South.

Socialists, therefore, are opposed to partition and to both states in Ireland. We stand in the tradition of James Connolly, and fight for a Socialist Ireland as part of a wider struggle for international socialism. And we welcome the opportunity to engage in a process that might reshape Ireland for the many and not the few. But we should be cautious, too, about falling behind any mythical notion that a united Ireland is in anyway predestined, or that Nationalist leaders will lead us to one. Many people have suggested the same in the past. History hasn't been kind to them.

The Return of the National Question

Despite pretences to the contrary, usually by overeager mouthpieces of the British and Irish governments, the Irish national question has never been resolved. Certainly, the last twenty years have not been marred by the intensity of violence witnessed during the Troubles, and this has been a welcome development. But on a number of occasions since the Belfast Agreement in 1998, the Northern state has entered into a fit of crises, revealing its deeply engrained contradictions. Most recently, this has led to increasedinterest in a United Ireland. There are, I think, four main reasons for this.

The first is Brexit, and its subsequent fallout. This might seem ironic, given the certainty of sections of the Tory right that exiting the EU would strengthen the British state. In reality, however, Brexit has accelerated the deep contradictions of that state; placing question marks over the future viability of the UK particularly in Scotland and the North of Ireland. In the 2016 EU referendum, a clear majority of voters in the North opted to remain. This tendency was particularly pronounced amongst Nationalists, and those who deem themselves as "other" (ie neither nationalist or unionist). The primary reason for this was the underdevelopment of the North as an economic region, and the fear that a Tory-led Brexit would disproportionately impact the area. Whereas in the South the EU was seen by many to have imposed austerity in Ireland, in the North people were more likely to point the finger at the Tories in London. During the peace process, the EU was consistently promoted as a benign and supportive partner in the move away from conflict. Most notably, the EU has funded the PEACE I, II, III IV programmes in the North; which according to its authors was designed to promote "cohesion between communities involved in the conflict in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland." Figures vary as to how much the North actually received from the EU. Leave supporters argued that the North was a net contributor to the EU, whilst remain supporters claimedto the contrary that it was a net beneficiary of anywhere up to £58 million. But whatever the true figure, few trusted that a Tory government would automatically honour the money for projects previously in receipt of EU funding.

In the North, and to some extent in Scotland, there is a growing sense that the Tories simply do as they please, against the wishes of the 'devolved' regions. The whole Brexit debate has been seen as another example of this, and the subsequent failure of Westminster to include these areas in any meaningful way in the negotiations with the EU—and its willingness to use the border as a political football—has only exacerbated this further. The terms of debate in the EU referendum, and the discussion about a post Brexit future, are set in London. The absence of any serious left-led campaign for exit in Britain, and the subsequent failure of the British left to agitate for a post Brexit program that took seriously its impact on Ireland (beyond the occasional nod to support for a united Ireland, without any suggestion as to how one might be achieved, or how the more immediate issues around the border may be ameliorated), has only heightened the sense that Brexit is a London-centric fight between Tory public school boys with no benefit to people in Ireland.

Perhaps the greatest Brexit related factor has been fear of instability. It was this factor that precipitated Peter Robinson to make his intervention on a united Ireland. As he said in his speech: *"No matter how one views the Brexit process it has been disruptive, distracting and - let's face it—wearisome. It could not have been otherwise. For a sustained period there has been a settled understanding of the constitutional position of Northern Ireland and its interaction with both the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.*

Shaking that tree was certain to cause an abundant fall-out." Robinson is not alone on this point. Rarely a week goes by without some commentator or other exalting the dangers of a return to the Troubles if Brexit goes ahead. Of course, much of this is hyped-up guff; the likelihood that a new generation of Catholic youth will rise up to reclaim their European identity is fanciful in the extreme. But a mixture of uncertainty, scare-mongering, and a genuine fear of the unknown has led many people to worry about the impact of Brexit. And how could it not. At the time of writing, over two years since the referendum, and the Tory government has still not arrived at a solution to the question of the Irish border. For that reason, and many more besides, an increasing number of people have become open to the idea of a united Ireland than they previously had been.

The second factor fuelling the return of the national question is the crisis of the Northern state itself. Over twenty years since the Belfast Agreement, and after nearly ten years of a power-sharing government, the Northern Ireland Assembly has again entered a protracted period of crisis; with a collapsed executive for over eighteen months, and an empty chamber at Stormont. The initial spark of the crisis was the Renewable Heating Initiative (RHI) scandal—the revelation that hundreds of millions of pounds had been squandered in a boiler renewal scheme set up by First Minister Arlene Foster. RHI was a symptom, however, not the ultimate cause of the instability in the North, and exposed in a dramatic way the underlying contractions of the Northern state. Crises of this kind are inherent to the sectarian state, which is built upon an unstable imbrication of competing communal structures. The particular form or the precipitating factor of these crises may change year to year, but sectarian instability will invariably emerge because of these tensions. RHI was not, therefore, just a case of blundering politicians botching a governmental initiative. Instead, it revealed the innate instability of the Northern state and its propensity to enter crises.

