

# Regressive and Unstable – Stormont Returns to Failure

*Michael Jackson*

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On 3 February, the North's devolved institutions were restored - two years after they were collapsed by the DUP. Local and world media once again crammed into the grand foyer of Stormont's 'Parliament Buildings' to herald the return of the most fragile of governments. In a building renowned for false dawns, media fanfare suggested there was at least some hope that the new Executive would immediately set about tackling the extensive to-do list that had accumulated in its absence.

Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, government in the North has been suspended five times, the longest being between 2002 and 2007 following the discovery of an IRA spy ring at Stormont. While the Assembly has been in a state of collapse for over 40 percent of its existence,<sup>1</sup> the most recent period was marked by the worst cost-of-living-crisis in living memory, renewed austerity efforts from the Tories,<sup>2</sup> and the biggest strike wave witnessed in Ireland for some time.<sup>3</sup>

The immense pressures facing the incoming Executive seemed far from the minds of those who came to rejoice in Stormont's restoration, however. Corridors were thronged with immaculately dressed members of Sinn Féin's wider parliamentary apparatus, who came to celebrate the crowning of Michelle O'Neill as the North's first nationalist First Minister.

Government parties entered the Assembly chamber promising a new beginning and pledging to tackle the multitude of crises that emerged during their 24-month-hiatus, not least the issue of public sector pay.<sup>4</sup> People Before Profit MLA, Gerry Carroll, the lone socialist representative at Stormont, was in a minority of one in pouring cold water on such notions - pointing to the Executive's economically regressive and unstable past. As the intervening period has shown, the newly restored Stormont has indeed been fraught with difficulty and racked by instability from the very beginning.

Mainstream commentary continues to suggest that the DUP collapsed the Executive over its concerns about the post-Brexit trading arrangements.<sup>5</sup> However, its self-serving boycott was predominantly about placating loyalist hard-liners and staving off electoral losses to its right (in the form of TUV). To understand the roots of the most recent Stormont collapse we have to go back to the Brexit vote in 2016.

### **Brexit and the collapse of Stormont**

The DUP supported the call for Britain to leave the European Union in 2016, and although a majority in the North disagreed, the DUP soon found itself in a position of strength. In 2017, the new Conservative leader, Theresa May, gambled that a snap election would give her the parliamentary majority necessary to get her Brexit deal over the line. This gamble backfired spectacularly, however, when Jeremy Corbyn's radical manifesto helped the Labour Party to surge in the last weeks of the campaign. This resulted in a hung

parliament. It also meant that with just 10 MP's in the new parliament, the DUP were suddenly king makers. May needed them to govern, so they set about leveraging their new position for extra money and extra influence. But they simultaneously sold May out by refusing to back a withdrawal agreement that would have included customs checks between Britain and Ireland under its 'Northern Ireland Backstop' provisions. Unable to get her deal over the line, May was replaced as Prime Minister in 2019 by Boris Johnson who promised to 'Get Brexit Done'. Johnson, who the DUP had paraded around its 2018 conference, soon found himself in the same predicament as his predecessor.

This was the start of the trouble for the DUP, moreover, as they looked to hardliners in the European Research Group and Boris Johnson to make sure that any agreement was based on a hard Brexit that would include the whole of the UK – Britain plus Northern Ireland. But as he has done so often in the past, Johnson made commitments he was never planning to keep. He promised unionism he would deliver a hard Brexit for the whole UK. But when the EU insisted on customs checks for any part of the UK remaining in the customs union, Johnson put the interests of British capitalism ahead of his previous support for the DUP. His 'Northern Ireland Protocol' deal, reproduced much of the detail in May's Backstop Arrangement including a border in the Irish Sea that allowed him to present his government as having gotten Brexit done.

