HED: After Brexit, What’s Left for Northern Ireland’s Unionists?

DEK: Faced with growing calls for a united Ireland, Britain’s most loyal subjects look to an uncertain future.

By Jon Tonge

For the first time in history, only a minority of members elected to the U.K. Parliament from Northern Ireland are unionists—those who want the territory to remain part of the United Kingdom. The region’s main Irish nationalist party, Sinn Fein, continues to air demands for a referendum on Irish unification—a so-called border poll. This, combined with the recent electoral changes and the English public’s decisive endorsement of Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s plan for Brexit may have profound implications for the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Under Johnson’s deal to bring the U.K. out of the European Union—which Parliament recently passed into law—Northern Ireland will remain attached to the rest of Ireland and the EU in terms of regulatory standards and, for all intents and purposes, customs. There will be customs checks on goods heading from Britain to Northern Ireland, which will be treated effectively as exports, to ensure that EU tariffs are applied and that the goods meet EU standards. Traders will then apply for reimbursement if their goods remain in the U.K. The sum of the parts is an embryonic economic united Ireland. So, will this lead inevitably to the more highly sought-after constitutional united Ireland?

During this year’s general election campaign, Northern Ireland’s unionists and loyalists organized several well-attended rallies in opposition to the prime minister’s Brexit deal. The sense of betrayal was understandable given that Johnson’s Brexit, with its semi-detachment of Northern Ireland by effectively placing a border in the Irish Sea, will take a form that he [told](https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2018/11/boris-johnsons-speech-to-dup-conference-we-are-on-the-verge-of-making-a-historic-mistake/) the 2018 Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) conference “no British Conservative government could or should sign up to.”

Yet despite their protestations, there is little those most loyal to the British Crown can do. There has not been a successful grassroots protest by the Protestant-unionist-loyalist population against British government policy since they toppled the Sunningdale devolved power-sharing arrangement in 1974. They achieved this triumph through a mass resistance campaign that combined a Northern Ireland-wide workers’ strike with bombings in the Irish Republic that [killed](https://www.rte.ie/archives/2019/0508/1048174-witness-accounts-of-dublin-bombings/) 33 civilians and injured almost 300. Power-sharing resurfaced in only slightly modified form, eventually, as the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, and although a majority of unionists signed on that time, many of them did so only reluctantly.

Since then, loyalist protests against several cultural changes in Northern Ireland—such as the rerouting of Protestant parades and the removal of Union Jack flags—have failed. The latest leg in an ailing culture war is the refusal to countenance an Irish Language Act, currently the main barrier to the restoration of power-sharing in the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont. Yet Irish language legislation will surely come, as will the awkward post-Brexit economic arrangements, demonstrating that even when unionists are at the heart of power—as the DUP was before the election—they still eventually end up losing. They are finding themselves in an increasingly marginal political position.

Despite their considerable disaffection, most unionists will not take to the streets to protest customs completions at Northern Ireland’s ports. EU demands that some products are labelled distinctively as “U.K. (NI)” are hardly a matter for riot and rebellion. One-third of the unionist population supported Remain in the 2016 Brexit referendum, in which Northern Ireland [voted](https://www.qub.ac.uk/brexit/Brexitfilestore/Filetoupload,728121,en.pdf) by 56 percent to 44 percent to stay in the EU.

Many within Northern Ireland’s business class supported the preservation of the softest of borders on the island of Ireland to the extent that they backed former Prime Minister Theresa May’s backstop—which also uniquely aligned Northern Ireland with the EU—and they are sanguine about Johnson’s plans to minimize north-south trade barriers. In the end, the cost of keeping the politically sensitive border in Ireland frictionless is a weakened union between Britain and Northern Ireland.

Yet the maintenance of an integrated all-Ireland economic zone does not guarantee a united Ireland, because the pragmatic recognition of the need for an all-island economy does not necessarily equate to a political demand for Irish reunification. This leaves open the question of how far advanced that demand is and, importantly, how the British government is obliged to respond.

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement permits the secretary of state for Northern Ireland to call a border poll when it appears that public opinion on a united Ireland has shifted sufficiently to make it a possibility. We are not there yet. Having signed up to the principle of consent within Northern Ireland in 1998—which it once derisively dismissed as a “unionist veto”—Sinn Fein still has plenty of convincing to do. There is nothing inevitable about unity, but its proponents hope that promoting all-island alignment after Brexit will render former opponents much more receptive. United Irelanders have the advantage of playing a long game. If a border poll is lost, another can be called seven years later, under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. Unionists, on the other hand, will need to devise a long-term strategy that reflects that reality but also protects them from the effects of negative [demographic change](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/new-light-shed-on-prospect-of-catholic-majority-in-north-1.3891032). It looks like a losing game.

