



Lebanese American University

Department of Social Sciences

Course: Senior Study - POL499

The Effect of Brexit on the Unification of Ireland

by

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Thursday 8 December 2022



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Abstract

While Northern Ireland voted against Brexit, the constituent country was forced to leave the EU, hence the many ramifications on its affairs. This research explores how Brexit shifted the balance closer to Irish unification. It first establishes a stalemate regarding unification and how this stalemate was broken. Drawing on different papers, literature, and books, this research examines the effect of Brexit on identity, consent, and destabilization of Northern Ireland. We find that Brexit has converged the unionist identity with the English identity contributing to its decline locally. We also find that Brexit destabilized the country and violated the principle of consent. These findings are analyzed and their effect on the political context is specified, concluding their effect on Irish unification as a result. The main conclusion of this research is that Irish Unification is now contingent on non-aligned parties who could look to unity as a ticket back to the EU, but that is reliant on the success or failure of the Northern Ireland Protocol.



ABBREVIATIONS

BIC – British-Irish Council

DUP – Democratic Unionist Party

ECC – European Economic Community

EU – European Union

GAA – Gaelic Athletic Association

GFA – Good Friday Agreement

IRA – Irish Republican Army

MP – Member of Parliament

NIRA – New Irish Republican Army

NSMC – North/South Ministerial Council

PM – Prime Minister

SDLP – Social Democratic and Labor Party

UK – United Kingdom



Introduction

Northern Ireland, the northern part of the Celtic Island, is under the United Kingdom as a constituent country. The long history of violence in Northern Ireland stretches back to the 1600s when British and Scottish “planters” first settled in Ulster, a province in the north of Ireland. The two main fighting sides were unionists who are loyal to the United Kingdom and are mostly Protestants, and nationalists who seek to be united with the nation of Ireland under its Republic and are mostly Catholics (Clancy, 2010, p. 7, 8).

As a result, many riots occurred over the years, bombings from different paramilitary groups in the name of retaliation, in addition to several massacres on civilians including Bloody Friday (1972) and Bloody Sunday (1972). The conflict, known as The Troubles, claimed the lives of around 3,500 people. To end The Troubles, an agreement called the Belfast Agreement, also known as the Good Friday Agreement, was signed in 1998. It eliminated a hard border between north and south and ended the conflict. The treaty involved the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, and most of Northern Ireland’s political parties. It set the political system that is present in Northern Ireland today based on power-sharing and consent of the people (Clancy, 2010, p. 7-16).

The Good Friday Agreement was the sum of all the arguably failed agreements that came before it (Aughey, 2005, p. 86), and a result of two war-weary communities (p. 45) that came to realize that “any total victory would be unstable, uncomfortable, and unsustainable” (Bruton, 2000, as cited in Aughey, 2005, p. 98). The GFA was ambiguous enough and yet carefully crafted to provide both sides with a mostly satisfying result. To nationalists, Northern Ireland remains a part of the UK since there is no consent for unity with Ireland in this part of Ireland. To unionists, they had to accept that the consent of nationalists is needed to maintain Northern Ireland’s place within the UK (p. 98, 99). The GFA also provided governing and legislating bodies with devolved powers related to local issues. It retained the



powers of security, taxation, EU matters, and foreign policy to the UK (Aughey, 2005, p. 87; McGarry & O'Leary, 2004, p. 11).

In 2016, talks of withdrawing British membership from the EU started. The UK government held a referendum in 2016, in which 51.9% of British voters chose to leave the European Union. In the referendum, the majority of votes in Northern Ireland along with Scotland voted to remain. However, the decision was a sum of all votes and did not take into account the different devolved governments' stances on the matter (Garry et al., 2021). As the conversation of leaving the European Union was first opened in 2016, concerns over the Northern Ireland case arose claiming that Brexit is a threat to the peace process. Common membership of the UK and Ireland has provided a framework that made border politics, a major point of conflict between unionists and nationalists, easier to ignore (Mulhall, 2016, as cited in Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017, p. 499).

