

# EDITORIAL

## Turning point in the North

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The Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly elections on 5 May marked a seismic shift for the North and for the country and as whole.

In a state that was set up a century ago with the express purpose of creating a jurisdiction with a unionist majority in perpetuity, the unionists lost their majority. Not only was Sinn Fein returned for the first time as the largest party with 27 seats, compared to the DUP's 25, and thus entitled to nominate the First Minister, but the Assembly of 90 seats in total contains only 37 unionists (9 UUP, 1 Traditional Unionist Voice and 2 'independent' unionists). In terms of the popular vote the results were even worse for unionism. The DUP vote shrank to only 21.3% as compared with 28.1% in 2017 and 29% at this election for Sinn Fein.

- The ongoing and profound crisis of Unionism has been subject to repeated and detailed of analysis in this journal over the years. Here it is sufficient to list some of the main factors involved in its historic decline.
- The declining importance of the North as an industrial base for British capital. Hence, when push comes to shove, the willingness of even 'unionist' Tories like Boris Johnson to throw Unionism under a bus.
- The growing inability of Unionism, because of this decline, to throw crumbs, in terms of marginal advantages, to its working class and lower middle class base.
- The slow but steady demographic shift which has changed a society that was over 60% Protestant at the time of Partition into one which is almost evenly divided between those of a declared Protestant and declared Catholic affiliation.
- The emergence of a new generation 28 years after the IRA ceasefire and 24 years after the Good Friday Agreement for

whom the sectarian divisions and allegiances of the past hold less and less meaning. (at the last census over 16% declared themselves as having no religious affiliation).

- The increased immigrant population, also free from sectarian allegiances.
- Major changes in the South – both the economic development, most marked during the Celtic Tiger and the end of Church domination as signalled by Repeal – which make the bogey of 'Rome Rule' much less available.

The combination of these factors finds Unionism impaled on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand its core bigoted message – not only anti-Catholic but also misogynistic, homophobic, and generally out of touch with the 21st century – is less and less appealing to the majority, less and less able to reach out beyond its Orange heartlands. On the other hand as a declining and increasingly beleaguered force it dares not move away from that core bigotry for fear of further fragmenting its fundamentalist base. Hence the bizarre spectacle of the temporary election of Edwin Poots, 'the dinosaur who doesn't believe in dinosaurs' [Joe Brolly] as DUP leader and the arcane internal conflicts over conversion therapy.

The chronic intractability of the crisis of Unionism does not mean a united Ireland is coming tomorrow. The British ruling class, with Scottish Independence in the offing, will not welcome the reduction of the empire 'on which the sun never set' to the kingdom of England and Wales. The Irish Government, despite its ritual declarations, has no appetite for such an upheaval and even Sinn Fein will probably be cautious. Such a momentous development will require a massive push from below.

Nevertheless what happened on 5 May was an important step in that direction. Moreover it was widely heralded before the actual election so the prospect of inflicting this defeat on the DUP will have affected voting. In this situation it was almost inevitable that we in People Before Profit would find our vote squeezed, particularly as our voters would be among those most keen to give the DUP a bloody nose and the obvious way to do that would be to vote Sinn Fein. As Eamonn McCann commented:

'Also, I think that everybody knew from the start the fact that we are going to have a battle between Sinn Féin and the DUP to be top dog, as it were and that was overwhelmingly what the election seemed to be about, what the coverage was about.'

Given these difficult circumstances PBP performed pretty well. We waged a big and intense campaign with 12 candidates, focused on the cost of living and crucially Gerry Carroll kept his seat in West Belfast defeating the DUP for the fifth seat. In Foyle Shaun Harkin, stepping into the shoes of Eamonn McCann, polled a strong 2621 first preferences, rising to 4032 after transfers. Particularly encouraging were the results of first time contenders such as Siphon Sibanda and Hannah Kenny. Siphon polled 629 first preferences in Belfast South and Hannah Kenny, in the face of a vile sectarian assault, got 500 in the difficult territory of Belfast East. Thus creating a very solid platform to build.

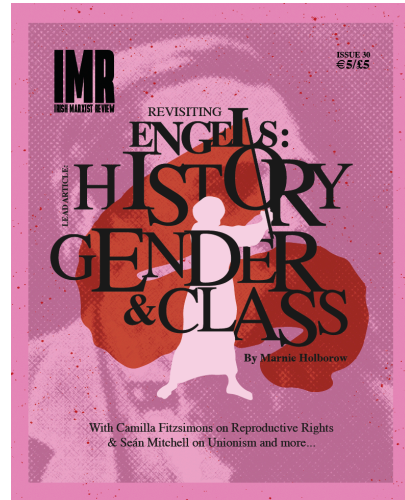
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Obviously politics over the last few months, nationally and internationally, have been dominated by the War in Ukraine, and increasingly by the cost of living crisis. This issue contains two major articles on these issues: Kieran Allen on the politics of inflation and John Molyneux on Ukraine: Debates on the Left. In addition we have important contributions from Mark Walsh on War and the Environment, Marnie Holborow on Homes, Gender and Capitalism and Ian Rappell on Biodiversity in Crisis. There is also an interesting contrast of views on David Graeber and David Wengrow's controversial book *The Dawn of Everything*.

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# Irish Marxist Review

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