Out of 12 opinion surveys [conducted](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Ireland" \l "Opinion_polling) in Northern Ireland on the border issue since the 2016 EU referendum, only three have shown more in favor of a united Ireland than against. Of the nine studies showing more against unity than those backing the idea, the majorities of opposition have ranged from 3 percent to a whopping 41 percent.

But the timeline of the results does show a gradual shift toward unity. **A LucidTalk survey [conducted](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/survey-majority-say-no-to-ireland-border-poll-and-yes-to-staying-in-uk-35086513.html) a few months after the 2016 EU referendum did not show any head of steam for a united Ireland. Thirty-one percent backed unity, with 68 percent against, according to this poll**. However, a recent poll by independent pollster Michael Ashcroft [suggests](https://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2019/09/lord-ashcroft-my-northern-ireland-polling-six-out-of-ten-voters-accept-the-backstop-but-only-one-in-five-unionists-do-so.html) a much closer contest, showing 46 percent backing unity versus 45 percent against. Poll results do [vary](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/irish-times-poll-northern-ireland-voters-do-not-want-dup-tory-brexit-1.3818264), but the general trend does suggest growing support for a united Ireland.

Election results tell a similar story. At the recent general election, the combined support for nationalist and republican parties—those that favor a united Ireland—**totaled just under 39 percent**, whereas the combined unionist vote amounted to 42 percent. Nationalist parties were outpolled in first preference votes in the both the 2019 [council](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/local-elections-2019/) and [European](https://europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/national-results/united-kingdom/northern-ireland-electoral-college/2019-2024/) elections by similar figures. Still, the nationalist vote share has risen substantially since 1998—typified by the loss of the unionist majority in both Stormont and Westminster—so even though a united Ireland still looks like it’s a long way off, the general trend favors nationalists.

The more significant shift has been toward the constitutionally neutral Alliance Party, however, whose vote share rose by about 8 percentage points across the three elections in 2019. Unionists can at least take solace in the fact that the fastest-growing political movement in Northern Ireland is one that is content to maintain the constitutional status quo.

There is disagreement among unionists over whether to engage in discussions on Irish unity. For some, being complicit in the possible dissolution of their own country is unacceptable. The more pragmatic argue that planning is needed to avoid the risk of being thrust into a new state guided by an outdated and irrelevant political ideology. Former DUP leader Peter Robinson even counseled that unionists should, as a precaution, discuss their future inside a united Ireland. Some nationalists—emboldened by their historic electoral performance—have taken the initiative and are beginning to seriously consider how to meaningfully represent unionists in all-Ireland political structures.

In Westminster on Dec. 12, the DUP watched helplessly as its influence evaporated. Its team of eight—down from 10 in the previous Parliament—also lost its high-profile parliamentary leader, Nigel Dodds, who lost his North Belfast seat to Sinn Fein. Measured against the Conservatives’ decisive 80-seat majority, the DUP no longer holds the balance of power the way it did before the election. The DUP campaigned on Brexit, and Parliament’s recent decision to pass Johnson’s deal means it’ll get it. But it’s in a form that detaches Northern Ireland economically from the metropole, and there’s little unionists can do now to prevent that. True, the Conservative Party (officially the Conservative and Unionist Party) is nominally unionist, and Johnson has gone to considerable lengths to brandish his unionist credentials, but he chose to disregard widespread unionist concerns to win the election, and he’ll do little to assuage those concerns now that he’s in power.

Some loyalists, fearing that the political system has now totally abandoned them, are beginning to consider alternative options. Activists have organized several events across Northern Ireland to demonstrate their frustration. Leaders of the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Defence Association have attended these gatherings, and a rare inside look granted to the *Belfast News Letter* [suggests](https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/latest-news/ben-lowry-loyalist-protest-meeting-in-portadown-against-boris-johnson-s-betrayal-act-was-packed-and-angry-1-9152301) that some members of the public believe a return to violence is legitimate under the circumstances. Some hard-line loyalists have gone so far as to [claim](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2019/10/23/news/loyalists-plan-war-of-attrition--1745909/) that they are planning a “war of attrition” to prevent Northern Ireland from slipping unwittingly into a united Ireland.

Given the shift toward Irish economic unity and the growth of nationalism in recent elections, a constitutional united Ireland will remain a live issue. In 2021, unionists will celebrate the centenary of the foundation of Northern Ireland, but it will happen against the backdrop of arguably the greatest crisis unionism has faced in the last century. Whether or not unionists choose to engage meaningfully with the prospect of Irish unity or continue to pursue their uncompromising devotion to the union is a question for them, but it’s clear that fundamental debates about the future are taking place within unionism. The outcome will have profound consequences for Ireland and the U.K.

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