This ‘betrayal deal’, as the Orange Order branded it, immediately brought immense pressure onto the DUP. On one side, the TUV demanded stringent opposition to Johnson’s ‘sell out’. Hardline unionists, amongst them loyalist paramilitaries, could hardly countenance any border between the North and Britain, viewing the Irish Sea Border as an undeniable threat to the union. On the other side, more moderate unionism demanded a deal that would protect the interests of Northern Irish capitalism. Represented by the Ulster Unionists and the Alliance Party, these unionists wanted the benefits of being inside the European Single Market and the UK Internal Market and they valued political stability above hardline rejection of the trading agreements. The DUP needed to placate the hardliners without losing the economic advantages, but they were soon under massive pressure from the TUV - a hard right organisation headed by tub-thumping, unionist fundamentalist and former DUP member, Jim Allister.

To shore up their right wing base, the DUP embraced their sectarian roots, whipping up unionist fears around the Sea Border that they themselves had helped to create. Mirroring the TUV, they embraced the outrage espoused by sections of loyalism, holding up the Protocol as a bogeyman to ordinary working-class protestants who might not otherwise have cared. With Arlene Foster at the helm, the party made headlines for Brexit-related meetings with the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC), an umbrella organisation for the UVF, UDA, and Red Hand Commandos paramilitary groups. Given the DUP’s politics, and its historic

role in founding the paramilitary Ulster Resistance, its blatant engagement with loyalist paramilitaries shocked virtually no one.<sup>6</sup>

And moral outrage from a small number of media sources was not enough for them to scrutinise the DUP’s motivations or the destination that their strategy might lead them to. In February 2021, less than two months after the Protocol came into effect, port staff were already facing threats from loyalists over the new customs checks. By April, young people incited by loyalist paramilitaries were rioting - ostensibly over the Protocol - at the Lanark Way interface in West Belfast. Unfortunately, their young nationalist counterparts responded with bricks and petrol bombs of their own.

Amid escalating sectarian tensions, Belfast also experienced a few rare acts of anti-sectarian, working class solidarity, as bus drivers staged several walkouts after their colleagues fell victim to riots<sup>7</sup> and acts of violent disorder.<sup>8</sup> No doubt, the DUP played a significant role in fanning the flames of loyalist discontent, but the insincerity of its opposition to the Protocol was also increasingly obvious. Arlene Foster, for example, had branded an early iteration of the proposals “a serious and sensible way forward to have engagement with the European Union” and was never really trusted after that.

Calls for more stringent opposition to the Irish Sea Border from both inside and outside the DUP saw Foster ousted from the party’s leadership in May 2021. She was

succeeded by Edwin Poots, who was himself replaced by Jeffrey Donaldson just 21 days later. The swift rotation of leaders showed that the DUP were feeling the heat and desperately grasping for a strategy that would appease those most ardently opposed to the post-Brexit arrangements. Anti-protocol protests, some headed by prominent loyalist crank, Jamie Bryson, were a key feature in the early period of Donaldson's leadership. At a party-political level, anger about the Irish Sea Border continued to be most vocally represented by the TUV and it was in this context that the DUP finally withdrew from the Stormont Executive with the resignation of the then First Minister, Paul Givan, in February 2022 - the subsequent collapse of the Assembly followed soon after.

With the May 22 Assembly Election looming, DUP representatives looked anxiously over their shoulders at the TUV, hoping that a boycott of the institutions would stave off electoral disaster. Finding themselves in a difficult position, the DUP calculated that they would need to polarise the election along sectarian lines if they were to see off the TUV and keep pace with Sinn Féin. The boycott was accompanied with the call for an end to the Irish Sea Border and for the North to be 'reinstated' into the UK's Internal Market.

