

## Brexit Takes a Back Seat in Northern Ireland

by Jessica Ní Mhainín

Northern Ireland stands to lose the most from Brexit, but recent months have seen the Irish language – rather than the UK's exit from the EU – dominate political debate in the region. With no agreement between the two largest political parties on the future status of the language, Northern Ireland has been without a sitting government since January of last year.

The Irish language was once spoken natively throughout the whole of Ireland. By the mid-19th century, after several hundred years of English colonization and mass Irish emigration, as well as a period of famine that primarily affected the Irish-speaking peasantry, the English language came to dominate the island. Irish, a Celtic language, is today spoken by about 1.7 million people in the Republic of Ireland.<sup>1</sup> It is the country's first official

language, and one of the EU's twenty-four official languages.

In Northern Ireland, a part of the United Kingdom which covers approximately 17 per cent of the island's territory, about one in ten people claim to speak Irish. Recent attempts to give the language an official status have caused political deadlock, by which Northern Ireland has remained without a devolved government for fifteen months.

Since the 1998 peace agreement, governments of Northern Ireland have been jointly led by the largest parties from the nationalist (who want a united Ireland) and unionist (who want Northern Ireland to remain in the United Kingdom) communities. Sinn Féin, the main Irish republican party active in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, have made an Irish language act a prerequisite for re-entering government with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the largest unionist party in Northern Ireland and currently a coalition ally of Theresa

<sup>1</sup> Ireland's Central Statistics Office (CSO), "Irish Language and the Gaeltacht", in *Census of Population 2016. Profile 10: Education, Skills and the Irish Language*, 23 November 2017, <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/ilg>.

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May's Conservative-led government in the UK.<sup>2</sup>

Sinn Féin (which in Irish means "ourselves") claims that an Irish language act will ensure that all citizens are treated equally by the state. But the DUP are sceptical of Sinn Féin's so-called "equality agenda". At a public meeting in 2014, former Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams referred to equality as "the Trojan horse of the entire republican strategy". In other words, he believes that a united Ireland could be achieved by working under the guise of equality. "Who could be afraid of equality?" he asked the crowd.<sup>3</sup> It is likely that Sinn Féin had hoped to gain politically from the DUP's untenable position against "equality".

Irish is primarily associated with nationalism, but the language does not inherently belong to nationalists or unionists. Opponents and supporters of the language have been from both backgrounds. Linda Ervine, a unionist, is currently one of the most prominent Irish-language activists in Northern Ireland. The "nationalization" of Irish can arguably be traced back to late 19th century, when the language became intertwined with Irish nationalists' campaign for independence. A proverb that remains popular today, *tír gan teanga, tír gan anam* (a country without a language, a country without a soul), was coined by one of the architects of

the 1916 uprising against the British.

Sinn Féin draws on this precedent by trying to claim the language exclusively for those who identify as Irish. In 2014, the party named a funding programme, aimed at sending students on trips to Irish-speaking regions, after a Provisional IRA member who died by hunger strike while in prison in 1981. In February 2018, Sinn Féin's new president Mary Lou McDonald ended her party conference speech with "*tiocfaidh ár lá!*". The emboldening slogan, "our day will come", refers to a desire for a future united Ireland. For most, it is inextricably linked to republican violence.

Sinn Féin's politicization of the language has been echoed in wider nationalist culture. Late last year, the Irish-language song *C.E.A.R.T.A.*, the Irish word for "rights" (a reference to language rights), was released by a Northern Irish band called Kneecap. The band's name is an implicit reference to a form of malicious wounding of the knee, a practice carried out mostly by republican paramilitary groups during the Troubles (1968-1998). The song is primarily about drugs, but it includes several anti-unionist slurs. It refers to the "stupid crowd" of Maghaberry, a predominantly unionist town south-east of Belfast, and instead of referring to Northern Ireland's police force by its current name (the PSNI), it derogatorily refers to it as the RUC. The RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) was one of the forces that policed Northern Ireland from 1922 to 2001, and some of its members are now known to have discriminated against nationalists and colluded with violent unionists.

<sup>2</sup> "Gerry Adams Warns No NI Assembly without Irish Language Act", in *RTE*, 30 August 2017, <https://www.rte.ie/amp/901048>.

<sup>3</sup> "Gerry Adams: Unionists Condemn Use of Swear Word", in *BBC News*, 25 November 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-30186975>.

Far from pushing back against Sinn Féin's politicization of Irish, DUP statements and actions have helped to make the language an exclusive feature of nationalist culture. In 2014, a DUP member of parliament refused to apologise after publicly mocking Irish-speaking nationalists in the Northern Irish Assembly. While in 2016, a fisheries protection vessel that had been named *Banríon Uladh* by a Sinn Féin minister in 2010, was renamed by a DUP minister with its English translation, "Queen of Ulster".<sup>4</sup>

A popular Northern Irish television host recently asked unionists why they are "so terrified" of an act that would give Irish official status. Some unionists said they were afraid it would undermine their British culture. Others cited fears that such an act would introduce quotas for civil service jobs, which would discriminate against them. One unionist politician suggested that an Irish language act would be a form of "ethnic cleansing" that would ultimately purge Northern Ireland of its Protestant unionist population. The politicization, and arguably weaponization of Irish has intensified the already entrenched mistrust between Northern Ireland's nationalists and unionists.<sup>5</sup>

Division over the language could be viewed as a proxy for the Brexit issue, over which Northern Irish politicians wield relatively little power. Sinn Féin, like the Irish government, has welcomed

the EU's draft treaty (published in February) because it plans to keep Northern Ireland in the EU customs union after Brexit, thus eliminating the need for a hard border with the Republic of Ireland but necessitating checks between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. Given that a border infrastructure would undoubtedly be a target for republican paramilitaries, this is aimed at ensuring peace and security on the island of Ireland. But like the British government, the DUP has rejected the EU's draft treaty. They believe that the EU's proposal threatens the constitutional integrity of the UK. Some members of parliament have gone as far as to accuse the EU of trying to "annex" Northern Ireland.<sup>6</sup>

Economically, Northern Ireland stands to lose the most from Brexit, and what Sinn Féin and the DUP expect from the EU-UK negotiations are currently irreconcilable. Yet, both parties continue to be distracted by the status of a minority language. With Brexit being interpreted as a manifestation of a newly emergent English nationalism, the official recognition of Irish in Northern Ireland would in turn be perceived (by unionists and nationalists alike) as a victory for Irish nationalism. Since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland has been dependent on a shared political space. But the rise of nationalism is shrinking that space and, in so doing, putting Northern Ireland's peace process at risk.

<sup>4</sup> Conor Macauley, "Boat's Irish Name Banríon Uladh Becomes Queen of Ulster", in *BBC News*, 29 September 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-37507482>.

<sup>5</sup> BBC One, *Nolan Live*, Series 11, Episode 6, 7 March 2018, <https://youtu.be/AO9bjJv6fJU>.

<sup>6</sup> "DUP slam EU plan for Northern Ireland to stay in customs union", in *The Irish Times*, 28 February 2018, <https://www.irishnews.com/news/brexit/2018/02/28/news/dup-slam-eu-plan-for-northern-ireland-to-stay-in-customs-union-1266945>.

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