This research will examine the effect of Brexit on the question of Irish unity. The paper will start by establishing a stalemate in the process and conversation around Irish unity. After that, it will state proof that the stalemate has been broken as a result of Brexit. Then, political identities of Northern Ireland would be dissected in their core, their development after the Good Friday Agreement, and the effect of Brexit on these identities. It also explores the principle of consent, which is crucial under the GFA, and how it has been treated throughout Brexit and possibly violated. Finally, we explore how Brexit destabilized the region. We later discuss how the changes triggered by Brexit could lead to the unification of Ireland.

Research Question

This research paper would analyze the different prospects of the post-Brexit climate in relation to the possible unification of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. It



attempts to understand this relation by understanding Brexit's different ramifications on Northern Irish politics. The main research question is: How has Brexit shifted the earlier balance towards a unification between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland?

This research hypothesizes that Brexit has moved Northern Ireland towards this unification. It intends to answer how has Brexit pushed towards a unification and to what extent.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

For this study, the main research method to be utilized is the revision of data from various literature sources. The type of resources to be used in this study are books and different scholarly resources covering each aspect of the topic. Although this study specifically focuses on the political and social context in Northern Ireland post-Brexit, it will also provide a background of the identities to understand the change that the disputing communities went through. The main method for this research is a contextual analysis of existing literature.

The general theoretical framework is "Political Realism [that takes] people as they are" and yet does not "lose sight of things as they might be" (Aughey, 2005, p. 27). Given that, in this context, Northern Irish actors are not states, both unionists and nationalists are considered unitary actors. This is necessary since each actor follows their own rationale in pursuit of a different, in this case opposite, end goal. Mainly, however, this research highlights that such identities are dynamic not static, and their interests could change and develop.



Literature Review

Stalemate

Before Brexit, unification with the Republic had not been on nationalists' priority list. In 2001, SDLP which was the leading nationalist party at the time saw talks of unification to be premature and "irrelevant to stabilizing institutions of the Agreement." The calls for unification have been majorly reduced after the GFA which saw nationalists believing in an eventual inevitable unification due to higher birthrates among Catholics than Protestants (Aughey, 2005, p. 138). The GFA took the border out of politics for unionists and took the border out of the island for nationalists making them feel safe and secure within Northern Ireland. Consequently, a 2015 opinion poll suggested that most Catholics (52%) backed short-term policies under the union, yet 57% still hoped to see a united Ireland in their lifetime (RTE, 2015, as cited in Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017, p. 502). Even Sinn Fein's election manifestos tended to focus on building institutions rather than unification (Cochrane, 2021, p. 230). The subject was mainly used to rally voters, specifically in the case of Sinn Fein who became the majority party among nationalists replacing SDLP through its reiteration of unification as its main end goal. For the UK and Ireland post-GFA, they were only concerned with "stabilism" and establishing institutions that sustained peace and functionality (Aughey, 2005, p. 101).

The reason why such stalemate existed was the lack of need to discuss core issues such as borders, constitutional status, and identities. The GFA aimed to remove such contested topics from daily and public political discourse to be replaced by issues of governance and institutions to build a viable economy in a war-torn region for all its peoples. This was possible within the stable context of UK and Irish EU membership. With the certainty of the British membership gone, there is a technical need for exact borders and an exact definition of Northern Ireland's constitutional status (Murphy & Evershed, 2021, p.



12). The membership of both countries provided a “safety harness” given the diversity model that the European framework provides for all identities in Northern Ireland, and the absence of such harness fosters uncertainty and leads to an ideational “freefall” of those identities (Cunningham, 2022, p. 12).

This stalemate was also rooted in the belief that unification can be achieved through the EU framework. Former Taoiseach, meaning head of government of Ireland, Garret FitzGerald, saw in the EU context as the key to resolving issues of identity in the north. Not only did the European economic model provide post-colonial Ireland a more symmetrical participation in trade with the EU and UK, but it also offered a bridge between unionism and “deep-seated partitionism in the South” (FitzGerald, 2003, as cited in Cunningham, 2022, p. 6). Therefore, FitzGerald’s united Ireland was not based on a distinct ethnic identity subjugated to a colonial power that finally acquired its right to self-determination, but a strive towards self-actualization of the Irish nation as a whole (p. 7). For nationalists, the EU framework provided close relations with the Republic and an alternative path towards unification. This is especially true for the Irish Republican Army (IRA), who agreed to a ceasefire in July 1997 and officially decommissioned in 2005 in pursuit of a different path than “armed struggle” (Cochrane, 2021, p. 231).

