

*Overcoming Divisions:
A Conference for Lebanon's Future
Session 1: Remembering the Past, Imagining the Future*

Lessons from Northern Ireland

Presentation at Maison du Futur, Bickfaya, Lebanon
Wednesday 14th May 2025

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Northern Ireland
United Kingdom



Differences between the situations in Northern Ireland and Lebanon

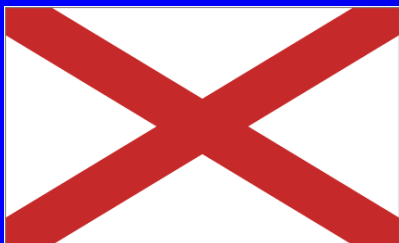
- Northern Ireland is part of the UK whereas Lebanon is a sovereign state.
- Since its creation following Irish Partition, the fundamental fault line in NI is over its constitutional status – either continuing within the UK or in a ‘united’ Ireland, linked to questions of identity – British/Irish/Northern Irish; Protestant/Catholic/Other; Unionist/Nationalist/Other.
- In Lebanon, no one is proposing to dissolve the state or absorb it into a neighbouring state. How to share the space peaceably is the issue.
- No direct foreign intervention exists in NI unlike Lebanon (Syria, Israel, Turkey, Iran, USA, France etc.)
- In both, *perhaps* a colonial legacy – but not a colonial problem per se.
- In NI, a strong state, the rule of law and an independent judiciary, albeit with a contested and disputed legitimacy in the eyes of many. Strong civic society, institutions and citizenship rights, buttressed by legislation and fiscal provisions. These have ensured a descent into anarchy avoided.
- In Lebanon, do these exist? If not, can they be restored?

INTRODUCTION

- The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998 represented a fundamental overhaul of the territorial governance of Northern Ireland as part of a wider reset of relationships in the archipelago.
- Together with changing demographic, social, economic and political circumstances in Northern Ireland, Ireland and Great Britain, arguments continue over the long-term status of Northern Ireland, whether as part of the UK or in a new dispensation on the island of Ireland (reunification).
- Relative peace – a negative rather than a positive peace - but ‘good government’ remains elusive. There is an abnormal system – the ‘golden era’ was c.2010-2. The devolved institutions have been ‘down’ for some 40% of the time since the GFA. Public services are in crisis.
- Brexit provided a further shift in the tectonic plates underpinning Northern Ireland’s constitutional status – but have its effects in terms of the future of the Province been overplayed?
- In London, Dublin and beyond, there is ignorance outside NI of how it works. Amid other crises, the EU has lost interest, the USA likewise.

INTRODUCTION

- The GFA did not end the debate over the long-term future of Ireland, including Northern Ireland. Rather, it parked it. However, does the GFA need to be reformed/revised/reset to restore fitness for purpose?
- Northern Ireland's constitutional status is conditional but by no means temporary. Change is not imminent. The default position is the status quo.
- **Nationalism** – as measured in the electoral success of parties associated with it – has only grown by around 1% since 1998. It is a long way short of 50%+1. Current strategies are failing in the long-term aim – despite electoral progress in NI, this not matched in ROI, leaving Sinn Féin in its northern redoubts, unable to breakthrough in the ROI.
- A 'performative tribalism' endures in NI. Focus on the constitutional question has blinded Nationalist parties to showing how pragmatic all-Island cooperation can deliver wins for all (Strand 2 of GFA shows that).
- **Unionism** has likewise sacrificed ground to the centre.
- Winning the constitutional argument requires reaching out beyond comfort zones to appeal to the non-aligned, politically 'neutral' or others. In the meantime, making society work should be the utmost shared priority.



Government in Northern Ireland

- (1800 - Ireland incorporated into the UK)
- (1920 – Partition of Ireland)
- 1921 – Northern Ireland state formed 21 June
- 1922 – ‘Southern Ireland’ - the Irish Free State
- 1921-72 – Devolved Parliament & Government (known as Stormont)
- 1972 – Stormont abolished. Direct rule starts
- 1998 – Good Friday Agreement & Referendum
- 1998 – Assembly Elections (108MLAs by STV PR)
- 1999 – Devolved assembly begins
- 2000-03 - Devolved Assembly suspended 4 times
- 2003 – New elections but suspension remained, with Direct Rule again
- 2008 – Following St Andrews Agreement, Direct Rule ended and a multi-party coalition restored.
- 2016 – Brexit – UK votes to leave EU (effective 2021)
- 2017- Devolution suspended once again
- 2020 – Devolution restored, briefly, until 2022
- 2024 – Devolution restored , again, until

Ulster campaigns to remain British - Resisting Home Rule, 1893

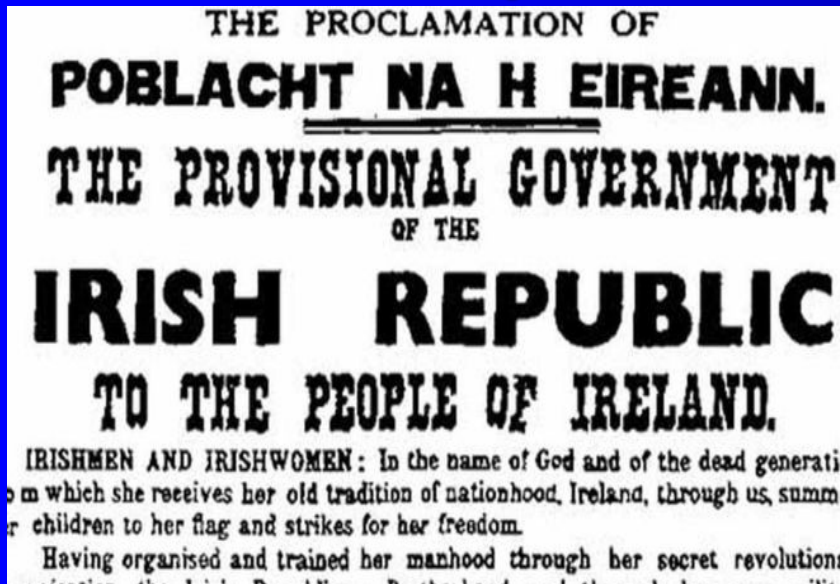


Easter Rising

24-29 April 1916

The Somme

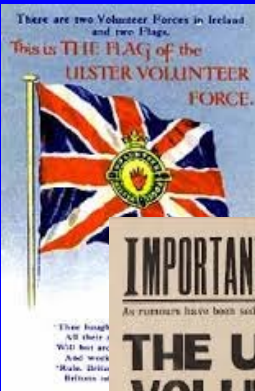
July 1916



The seven signatories of the Easter Proclamation
All were executed after the 1916 Rising



A threat of civil war; a war of independence; and another civil war

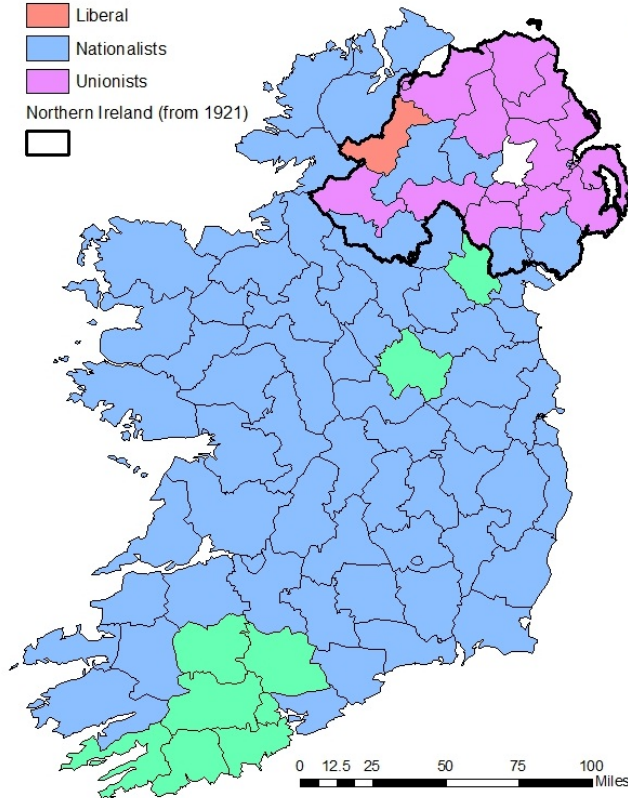


No independence referendum but the General Election results were clear December 1910 December 1918

Political party

- Ind. Nationalists
- Liberal
- Nationalists
- Unionists

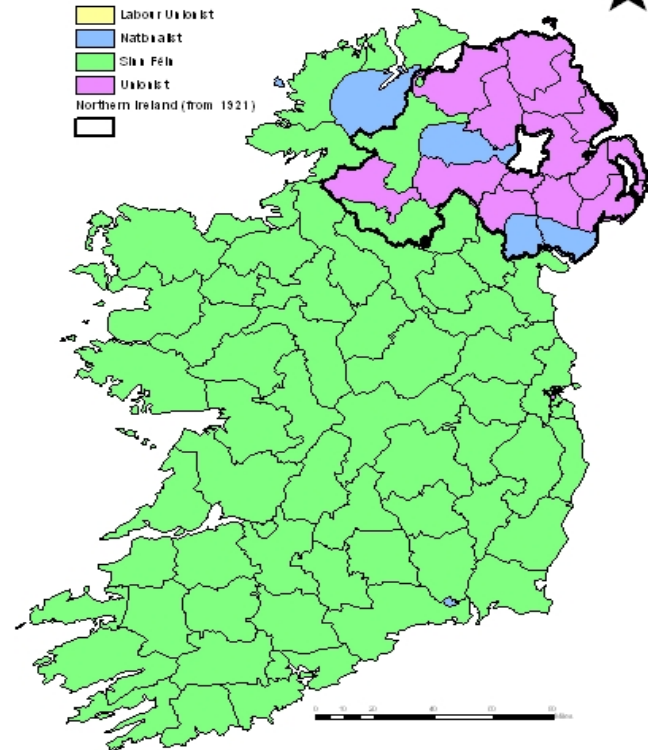
Northern Ireland (from 1921)