### **Tory 'Carrot and Stick'**

Having sold them out twice, the Tories were initially happy to indulge the DUP in their undemocratic boycott, showing little desire to pressure their one-time allies back into

government. Indeed, they used the crisis at Stormont to attempt to renegotiate the Brexit deal. First, they brought forward a Bill to unilaterally suspend the Protocol; then they opted for the DUP's preferred option of renegotiation with the European Union. Secretary of State, Chris Heaton-Harris, was content to take a hands-off approach while government colleagues re-entered the Brexit negotiations, which concluded in February 2023. The resulting deal - dubbed the Windsor Framework - was a sop to DUP hardliners who now had every reason to believe that their intractability was getting results. In its terms of reference, the Windsor Framework cites "acute political, economic and societal difficulties" allegedly caused by the Protocol. It should actually have stated that the difficulties were rooted in the tactical decisions of the DUP to cynically deploy the sectarian veto enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement for its own narrow electoral self-interest. Structured around communal division and designation, the Assembly is continually prone to stasis, crisis, and collapse.<sup>9</sup> Yet, rather than treat the cause of the problem in the sectarian nature of the institutions, the EU and the British government sought to treat the latest symptom. In other words, they attempted to deal with the DUP boycott on its own terms rather than looking at the reason why one party could collapse the government in the first place. In so doing, they have further legitimised the sectarianism inherent in the institutions with the introduction of a new mechanism called the 'Stormont Brake'.

The Stormont Brake was a sop to the DUP, allowing them to argue that they had gained crucial leverage over the post-Brexit trading relationship. In theory, it allows MLAs to veto any new EU regulations around the movement of goods but, in practice, it is little more than a complaint mechanism with the real power left with a British government that has no mandate in the North. Provisions for triggering the ‘emergency brake’ are also sufficiently vague as to allow Westminster to dismiss any objection from Stormont. The entire mechanism rests on Stormont’s sectarian and undemocratic ‘petition of concern’. In the past, this tool has been used to block popular demands for equal marriage, abortion access, and Irish language rights. A divisive and destabilising measure in any circumstance, the petition has the potential to further polarise opinion on sectarian lines in any wrangle over the application of EU law. Opportunities for the Stormont house of cards to come tumbling down over the post-Brexit arrangements abound.

Some years ago, in a now infamous interview about the DUP’s blocking of long-promised Irish language legislation, Arlene Foster remarked that when you feed a crocodile it tends to come back for more. The same analogy might be used to refer to the DUP’s anti-Protocol actions. They had forced a concession from the Tory government, and they were not about to enter government without their full pound of flesh.

But the Tories were not about to concede anymore ground. Having offered the carrot of a Stormont Brake they were about to issue the stick of austerity to communities across

the North. In the absence of an Executive, Heaton-Harris was obligated to set a budget for Stormont’s Departments for the 2023/24 financial year. True to Tory form, the budget contained a raft of brutal budget cuts aimed at punishing local communities to ramp up pressure on the DUP. Funding provided to the Department of Health shows the severity of the attacks on the public sector. CPI inflation had reached 8.3 per cent when the budget was announced (April 2023), yet the Department was given a flat cash budget of £7.3billion. Belfast Telegraph journalist, Suzanne Breen, accurately summed up the situation when she told the BBC’s Sunday Politics show that it was a ‘bloodbath budget’. Cuts were paired with renewed talk of - and later Tory instructions for - revenue raising measures such as water charges, prescription charges, and higher tuition fees, all of which are still up for debate.

### **Communities fight back - Stormont is restored**

Crucially workers were not prepared to be hapless victims in the face of Tory austerity. On the eve of the budget, schools across the North were shut down by striking teachers who have had their pay eroded by up to 33 percent since 2010. Health workers had also taken to the picket lines in the days and weeks preceding the budget in a dispute about pay and safe staffing levels.

Workers were already incensed that the DUP was refusing to govern and, in most people’s view, preventing other local parties from tackling declining wages and crumbling public services. Now working families were

also on the receiving end of vicious Tory austerity, deployed as part of a strategy to force the DUP back to Stormont.

Working class communities had an early victory when mass protests forced government functionaries to roll back proposed cuts to early years services, which would otherwise have led to widespread job losses and left many families and young people without childcare or early education.