Clearly, Brexit brought the topic of unification back into public discourse. An example of that is a 2017 statement by the president of the all-Ireland Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), which affirmed the commitment of the association to a united Ireland. This was the first public statement of its kind at the annual congress in 15 years (Boland, 2017, as cited in Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017, p. 504). A nationalist activist, Raymond McCord, submitted an application asking to trigger a border poll by the secretary of state which was rejected in April 2020 by the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal (Montgomery, 2021, p. 23). Sinn Fein also called for a border poll in both Irelands (Garry et al. 2021, p. 3).



In the 2017 Assembly elections, Sinn Fein put Irish unity back on their political agenda leading to an unprecedented turn-out of young nationalist voters for the 2017 Assembly elections (p. 505). According to Murphy and Evershed (2021), Brexit brought back the discussion around unification of Ireland in an urgency that had not been seen since the Troubles, in addition to raising questions about the constitutional status of Northern Ireland from both sides that have been often overlooked for the sake of stability (p. 11).

Identity

The extent of effect that history still has on contemporary northern Irish politics is debated and sometimes underestimated. There is no denying that political identities and attitudes are in a state of constant change and development. However, the core of political attitudes in Northern Ireland has always been people subscribing to the political attitudes of the community and culture they are born into, identifying themselves with the “myth it takes from Irish history” (Stewart, 1977, as cited in Aughey, 2005, p. 12).

The contesting identities in Northern Ireland are not only based on cultural and religious differences, but also based on accumulated historical grievances. Both nationalists and unionists feel a sense of victimhood and self-pity. There is a sense of self-righteousness that justifies each side’s violence in the name of resistance and constant retaliation, the cycle of which seemingly would never end (Aughey, 2005, p. 10). It is also important not to reduce the impact that religion had and still has on forming political identities. Regardless of personal or theological beliefs, religion in Northern Ireland is a cultural subscription to one community which is enhanced through social institutions such as schools, churches, and segregated spaces and areas (Mitchell, 2006, p. 1-7).

The nationalist identity in its core is driven by Irish unity as its end aspired goal. This aspiration for this imaginative community is fueled by sentiments of nostalgia for what could



have been if not for the Irish partition of 1921. According to the nationalist view, the right of self-determination of the Irish nation “has been frustrated” by this unfair partition that rendered it two separate entities with two supposedly different rights to self-determination. To nationalists, Northern Ireland should not even exist. The region they live in is supposed to be the North of Ireland. As far as nationalists are concerned, the creation of this political entity was to “sustain inequality” and the marginalization of Catholics (Aughey, 2005, p. 40). The artificial nature of the Northern Ireland borders to ensure a protestant majority within has led to a community that does not consent to be part of the imaginative all-island Irish community of the nationalists.

The unionist identity is also based on nostalgia, but contrarily, towards a union with the United Kingdom. Unionists believe that for all the people of Northern Ireland to live and prosper, the region must be under the good governance of the UK. Only within the Union can the diverse cultural and religious identities be accommodated. The problem was that the other cultural and religious identities did not wish to be accommodated in a geographical entity they do not even recognize. In opposition, the protestant population saw the United Ireland project as an existential threat that would lead to their marginalization as a minority in a catholic-majority state. No amount of “rhetoric of goodwill or promises of future generosity” were able or might be able to convince unionists that they have a place within the Irish national identity (Aughey, 2005, p. 40).

Identities post-GFA:

To escape the zero-sum game of exclusive and conflicting identities, a post-nationalist view post-GFA emerged to accommodate all present national identities on the island. It replaced the idea of “either/or” with “and”, meaning the people of Northern Ireland can choose whether they want to identify as Irish, British, both, and/or a European trans-national identity (Aughey, 2005, p. 68). That way, the “Irish ideology”, meaning the strive towards



unification with the south, continues but with a more open stance regarding power-sharing and an indirect acceptance of the inability to overlook the Britishness of the north (Aughey, 2005, p. 69). Even before Brexit, there were projections that indicated a shift in political identities a decade after the GFA. A study by Tilley and Evans (2011) concluded that as political generations of Northern Ireland progress, it is more likely that a stable long-term democratic solution beyond the binary divide is found by the parties to maintain electoral support for them.