Political party

- Labour Unionist
- Nationalist
- Sinn Féin
- Unionist

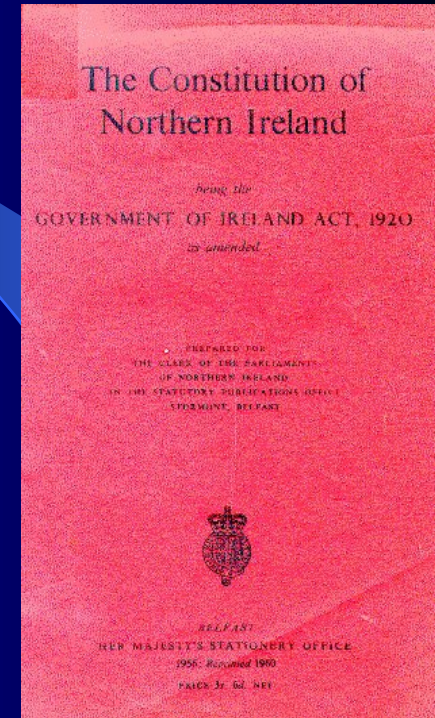
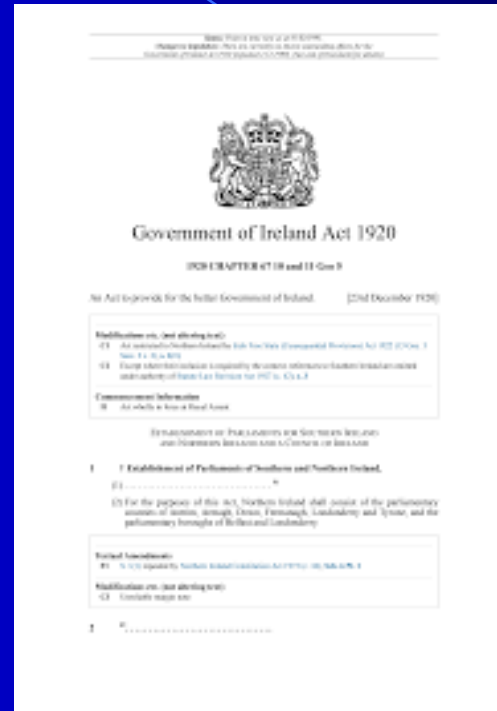
Northern Ireland (from 1921)



Northern Ireland is created ...



GEOATLAS.com © 2004 © Graphi-Ogre



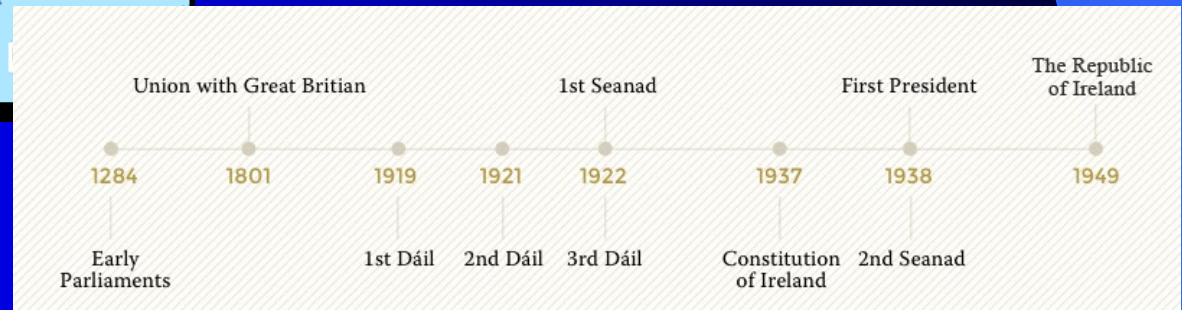
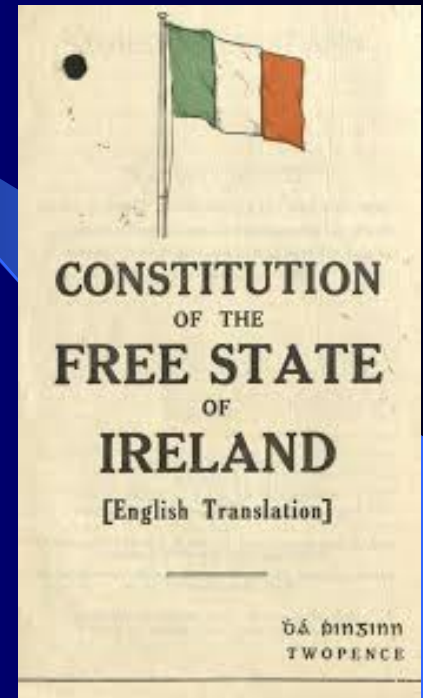
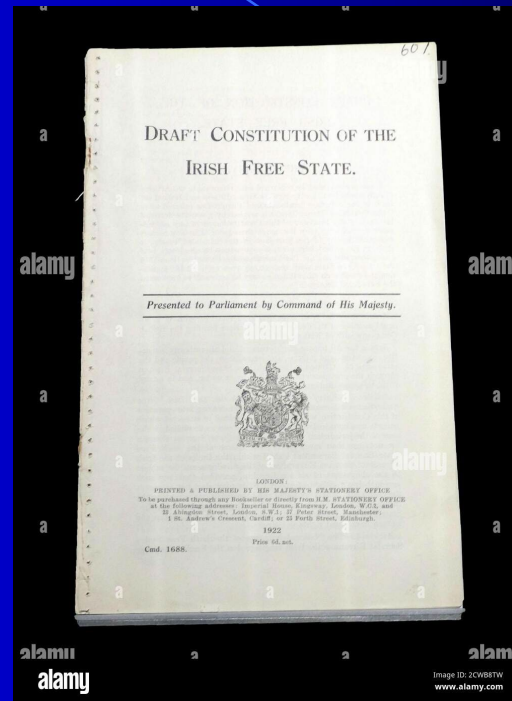
THE WHOLE MAP OF EUROPE HAS BEEN
CHANGED...BUT AS THE DELUGE SUBSIDES
AND THE WATERS FALL SHORT WE SEE THE
DREARY STEEPLES OF FERMANAGH AND
TYRONE EMERGING ONCE AGAIN.