A series of public sector strikes soon followed, involving teachers and education support workers, health workers, civil servants, and transport workers. These showed the power of the working class, but they also showed the limits placed on this power by trade union bureaucracy. Instead of harnessing the class into a full assault on Tory austerity, the union leaders opted for a series of one-day on-off strike actions, with each section of workers (or each union as was often the case) taking turns at striking. This led to an absurd situation where unionised workers crossed their colleague's picket lines as their own unions was not out on that particular day.

Of course, this was not the fault of the workers themselves, who had sacrificed pay, time, and energy during the strike wave. Many of them were crying out for more coordinated and generalised action which simply was not forthcoming. The stop-start, take-it-in-turns strategy was concocted by a trade union bureaucracy trained through years of social partnership. Trade union leaders unused to organising any serious industrial action perhaps bargained that sporadic strike actions might shame the

Tories into giving workers a pay rise, or perhaps even restoring the Assembly. In practice, this strategy had the effect of sapping workers' fighting energy as the months passed without resolution.

But just as a broken clock is right twice a day, even the most conservative trade union leaders can grasp a blatant opportunity when it presents itself. Rumblings about a potential deal to restore Stormont had reached the public by December 2023. Around this time, the Secretary of State announced that an additional £3.3 billion - including £600 million for public sector pay - would be provided if the Northern Assembly got back up and running. When the New Year arrived the trade unions decided to play their hand, calling some 170,000 public sector workers out in what was arguably, the largest strike since the loyalist-led Ulster Workers' Council Strike of 1974.<sup>10</sup>

Workers had demonstrated their willingness to take up the fight against low pay and budget cuts. For the best part of a year, the more militant among them had been calling for the kind of coordinated strike action that briefly brought parts of the North to a standstill. Unfortunately, their struggle was mediated through a conservative and powerful trade union bureaucracy which dictated that the Tories could get their way without providing sufficient funding to cover their public sector pay obligations. Trade Union conservatism helped to ensure that the Tories could coax the DUP back into government with a relatively minimal financial package. And this, in turn, meant the new Executive would still not be able to properly invest in workers' wages or public

services. The deal, known as the ‘Safeguarding the Union’ document contained other worrying aspects, including a pledge to further integrate the North’s war industries into the UK’s military defence and a recommitment to devolve corporation tax, which local establishment parties have wanted to slash for some time.<sup>11</sup> The document is explicitly couched in the language of the DUP, but it is deliberately light on substance - combining lots of window dressing with the relaxation of some customs checks to allow the DUP to save enough face to get the deal over the line. But if media commentators were more honest it would have been represented as an embarrassing climb-down for the party, which had lied to protestant workers about the dangers of the Protocol in the first place. Their decision to suspend Stormont was never about the Protocol after all. It was about a set of calculations designed to arrest the decline of the DUP itself.

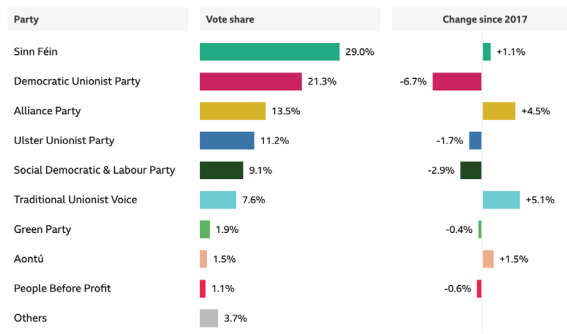
### **Historic decline of Unionism**

The backdrop to all of this is the historical decline of Unionism which has rumbled on despite the best efforts of the DUP to reverse it. Unionism has been in steady decline for decades and in this longer context the Brexit debacle represented two additional errors that have proven extremely costly. First, the DUP campaigned for Brexit on the basis that it would solidify the union, but they failed to appreciate that the Tories would always rank their own neoliberal fantasy ahead of any considerations of the Irish Sea border. The British elites were always going to sacrifice the North to secure Brexit for the rest of

