

FOR AN ALL-ISLANDS, REPUBLICAN COALITION

Part 1 – THE CHANGING NATURE OF BRITISH RULE IN IRELAND - ONE LEFT RESPONSE

Allan Armstrong reviews

Ireland's Partition: Coda to counterrevolution by [John McAulity](#)



Women's dustbin lid protests in the communities of resistance

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a) Introduction

This is the first part of a three-section article, reviewing *Ireland's Partition: Coda to counterrevolution* by John McAnulty; *The State of Northern Ireland and the Democratic Deficit: Between Sectarianism & Neo-Liberalism* by Paul Stewart, Tommy McKearney, Geoid O'Machail, Patricia Campbell and Brian Garvey; and *Anois ar theact an tSamhraidh – Ireland, Colonialism and Unfinished Revolution*, by Robbie McVeigh and Bill Rolston.

John McAnulty has witnessed and participated in the struggles throughout the period of the Civil Rights Movement and the wider Republican Movement through to the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and its successors. Within those earlier struggles, a Socialist pole of attraction was created. It included Peoples Democracy (PD) and after PD's demise, Socialist Democracy (Ireland) – SD(I). SD(I) was formed soon after the Republican highpoint of the struggle around the Hunger Strikes from 1980-2. John has been a member of both PD and SD(I).

This review examines some of the key arguments John puts forward in his book. It assesses these from the viewpoint of developing a Republican 'internationalism from below' alliance to challenge the UK state not only in Northern Ireland but throughout these islands.

b) From the communities of resistance under Stormont mark 1 to the GFA under Stormont mark 2

John, looking back over all his years of struggle, argues that what he sees as the endpoint - "the Good Friday Agreement was a stunning defeat for revolutionary nationalists {Republicans} and socialists."^[1] This view seems to reflect John's experience first of the marginalisation of the Socialist pole within the wider Republican struggle. This came about due to the Provisionals' ability to "{take}

over a spontaneous movement supporting the prisoners”[2] who had gone on hunger strike.

However, this “spontaneous movement” had its own deeper roots, which coalesced around the ‘communities of resistance’, highlighted by the women’s dustbin-lid protests. John and another PD member, Fergus O’Hare (later head of the first Irish Gaelic medium secondary school in Belfast and Northern Ireland), both very much part of these ‘communities of resistance’, were elected to Belfast City Council in 1981, when the Provisionals were still abstaining from electoral politics.

During the Hunger Strikes, John already pinpoints the future role of the Provisional “Republican leadership ... running a diplomatic track through the Catholic Church and Dublin government”. [3] This eventually contributed to the demise of the specifically Republican struggle, or what John terms “defeat”. Later there were behind-the-scenes talks between Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein and John Hume of the Social Democratic & Labour Party (SDLP). These were held at Clonard Redemptorist monastery in West Belfast. However, the Provisional leadership’s moves to finding an accommodation, which still left the UK state in overall control of Northern Ireland, only became apparent to others later. This awareness occurred following the Provisional leadership’s tentative backing (in public) for the Downing Street Declaration in 1993, whilst the Tories were still in office; before their wholehearted backing for the GFA in 1998, after New Labour was elected.

c) Ireland in and beyond the 1967-1975 International Revolutionary Wave

John attributes the Provisional leadership’s eventual abandonment of a declared Republican perspective and their acceptance of a subordinate role within the UK state’s Stormont Mark 2, to the legacy they inherited from traditional Republicanism - “a revolutionary nationalism... veering between workers and capitalists”.... which “{left} it open to division and unable to counter... capitalist counter-offensive”. [4]

But these two outcomes cannot be attributed solely to the “class nature and politics”^[5] of the Republicans. These have shifted over time, due to changing circumstances, under pressure from below as well from above. The balance of political and class forces and the wider political context need to be considered.

So too does the fact that the 1981 Hunger Strikes, which John recognises as the highpoint of the struggle, took place well after the 1968-75 International Revolutionary Wave had ebbed. This demonstrates the remarkable continuing international resonance of the ‘communities of resistance’ in the North. This resistance had grown throughout Northern Ireland from 1969 and continued to challenge both Loyalist pogroms and killings and UK state repression. But the ebbing of this wave contributed to the increasingly difficult wider political conditions under which both Socialists and Republicans operated.

Back in the early 1970s, Republican activists (both the Officials and later the Provisionals too) very much identified with the anti-imperialist struggles, whether in Vietnam, Cuba, Palestine or elsewhere. Combined with the internationally acknowledged impact of the ‘communities of resistance’, Republican anti-imperialism took on the characteristic of being the main component of that 1968-75 International Revolutionary Wave in Ireland. But this movement maintained the capacity for concerted independent struggle on a broad scale up to the end of the Hunger Strikes in 1981. Socialists, including those in PD and later SD(I), contested the Republicans for the leadership of this wider anti-imperial struggle.

However, John, whilst providing a critique of the political limitations of the Provisional leadership, does not provide an adequate explanation for the inability of Socialists, including SD(I), to take the lead. Socialists were marginalised by subsequent events, despite the continued committed activity of many of their activists, John included. But were there also features of SD(I) politics, as well as the external impact of events, which had some bearing on these setbacks?

