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**Michael Freeden** takes a look at the sea changes political ideologies are undergoing

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# RSA JOURNAL

21st century enlightenment



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# THE PACE OF PEACE

Brexit has put many constitutional issues under the spotlight; none more so than the status of Northern Ireland

by Duncan Morrow  
 @duncan\_morrow

Northern Ireland was born in contention, and has known only fleeting moments without it. The existential dispute over the 1920 settlement was embedded in politics, employment, residence, school and friendship, in sporting preferences, and in violence. The 30-year eruption of violence after 1969, euphemistically called ‘the Troubles’, only reinforced division, tragedy and hostility.

Against this, the Belfast, or Good Friday, Agreement of 1998 (its name is still disputed) always had something of the quality of a miracle; although, in the 20 years since, fragility more than miracle has been its hallmark. While it has certainly reduced violence dramatically and established power-sharing, Northern Ireland politics has since progressed unsteadily through one threat of collapse after another. But, with the immediate threat of the Troubles over, the view from London and Dublin was that Northern Ireland was mostly a minor (if expensive) irritant that could be safely ignored.

Perhaps this complacency accounts for the failure to fully anticipate the risk that the referendum on EU membership posed to Northern Ireland, or that Northern Ireland posed to Brexit. Certainly, Brexit revealed that the British population had not fully internalised that the Agreement of 1998 changed not only Ireland, but also the UK. Even MPs failed to anticipate (or care?) that the UK’s only land border with Europe – and all its contentious history – would be back in play if the country voted to leave the EU.

A corruption crisis, followed by sectarian polarisation, did for the Belfast Executive before the implications of the referendum had fully crystallised. But in the context of Brexit, it proved impossible to breathe life back into the Executive for three years. Sinn Fein gains in Assembly elections in March 2017 were followed by a swing to the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in the June 2017 UK general election, handing the DUP the balance of power in Westminster.

Officially, the Agreement was intact; in practice, its main operating institutions were in suspended animation. Divisions over borders and sovereignty, from which the Agreement and EU membership had removed most of the sting, re-opened with a new vitality. The EU, previously an advocate and context for cooperation, was now a party to the dispute.

## The winds of change

All sorts of old assumptions no longer seem so certain. Catholic voters – soon to be a majority in Northern Ireland – united to oppose Brexit. ‘Civic nationalists’ in Northern Ireland have campaigned to demand the Irish government prepare a case and a proposal for unity. Sinn Fein calls regularly for a border poll.

Many younger Protestants, and those in the suburbs, voted as Remainers. Opinion polls after 2016 have indicated that a democratic majority in Northern Ireland for a united Ireland has become numerically plausible for the first time since 1920, if not yet likely. Polls in Great Britain have suggested that a majority

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Image from iStock



of English Brexiteers see losing Northern Ireland as a price worth paying for a clean Brexit.

But there are contrary voices. Unionism has loudly denied Brexit has raised any constitutional question at all, and has so far refused to enter the debate for fear that engagement might be taken as encouragement. But there is no disguising the increasing alarm that reunification has entered public discourse. There have been stirrings in the undergrowth of loyalism, and grim warnings of the violent consequences of any attempts at change. But, above all, the Irish political establishment, aware that there has been no significant preparation for the huge cultural, political, security or economic disruption that a sudden all-Ireland state would inevitably bring, has made haste to dampen expectations and to prevent any automatic transition from Brexit to Irish unity. Irish insistence on continuing free-flowing trade within Ireland after Brexit as the *sine qua non* for a Withdrawal Agreement seemed to many to be largely designed to prevent radicalisation over sovereignty.

Despite a three-year vacuum and rampant speculation, the good news from Northern Ireland is that there is almost no appetite for or belief in violence as a solution. Northern Irish politics, which once seemed interminably slow, eventually moved with almost indecent speed. The brutality of the Johnson government's abandonment of its DUP allies shocked even those who had predicted it. Westminster, Dublin and the 26 other EU capitals agreed that Northern

Ireland would remain in the effective orbit of the EU and the Single Market. An unmanageable hard border in the Irish Sea. The greater the distance that emerges between the UK and the EU, the deeper the regulatory divide between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Unionism emerged from the most recent general election with fewer seats than nationalism for the first time. However, the big winners were not Sinn Féin, but the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the inter-community Alliance Party. Both championed no Brexit above Irish unity. Both made clear that maintaining the fragile peace in Northern Ireland was critical before considering constitutional change. Even nationalists set on a border referendum acknowledged that a Brexit-style aspirational vote without operational plan would be disastrous for stability and trust.

As 2020 began, forming an Executive seemed less threatening for the larger parties than an election. But amid general relief that an Executive finally existed once more, there was uncertainty about what a divided Executive would or could do to negotiate Brexit. A change in the Irish government seems imminent (with opinion polls showing Sinn Féin to be in pole position), the nature of the eventual Brexit deal remains unknowable and the consequences of Scottish constitutional uncertainty unresolved. What is currently moving at a gradual pace could change suddenly. Meanwhile, Northern Ireland waits, wonders and worries. ■

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