Britain and the failure to see this constituted a major strategic error by the DUP. Second, they trusted Boris Johnson when he made the same calculation. The Tories wanted to neo-liberalise the mainland economy and the North would always come a distant second to the competitiveness of British capitalism. These DUP miscalculations gave Sinn Féin a golden opportunity to present itself as the party of progress and as the party that would bring the North back into the European Union as part of a United Ireland. No less importantly, the DUP’s actions exposed a major Faultline within unionism between those who take a hardline position around loyalist symbolism and those who want to protect their economic relationships with the EU and the UK.

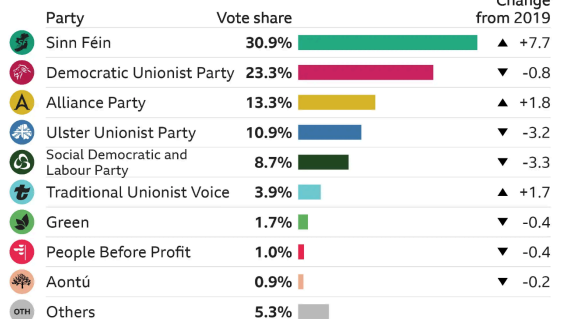
In this context the DUP is losing support on both sides of its electorate. It has lost support on its right to the TUV, and to the neoliberal centre- particularly to the Alliance Party. In the end their tactical decision to collapse the Assembly slowed their electoral decline. But it also meant that when they did re-enter the Executive they did so under significant pressure. Back-to-back elections showed that while their boycott helped to prevent major losses to the TUV, it was not enough to outstrip Sinn Féin or to stop Alliance from eating into its vote. The May 2022 Assembly election saw Sinn Féin become the North’s largest party for the first time with 27 seats.<sup>12</sup> The DUP picked up 25 seats - three less than in the 2017 Assembly election, while the Alliance Party surged to pick up nine additional seats, 17 in total.<sup>13</sup>

## First preference results



Sinn Féin repeated its success in the 2023 council elections as it usurped the DUP as the biggest party in local government, gaining 39 seats across the North. Alliance gained 14 seats while the DUP stagnated.

## Council Elections 2023: First preference vote share



15:25, 20 May



The DUP entered the debate around Brexit as the more or less hegemonic force within unionism. They leapfrogged the Ulster Unionists through their rejection of the Good Friday Agreement and reinforced their support by initially refusing to work with SF. When they reversed this decision in 2007 the party had already consolidated its support among unionists, and so, for much of the

decade to 2017, the DUP improved its own position even as unionism declined overall. The Brexit debacle then fractured unionism into a number of parts, at the same time as it consolidated power for Sinn Féin. Perhaps the DUP's biggest challenge was the Hobson's choice that gradually developed once they collapsed the Assembly. Although their own electoral fortunes were the primary driver of that decision, part of the reason for keeping the institutions down was their realisation that going back into Stormont now meant accepting the reality of a SF First Minister. Bigotry and assumed supremacy remain strong motivators for the DUP, but every day that the Assembly was down was a day that Sinn Féin was gaining ground.

For their part, Sinn Féin just had to trot out simple and well-rehearsed lines about the need to restore the Executive as a sort of silver bullet to people's problems. The fact that Sinn Féin had worked hand-in-glove with the DUP to cut services and attack workers' living conditions was easily forgotten. As was the still-undelivered peace dividend promised by the neoliberal proponents of the new Northern Ireland post-ceasefire. Indeed, thanks to the intransigence of the DUP, Sinn Féin were able to ride on the crest of a wave for the best part of two years. Not only were they absolved of government duties in a period of economic crisis, but they were also effectively gifted two election results on the back of a hard-up public's desire to punish the DUP.