The modernist and postmodernist belief were that integration within the EU context would lead to the transformation of political identities in Northern Ireland. Modernist nationalists believed that economic integration and encouraging a single “island economy” would pave the way for a united Ireland. Some modernist unionists, however, argued that such European economic integration would instead make it easier for nationalists to reconcile a future within the UK (McGarry and O’Leary, 2004, p. 297-301). Unionists, in general, are more reluctant to accept European influence. A majority of unionist MPs voted against the UK joining the European Economic Community (EEC), now known as the European Union, in the 1971 Westminster vote. They have also historically aligned themselves with the Conservative party who are Euro-skeptic (p. 308).

Brexit’s effect on identity:

The utility of being European certainly made it easier for people in Northern Ireland to reasonably pick and choose the nationality they ascribe to. It also relaxed relations between unionists and nationalists. With Brexit, the binary that was seemingly ended, or more accurately pushed to the back, by the GFA came back to relevance: the binary of choosing to be either Irish or British. In Northern politics, the Leavers were clearly the unionists and the Remainers were nationalists. In such view and association of political identities, the result was bound to be considered a defeat of a community and the triumph of the other (Gormley-



Heenan & Aughey, 2017, p. 502). It is natural and predictable given the history of dynamics between the two communities that such “victory” would trigger a new challenge by nationalists that could threaten the stability of the constitutional position of Northern Ireland.

An influential writer and journalist, Fintan O’Toole (2016), argued that the referendum vote in Northern Ireland displays a proclamation of English nationalism instead of unionism (as cited in Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017, p. 504). In general, it is viewed that Brexit was “made in England” not only for its majority disapproval among devolved countries such as Scotland and Northern Ireland, but also due to its ideological motivations of anti-immigration, right-wing sentiments, and imperial nationalism that focuses on returning focus to the nation-state (Henderson et al., 2017, as cited in Cunningham, 2022, p. 10).

Cunningham (p. 11) also cited O’Toole (2018a) and discussed the convergence of unionist with the English identity. O’Toole stated that unionists’ concerns cannot be viewed independently from English concerns. This creates a shift in an identity of a community that has already been on uncertain grounds since the decline of its power and identity following the GFA (Aughey, 2005, p. 136, 139). To Northern Irish politics, unionists no longer represented a separate entity to the Union, but a “subsumed” group “into an amorphous ‘English’ genus” (Cunningham, 2022, p. 11). To unionists, an exit deal specific to the North threatens their identity because it places a border between the North and the UK fragmenting their special relation (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022, p. 3). To nationalists, their discourse around Brexit reverted to the traditional tropes of victimization, marginalization, and struggle (Tonra, 2021, p. 164).

O’Toole (2018a) also argues that Brexit is a representation of the UK’s insecurities towards its decline in hegemonic power, and that England never came to terms with this decline. He explains that in the imperial imagination, a state can either be colonized or a



colonizer. Therefore, if England is not currently the leading imperial power, then it is colonized (as cited in Cunningham, 2022, p. 10). This is what Cunningham (2022) labelled as imperial nationalism and pointed to its clash with cosmopolitan nationalism represented by national identities such as Irish and Scottish that look for support in their strive for independence through the supranational framework that the European Union provides (Keating, 2004, as cited in Cunningham, 2022, p. 7). However, he also calls cosmopolitan nationalism to have imperial aspirations. O'Toole claims that the new power geometries that arose from and after Brexit have led to an embrace by previously colonized countries such as Ireland of a supranational imperial identity beyond territories. This new vision of Ireland replaced the territorial nationalist ideology exemplified by the repealed Articles 2 and 3 of the Republic's constitution that claimed the North as part of it. Hence, cosmopolitan nationalism aspires to unite markets first and foremost, and by extension, its people, and territories (p.12).

Consent

The Good Friday Agreement (1998), along with the culmination of the treaties that came before it such as the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985) and the Joint Declaration known as the Downing Street Declaration (1993), all highlighted the importance of the consent of the majority of Northern Irish people as necessary for any future constitutional changes. At the time of the Agreement, the GFA indicated that there was a simple majority for Northern Ireland's place in the UK, and until this simple majority changes, Northern Ireland will remain part of the British Union (Aughey, 2005, p. 98). Thus, Irish unity can only come through a democratic referendum that indicates the will and consent of the simple majority of the north as well as the south of Ireland (Montgomery, 2021, p. 6). The second definition of consent under the GFA is regarding governance. According to the GFA, consent of all parties is needed for the functioning of the Agreement's institutions (p. 11). In case the Northern



Irish Secretary of State in Westminster deems a vote for unity attainable, the GFA provided the mechanisms for initiating a border poll (p. 15-17).

