

Are We About to Witness the Reunification of Ireland? Ken Kivingstone

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*In light of a well-earned Sinn Fein victory in a system set up to prevent republicans from winning, unity is on the cards — the left in Britain must now stand up for Ireland’s right to self-determination, writes **KEN LIVINGSTONE***

Throughout my time in politics, there have undoubtedly been some hugely significant changes. Whilst many of these have sadly been negative for the left (most notably the rise of neoliberalism and its attack on organised labour), it’s important to acknowledge and celebrate examples of real progress — and the situation in Ireland has undoubtedly been one of those in recent years.

Britain’s history in the country is a long and bloody one going back centuries, but even in the context of the last 40 years alone you can see just how significant recent developments are.

At the height of the Thatcher government’s vicious and jingoistic offensive, myself and a group of other figures on the Labour left who used our positions in public office to call for peace and justice in Ireland were decried as “terrorist sympathisers.” The MPs and newspapers denounced us for arguing in favour of dialogue to end the conflict.

At the same time, those who made these attacks on us were rather less concerned about revelations of collusion between the British state and loyalist paramilitaries in cases such as the assassination of human rights lawyer John Finucane at his family home and the Loughisland Massacre, where six people were murdered in a bar whilst watching the Republic of Ireland play at the 1994 World Cup.

It was as recently as the mid-1990s that the ban on Irish republican voices even being broadcast in Britain was still in place — creating the farcical situation where interviews with figures such as Gerry Adams had to be dubbed with the voice of an actor.

Even things which are now treated as mainstream cultural celebrations, such as the St Patrick's Day parade in London, faced a huge amount of resistance when my administration proposed it.

As recently as 2012, whilst running for re-election as Mayor, Boris Johnson defended his decision to scrap the annual dinner we held for London's Irish community by dismissing it as "lefty Sinn Fein crap" — although clearly his aversion to putting on big social events didn't last over the subsequent decade!

Yet today, following recent elections, Sinn Fein now stands as the largest party across Ireland, a pro-reunification party topping the Assembly poll in the North for the first time in a state that was designed to prevent this ever occurring.

As with most elections, there are numerous factors that can be taken into account here — the disastrous approach of the DUP undoubtedly being one of them (the DUP clearly learned nothing from the famous words of unionist leader Edward Carson: "What a fool I was. I was only a puppet, and so was Ulster, and so was Ireland, in the political game that was to get the Conservative Party into power.")

With the various constitutional ramifications of Britain's departure from the European Union continuing to shape much of the political landscape, more and more people are questioning how having two different states, currencies and sets of public services on an island with a population of around 7 million people can be said to make any kind of sense — including no small number in Britain itself.

And as more and more members of a generation who have grown up with most or even all of their lives spent under the Good Friday Agreement reach voting age, reactionary divide-and-rule scaremongering simply no longer holds the same sway, with many young people from a Unionist family background choosing options such as the liberal Alliance Party instead of the established right-wing parties.

There can also be no honest account of this result which doesn't take into account the bold and strategic leadership provided by the republican movement in recent years. Sinn Fein have embraced the peace process and been prepared to engage pragmatically with those from different political traditions whilst maintaining a clear commitment to their core objectives and throwing themselves into movements for change and equality.

As with numerous other issues lately, the leadership of the Labour Party has taken a disappointing stance on Ireland.

Comments from Keir Starmer and shadow foreign secretary Lisa Nandy claiming the party would campaign on the unionist side of any future border poll are not only wrong politically, but fly in the face of longstanding party policy; even under Neil Kinnock, hardly a champion of Bennism, the 1987 manifesto stated that "we believe in a united Ireland" and New Labour at least emphasised neutrality.

They also undermine Labour's historic links with Irish communities in Britain — with YouGov finding that a plurality of Labour voters supported reunification. Groups such as Labour for Irish Unity are quite right to oppose this shift.

Progressives in Britain should embrace the opportunities for change that the current period in Irish politics offers — first and foremost by demanding our government respects the Good

Friday Agreement and supporting the basic principle of self-determination in recognising the right to hold a border poll.

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Featured image: Ken Livingstone, pictured (left) with Gerry Adams in London in 1983, promoted dialogue with Sinn Fein during the Troubles (Source: Morning Star)

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