The collapse of Stormont has led many to question whether the bright new dawn promised by the Belfast Agreement will ever come. Additionally, a new generation of young people has emerged, unscathed by the experience of the Troubles (at least directly), and less susceptibleto the prognosis that the best the North can hope for is some stitch-up between Unionism and Nationalism. If you are aged 18-20 today, you were not born when the ceasefires were called, and still weren't when the Belfast Agreement was signed. Certainly, there is no uniformity here. And BBC producers will not have any difficulty finding some pre-prepped A-Level student who will tell the politicians that young people want Stormont back, as an excited Steven Nolan encourages them on. But it is also true that support for a United Ireland is higheramongst young people than any other group, and perhaps higher than it has been for a generation.

The third factor, and following directly from the second, is the historic crisis of unionism. The bedrock of partition has always been the ability of Unionism to maintain an artificial majority in the North. This was, after all, the motivation behind the drawing of the border in the first place, and the decades of gerrymandering that followed. In the last few decades, however, Unionism has been in slow decline. Most notably, of late, was the loss of its overall majority in the NI Assembly. There is also the question of the politics of Unionism today. Undoubtedly the amped-up sectarianism of the DUP allows it to create the kind of polarisation necessary for its vote to survive. But at the same time, its hard line opposition to equal marriage and abortion—not to mention its cosy relationship with the Tories—risks creating a gap between it and younger or more liberal people from a protestant background.

Lastly, and perhaps least quantifiably, is changes in the southern state itself. The economic uncertainty surrounding Brexit, combined with a recovery in the Southern economy since the crash, has made the prospect of joining the South more palpable to many people. Similarly, on social questions, the South would appear to be on the move whereas the North has been stalled by Unionist intransigence. The equal marriage referendum, and the repeal referendum thereafter, have created a gap in basic rights between the North and South. For the best part of a century, Unionist leaders warned that 'Home Rule means Rome Rule'. There was some truth to this contention, as the history of Catholic Church influence over the Irish state attests. But the equal marriage and repeal movements have weakened this presumption considerably, even with Varadkar's rapid backtracking on the role of the church in schools and hospitals.

Forward March of a United Ireland?

This National Question has returned, therefore. But can we say that any of these factors, or all of them combined, lead to the inevitable conclusion of a United Ireland? I want to argue that they certainly open up the possibility to reorder Ireland, but that it would be folly to think that there is anything preordained about its outcome. Crucially, the strategy and politics employed by those in favour of a United Ireland will matter. In particular, I want to argue that here are a number of pitfalls that a campaign for a united Ireland must avoid:

■ *Not relying on the EU:* Sinn Féin has been arguing that support for the EU is the main way to strengthen the fight for independence in Ireland, even going as far as to describe them as their "gallant allies". But the hard facts suggest that the EU has been an enemy of national sovereignty,or anything that upsets their apple cart. Take two recent examples. Firstly, the experience in Catalonia where a majority of people in the country voted in a poll to secede from Spain. The response of the EU? They sat silently as Spain violently crushed the movement, refused to recognise the vote, and assisted them in hunting down the democratically elected leaders of Catalonia. It was the same story in Greece. After the popular "Oxi" vote against austerity, the EU simply ignored them and pressured the Syriza government to capitulate. Since then, the Greek people have been forced to endure a vicious program of austerity that they never voted for. Brexit certainly opens up possibilities, but this is not to say—as some Irish and Scottish nationalists naively argue—that the EU is some sort of benign institution, that can be relied upon to assist them in their journey to sovereignty. Sovereignty is anathema to the EU, and the experience in Ireland will testify to this as well. In 2008, for example, Irish citizens in the South of Ireland voted against the Lisbon Treaty, only to be told by the EU that this was not acceptable. If the Irish people did not accept Lisbon, according to the EU, there would be catastrophic consequences. Eventually the Irish government ceded to a second referendum, in order to get a result that was to the liking of the EU—as was done previously in both France and the Netherlands. And the same thing happened after the economic crash, when the EU imposed a strict regime of austerity on the people of Ireland. In 2012, they warned that a financial "bomb" would go off in Dublin if bondholders were not paid. This is hardly an institution we can rely on as allies in the struggle for democracy.