Although it would appear to be, at first glance, a matter of time until Catholics become the majority which could technically lead to a vote for Irish unity if the referendum was held, the issue is more complex. If a Catholic/nationalist majority came to be, Protestants/unionists would remain a considerable minority just like Catholics were at the time of the Irish Partition (1921). Such minority is still capable of destabilizing the region. Montgomery also noted that even if a majority vote for unity was acquired, the transitional period from under UK jurisdiction to jurisdiction of the Republic could be held back and derailed by the unionist minority, especially that their cooperation is required to ensure they are accommodated under the new authority just as nationalists are right now under the UK (p. 23). Additionally, consent for governance as defined by the GFA implied a cross-community consent no matter the majority which was unionist at the time. Hence, a demographic change is not enough on its own to acquire unity or govern the region (Aughey, 2005, p. 99).

Accordingly, the Irish stance on waiting to establish peace and prosperity upon the foundations of the GFA and not relying on a simple majority is consistent (Irish Government, 2020, as cited in Murphy & Evershed, 2021, p. 13). There has been a general understanding among moderate nationalists since the founding of the New Ireland Forum (1983) and onwards that to achieve a simple majority for Irish unity, meaning to legally acquire the consent of the majority, is not possible without persuading a portion of unionists. This is further reiterated in the Downing Street Declaration in which the Taoiseach asserted the importance maintaining a peaceful relationship between the two identities of the island especially in the process of achieving Irish unity (Montgomery, 2021, p. 12). Before Brexit, the opposition to constitutional change and therefore unity was sustained through a unionist majority and the “neither” category. Usually, the non-aligned tend to favor devolution within



the UK to maintain the status quo. However, after the unionist bloc lost their majority in 2017, the group to convince and sway could be the non-aligned “neither” category (Murphy & Evershed, 2021, p. 13).

Brexit on consent:

Going back to O’Toole (2016), he claims that Brexit is against the spirit of the GFA and threatens the core principle which this agreement is built upon which is consent. He elaborates that Northern Ireland did not consent to be removed from the EU. It also undermines the consent of nationalists who saw the EU as means to eliminate the border (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017, p. 504). Garry et al. (2021) also set forth that the UK risks destabilizing itself as a multinational state with its exit from a confederation such as the EU without strong support and consent from each of its nations. This is especially heightened when the region is prone to violence and conflict as is the case in Northern Ireland (p. 10). Ironically, unionists who previously relied on the consent of Northern Ireland to justify membership in the union now claimed the consent of the North regarding Brexit does not matter since the North is part of the UK who consented to exit the EU (Beachain, 2019, p. 264).

The negotiations for an exit deal pertaining to Northern Ireland mainly focused on avoiding a hard border between north and south. This naturally implied a special status towards Northern Ireland within the UK and towards the EU, especially with the creation of an economic border between Northern Ireland and the rest of Britain (Garry et al., 2021, p. 2). The Northern Ireland Protocol states that Northern Ireland would remain in the single market of the EU for goods and agricultural products. It would have to follow the rules and regulations of the EU on its goods. It would also remain part of the customs union of the UK while having a sea border de facto that administers products according to EU laws and taxations (p. 9).



Throughout the negotiations for an exit deal, the unionist group was insistent that Northern Ireland should be treated like any other part of the UK (p. 3). The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) argued that the constitutional link between the UK and Northern Ireland is diminished by a deal specific to Northern Ireland (Murphy & Evershed, 2021, p. 9). The DUP even went further to imply PM Theresa May is treasonous for the negotiated deal that seeks to set a sea border between Northern Ireland and the UK, also accusing the EU and Ireland of planning to annex the North. Additionally, some unionists claimed that such border violates the principle of consent that does not allow any change to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland unless by the consent of the majority. However, this was mostly dismissed since there is a consensus that the consent principle only applies to the choice between unity or union (Garry et al., 2021, p. 3). The overall disregard for the consent of Northern Ireland from unionists during the negotiation process fueled fears that their discourse is motivated by British conservative concerns instead of a Northern Irish lens (YouGov, 2019, 2020, as cited in Murphy & Evershed, 2021, p. 13).

