

Northern Ireland general election called as Stormont collapses amid Brexit crisis

By Steve James
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A general election has been called for the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly on March 2.

The poll, less than one year after the previous election, will be held under conditions of a deep political crisis. In jeopardy are all the power-sharing arrangements established in Northern Ireland under the 1998 Good Friday Agreement aimed at ending the conflict between the pro-British Protestant Unionist and Irish Catholic Republican forces.

The election date was announced by James Brokenshire, the British government's Northern Ireland secretary, following the resignation earlier this month of Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness, Northern Ireland's deputy first minister.

McGuinness is struggling with a serious heart and nerve condition and has subsequently announced he will not be standing again for office. But his resignation had the political aim of bringing down his rival and partner in power, First Minister Arlene Foster of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Sinn Fein, after ten years of sharing office with the DUP, has seized upon the scandal surrounding the Renewable Heat Initiative (RHI), or "cash for ash," in which Foster herself is deeply implicated, to strengthen its position north and south of the border. It is at the same time combining calls for Irish unity with opposition to last year's UK vote to leave the European Union (EU).

RHI, a British government scheme to promote bio-mass fuel sources, evolved into a decades-long hand-out to farms and businesses. Current estimates are that the scheme will cost the British government £660 million and Stormont £490 million. Former Minister for Enterprise Trade and Investment Jonathan Bell told Stormont last week that special advisers to the first minister and the party's director of communication "had such extensive interests in the poultry industry

that it [RHI] was not allowed to be on my [Bell's] ministerial agenda." Bell is suspended from the DUP and supports a public inquiry into the scheme, whose costs he was trying to restrict.

However, much more is at stake than easy money for chicken farmers. The RHI scandal has become the focus of political shifts rooted in the unravelling of the European Union (EU), which is a grave threat to Irish capital, North and South.

Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU by a majority of 56 to 44 percent. The region's economy is tied closely to the UK, but also the Irish Republic and the EU. Of export sales in 2014, for example, £12.7 billion arrived in the UK, but £3.6 billion went to the Republic, £2.1 to the rest of the EU and £4 billion to the rest of the world.

While the UK is the largest market, access to the EU, including the Republic with which the North is increasingly integrated, is vital. EU subsidies to the value of £3.5 billion over the last seven years have been handed over, while another £3.5 billion is planned for the period between 2014 and 2020. Most of this goes to farmers, but numerous cross-border projects to facilitate investment, such as train refurbishments, have also benefited.

In the immediate aftermath of the June 23 Brexit vote, Irish *Taoiseach* Enda Kenny raised the possibility of unification "if there is clear evidence of a majority of people wishing to leave the United Kingdom and join the Republic, that that should be catered for in the discussions that take place." Kenny went on to compare Northern Ireland's situation to the unification of Germany, noting that the former East Germany was immediately absorbed into the EU.

Subsequently, demands were raised from all sides for some form of special status for the North to ensure free

movement of trade and people over the currently unenforced border with the Republic. In December, the Dublin government hosted a conference attended by all the Northern parties except the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) to support calls for special status.

The hard-line unionists of the DUP campaigned to leave the EU. Writing in the *Irish Times*, journalist Fintan O'Toole complained that the DUP paid for a glossy supplement to the *Metro* free newspaper, handed out to London commuters just before the June 23 referendum. O'Toole reckoned the supplement would be the most expensive piece of election propaganda ever purchased by an Irish party. The *Metro* does not publish in Northern Ireland. The DUP, moreover, currently has eight MPs at Westminster. With the Conservative government's majority down to 14 seats and some Tories likely to vote against aspects of the Brexit process, the votes of DUP MPs might become crucial. The DUP, therefore, has significant leverage with the government of Theresa May. For her part, Arlene Foster has promised that the upcoming election will be "brutal."

In forcing an election, Sinn Fein are hoping to take advantage of the DUP's support for Brexit, its exposure over RHI and broad popular hostility to all Northern Ireland's political institutions, to shift the balance of power. On this basis, and by warning of the dangers of a post Brexit "hard border," Sinn Fein, the only major all-Ireland party, are hoping to further advance the case for Irish unification.

Tensions have been greatly intensified by May's January 17 speech confirming that the British government will pursue a "hard" Brexit involving departure from the European Single Market and customs union. Although May's speech referred to upholding the Common Travel Area, in operation between Britain and Ireland since Irish independence and partition, she made no reference to any special status for Northern Ireland by which single market membership could be retained.

The economically liberal Alliance Party described May's speech as "catastrophic for Northern Ireland." Deputy leader Stephen Farry said, "Any departure from the customs union and the single market will necessitate a formal border either across the island of Ireland or down the Irish Sea. ... Barriers will be erected in terms of either the east-west or north-south

relationships which are recognised and empowered under the Good Friday Agreement."

Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams went further. "Taking the North out of the EU will destroy the Good Friday Agreement," he said, describing the British government position as a "hostile action."

Adams cited the British government's decision to remove Britain from the European Convention on Human Rights as undermining "fundamental elements of the Good Friday Agreement." He pointed out that "citizens in the North, under the agreement, have a right to Irish citizenship, and therefore EU citizenship." He demanded that the Irish minority government should "be relentless in a diplomatic offensive" to avoid a hard border. The Irish government is currently expanding its diplomatic missions across the capitals of Europe, seeking support for the Irish position.

The situation is further complicated by the coming to power of the Trump administration in the US. Relations between Europe and America have soured over tax breaks offered by the Irish government to US companies exporting to Europe and seeking to exploit Ireland's uniquely lax tax laws. The EU has demanded the Irish government collect some €13 billion in back taxes from Apple Inc. In response, the Irish government has forged an alliance with Apple against the EU rulings.

President Donald Trump is said to be likely to favour vast new tax breaks to Apple to encourage the tech giant to repatriate some of its profits to the US, underscoring the position of Ireland, North and South, as a plaything of the major powers.

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