- WINSTON CHURCHILL -

'Southern Ireland', the Irish Free State, Eire, Republic of Ireland

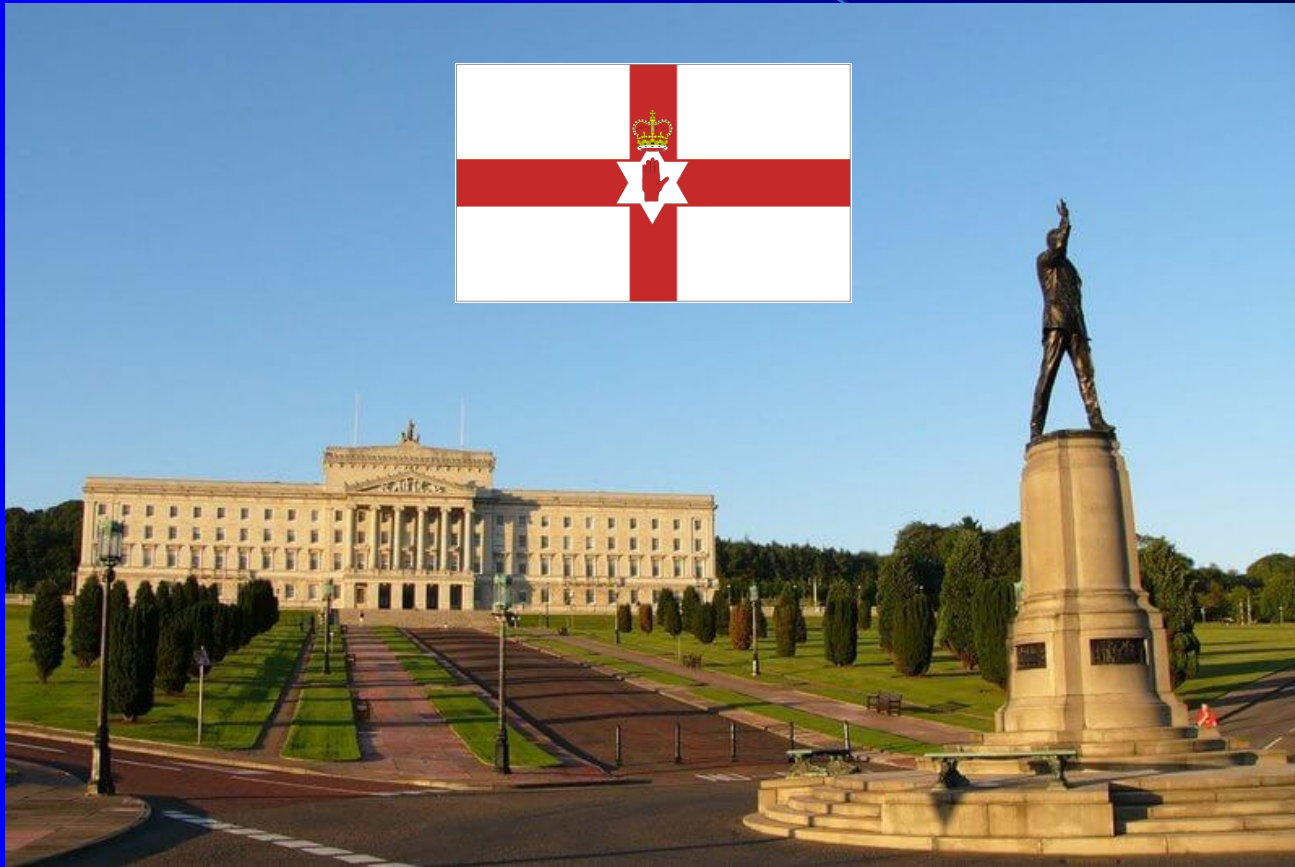


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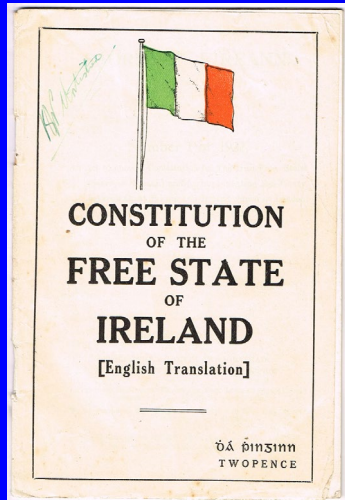


Stormont – The Northern Ireland Parliament

‘A Protestant Parliament for a Protestant People’?

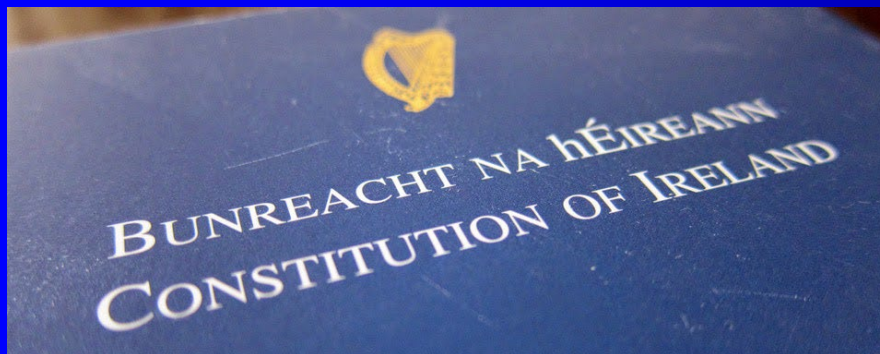


A 'Catholic Constitution for a Catholic People'?

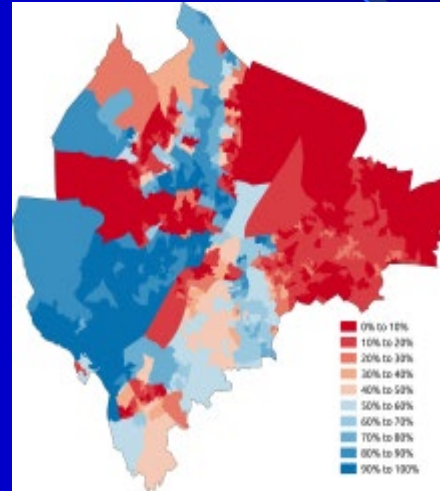


BUNREACT NA hÉIREANN CONSTITUTION OF IRELAND

Enacted by the People 1st July, 1937
In operation as from 29th December, 1937



'Apartheid', Ulster-style? Civil unrest bordering on civil war – with walls to match



Northern Ireland Civil Rights
ASSOCIATION

**A CIVIL RIGHTS
MARCH**

WILL BE HELD IN **DERRY**
ON **SATURDAY, 5TH OCT.**

COMMENCING AT **3.30 p.m.**

ASSEMBLY POINT: **WATERSIDE RAILWAY STATION**
MARCH TO THE **DIAMOND**

Where a **PUBLIC MEETING** will take place



From Civil Rights to Civil War?

Life went on in Northern Ireland



A soldier takes cover in a back garden - while the hedge is cut.

From Devolution to Direct Rule



The 'Border Poll', 1973

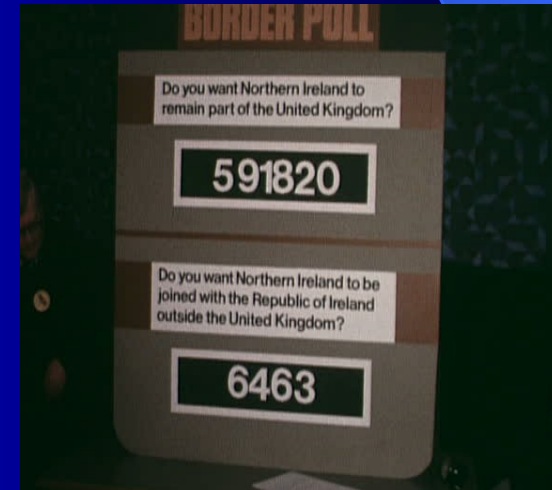
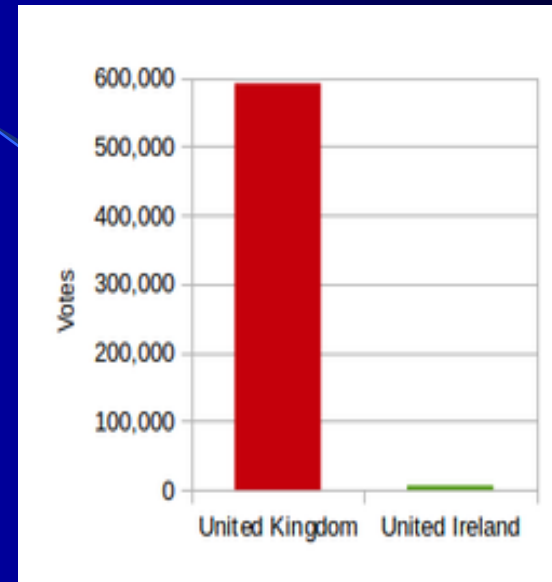
DO YOU WANT NORTHERN IRELAND TO
REMAIN PART OF THE UNITED KINGDOM?
IF SO, PUT AN X IN THIS BOX

OR

DO YOU WANT NORTHERN IRELAND TO
BE JOINED WITH THE REPUBLIC OF
IRELAND, OUTSIDE THE UNITED KINGDOM?
IF SO, PUT AN X IN THIS BOX

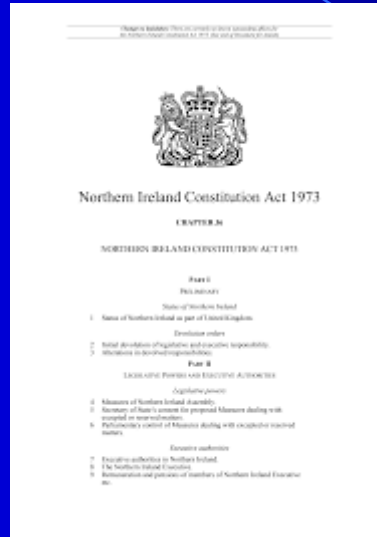
A

B

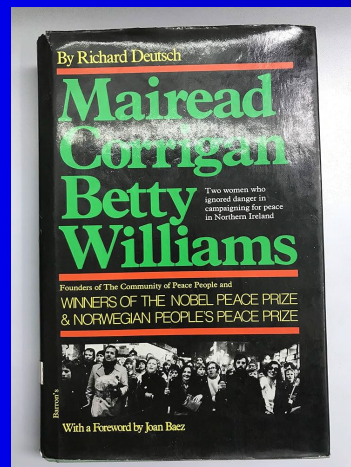
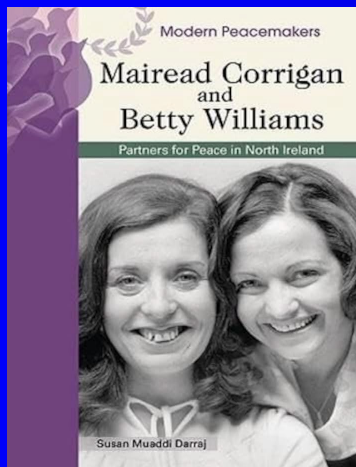