Brexit and Destabilization

Threat of violence:

Although many scholars do not believe that matters could descend into violence, there will always be fears especially with conflicting identities retaining their core beliefs. This is especially true after Brexit which damaged the notion of “a borderless Ireland within a borderless Europe” (Garry et al., 2021, p. 2). To nationalists and especially republicans, the border has a symbolic significance. It symbolizes enduring political and physical insecurity of Catholics within what they see as artificial borders as part of a settler-colonial project designed to keep them a marginalized minority (Cunningham, 2022, p. 5). Hence, the land border was a major target for the IRA in The Troubles, and there were fears that the return of the hard border would provide the militant Irish Republicans with the perfect opportunity to



revive their war (Garry et al., 2021, p. 2). Riots were also a concern particularly from nationalists and republicans who supported extreme protests and a possible escalation to violence in case the border returns (Laffan, 2018, p. 6).

Although the IRA officially decommissioned in 2005, there have been republican groups, although less powerful, that have since carried out some operations and are involved in the criminal scene. Security forces in Northern Ireland identified a group known as the “New IRA” (NIRA) as a possible threat to peace. Specifically, there were fears that Brexit might provide such groups with the momentum to strengthen their military presence. Retired para-militants have been reported to previously provide such groups with advice and training on techniques for counter-surveillance, bomb-making, and the use of weapons. Security authorities feared such collaboration could increase with Brexit (Okado-Gough, 2017). Unionist violence has been alluded to, but there is no evidence of a real threat. It has been used as tactic to hinder the discourse around Irish Unity post-Brexit, threatening violence if a simple majority border poll votes for unification (Beachain, 2019, p. 263).

Political Destabilization:

Decades of conflict were ended by the GFA which created a system of devolved power that provided an alternative context to manage competing and conflicting identities and traditions. Within the joint EU framework, Irish direct influence was not a violation of British Sovereignty (Aughey, 2005, p. 98). UK sovereignty over the North was easier for nationalists to accept, especially that although the land border existed de jure, it disappeared as a physical and economic barrier (Murphy & Evershed, 2021, p. 2). After Scotland and Northern Ireland’s fates within the EU were determined by English votes, it was clear that the devolution arrangements were flawed. There was an absence of mechanisms for intergovernmental communication and coordination between the different components of the UK. In a way, Brexit shed light on how the devolved system is inadequate and unprepared to



harbor dialogue between devolved governments to unify the narrative, equally participate in deciding their conjoint fates, and manage the issues that arise from Brexit in their different individual contexts. The problem with devolution is especially more severe in Northern Ireland, where such system is already weakened by political tensions, a fragile consociationalism, and weakness, or intentional vagueness, in its founding structures (p. 5).

Brexit has also affected the cross-border institutions set in place by the GFA. During the negotiation process, the British-Irish Council (BIC) was the only functioning GFA institution after the collapse of the Assembly in January 2017. This eliminated any possibility for dialogue on the effects of Brexit between the executive and the assembly as well as the Irish Government. However, the BIC had no real power to deal with the ramifications of Brexit. This led to the destabilization of already weak East-West and North-South institutions (p. 10). Brexit put a strain on relations with both the West and the South. The West, or the UK, was naturally occupied with the implications of Brexit on its state and on drafting an exit deal. The UK was also concerned with the rising Scottish Independence movement. Murphy and Evershed (2021) even claim that Northern Ireland diminished as a priority on the Westminster agenda since 1998 (p. 7). It is predicted that with the UK government “slacking” in its responsibilities towards Northern Ireland, the Belfast government would develop closer ties to Ireland (Coquelin, Bastiat, & Healy, p. 74). However, for now, Brexit has led to sour relations between unionism, specifically the DUP who is the leading pro-Brexit party in the North, and the Irish government, who is strongly opposed to Brexit (Murphy & Evershed, p. 10)

Discussion

The Good Friday Agreement set the political system of power-sharing and consent of the Northern Irish people (Clancy, 2010). Through this finding, we highlight not only the importance of the GFA as a reference point, but also the importance of exploring the effect of



Brexit on the principle of consent. This is relevant because the decision to leave the EU was a sum of all votes in the UK that did not consider the different devolved governments' stances on the matter (Garry et al., 2021).

