

Will Brexit Turn Northern Ireland Into a Frozen Conflict?

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A strange silence has descended over one of the main post-Brexit points of contention between the EU and the UK: the Northern Ireland protocol. It has been more than a month since the so-called Windsor framework, tweaking the protocol, was announced to much hoopla. Sighs of relief all around, crisis averted for the UK and the EU but most importantly for Rishi Sunak and his up till then fractious Tory party. Yet, very little has been made since then of the fact that the framework is a dead letter that can only come to life by the rather dubious restoration of power-sharing in Stormont, Northern Ireland's devolved parliament.

It's hard to brand the Windsor framework as a cynical exercise in passing-the-buck politics. Surely, any progress is better than head-on confrontation and all its possibly ugly consequences in what remains a volatile arena of former conflict. The Windsor framework is in essence a further watering down of what the EU would normally demand as a safeguard for its single market. This is to help the United Kingdom in its claim that the province is still much more firmly united with it than it is with the Republic of Ireland and the EU, of whose single market Northern Ireland also remains a part. It resolves a knotty question between the EU and the UK and has tamed, for now, the ultra-Brexiteers in the Conservative party's European Research Group, ERG. So far, so good?

Well, not quite. Because where are the people of Northern Ireland in all this? It's almost as if both the UK and the EU decided that it was of paramount importance to settle their differences, and allow Sunak to dominate his own party, without much thought given to the situation on the ground. Yes, the British government as well as international players, mainly the US, are still trying to revive the Northern Ireland Executive. But few seem to take into account that the latest breakdown of power sharing might be more structural than before, driven by dual processes of demographic change and Brexit.

Now, I'm not familiar with Northern Ireland but I am familiar with conflict. It has taught me that you should never be optimistic about its dynamics. And even though Northern Ireland has known 25 years of relative peace, the signs don't look all that encouraging at the moment. Northern Ireland, while relatively but not wholly, peaceful for the moment, shows signs of becoming a frozen conflict. Irreconcilable differences between segments of the population have been codified into law and into the shaping of parliament, leading to paralysis and further entrenchment, the likes of which can be seen in places such as Lebanon and Bosnia. Thankfully, it is far removed on most counts from the situation in those places, plus it has the UK, the Republic of Ireland and the EU to keep it from spinning out of control. But after 25 years, questions over the ongoing viability of the Good Friday agreements, which largely put a stop to the violence between Nationalist and Unionist factions, are becoming more urgent.

In fact, it was last month's quarter century celebrations of the Good Friday agreements that brought home the awkwardness of the current situation. Former negotiators, peace envoys, Prime Ministers, Taoiseachs, American presidents and other assorted luminaries descended on Belfast not only to commemorate the achievement, but also to variously beg or put pressure on the one obstructionist party that is threatening to unravel the whole deal, the Democratic Unionist Party. The DUP has blocked the formation of a Northern Ireland executive since elections in 2022 that saw it for the first time being eclipsed by Sinn Féin, once the political wing of the IRA.

The DUP would not, for now, say that it's intending to do away with the Good Friday agreements; too many voters are still appreciative of the end of the bombings, shootings, kneecappings and other

forms of violence that went before. Saying that, the DUP has never actually supported the peace deal and recent opinion polls suggest that a majority of Unionists would vote 'no' if a referendum on the agreements were to be held now. That doesn't mean that the Good Friday agreements no longer have the support of the majority in the province. Nationalist support is still overwhelming and, in any case, support for Unionist parties has dropped to around 40 per cent, from over 50 per cent at the time of the agreements.

It's the latter development, a steadily declining Unionist vote, that spells long-term trouble now that the stakes have been heightened by Brexit. Because even though Unionists must have been well aware of the inevitable demographic and societal trends in their region, the stakes were somewhat lower when both the UK and the Republic of Ireland were still members of the European Union. Even if a drift towards eventual unification with the Republic was on the cards, both sides could afford to soft-pedal it. Republicans could afford to wait, because belonging to the EU made the gap between belonging to the UK or the Republic much smaller. And, knowing that, Unionists could afford to postpone thinking about the inevitable. But Brexit has brought talk of unification much closer, causing jitters among Unionists that were reinforced last year when they no longer formed the largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

While the Windsor agreements cater to a Unionist pretense that the current crisis in Stormont is over a nebulous border in the Irish Sea, the reasons run much deeper. Yes, for a community that runs the risk of being increasingly cut-off from what it considers its heartland, it can be symbolically difficult to accept the Northern Ireland protocol. But it's not the protocol that threatens the direction of the province, or the Unionist's continuing hold over its affairs. It therefore seems overly optimistic to expect the DUP to soften its stance after the upcoming local elections. From where they stand, they're not playing politics, they're playing for their future.

That is why there are increasing Unionist calls to do away with Stormont altogether and reintroduce direct rule from Westminster. Nationalists are, of course, opposed and some have called for joint British-Irish involvement in running the province if it comes to that. This is, again, unacceptable to Unionists. Another way forward would be to do away with the effectively sectarian make-up of the Executive. The non-sectarian Alliance party, for example, wants to change the rules for the Northern Ireland Executive in order to do away with the effective veto that the largest party in either community now has on its formation. This would allow for the possibility of a government taking power without participation of the main representatives of one of the communities, which could also cause tensions but at least allows politics to be resumed. It would at the moment, however, further undermine the Unionist position.

As other places around the world have shown, when a once dominant group is on the verge of losing its position, conflict can ensue. The same goes for when a newly dominant group becomes impatient that its weight is not being sufficiently recognized, or when it tries to impose its will too comprehensively. The Good Friday agreements did a good job for a quarter century in managing these developments. Brexit is likely to have accelerated the timeline towards the necessity for a new arrangement. It is very unlikely that the Windsor framework alone will be enough to solve the current crisis.