Sunningdale Agreement

9 December 1973



The 'peace people' 1976 and Nobel Prize award – No to Violence, Yes to Dialogue



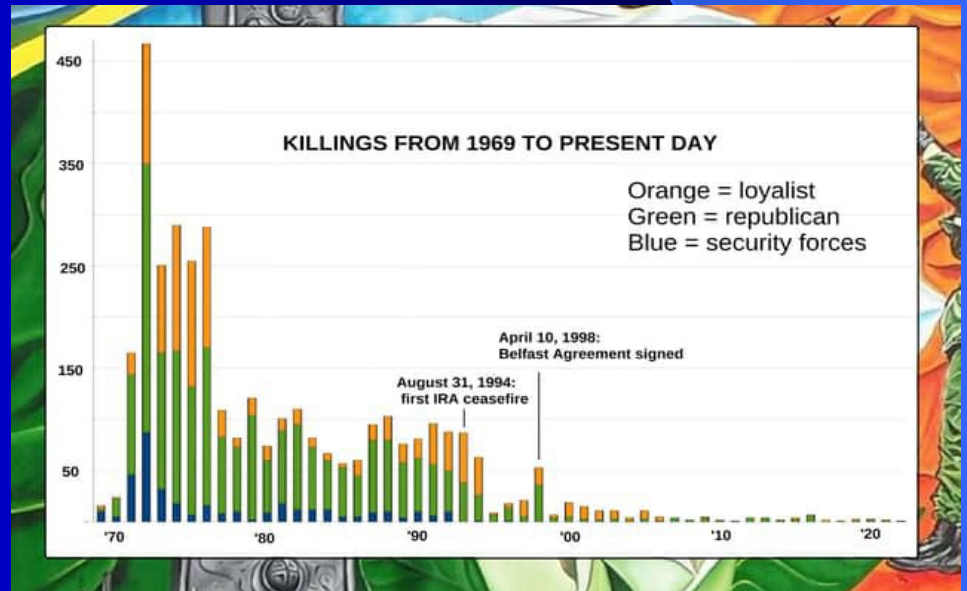
Murder and Mayhem continue



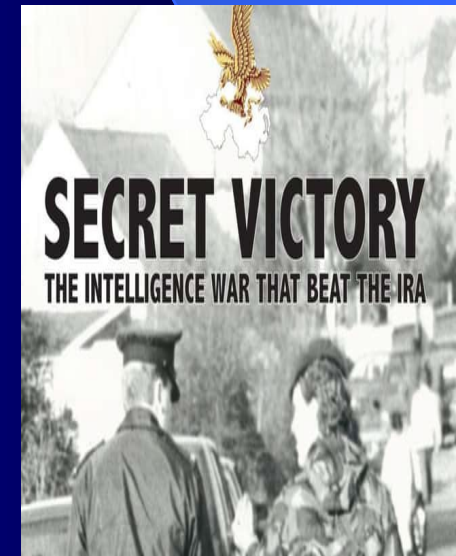
THE IRA INTENSIFIED THEIR CAMPAIGN IN UK CITIES. THEIR NEW METHOD WAS TWO PRONGED - THE ARMALITE IN ONE HAND THE BALLOT BOX ON THE OTHER....



A move towards peace and reconciliation



A Changing International Context, war weariness and 'defeat' of the terrorists



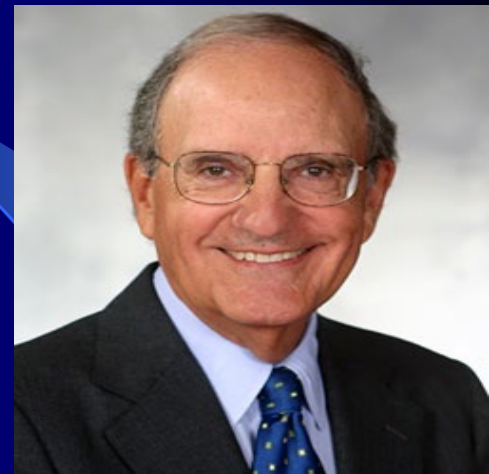
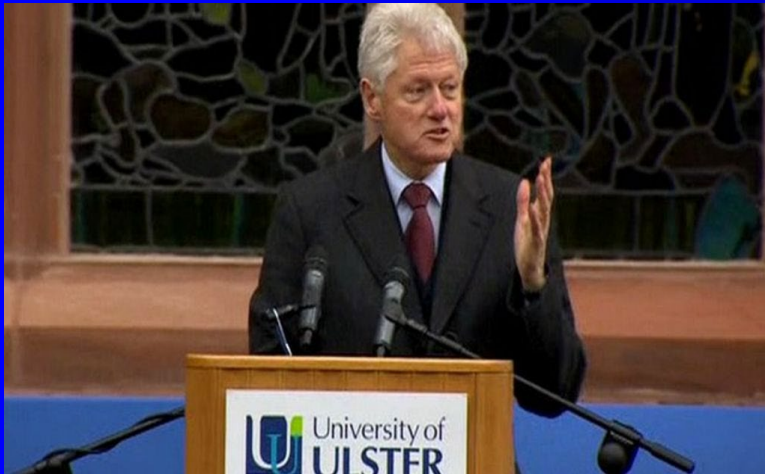


Incore

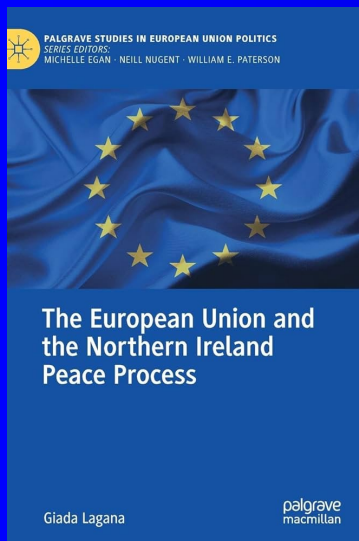
International Conflict
Research Institute



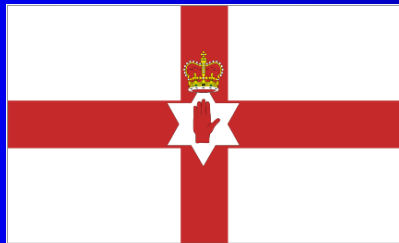
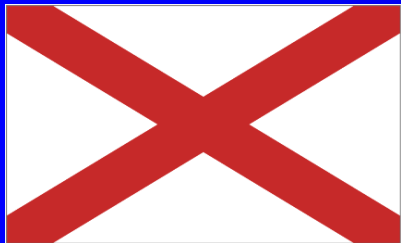
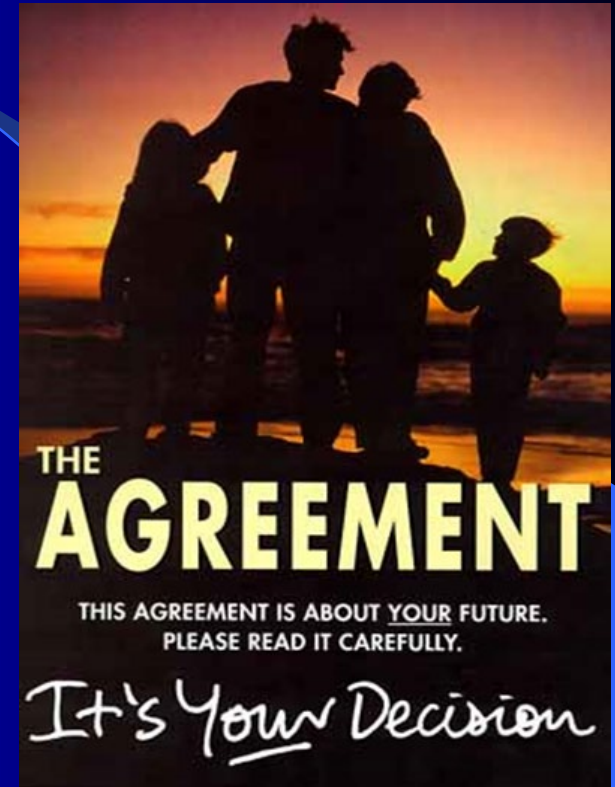
The Yanks are Coming – The ‘comeback kid’ (and another Nobel Prize, 1998!)



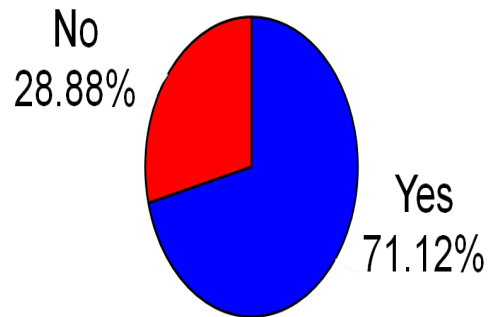
Meanwhile, “a New Deal in Europe”