To answer our research question which asks about the shift in balance towards unification, we must first establish a stalemate in the discourse surrounding Irish unity in Northern Ireland. Before Brexit, unification with the Republic has not been on nationalists' priority list (Aughey, 2005; Cochrane, 2021; Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017). Other actors such as the UK and Ireland were only concerned with establishing sustainable peace and functionality through stable institutions, thus stabilizing the region (Aughey, 2005). This stalemate was broken by Brexit. It brought the topic of unification back into public discourse (Cochrane, 2021; Garry et al. 2021; Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017; Montgomery, 2021). With the certainty that the EU framework provided gone with the British membership, there became a technical need for exact answers to questions, previously shoved aside by the GFA, regarding borders and Northern Ireland's constitutional status (Murphy & Evershed, 2021).

This research found that the European framework was a key to Irish unity. It provided a diversity model that allowed the coexistence of all identities in Northern Ireland (Cunningham, 2022). It is also important to note that the decrease in nationalist demands of unification post-GFA is not a sign of decline in identity, but a prioritization of battles which was also rooted in the belief that unification is inevitable and can/will be achieved under the framework of the EU (Cochrane, 2021; Cunningham, 2022).

Additionally, we found that the identities of Northern Ireland remain unchanged in their core (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022; Tonra, 2021). The nationalist identity is still driven by Irish unity as its end goal, while the unionist identity still believes in the Britishness of Northern Ireland. Notably, we also found that pre-Brexit, pre-GFA, and even pre-British



membership of the EU, then ECC, unionists were always more reluctant to accept European influence and have allied themselves with Euro-skeptic and conservative parties (Aughey, 2005). After the GFA, although the core remained the same, a post-nationalist political environment emerged accommodating all national identities present on the island, allowing the people of the North to identify with the national identity they ascribe to (Aughey, 2005). There were slight shifts in political identities and electoral patterns (Tilley & Evans, 2011), but that was not enough to bring about political change (Murphy & Evershed, 2021, p. 6).

With our understanding of the core of identities in Northern Ireland and how they have shifted post-GFA, we can pinpoint Brexit's effect on identity. With Brexit, the binary of choosing to be either Irish or British was brought back to public discourse, hindering the post-nationalist environment set in place by the GFA. It also added to the divide the factors of Leavers, who were unionists, and Remainers, who were nationalists. This created further challenges between the two communities due to the competitive zero-sum history of their dynamic (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017). There was an understanding in Irish politics that Brexit was "made in England" (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017), and that it represents the decline of imperial nationalism (Cunningham, 2022). Therefore, a shift, or a decline, in the unionist identity was recorded due to its rhetoric during Brexit's negotiation process that was nearly indistinguishable from the English identity, leading to a convergence and an amorphousness of the unionist identity with the English imperial national identity (Cunningham, 2022). Meanwhile, cosmopolitan nationalism looks to supranational frameworks such as the EU to acquire power, hence the importance of the EU to Irish unity (Cunningham, 2022). Therefore, Brexit reinforced polarization and anxieties in Northern Ireland.

As one of the main pillars on which Northern Ireland stands, it is important to examine the principle of consent and the effect of Brexit on it. First, we established its



relevance and why the consent of unionists is necessary for Irish unity, hence its delay.

Unionists are expected to obstruct the process of transition even if simple majority consent was acquired (Montgomery, 2021). Therefore, a simple majority through demographic change, although technically enough, would not be enough to achieve Irish unification (Aughey, 2005). Meanwhile, the Irish continue to halt the process until prosperity and peace, enough to convince unionists that their treatment under a united Ireland would be fair and just, are achieved (Murphy & Evershed, 2021). This wait was possible under the safety of dual EU membership. The opposition to unity was a simple majority of unionists and the “neither” category who tend to favor devolution. However, concurrently with Brexit, unionists lost their majority in the 2017 elections, and it is now more possible to sway non-aligned votes towards unification (Murphy & Evershed, 2021).

