

Irish Election Result Is a Victory for Nationalism

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Once upon a time Gerry Adams, the leader of Ireland's nationalist party, Sinn Fein, could not be heard speaking on the BBC. He was branded a terrorist and his voice was dubbed. How times have changed. Now his party, led by Mary Lou McDonald, has stormed to victory in the Irish elections. Having won the largest percentage of the vote at 24%, Sinn Fein has ended the decades long domination of Fine Gael and Fianna Fail in what was effectively a two-party political system.

McDonald now seeks to form a government with other left-wing Irish parties and although she doesn't expect to form a coalition with Fine Gael or Fianna Fail, she would still participate in talks with representatives of the parties:

"I also have consistently said that I will talk to and listen to everybody, I think that is what grown-ups do and that is what democracy demands."

Fianna Fail's leader, Michael Martin, said however that there were 'significant incompatibilities' to working with Sinn Fein. His party, along with Fine Gael have cited Sinn Fein's previous links to the Irish Republican Army (IRA) - the paramilitary group - as a reason for not working with them. However Mary Lou McDonald has said it is "not sustainable" for either party leader to rule out talks with Sinn Fein. Given the sizeable chunk of the Irish population that voted for her party, you can see she has a fair point.

The Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, has now been forced to admit that Ireland has a three-party system. It may be a marginal win, and one which will force Sinn Fein into a coalition, but it is nevertheless a highly significant turn of events. Although the party won due to its left-wing domestic agenda and promises to combat poverty and rising homelessness, it cannot be ignored that this win is part of a broader, Europe-wide trend. Nationalism is on the rise across Europe, call it populism if you will, but people are increasingly voting for parties which put the nation state first over further European integration. Centrist parties are failing to compete with those offering a nationalist, eurosceptic agenda.

People don't like to be dictated to. The arguably authoritarian decision by state broadcaster RTE not to include Mary Lou McDonald in their leaders' debate quite possibly only generated more support for her party. It was reported that prior to the election Sinn Fein sent the broadcaster a legal letter asking it to reverse its decision. The Irish establishment will now have to catch up with the reality that Sinn Fein is now an equal player in the political landscape, and a force to be reckoned with.

The nationalist vibe in the air has now awoken the idea of Irish unity. A [poll](#) conducted earlier in 2019 demonstrated that two thirds of Irish people are now supportive of Irish

reunification. Of 3000 people questioned, 65% said they were in favour of northern and southern Ireland becoming one nation again. Brexit, which has brought with it a surge in English nationalism, along with a Westminster government increasingly detached from the reality of the everyday struggles of working people, has encouraged more people north and south of the Irish border to rethink their stance on a topic few dared to broach in the past due to the violent conflict between nationalists and unionists. Under the Good Friday Agreement, it is indeed possible for Northern Ireland to secede the United Kingdom if a referendum result were to decide this.

Sinn Fein's stance on the EU is not entirely clear-cut, but the win could be interpreted as a victory for Euroscepticism. The party is against further European integration, campaigned for a 'No' vote in the Irish referendum on joining the European Economic Community in 1972 and criticised the proposal of a European Constitution in 2002. Although it did support Britain remaining in the EU in the run-up to the 2016 EU referendum, it has criticised the European Union in the past for its policies of neoliberalism. When it comes to post-Brexit trade talks with the UK, the new Irish government with Sinn Fein at the helm is likely to take a tougher stance.

In addition, it's likely that under Mary Lou McDonald's leadership, we will see a referendum on Irish unity. If the outcome is for unification, it will put more pressure on a UK government currently facing a real threat from growing Scottish nationalism. As Irish and Scottish nationalist movements gain popularity, the United Kingdom cannot be taken for granted any longer. As elections continue to demonstrate, the status quo is under threat and it's becoming increasingly possible that we will see the dissolution of the United Kingdom within our lifetimes.

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