The Good Friday Agreement, 1998

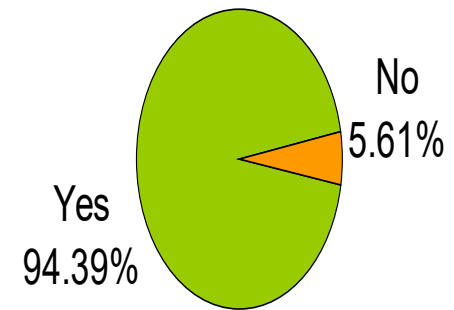


Referendum on Belfast 'Good Friday' Agreement, 1998



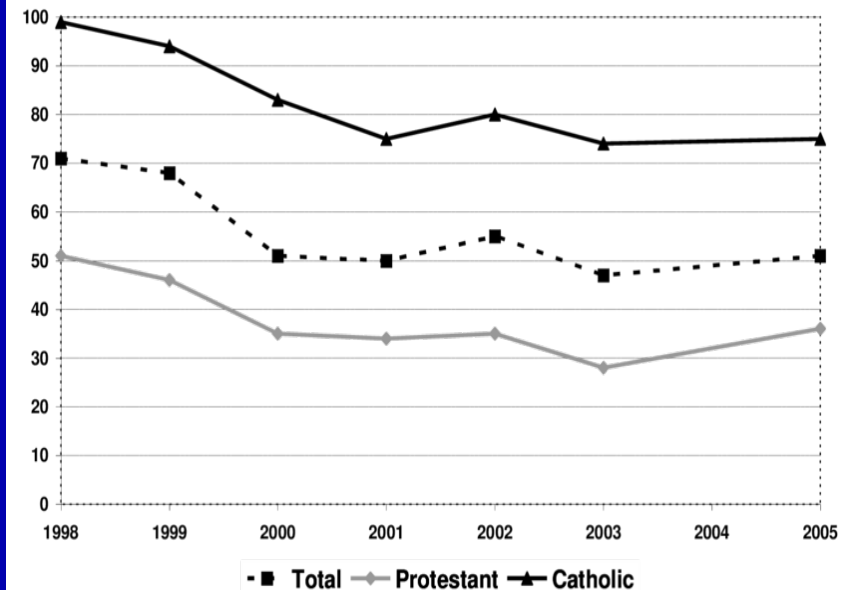
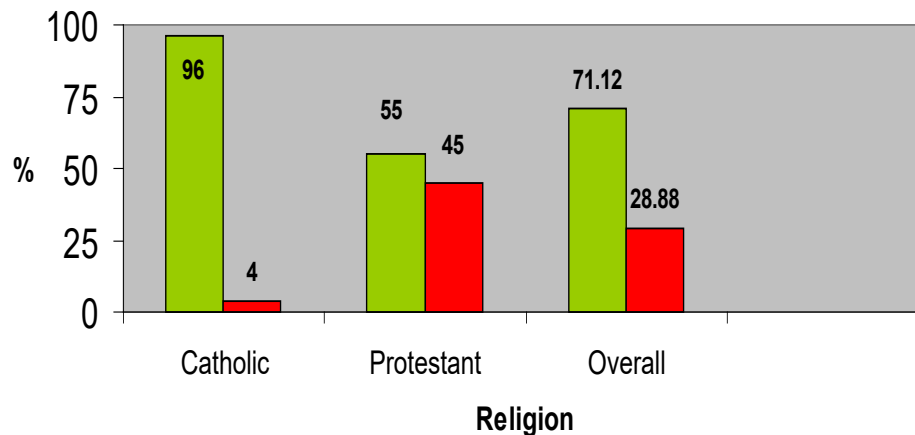
■ Yes ■ No

Republic of Ireland Referendum on Belfast 'Good Friday' Agreement, 22 May 1998



■ Yes ■ No

Northern Ireland Referendum on the Belfast Agreement - Breakdown by Religion



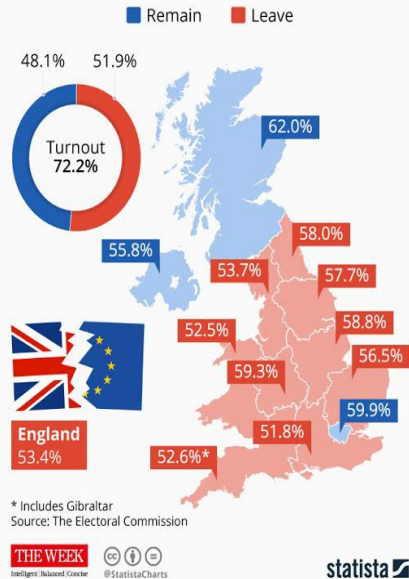
Rapprochement between Royalty and Republicans



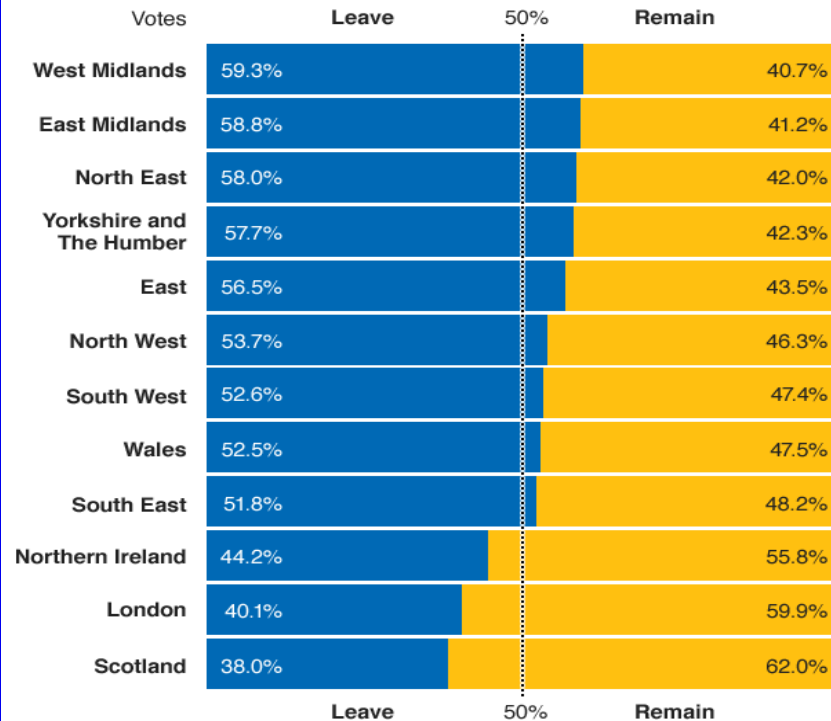
UK Brexit Referendum, 2016

UK chooses Brexit

EU referendum results by region



How Leave won the referendum



BBC



From borders across the land to borders of the mind – the Irish Border through the ages



Northern Ireland – Religious composition: From Majority Rule to a Plurality of Minorities

Year	Catholic %	Protestant %	Other religion / no religion / not stated %
1911#	34.4	65.4	0.2
1926~	33.5	66.3	0.2
1937	33.5	66.3	0.2
1951	34.4	65.2	0.4
1961	34.9	63.2	1.9
1971+	31.4	59.2	9.4
1981+	28.0	53.7	18.5
1991	38.4	50.6	11.0
2001*	40.3 (43.8)	45.6 (53.1)	14.2 (3.1)
2011*	40.8 (45.1)	41.6 (48.4)	17.7 (6.5)
2021*	42.3 (45.7)	37.3 (43.5)	20.4 (10.8)

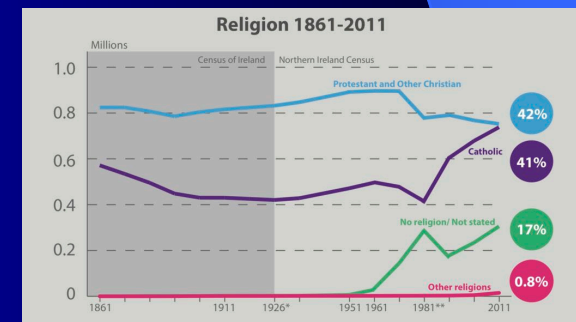
Notes: # last census conducted on an all-Ireland basis

~ first census conducted within Northern Ireland

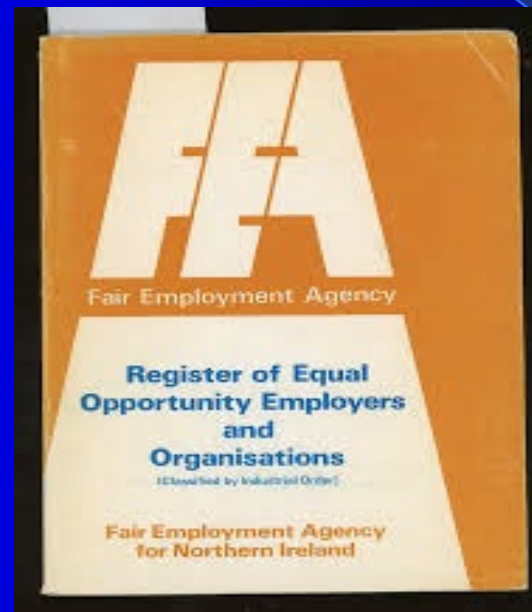
+ figures distorted by partial boycott of the census exercise in each year.

* figures in parenthesis indicate 'religion of upbringing'.

Source: Northern Ireland Census



Northern Ireland fair employment – a policy success and proof of reform?

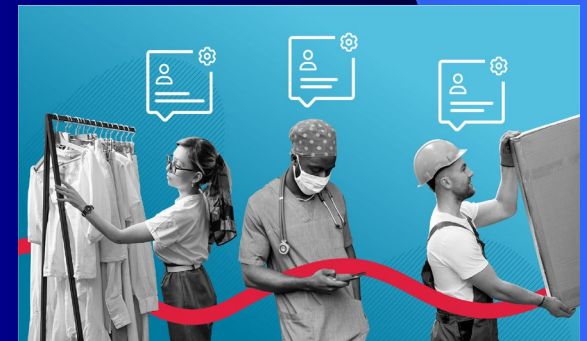


Summary of Northern Ireland Economically Active Population by Religion#

	%	
	Protestant	Roman Catholic
1990	61.0	39.0
2001	57.3	42.7
2010	55.1	44.9
2017	47.6	52.4
2024	45.9	54.1

Note: # Excludes non-determined

Source: Labour Force Survey, NISRA, Census 2001, 2011 and 2021.

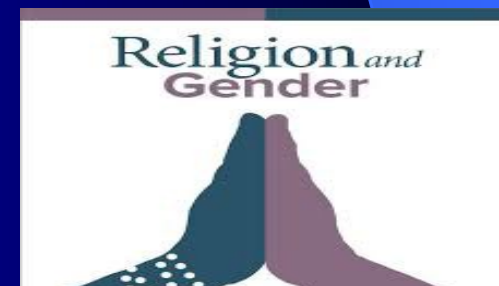


Summary of Northern Ireland Total Workforce by Religion and Sex

	Total Monitored Workforce % All Employees ++			
	Religion#		Sex	
	Protestant	Roman Catholic	Male	Female
1990	65.1	34.9	55.1	44.9
1996	61.9	38.1	53.6	46.4
2000	60.4	39.6	52.7	47.3
2001	59.7	40.3	49.6	50.4
2010	54.1	45.9	47.3	52.7
2014	52.0	48.0	47.3	52.7
2022	49.9	50.1	47.5	52.5

++ Measured workforce

- # Excludes non-determined (in 2022, at c.14.9%)
- Source: Northern Ireland Assembly (2012); Equality Commission (2024); Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency; Northern Ireland Civil Service.



