

The Irish Are Leading

By [James J. Zogby](#)

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Last week, Mary Lou McDonald, the president of the Irish republican/socialist party, and leader of the opposition in the Irish Parliament, addressed a European Union conference. When asked how she would direct Irish foreign policy, her remarks were compelling and instructive.

She began by noting: “The Irish experience of colonisation, partition and conflict... that’s where we come from.” She continued, “So Irish foreign policy has to be true to that tradition not in a passive way, in a very active way. We will be very firm on issues around self-determination, in particular on the question of Palestine. It is our firm view that we need international courage and leadership on that matter. It is clear that we have an apartheid regime. That the Israeli state actively confiscates land, actively discriminates and oppresses Palestinian citizens daily. I think Europe needs to be honest about all that and needs to exert maximum international pressure to bring that conflict to a resolution and to reach a two-state solution.”

What I have long appreciated about the Irish is their grounding in their history, and how they have learned positive lessons from it. Sinn Fein’s victories in both the Republic of Ireland (where they are now one seat away from being the largest party in parliament) and in the North (where they are the largest party) are important for what they say about the past and future of Ireland.

As McDonald recognised, Ireland long suffered under colonial rule, during which the British exploited Ireland’s resources and treated its indigenous Catholic inhabitants with racist contempt. To facilitate their governance, Britain sent thousands of its citizens to colonise the island and established the Protestant church in a privileged position as another display of their dominance.

The most notable of the many hardships endured by Irish Catholics were the infamous famines of the mid to late 19th century. During this period, over one million Irish died of starvation or disease, while more than two million were forced to flee the country. The

famines were a British-imposed crime on the Irish people. Even though the island was producing food aplenty, the Irish were forbidden to eat their grains or livestock, or hunt or fish on their lands, as all was reserved for export to Britain.

Despite Irish rebellion, it wasn't until the 1920s that they succeeded in casting off British rule and establishing the Republic of Ireland in all but the 6 northern counties heavily populated by Protestant settlers which remained under British control.

While the Republic of Ireland built a nation with strong support from Irish expatriate communities abroad, strife continued in the North between the Protestant majority and the restive Catholic minority. The bloody civil war ended with an agreement providing a power-sharing arrangement, open borders between the north and south, and a provision that should majorities in the Republic and North agree, in the future, a referendum would be held on Irish unity.

After the agreement, the population of the Republic put aside bitterness and focused on building a future of prosperity. The island, for all intents and purposes, became an economic unit. People travelled freely. Trade and investment went both ways. The north benefited from the south's prosperity and bonds were built. Ideological and political hostilities remained, with Protestant Unionists (those wishing to remain a part of the UK) squaring off against Irish Republicans (those seeking to politically unify the island).

Then came Boris Johnson and Brexit, keeping the border open but imposing awkward restrictions on commerce that pleased no one. This set the stage for the Sinn Fein victories in the North and the Republic.

While no one believes that the path forward will be easy, Protestants in the North will attempt to block Sinn Fein's efforts to govern. And no one should imagine that Irish unity is around the corner, despite shared economic concerns, the Protestants "fear of the other" remains strong. Nevertheless, a threshold has been crossed and the Irish see a way forward.

The lesson in this Irish experience is that tiny, once colonised, and oppressed Ireland can lead the way, challenging Europe to develop a values-based foreign policy. It should be an inspiration for struggling and oppressed peoples everywhere.

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James J. Zogby is president of the Washington-based Arab American Institute.

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