■ *Against sectarian demography:* One of the main arguments advanced for the inevitability of a United Ireland is the rising Catholic population. Progressives should reject this as a strategy. We should do so firstly on principle; because there is nothing inevitable about Catholics voting one way and Protestants voting the other. And polls show this as well. It is true that identity and national allegiance is a factor, but we should be fighting to overcome sectarian divisions, not acquiescing within it. We want to fight for an Ireland where everyone—including working class people in the South, Catholics and Protestants in the North, and migrants on both sides of the border—can have a stake in. But it is not only a question of winning over those from a Protestant background. There is very good reason to doubt that a clear Catholic majority in the North would even deliver a united Ireland in a border poll. Firstly, no poll has ever shown 100% Catholic support for a united Ireland. But more importantly, is the degree to which Catholic support for a united Ireland fluctuates. Something most commentators ignore. Before the economic crisis, for instance, and during the boom years of the Celtic Tiger, Catholic support for a united Ireland grew. But after the crash, and during the worst years of the recession, Catholic support slumped to a twenty-year low of just 28% according to the Life and Times survey. Support has risen since, but there are obvious strategic conclusions to draw; in order to ensure support for a united Ireland, we must move the Irish economy away from the insane neo-liberal model that caused the economic crash of 2008. And this is why Sinn Féin's strategy of cosying up to Fine Gael and FiannaFáil is so dangerous. If they enter into a government that again reinforces this agenda, they may well wreck any hope for unity for another generation, as the crash of 2008 did.

■ *Separating Church and State:* As stated earlier, Catholic Church dominance over Irish life was one of the main ways that Unionism maintained its support base. The equal marriage referendum, and the repeal referendum, have both weakened this and opened up the possibility of creating an Ireland welcome to all faiths and none. Crucially, the mass movements behind them have showed the potential for creating a serious grassroots movement for change in Ireland. But sights are now high, and people North and South will be

demanding a complete separation of church and state. Unfortunately, Leo Varadkar is now backtracking, and seems unwilling to challenge church control of schools and hospitals. Again, if we are serious about winning people to a new Ireland then we have to follow through on the fight to separate the church and state. Anything less will again reinforce partition.

■ *No to a neo-liberal Ireland:* One of the worst arguments for a United Ireland, is that it will lead to savings by gutting the public sector, by removing duplications. This is an argument that Sinn Féin have at times fallen into. For example, their *Irish Unity: An Activist's Guide* was designed to explain to their members *"how to have a conversation about Irish unity"*. One question posed is: *"Will a lot of public sector workers lose their jobs if Ireland is re-united?"* The answer reads: *"Of course a United Ireland will lead to efficiencies in public services as we will no longer have two separate agencies dealing with each and every task of government."* This kind of vision might well excite the captains of industry and the wealthy in Ireland, but it will do nothing to entice ordinary working class people on either side of the border. If a debate about a united Ireland becomes serious, and this is the vision presented, then support will quickly evaporate. A new Ireland will need a national health service, a serious programme for homes and jobs, and a decent free education system. One RTE poll suggested that overall support for a reunited Ireland in the South dropped to 31% "if it meant paying more tax". In order to build support for unity, therefore, we must combine this with a move away from a tax system that is biased towards the wealthy and corporations. The Sinn Fein strategy of supporting a lower corporate tax rate will not assist in this endeavour. Instead, we must insist that a move towards a united Ireland must be combined with a massive redistribution of wealth in Irish society to create a new Ireland. This means moving away from a neo-liberal model of economics, towards a socialist one.

Labour Cannot Wait

The points above should be of interest to any supporter of a United Ireland, but they also come to the core of the difference between a Nationalist and Socialist perspective on the National Question. Like James Connolly, socialists see the fight to overcome inequality and injustice as inextricably linked to the struggle to build a new Ireland. One is not possible without the other, nor should the struggles of today have to wait until the national question is resolved. As Connolly put it himself; "The whole age-long fight of the Irish people against their oppressors resolves itself in the last analysis into a fight for the mastery of the means of life, the sources of production, in Ireland."

But this has not been the position followed by Nationalist leaders, who have invariably declared that issues must be parked in favour of the struggle for independence. Infamously, this was spelled out by Ireland's first President Eamon De Valera, when he declared that "Labour Must Wait". His argument was simple; the labour movement, and working classes more generally, should set aside their demands until after independence. But there is also a subtler variant of this politics, epitomised by the spin machine of Sinn Féin. Here, radicals are cautioned to moderate their views, to be "practical." When we demand higher rates of tax on corporations, Sinn Féin say we will get that in the Socialist republic. When we demand that the power of the wealthy needs to be challenged, Sinn Féin says we will get that in the Socialist Republic. Tied to this is a strategy of cosying up to the establishment North and South, to slowly and incrementally move towards independence. But this strategy has not worked. And has invariably led to radicals being tamed by the state, not the other way around.

