



THE EU REFERENDUM IN NORTHERN IRELAND: OPENING UP OLD WOUNDS?

Recent elections to the power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly took place less than seven weeks before the UK referendum on EU membership. Any expectation that the looming referendum would spark spirited discussion of the EU on the election trail has been emphatically quashed. The 2016 election, like those before it, remained resolutely focused on local issues and influenced by old communal rivalries.

Political parties in Northern Ireland were late to develop their positions on the EU referendum and they have not been vociferous in communicating their views. This limited discussion is compounded by a lack of information. The precise impact of a UK departure from the EU on Northern Ireland has not been comprehensively investigated, although there is a view that the region, more so than any other part of the UK, will be worst affected if there is a vote to leave.

Opinion polls suggest that a majority in Northern Ireland favour continued UK membership of the EU. The latest *Lucidtalk* poll conducted in May shows 54% support for the Remain campaign. Since polls were first conducted last summer, support for continued UK membership of the EU among Northern Ireland voters has been consistently maintained within the 54-58% band.

The overall support for remaining in the EU, however, masks a strong divide in terms of the preferences of the Unionist and Nationalist communities in Northern Ireland. Nationalist voters are strongly in favour of Remain, upwards of 80% intend to vote for the UK to stay in the EU. In contrast, just 18% of Unionist voters share that view. The two communities clearly have opposing views on the merits of continued UK membership of the EU. Given Northern Ireland's recent history of communal conflict, this difference of opinion is troubling.

The EU, it seems, is not a forum where Nationalist and Unionist opinion has coalesced, rather it exposes continued tensions between the two communities. Most worryingly, these tensions may become even more pronounced following the referendum. In the event that the UK votes to leave the EU, political and communal stability in Northern Ireland may be threatened. Three developments in particular may undermine Northern Ireland's still delicate peace process.

Firstly, there is a distinct lack of clarity about the status of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland following a UK vote to leave. The effective absence of a physical border between North and South has been economically significant for both jurisdictions, but it has also been symbolically important, particularly for Nationalists. The possible reinstatement of the border following a UK exit from the EU poses serious economic and political challenges for relations within Northern Ireland and for those between North and South.

A second possible development following a vote for Brexit is likely to be strong calls for a second independence referendum in Scotland. This will unleash uncomfortable conversations in Northern

Ireland about the future unity of the UK. Having voted for the UK to leave the EU, Unionists may in fact be contributing to the break-up of the *United Kingdom*, a union which is central to their history and sense of identity.

Thirdly, even more concerning than a future referendum in Scotland is the possibility of one in Ireland. The prospect of the Republic of Ireland being in the EU, and Northern Ireland being outside, is dismaying for Northern Ireland nationalists. The largest nationalist political party, Sinn Féin, has promised to call for a border poll (referendum on a united Ireland), in the event that the UK chooses to leave the EU. A possible referendum, and the discussions it would prompt, would be deeply uncomfortable for Northern Ireland's unionist population.

Issues around borders, identity and sovereignty are keenly felt in Northern Ireland and may be further tested by a Leave vote which provokes difficult conversations touching on Northern Ireland's constitutional future. To date, the EU referendum debate has been heavily focused on the economic rationale for remaining in the EU. Although these arguments may have strong application in Northern Ireland as elsewhere, it is in fact the political and constitutional dimensions of the Brexit debate which are most salient in the UK's most troubled region. If the worst effects of a UK departure from the EU are to be avoided, these political issues deserve far greater political attention than has been the case to date.

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