

## **Varadkar's call for Irish unity is mere posturing**

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There was considerable irony in the timing of Leo Varadkar's recent call for Irish Unity. He said at his party's Ardfeis (annual conference) that he "believed in the unification of our island and believe that it can happen in my lifetime. While the views of unionists must be acknowledged, understood and respected, no one group can have a veto on Ireland's future". The irony stems from a Northern Ireland poll issued a few days earlier which showed that only a quarter of those polled, and only half of northern Catholics, supported Irish Unity.

Varadkar is deputy Taoiseach in Ireland and soon to be Taoiseach under a coalition agreement. His remarks were no doubt aimed at halting the drift of voters towards Sinn Fein. The latter is now easily Ireland's largest party with nearly a third of the vote, forcing the traditional governing parties into what may prove to be permanent coalition. His statement was immediately denounced by Northern Ireland Secretary of State Brandon Lewis who called it a deviation from the consent principle in the Good Friday Agreement and particularly ill-timed.

The call for unity is part of a cacophony of such calls from the Republic and from northern nationalists. This campaign is longstanding, ancient even, but has grown so much in volume since Brexit as to amount to a form of political harassment of Unionists. It has been encouraged by commercial polls in Northern Ireland which appear to show support for Irish Unity approach or even surpassing 50%. The main polls, from the LucidTalk organisation, are however based on samples drawn from a voluntary panel which is susceptible to manipulation. LucidTalk's 45% for unity contrasts with the 2021 NI Life and Times Survey's 26%. Both cannot be correct, and it is the Life and Times Survey which is the more scientific.

The Life and Times Survey was originally part of the British Social Attitudes survey and has been renamed. It is an annual survey run since 1998 from Queen's University and financed by the Economic and social Research Council and the NI Executive. Unlike other email surveys it usually uses an in-depth face to face approach although a little less so this year due to Covid.

Each year since 1998 it has asked the same question: "Do you think the long-term policy for NI should be to remain in the UK or to reunify with the rest of Ireland". For many years the answers showed declining support for Irish unity reaching a low of 14% in 2015. Brexit gave support for unity a boost, but only raised it to a peak of 22% in 2019. The latest figure, based on fieldwork last Autumn when public perception was that the pandemic had been mishandled, was 26%. Support for remaining in the UK was 55% and 19% had other or no preferences.

Nationalists like Varadkar know of these results but choose to ignore them. Sinn Fein's tactic appears to be to undermine unionist confidence and to wear down their resistance. There are persistent calls for a border poll but, implicitly recognising the opinion polls, never for a poll immediately. The last time the Life and Times Survey asked if respondents wanted Irish unity immediately, only 7% said yes.

Varadkar's support for unity can be regarded as empty rhetoric and is not supported by the more thoughtful current Taoiseach, Micheal Martin. There is no chance of popular support for unity because the cost to southern taxpayers would be so high. The £10 billion annual subsidy to NI from the UK Exchequer would cost every southern household £6000 each year. Nationalistic economists

in the South attempt to pare this down by assuming the UK would continue to pay all pensions, forgive NI's share of the national debt and switch from UK-level support for defence to the low free-riding defence costs of the South.

National identity is not mainly a matter of economics. It would though be unusual for voters to support joining a country with lower living standards. Surprisingly, living standards are if anything higher in Northern Ireland than in the Republic. This is surprising because Irish National Accounts appear to show the opposite, and it is not widely realised that Ireland is the world's largest tax haven and its national accounts are totally misleading. Nobel prize winning economist Paul Krugman calls it 'leprechaun economics' and another American economist says that Irish national accounts reveal more about the tax affairs of American corporations than about the Irish economy. A conventional comparison using per capita GDP would indicate that Irish living standards are 84% above the UK, but the Irish figures are hugely boosted by fictitious movements of profits by multinational corporations for tax reasons. An undistorted comparison measuring spending by households and by government of behalf of households, supported by the former governor of the Irish Central Bank, indicates Irish living standards 7% below the UK and lower than in Northern Ireland.

All in all, there is no possibility of any border poll resulting in a United Ireland and nor should there be. Unity would drag a million northern unionists unwillingly into a country whose culture is alien to them, and which could not possibly respect their main political aspiration, which is remain part of the UK.

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