### Stormont restored

It was these considerations that eventually convinced enough of the DUP to accept the terms of the ‘Safeguarding the Union’ document. They recognised that remaining out of government was helping their most bitter rivals and concluded that the sops included in the document were enough to allow them to go back in. Eventually, in other words, they accepted the need to allow Sinn Féin to ‘have their day’ in the hopes that they could reassert their own authority over unionism -through their dominant role in the Executive - at the same time as they could tie SF into unpopular decisions around budgetary decisions and public services. Ahead of the big restoration ceremony, the two main parties reached an agreement that would have seen the DUP take the Finance Ministry, but they instead opted for Education unexpectedly leaving Sinn Féin’s Caoimhe Archibald in Finance. Indeed, the DUP shrewdly lumped its main rival with both the Finance and Economy Ministries putting them firmly in charge of an austerity budget of just £15 billion. The Sinn Féin honeymoon may well be coming to an end but the price for unionism has been extremely significant, at least in the short run - a nationalist First Minister in a state that was built to exclude and oppress the nationalist community. In Catholic districts where the seemingly unassailable might of the undemocratic and unjust Orange State was most strongly felt, a nationalist First Minister is enormously symbolic. It indicates that the loyalist structures that oppressed them for generations are no longer functional, but what material changes this

will deliver in people’s lives is far less certain.

Built on communal segregation and communal designation, the newly formed Assembly will continue to grapple with the legacy of sectarianism. And in any case, symbolism, however powerful, will not be enough to satisfy the needs of workers on any side of the communal divide. A day one appeal to the then Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, for additional funding showed that the £3.3 billion on offer from Westminster was not, and is not, enough to deliver public services. Stormont’s establishment is nervous about the task at hand but has already set about implementing its latest austerity budget, which passed despite some vocal opposition.

Although the Finance Minister was keen to talk up the £685 million allocated to settle the various pay disputes that had arisen while the assembly was down, she also quietly briefed the Finance Committee that the Executive was “not in a position to fund the full £700 million of estimated pay costs identified by departments”. This was the prelude to a real terms pay cut for most public sector workers, sold to them by their respective trade union leaderships, who stymied worker militancy with their stop-start strike strategy. This has renewed anger among many sections of the public sector with the budget failing to provide money for a pay rise for junior doctors or a pay and grading review for education support workers. At the time of writing, junior doctors are still in dispute with the government while the education support

workers are to be balloted on a belated offer, the details of which remain unclear. Meanwhile, The Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC-ICTU), whose leadership maintains close links to Sinn Féin, appears in no mood to rock the boat, despite a clear and obvious return to austerity. Neither pay cuts, the reimposition of hospital car parking charges on health workers, nor the revenue raising measures that hang like the sword of Damocles have been enough to stir the leaders of the trade union movement. Currently, NIC-ICTU is in the process of co-designing industrial legislation alongside Sinn Féin Economy Minister, Conor Murphy. Limited discussions suggest Murphy wants to strengthen social partnership in-line with the NIC-ICTU policy document that he recently helped launch at Stormont.<sup>14</sup> It would be foolish to believe that the trade union leadership will be drawn into battle with the new Executive without any serious rank-and-file trade union strategy. This must seek to restore workplace democracy and provide a countervailing force against a union bureaucracy, which will be tied ever closer to the political establishment. Otherwise, trade union leaders will continue to march workers up Stormont Hill, and then back down at their whim.

The 2024 Westminster election only added to the DUP's electoral woes, moreover, as they lost three seats, one each to Alliance, TUV, and UUP. The news that the party leader, Jeffrey Donaldson, had been charged with a series of historic sex offences in March was yet one more disaster for a party in crisis

since at least 2020. Sinn Féin held its ground in terms of seats but is now the North's biggest party at Westminster with 7 MPs. With Stormont restored, the stark polarisation between Sinn Féin and the DUP which marked the Assembly and Council elections was notably absent. A year earlier they were tearing strips off one another. This time an apparent electoral armistice prevailed, perhaps alluding to the fragile nature of the new Stormont regime.