After understanding the relationship of consent and unity, we have found that Brexit threatens consent. It also undermines the consent of nationalists who voted for the GFA under the impression that the EU context will remain to eliminate the border (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017). The insistence of the DUP on a no-deal exit for Northern Ireland disregards the consent of the Northern Irish people who chose to remain in the EU (Garry et al., 2021) and proves further the convergence of the unionist and English identities away from the Northern Irish lens (Murphy & Evershed, 2021).

Given that our research found the core of political identities to have remained consistent, it is realistic to assume a threat of violence is still present although on a smaller scale (Beachain, 2019; Cunningham, 2022; Garry et al., 2021; Laffan, 2018; Okado-Gough, 2017). We have found that the concerns for destabilization are mainly regarding the system of devolution and the flaws in intergovernmentalism that were brought to light because of Brexit. These flaws are especially more damaging in Northern Ireland with weakened institutions by political tensions, a fragile consociationalism, and intentional vagueness in its



founding structures (Murphy & Evershed, 2021). We also found that concerns over the weakening of cross-border institutions were valid given the helplessness of the BIC and the NSMC during the negotiations for an exit deal. Not only has Brexit led to sour relationships between Ireland and Britain, but also Ireland and the unionist bloc headed by the DUP. Since cross-border institutions are also one of the pillars of stability established by the GFA, such strain on their roles and functions could lead to instability (Murphy & Evershed, 2021).

Conclusion

Northern Ireland was founded as a “Protestant state for a Protestant people”. This is claimed by its first PM, James Craig. Nation-building started as a process to institutionalize this principle, marginalizing the people whom this entity was not made for (Murphy & Evershed, 2021, p. 2). At first glance, one would assume that a change in the demography, the principle of which Northern Ireland was created for, would mean Irish unity within a few years. This is particularly evident after the 2022 elections with Sinn Fein securing most seats at 27 MPs, DUP securing 24 seats, and the non-aligned centrist Alliance Party recording a huge increase in support scoring 17 seats (NPR, 2022). This means that, for the first time, there will be a nationalist First Minister, in addition to the reliance of the consent for the devolved system on the non-aligned seats. A change in the political context away from the balance set by the traditional duality is observed. Concurrently, a move backwards post-Brexit towards the traditional binary from the post-nationalist environment entrenched by the GFA is also observed.

The consent for unity is dependent on non-aligned parties not demography. Before Brexit, non-aligned parties tended to prefer devolution under the UK due to the stability it provides to stick to the status quo. According to an opinion piece by renowned author John Doyle (2022), with the instability that Brexit brings, it is possible that non-aligned parties would be swayed towards Irish unity solely to acquire EU membership again. This is



especially possible due to the insistence of unionist parties against the Northern Ireland Protocol, therefore the uncertainty and instability of local politics. Hence, Irish unity is contingent on centrists not unionists anymore.

Another change in the political context is how unionists are moving further right-wing towards the British conservative party and growing into obstructionist tactics such as refusing to appoint a deputy. This makes the hope to sway unionist votes towards unification unlikely anytime soon. This reluctant attitude of unionists towards nationalists and the heightening of tensions, paired with the UK “slacking” its responsibilities towards the peace process, Belfast in its different institutions and components would develop closer ties to Ireland (Murphy & Evershed, 2021, p. 10). Socially, after COVID-19, a study by O'Connor et. al (2021) showed that there was mostly no opposition to a public health response that includes the island as a whole. An understanding was observed that traditional politics should yield in favor of pragmatism (p. 9). Hence, the effect of the pandemic on Irish unity is a factor to consider in future research.

We conclude that Brexit has shifted the unionist identity and transformed it from a unitary actor to a proxy that acts on the English conservative identity’s interests. Considering political realism examines what actors can be, we have concluded that it is highly unlikely that the unionist identity would accept Irish unity. Therefore, if it is to happen, the deciding factor would be the failure of the Northern Ireland protocol which could promote a need to go back to EU membership to be achieved automatically through unity (Murphy, 2019, p. 539). Therefore, the deciding factor is no longer solely one’s ideological subscription, but also EU membership. Socially, there is a move towards an all-Island approach. Overall, the instability that Brexit triggered such as unraveling the flaws of the devolved system has raised many questions regarding the future of governance in Northern Ireland that warrant an answer. A



transformative change in its constitutional status is highly likely. In short, Brexit shifted the balance and pushed towards unification of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.



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