Summary of Northern Ireland Public Sector Workforce by Religion and Sex

	Public Sector % All Employees			
	Religion		Sex #	
	Protestant	Roman Catholic	Male	Female
1990	64.3 (60*)	35.3 (32*)	51.1	48.9
1996	62.2	37.8	48.3	51.7
2000	60.3	39.7	45.7	54.3
2001	59.8	40.2	40.9	59.1
2010	53.6	46.4	38.7	61.3
2022	49.2	50.8	34.1	65.9

- # Full time employees only
- * Plus 8% non-determined
- Source: Northern Ireland Assembly (2012); Equality Commission (2024); Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency; Northern Ireland Civil Service.

The Changing Composition of the Police in Northern Ireland ++

	Protestant	Catholic	Other or Not Determined	Male	Female	Ethnic Minority
1922	80	20	-	100	0#	-
1969	88	12	-	96.5*	3.5*	-
1990	92	7	>1	91.4	8.6	-
1999	88.3	8.3	3.4	88.2	11.8	-
2011	69	30.1	0.9	73.9	26.1	-
2024	65.8	32.9	1.4	67.8	32.2	0.64

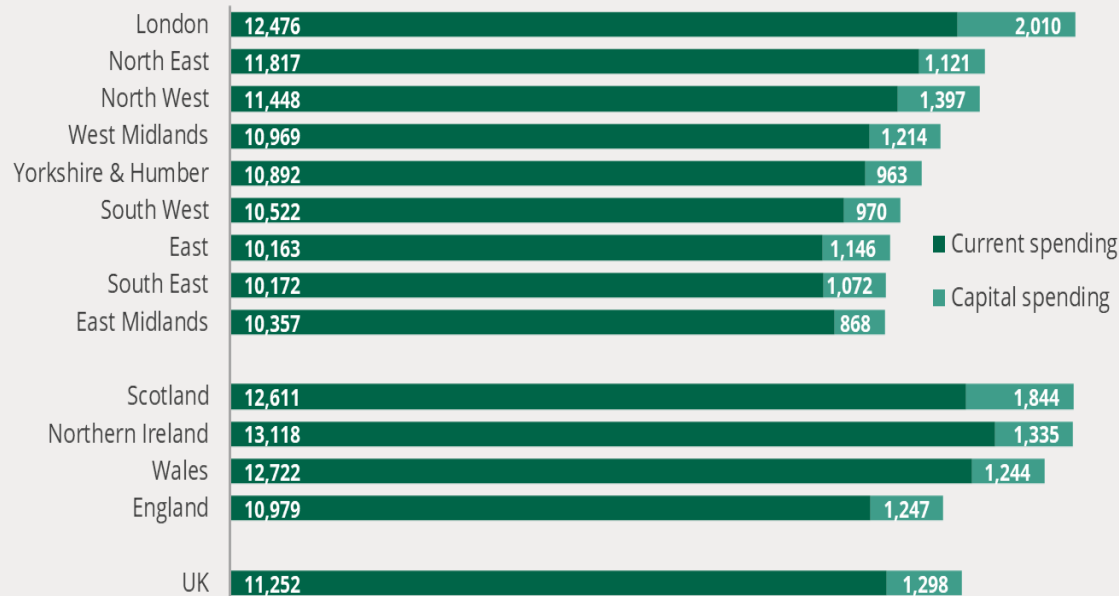
- * Figures for 1971
- ++ Refers to establishment posts and excludes reserves.
- # first female police officers in Northern Ireland were in 1943



Differences in Public Expenditure across the UK (£ per capita)

Current and capital spending per person, by country and region of the UK

£ per person, 2022/23

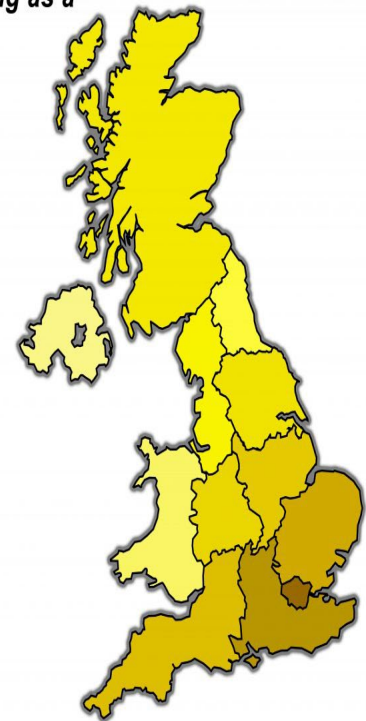


Source: HM Treasury, Country and regional analysis: 2022, 16 November 2022

UK Government Spending as a ratio of regional GDP

	Ratio of GDP at Market Prices (%)
NORTH EAST	62.3
NORTH WEST	53.6
YORKSHIRE	51.7
EAST MIDLANDS	47.9
WEST MIDLANDS	50.2
EASTERN ENGLAND	41.1
LONDON	26.9
SOUTH EAST	33.7
SOUTH WEST	44.5
SCOTLAND	53
WALES	66.4
NORTHERN IRELAND	68.3
UK	43.1

Highest Lowest



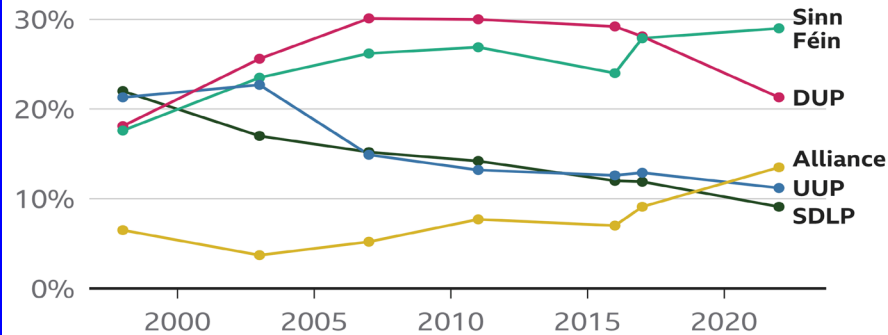
*Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/public-expenditure-statistical-analysis-2019>

Northern Ireland Assembly Elections

From majority/minority to a plurality of minorities

Popularity of parties, over time

Share of first preference votes at each Stormont election since 1998

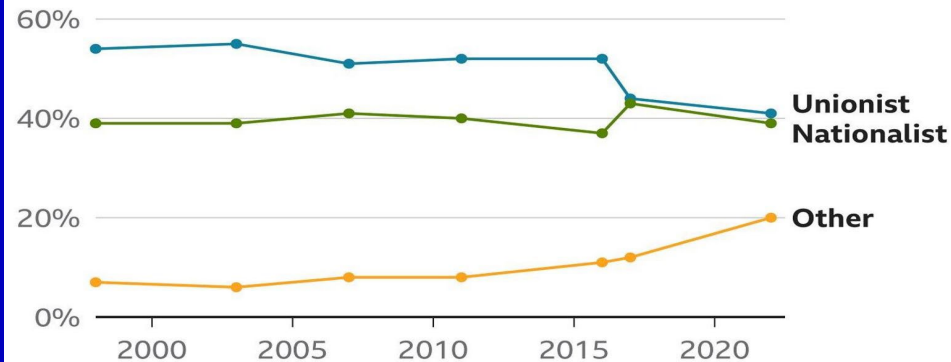


Source: Ark, BBC election results

BBC

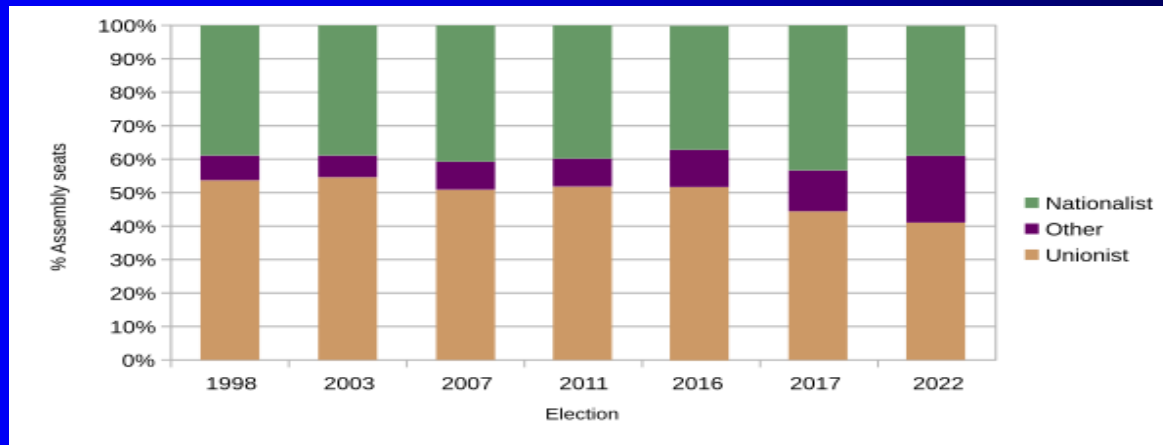
Popularity of unionist, nationalist and other parties over time

Share of seats won by community designation at each Stormont election from 1998 to 2022