Once again engaged in mutual misrule, the DUP and Sinn Féin are eager to present a somewhat unified front. Seemingly, the glossy PR photos of Sinn Féin's Michelle O'Neill and the DUP's Emma Little-Pengelly (the sliotar sisters) playing camogie, walking arm in arm, and talking of political progress, were not to be tarnished by an acrimonious election campaign. If the DUP continues to suffer such electoral losses, however, it is doubtful any side can keep up this charade.

### **An exit strategy?**

For its part, Sinn Féin will desperately cling to power in the North as it attempts to take power in the South. Led by 'First Minister For All' Michelle O'Neill in the North and, it hopes, Mary Lou McDonald in the South, it is anxious to exemplify responsible management of the entire island in order to strengthen support for its conservative vision of a United Ireland, where its Finance spokesperson Pearse Doherty insists corporate welfare will remain untouched.<sup>15</sup> Managing the expectations of a largely working-class base while implementing a brutal economic programme in the North

will be a tough balancing act for Sinn Féin. So too will convincing its southern supporters that it is not just another establishment party in waiting. In the most recent European and local elections in the South, Sinn Féin finished a distant third to the two main conservative parties – caught between those who wanted it to get tougher on immigration and those who see the party drifting towards the establishment. Their chances of forming the next government in the South look to have lessened but there is a long way to go and in the meantime, Sinn Féin will continue to court ruling class elements to its ‘New Ireland’ project at the same time as it talks left on social issues.

In that context, any left-wing project worth its salt must be able to articulate a clear socialist vision for a United Ireland that can uplift all working-class people, regardless of communal background. After all, what is clear from the recurrent crises at Stormont is that the Northern establishment offers very little to working people while the British ruling class no longer has a coherent strategy for dealing with the North. When Conservative leader, John Major, signed the Downing Street Declaration, which insisted Britain had “no selfish strategic or economic interest” in the North, he could hardly have imagined Chris Heaton-Harris’ floundering in the face of Stormont’s most recent crisis. The Secretary of State’s unwillingness to take any direct policy decisions over the course of two years could be as good an indication as any that the British establishment does not have an answer for the ‘Irish Question’.

British capitalism is in a state of decline, with the UK economy recently slipping into and then out of recession. The Tories have responded with the Thatcherite playbook of high interest rates for the banks, tax breaks for the corporations, and massive public spending cuts. Locally, these cuts are being administered by Stormont and will be acutely felt in our overwhelmingly deprived communities.

The resulting political instability may be bad for business, but British capitalism is unlikely to respond to local decline by investing in the North or seriously factoring it into its long-term planning. This is not the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Orange capital meant something in British ruling class calculations. But while British capitalism might not need its union with the North, it does need the Tory party to represent its interests. And although it has recently been booted out of office, the Tories still need the union, or at least the veneer of a strong United Kingdom and this is the key reason that the Tories occasionally pander to DUP demands.

That said, the relationship between British capitalism, the Tories, and the unionist establishment is increasingly fractured and contradictory. The decline of British capitalism means there are less resources to placate unionism, particularly as the major move by the right of the British ruling class involves a neo-liberalisation of the UK economy that will put it in dispute with the EU Single Market.

For these reasons the Tories have consistently let their unionist allies down and have occasionally played hardball with them. But at the same time, the British establishment also need to maintain the union and are desperate to avoid a United Ireland as the harbinger of an independent Scotland and the breaking up of the United Kingdom. This is why the Tories constantly deploy an unstable strategy of carrot and stick with the DUP, placating and then cajoling them in turn.

