**The Election in Northern Ireland: A Route back to Stormont?**

Jon Tonge

**The results**

Northern Ireland’s election contained plenty of drama, with four of the 18 seats changing hands but the impact of the Conservatives’ substantial majority will be to marginalise its MPs. The DUP had a tough defence to mount, having won ten seats in 2017. Amid a 6% fall in vote share, which dropped in all bar one constituency, the party was reduced to 8 MPs and came close to losing all 3 of the seats it held in Belfast. Sinn Fein’s return of 7 MPs matched its 2017 tally and the party took a notable scalp in capturing the North Belfast seat of the DUP’s Westminster leader, Nigel Dodds. However, Sinn Fein’s vote share fell overall by 7% and was down everywhere except North Belfast. The nationalist SDLP regained the Westminster representation it lost in 2017, its leader Colum Eastwood thrashing Sinn Fein to retake Foyle, one of two SDLP gains.

The most striking feature of the results was the rise of the centrist Alliance Party, which repudiates unionism and nationalism. Whilst only capturing one Westminster seat, the party’s vote share soared by nearly 9%, to add to the 11% European election increase and 5% in council elections in 2019. Alliance increased its vote share in every constituency bar one. With successive surveys of public opinion showing that those rejecting unionist or nationalist labels outnumber those who do identify as such, Alliance has a large and growing electoral reservoir in which to fish.

Given its potentially profound implications for Northern Ireland, Brexit dominated the election, although older Orange versus Green sectarian issues were never far away, even amid the rise of centrist voters. The key outcomes were the marginalisation of the region’s representatives and the increased hopes of a revival of the devolved power sharing which collapsed almost three years earlier.

**Electoral pacts: Brexit-based or sectarian?**

The DUP’s confidence-and-supply deal with the Conservative government from 2017 to 2019 was successful in attracting a large amount of extra funding. However, the DUP was then cast aside by Prime Minister Johnson, who reached a Brexit deal which aligned Northern Ireland much more closely to the EU than the rest of the UK. Johnson had promised the DUP the exact opposite at their party conference one year earlier.

Much derision was aimed at the DUP for its failed Brexit strategy and the 2019 election was marked by ‘Remain pacts”, as the SDLP stood aside for Sinn Fein in North Belfast and Sinn Fein reciprocated in South Belfast. The arrangement allowed Sinn Fein to unseat the DUP’s Dodds, whilst the SDLP gained South Belfast from the DUP, although such was Claire Hanna’s winning margin that it is doubtful a pact was needed.

The DUP complained these so-called Remain pacts were merely ‘pan-nationalists’ fronts, a charge containing some truth but the DUP was equally content to see pan-unionist fronts on its side. The UUP stood aside to try and help the DUP in North Belfast and the DUP did likewise for the UUP in a similarly unsuccessful pact in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Unionism versus nationalism overlay the Remain versus Leave battles, not least because the Unionist parties were even more opposed to Boris Johnson’s form of Brexit than those parties which had always supported Remain.

**Marginalisation at Westminster – so a return to a devolved Assembly?**

Given the size of the Conservative majority, there was little prospect of Northern Ireland’s MPs being able to achieve much at Westminster. With the DUP’s once-pivotal role gone, the possibility of a return of devolution loomed large. Whilst Sinn Fein’s moderate election performance also raised the issue of whether its policy of abstention from Westminster should be revisited, all Northern Irish MPs, participatory or absentionist, would struggle for influence in London. Even if it could be proved beyond doubt that abstention was harming Sinn Fein’s electoral fortunes, the party leadership would be wary of touching the issue. A two-thirds majority of members would be needed for change and risks a split.

The underwhelming performance of the DUP and Sinn Fein may have indicated that the electorate was tiring of their failure to restore devolved power-sharing and the Northern Ireland Assembly is the focus of renewed attention. If locally elected politicians want power, they will need to restore Stormont. The DUP might take the view that conceding Sinn Fein’s demands for an Irish Language Act is the bitter pill that needs swallowing to avoid the grim vista of power being confined to local councils for at least half a generation. If agreement cannot be found, another set of elections is probable. If there it still no agreement, direct rule may be reintroduced but this now seems improbable.