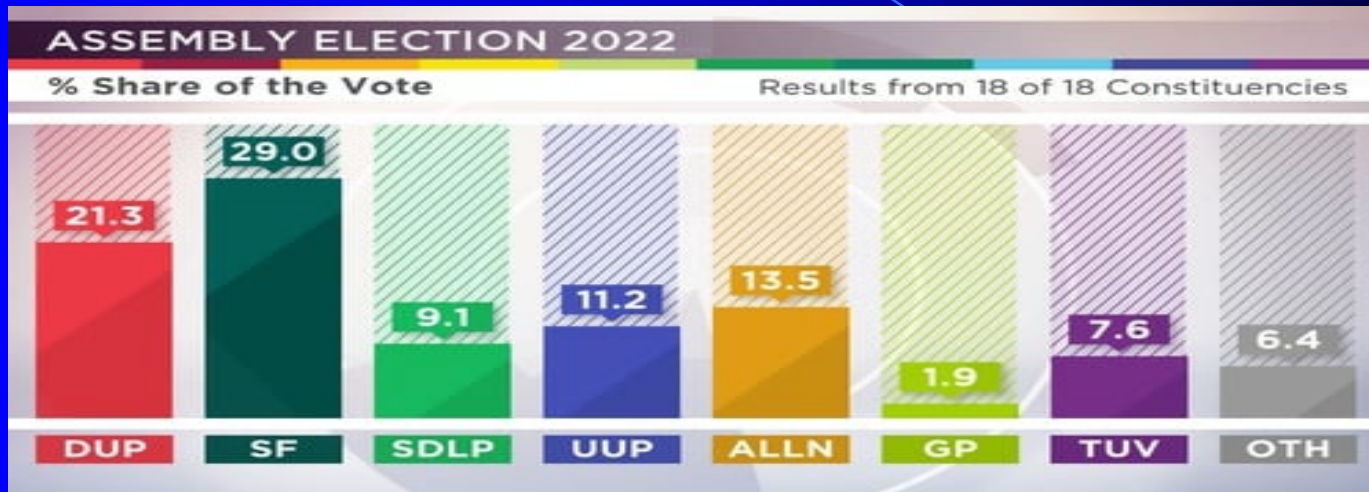


Source: Ark, BBC election results

BBC



Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2022 - an historic result



Northern Ireland Assembly elections: 2022

Seat and vote share for main parties, change since last election

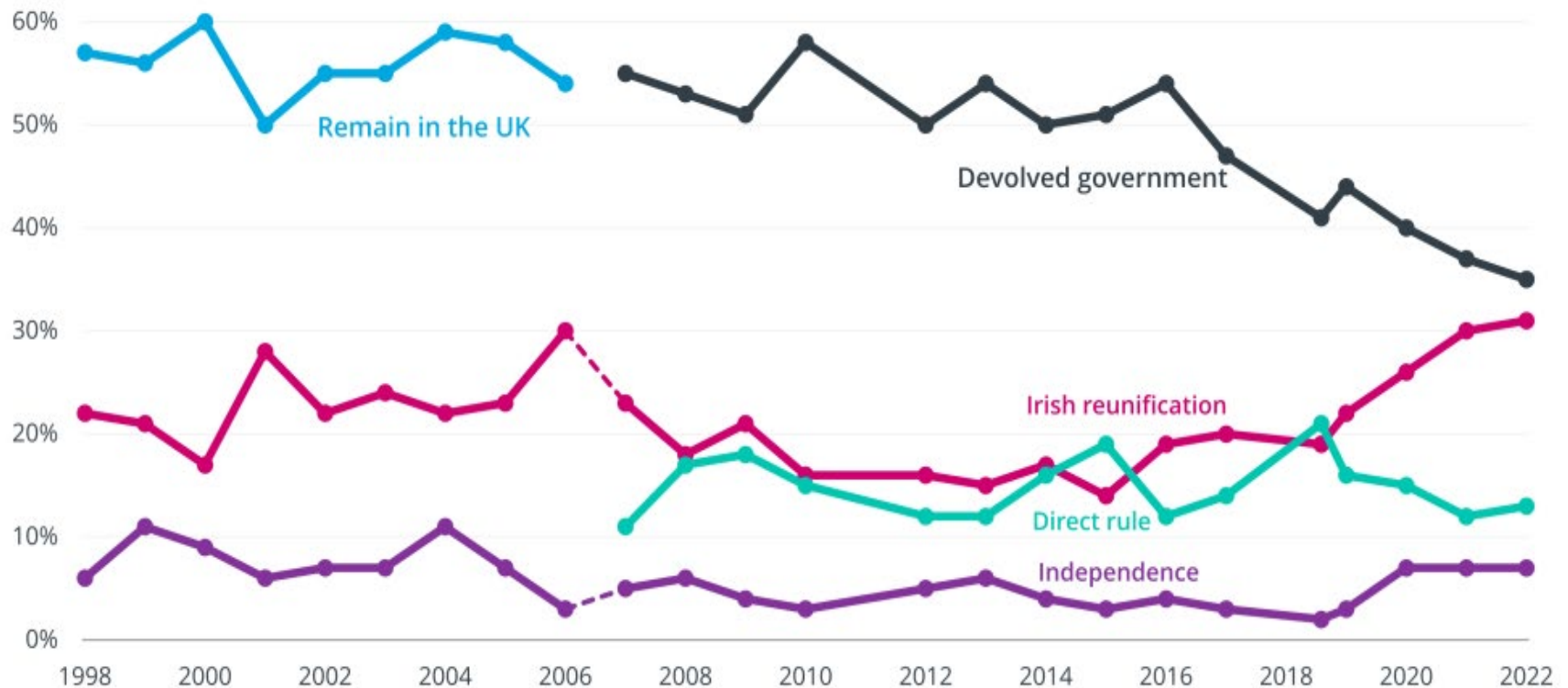
	Seats won			1st preference votes		
	Number	% of seats	Change	Number	% of votes	Change
Sinn Féin	27	30.0%	-	250,385	29.0%	+1.1%
DUP	25	27.8%	-3	184,002	21.3%	-6.7%
Alliance	17	18.9%	+9	116,681	13.5%	+4.5%
UUP	9	10.0%	-1	96,390	11.2%	-1.7%
SDLP	8	8.9%	-4	78,237	9.1%	-2.9%
TUV	1	1.1%	-	65,788	7.6%	+5.1%
PBPA	1	1.1%	-	9,798	1.1%	-0.6%
Green Party	0	0.0%	-2	16,433	1.9%	-0.4%
Other	2	2.2%	+1	44,986	5.2%	+1.9%
Total	90	100.0%	-	862,700	100.0%	-



Constitutional preference in Northern Ireland, 1998-2022

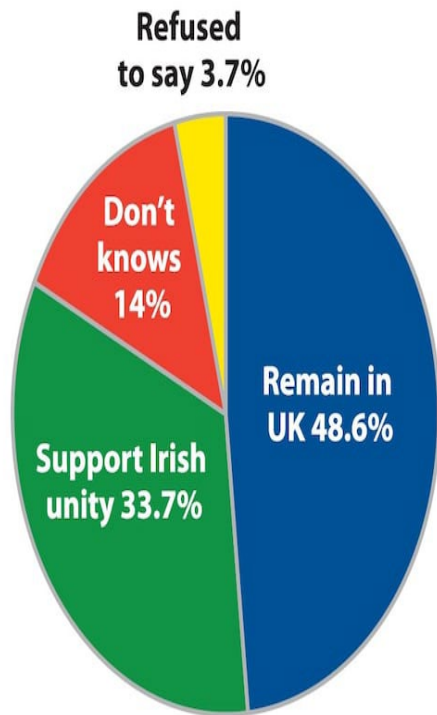
Constitutional preference in Northern Ireland, 1998 to 2022

IfG

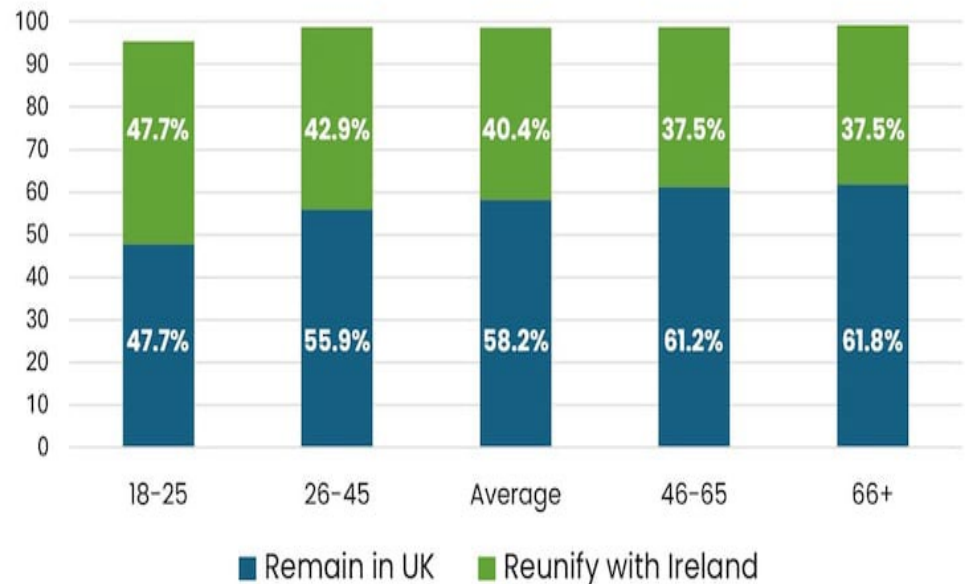


Source: Institute for Government analysis of the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 1998 to 2022. "Other" and "don't know" responses not shown.

Attitudes in Northern Ireland to its Constitutional Future (Northern Ireland General Election Survey, 2024)



Constitutional Preference
(by age)



margin of error ± 3.1

Voting intentions in a referendum (ARINS/Irish Times Poll, 2023)

How would you vote in a referendum?

