



By: *Harvey Morris*

# Whither the Union after a nationalist takes the helm in Northern Ireland?



The appointment of the first nationalist politician to head Northern Ireland's power-sharing government was hailed by her supporters as a step towards fulfilling their dream of breaking the province's ties with Britain and joining a united Ireland.

Michelle O'Neill diplomatically avoided any such boast at the weekend in her **opening address** to the reconstituted Stormont assembly where her Sinn Féin party shares power with the Democratic Unionists.

The deal that led her elevation had more to do with the untangling of a botched post-Brexit accord on trading arrangements with Europe than on reviving the question of the region's future status.

Developments in Northern Ireland, when coupled with the fortunes of nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales, nevertheless offer some pointers to current state of the Union.

While nationalists in Ireland are experiencing a possibly short-term high, their counterparts in Scotland and Wales are somewhat in the doldrums because of factors that have little to do with the independence issue.

They have failed to profit from the crises that beset the UK at Westminster to a degree that might have been expected less than a decade ago.

## Post-Brexit opportunities

In 2016, the decision of a majority of UK voters to leave the European Union was seen as having dealt a potentially irreparable blow to the historic union of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Scottish and Northern Irish voters had, after all, voted by substantial margins to remain in the EU. But their votes did not decide the outcome given the size of the leave vote in England and in Wales, where some analysts attributed the result to Brexit-voting English retirees.

Two years earlier, Scottish voters had opted by a 10 per cent margin to reject independence in their own referendum, a result that might have been much narrower or even reversed had Scots known they would be soon be leaving the EU.

## Nationalists within England's partner nations could be forgiven for believing that their time had come

As the Westminster parliament descended into factional squabbles and stalemate over the substance of post-Brexit arrangements with Europe, nationalists within England's partner nations could be forgiven for believing that their time had come.

The dominant Scottish National Party, under the leadership of first minister Nicola Sturgeon, pressed for a new independence referendum but was **spurned** by a UK government that asserted the Scots had already had their say.

Sturgeon quit unexpectedly in early 2023, citing the pressures of the job, before become briefly embroiled in a police investigation of her party's finances.

The Welsh nationalists meanwhile had their own scandal the same year, when the Plaid Cymru leader Adam Price was forced to quit after an investigation exposed a culture of harassment and bullying within the party.

It was wider events, however, rather than internal scandal, that prevented nationalists from fully seizing their post-Brexit opportunities.

## Northern Ireland, as a special case

With economic challenges already preoccupying voters across the UK, Covid-19 struck. Scotland's SNP, like the Conservative government in Westminster, have being

paying the price for their handling of the pandemic.

A tearful Sturgeon defended her own conduct at a recent Covid inquiry hearing at which she rejected allegations that she had prioritised the independence issue during the crisis.

In Wales meanwhile, Plaid Cymru, the third largest party in the devolved assembly, has failed to exploit the setbacks of the Labour minority government, linked to Covid and its alleged “war” on motorists. Opinion polls indicate that the number of Welsh favouring independence remains stubbornly at little more than 20 per cent.

**The nationalists are threatened by a Labour resurgence in which a reformed party under the leadership of Keir Starmer hopes to recapture some of its lost heartlands in northern England and Scotland**

Like other parties across the UK, including the ruling Conservatives, the nationalists are threatened by a Labour resurgence in which a reformed party under the leadership of Keir Starmer hopes to recapture some of its lost heartlands in northern England and Scotland.

Opinion polls indicate that while support for Scottish independence remains fairly static - as in the 2014 referendum those who oppose it are ahead - Labour has overtaken the SNP in the run-up to the next UK general election.

But, if the fortunes of nationalists in Wales and Scotland appear to be dwindling, what of Northern Ireland, as ever a special case?

## The main challenge to the Union

While O’Neill’s Sinn Féin are celebrating her appointment, the moment also represented a small triumph for Rishi Sunak’s Conservative

government, which negotiated its way out of an impasse that threatened to undermine a decades-old peace deal.

In practice, O’Neill will enjoy equal status with her Unionist deputy Emma Little-Pengelly under the power-sharing deal that the Unionists had boycotted for two years in protest at post-Brexit trade arrangements.

While the nationalists were celebrating, the bulk of the population was breathing a sigh of relief at an outcome that promised to end a period of economic as well as political uncertainty, sweetened by a £3.3 billion financial package from London.

In the Republic of Ireland, opposition Sinn Féin is now the most popular party, having attracted younger voters and lower paid workers faced with rising rents and housing costs, rather than by promoting the unification cause.



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So, whither the Union in a year which is likely to see a new UK government in power at Westminster?

For Welsh nationalists, independence remains a distant dream. Most voters appear unpersuaded that Wales could prosper on its own.

In Scotland, the SNP has yet to convince a majority of the benefits of going it alone and a further referendum on the issue seems a more

distant project under the party's new leadership.

Northern Ireland has avoided the total collapse of a power-sharing arrangement that had threatened to reignite sectarian conflict. As envisaged in the 1998 Good Friday agreement, Irish reunification will only come if people on both sides of the border embrace it.

The majority Protestant and Unionist northerners remain opposed but changing demographics might one day change that. As things stand, North Ireland might survive for decades.

The main challenge to the Union is that its advantages are no longer as evident as perhaps they once were. A new UK government of whatever stripe must look urgently at developing devolution, possibly through giving greater powers, not only to member nations but also to English regions.

For it to survive, the people of all four members of the Union have to be persuaded that they are better off together than they would be apart.