The latest Tory-DUP pact also further integrates the North into British military spending at a time of significant tension between the world's imperialist powers, most notably being played out in NATO's proxy war in Ukraine. In that context, and in the event of Britain's entry into another global conflagration, the British establishment's interest in holding onto the North could be strengthened.

Given the experience of previous Stormont administrations, working class people must build on the experiences garnered during the recent strike wave and continue to place demands on the new Executive.

Socialists should raise the transitional demands of workers in the hope of staving off the worst of the government's attacks and of making some gains. However, we must be aware that the convergence of crises besetting the newly restored Assembly make it increasingly unlikely that it can deliver on these demands. Founded on sectarianism, strapped for cash, and already exhibiting signs of political fallout, Stormont's collapse is all but guaranteed.

This realisation should necessitate more open agitation and campaigning that lays the ground for a future beyond Stormont, one which reunites and reshapes Ireland in the interests of working-class people.

While the political establishment seems content to plough on, socialists will need a serious exit strategy that points to the inability of unionism, nationalism, and the northern state to deliver on the aspirations of ordinary people. Only then can the sectarianism and dysfunction of Stormont be consigned to the past.

<sup>1</sup>Pivotal. 2022. Governing Northern Ireland Without an Executive. Available online from: <https://www.pivotalppf.org/cmsfiles/Publications/20220901-Pivotal-briefing-Governing-Northern-Ireland-without-an-Executive.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> The Northern Ireland Office and Chris Heaton-Harris. 2023. Secretary of State writes to Northern Ireland Civil Service on sustainable public finances. Available online from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/secretary-of-state-writes-to-northern-ireland-civil-service-on-sustainable-public-finances>

<sup>3</sup> Dáire Cumiskey. 2023. A day of power and unity in Northern Ireland. *Socialist Worker*. Available online from: <https://socialistworker.co.uk/news/a-day-of-power-and-unity-in-northern-ireland/>

<sup>4</sup>Northern Ireland Assembly. 2024. Official Report: 03 February 2024. Available online at: <https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2024/02/03&docID=386860>.

<sup>5</sup> Jayne McCormack. 2023. NI's government has returned to Stormont - what you need to know. BBC NI. Available online from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-67726389>

<sup>6</sup> Ian Cobain. 2019. Troubled Past: the paramilitary connection that still haunts the DUP. *The Guardian*. Available online from: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/27/troubled-past-the-paramilitary-connection-that-still-haunts-the-dup>.

<sup>7</sup>Jordan Doherty. 2021. Bus drivers pull services after 6pm in areas where safety 'is not guaranteed'. *Andersonstown News*. Available online from: <https://belfastmedia.com/belfast-bus-drivers-on-strike>

<sup>8</sup> Jane Corscadden. 2021. Belfast bus drivers stage 'walkout' to protest against ongoing attacks after Rathcoole hijacking. In *Belfast Live*. Available online from: <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/belfast-bus-drivers-stage-walkout-22102969>

<sup>9</sup> Eamonn McCann. 1994. Worth Fighting For. *Socialist Review*, No. 175. Available online from: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/mccann/1994/05/interview.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Martin Melaugh. Fionnuala McKenna. Ulster Workers' Council Strike – Summary of Main Events. Available online from: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/uwc/sum.htm>

<sup>11</sup> The Northern Ireland Office and Chris Heaton-Harris. 2024. Safeguarding the Union. Available online from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-the-union>.

<sup>12</sup> BBC NI. 2022. Northern Ireland Assembly Election Results 2022. Available online from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2022/northern-ireland/results>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Irish Congress of Trade Unions Northern Ireland Committee. 2024. Democracy at Work - Social Dialogue and the Tripartite Model. See: <https://www.ictuni.org/news/nic-ictu-launches-new-policy-paper-social-dialogue-long-gallery-tuesday-5-march-2024>.

<sup>15</sup> Kieran Allen. 2023. Sinn Féin's Southern Strategy – The Long March to the Centre. *Irish Marxist Review* Volume 12 Issue 36.