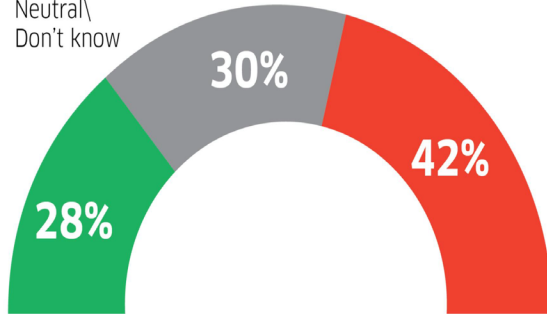
UK Irish unity Would not vote Don't know



Attitudes in the Republic of Ireland – when costs and taxes are factored in (Business Post, April 2024)



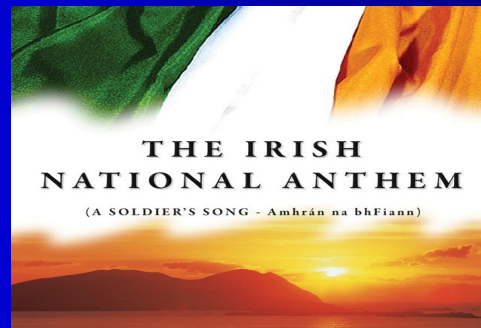
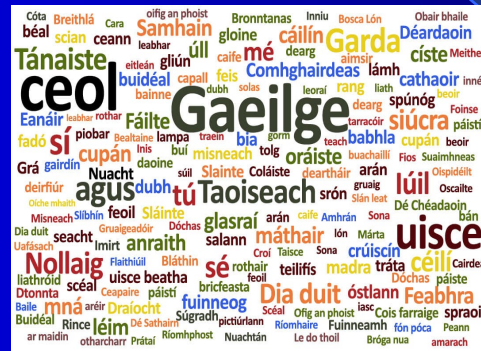
Neutral\ Don't know



I would Vote **YES** in a referendum for a United Ireland even if it cost the state €20 billion per year for 20 years

I would vote **NO** in a referendum for a United Ireland if it cost the state €20 billion per year for 20 years

TAX

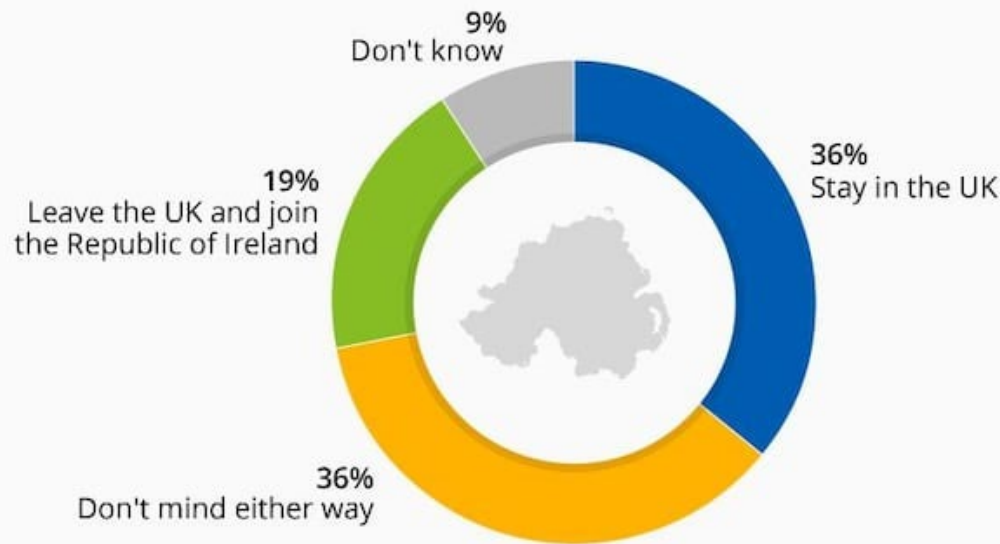


Attitudes in GB to Irish (re)unification (Irish Times/IPSOS poll, 2019)



Brexit Britons indifferent about N. Ireland leaving UK

"If there was a referendum in Northern Ireland on its future, would you personally prefer it to choose to Stay in the UK or Leave the UK and join the Republic of Ireland?"



@StatistaCharts

Source: Ipsos MORI/King's College London

THE IRISH TIMES

statista

CONCLUSION

- Fitful devolution and multiple suspensions have damaged confidence in the devolved institutions, compounding a wider crisis in the governance of Northern Ireland, with the casualty being public service delivery.
- Unionists have been slow to realise or accept that they cannot win a Border Poll with Unionists alone – ‘soft’ nationalists and others need to be won over to the ‘pro-Union’ cause, too.
- Likewise, Nationalists have not reached out beyond their natural support base to attract the ‘disillusioned’, the ‘unity curious’ and ‘others’.
- Mounting anticipation exists (or is at least trailed) among nationalism/republicanism, in terms of momentum for the (re-)unification of Ireland.
- Growing angst among Unionism/loyalism that is ever more fragmented in its reaction and how to respond to developments ostensibly prejudicial to their political aspirations and interests.
- Civic groups have emerged on both sides of the constitutional debate, seemingly in preparation for the ‘impending’ referendum. ‘Together UK’ and ‘Uniting UK’ (pro-Union) and ‘New Ireland Commission’ (‘Ireland’s Future’) (anti-Union). Is the twilight of the Union upon us?

- However, reunification enthusiasm is largely confined to the media, academia and key political representatives. The conversation is largely inaccessible to, and unengaged with by, the wider public.
- Majority support for unification doesn't exist yet... and is not close though, following the Brexit referendum, the conversation about Irish reunification has increased in prevalence.
- Whether it is an 'All Ireland', a 'New Ireland', a 'Shared Ireland', let alone a 'United Ireland', securing an 'Agreed Ireland' is essential before constitutional change, otherwise exchanging one sovereignty for another does nothing to address fundamental issues.
- The exact terms of reunification would need to be worked out. Would separate arrangements be retained for Northern Ireland (federalism), or would Northern Ireland be fully integrated into the unitary Irish state.
- Insufficient thought has been given to how Irish unity might be achieved, or what it might look like, or how it might operate, or the consequences.
- Planning is fraught due to so many uncertainties, plus a reluctance by Unionists to engage on the not unreasonable basis of "why help engineer the very thing against which you are most opposed?"

- Eulogies of thuggery, such as those of ‘Kneecap’, the Irish-speaking rap group that, supposedly all done with irony, adopt the trappings of Irish republican paramilitaries – balaclavas, kneecapping, tricolour flags and ‘Brits Out’ mantra, do little to dispel the fears that a ‘united Ireland’ will be a cold house for unionists, Protestants and others who view themselves as British or Northern Irish.
- They echo the political message that revels in a highly partisan and convenient amnesia, a revisionist approach to physical force nationalism that blithely asserts there was ‘no alternative’ to 30 years of bombs, bullets, murder and mayhem.
- It amounts to a dash of nihilism, banal amorality and edgy flirtation with the dark forces of the past that lurk, still, in the shady corners of all too many communities, a menace that has, to quote a former leading Republican, not “gone away you know”.
- This spectre at the feast lingers on the other side too. Loyalists and hard-line unionists persist in a form of Ulster nationalism with a conditional fealty to the Union and the Crown but one that is incapable of accepting that Northern Ireland is not ‘as British as Finchley’.

- By 2022, c. 40% of Northern Irish adults saw themselves as “neither” unionist nor nationalist, up from c. 30% in 1998. The conventional binary of ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ is outmoded - ethno-religious backgrounds and electoral preferences are no longer congruent.
- In the 1980s, Conor Cruise O’Brien, said apartheid in South Africa would be around for a long time, while the Berlin Wall and Iron Curtain looked similarly permanent. Both dispensations changed suddenly. Are we at a similar tipping point? Will Ireland experience the same dramatic change?
- The Irish Government has also taken the position that the time is not right for a border poll. In October 2023, Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar spoke of unity as “an objective and not just an aspiration” but that an Irish unity poll was currently “not a good idea” as it “will be defeated”.
- Labour Leader Sir Keir Starmer said a referendum on Irish unification was “not even on the horizon”, adding “I don’t think we’re anywhere near that kind of question”.
- Unlike the South African or German cases, a quick, seismic and irrevocable change in Northern Ireland’s constitutional position is less likely than its proponents suggest - or its opponents fear. Pragmatic cross-border and wider cooperation across the Islands offers a far more realistic and credible way forward in the medium term.

Some things to do or to avoid

- Avoid a dialogue of the deaf – talking only to one's own or one party to conflict.
- Don't talk to terrorists/armed parties? Well, not in public and not at first. The role of widely trusted intermediates and interlocutors is critical.
- Do acknowledge that there is no monopoly of suffering or victimhood - but does this imply no hierarchy of victims? (Are combatants' – or those who take up arms – to be treated differently to innocent civilians?)
- Do commit to exclusively peaceful means leading to inclusivity. Build on common ground, shared interests and mutual benefits.
- Do have proportionality and fair representation, in elections, resource allocation, public sector employment and access to services, as well as through taxation.
- Don't 'game the system' by involving foreign elements with prejudicial vested interests but do embrace the value of external catalysts and actors that provided support and positive influence through financial measures and building pressure for consensus, concession and rapprochement.
- Do capitalise on the goodwill of international donors and agencies.
- Do recognise and celebrate multiple identities and diversity.
- Do emphasize rights but also responsibilities and duties.