The struggle for abortion rights is a useful example here. There can be no doubt that the movement for repeal seriously enlivened a new generation of people to the idea of a new 32 county Ireland; both in the way it has weakened church dominance over South, but also in the 32 county nature of the campaign. And yet, despite the great strength this campaign displayed, for many years Nationalists including Sinn Féin paid lip service to it. During a debate on abortion policy in Sinn Féin in the 1980s, Gerry Adams outlined this strategic orientation; "I merely point it out [abortion] as an example of an issue which cuts across the strategy of a successful national liberation movement which must be to rally the broadest mass of the people around certain fundamentals and upon an easily grasped programme of points on which people can agree. We need to avoid issues which are too local, partial or divisive."In the Nationalist strategy, therefore, issues like abortion are subordinate to the national question. Of course, this does not mean that Sinn Féin cannot change their

position. And they have. But it is an example of how nationalist's movements use certain issues, only if they can be of use to their cause.

This kind of perspective does not arise from the personalities of nationalist leaders. Rather, it emerges from the class nature of their movement; that seeks to bind Irish people rich and poor into the same party. In reality, however, the rich and powerful of Irish society have never been consistent supporters of freedom and equality. As James Connolly long ago argued, even if the Irish rich supported independence in words, in the end they had "a thousand economic strings in the shape of investments binding them to English capitalism as against every historical attachment drawing them towards Irish patriotism." A "union of classes" always led to disaster for those struggling for self-determination, Connolly insisted. Only the working class, and the mass of the people of Ireland north and south, were capable of the "the revolutionary reconstruction of society and the incidental destruction of the British Empire".

Socialist Strategy

Socialists, and the wider left for that matter, can play an important role in moving the discussion on a united Ireland away from the narrow confines of Nationalism. We should support a border poll as a basic democratic right, and oppose any notion that a majority is not enough to end partition. But we should creatively intervene into the discussion about what a border poll should look like. It is often presumed that a border poll would be a vote in the North to join the Southern state. We should argue, instead, that a border poll should be a vote to create a completely new state, not one where we simply subsume the six counties into the Southern state under the auspices of its conservative constitution. We need an Ireland where a roof over your head is an enshrined right, where everyone is guaranteedaccess to free education and health care, and to a basic and decent standard of living for all.

We should also boldly articulate a strategy for linking the struggle against partition with other struggles, and a radical vision of what a post-partition Ireland could look like.People Before Profit has produced a useful "vision document" for what it thinks a new Ireland should look like.This should be widely circulated and discussed. And we must insist that the struggles must be fought in the here and now. Socialists reject the idea that we can create a new Ireland by inveigling ourselves with the Green and Orange Tories on both sides of the border. We need a new movement, independent of these forces, that fights for a socialist Ireland.

Ultimately, however, the key to our strategy must be people power. We saw hundreds of people travel from the North to join the campaign during the repeal referendum. In the months after the referendum activists from the south returned the favour. It is this kind of endeavour, linked up in a mass way, that holds the potential to create the conditions for a socialist Ireland to emerge. We should proactively seekways to link up every campaign that emerges in the South with campaigns in the North and vice versa. As Eamonn McCann put it: *"We believe that the way to bring North and South together is through a concerted heave against injustice and austerity across this island. This is the practical approach to mending the divisions which blight our society and moving towards a better place."*

1 North should prepare for united Ireland possibility, *Irish Times*, 27 July, 2018
2 Peter Robinson's united Ireland remarks 'dangerous', BBCNI, 29 July 2018, *https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-45000495*
3 These Figures can be found in Lucid Talk 's May 2018 – Northern Ireland Tracker Poll
4 *https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/new-poll-finds-just-21-support-for-a-united-ireland-despite-fears-about-post-brexit-irish-border/*
5 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-36315882
6 For more on this see Endgame For Unionism, Rebel, *http://www.rebelnews.ie/2018/07/03/endgame-for-unionism/*
7 *https://sluggerotoole.com/2017/06/16/northern-ireland-life-and-times-survey-suggests-slight-increase-in-support-for-irish-unity-and-cross-community-support-for-abortion-reform/*
8 For more on this see Kieran Allen's article *http://www.rebelnews.ie/2018/08/28/state-still-protects-church-power/*
9 *https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/united-ireland-would-lead-to-public-sector-jobs-being-lost-says-sinn-fein-37279871.html*
10 *https://www.rte.ie/news/2015/1105/739708-cross-border-survey/*
11 James Connolly, *Labour in Irish History*, p166
12 Gerry Adams, *Signposts to Independence and Socialism*, 1988
13 James Connolly, *Labour in Irish History*, p24
14 *http://www.pbp.ie/our-vision/*
15 *http://www.irishnews.com/paywall/tsb/irishnews/irishnews/irishnews//news/2016/05/03/news/people-before-profit-fights-for-those-left-behind-by-stormont-eamonn-mccann-506028/content.html*