And in raising this question, the point is not to pin the blame on the SD(I). The struggle was fought throughout these islands. John highlights political failings in the ‘South’[6], but the British Left was far more culpable. Plenty of others were part of that British Left at the time, and very much wanted to provide effective support. But we were still hampered by our inability to fully understand the nature of the UK state. John does not address the political implications of this for the struggle for Irish self-determination, and how it contributed to the wider Left’s marginalisation.

d) The British Left and its weak understanding of the anti-democratic, unionist nature of the UK state

John would have argued for PD to become a section of the Fourth International (FI) as SD(I), to provide an international basis for continued resistance. The FI had played an important role in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign[7]. Membership of the FI provided the SD(I) with links to a section of the British Left. And Vietnam did provide an imperial template through which Ireland’s relationship with the UK and British Empire was interpreted by the British Left.

But one major difference between the Vietnam Anti-War Movement in the USA and the Irish Anti-War Campaign in Great Britain was the major contribution made by Black Americans, including conscripted soldiers, in the USA. This ensured that resistance was linked to a questioning of the very nature of the US state. This resistance forced the US state to concede major civil rights, which were extended to the Jim Crow South; whereas the UK government’s own belated attempts at top-down reform in Northern Ireland were largely tokenistic. The new civil rights legislation opened up politics in the USA, North and South, to Black participation. The abolition of Stormont in 1974 led to direct UK state rule enforced by the British armed and security forces.

The numbers involved in the Irish Anti-War Campaign in Great Britain were relatively small; whilst the number of openly dissident soldiers in the British army, occupying Northern Ireland, could be counted on the fingers of one hand. A greater questioning of the nature of the UK state

hardly occurred amongst those on the British Left attempting to build solidarity with the Irish struggle. We remained trapped within a Left British unionist way of thinking.

The British Left still largely accepts the existing unreformed UK (or Great Britain when they deign to think about the constitutionally semi-detached Northern Ireland) as a suitable vehicle for their Left social democratic, economic and social reforms. This was revealed in Jeremy Corbyn's Westminster election manifestoes for 2017 and 2019. They both offered strong defences of the existing Union, whilst the 2019 manifesto looked no further than the re-establishment of the Northern Ireland Executive (NIE) and Stormont[8]. Indeed, in relation to the immediate constitutional issues facing Scotland and Northern Ireland, there was little to distinguish Jeremy Corbyn from Boris Johnson. These manifestoes were also championed by most of the British Left whether operating as internal or external factions of the Labour Party.

Much British Left thinking has also been influenced by the history of another unionist state – the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics. (USSR). In the nineteenth century, many Radicals, then the Liberal Party, followed later by Lib-Labs, early British Social Democrats (SDF/BSP), ILP and the Labour Party, liked to claim that the United Kingdom and Westminster (“the mother of parliaments”), and for some the British Empire, provided a political ‘beacon of progress’ in the world. But during the 1916-21 International Revolutionary Wave, that ‘baton’ was handed over by many British Socialists, first to the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) in 1917, and then to a new unionist state, the USSR in 1922. But by that date, the revolutionary wave had ebbed, and the USSR had become a one-party, union state with growing police powers.

The USSR was unilaterally declared by the All-Russian Communist Party (bolshevik) – A-RCP(b). And it wasn't until 1925, that the A-RCP(b) leadership decided, somewhat as an afterthought, that their party should be renamed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). But this did not affect the Russian-dominated nature of either the party or the union state. The RSFSR, which formed the inner core of the USSR, was buttressed by the Ukrainian SSR and the

Byelorussian SSR. These were seen to be ‘nations.’ The non-national Transcaucasian SFSR (TSFSR) was added, with no mandate from the nations or peoples living there. The TSFSR was later also bureaucratically split up into 3 ‘nation’ republics, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in 1936. This was at the same time as a number of autonomous republics in Central Asia, up till then still part of the RSFSR, were also bureaucratically made into 2 ‘nation’ republics within the USSR – Kazakh and Kirghizia SSRs.

The USSR union state reached its maximum extent immediately after the Second World War, when it became based on 15 ‘nation’ republics, with the territorial expansion of the Russian SFSR and the Byelorussian and Ukrainian SSRs, and the addition of the Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Moldovan SSRs. None of these additions were acts of national self-determination, but all the result of military conquest.

At the same time, Josef Stalin ensured that, as well as the USSR, both the Ukrainian and Byelorussian SSRs were given seats at the new United Nations. This complemented Stalin’s own version of Russian-led pan-Slavism, which he was trying to use to extend the USSR’s influence in Eastern Europe. This pan-Slavism, sometimes in the form of ‘Great Russian’ chauvinism, was promoted more strongly at some times than others. Although unionism was a specific feature of the USSR, Russian supremacy has been a continuous feature of the Tsarist Empire, the USSR (particularly under Stalin) and Vladimir Putin’s Russian Federation. Putin has abandoned this unionism and reverted to the old tsarist and orthodox, ‘Russia one and indivisible’. One of the organisations responsible for such thinking, Pamyat, although illegal under the old USSR, seems to have enjoyed behind-the-scenes support from the KGB.[9] Putin worked at the time for the KGB.

The territorial extent of the USSR state in some ways resembled the UK plus its British Empire, but with its imperially dominated territories lying within the state’s boundaries. This came about due to the different natures of their imperial acquisitions – the UK by overseas expansion, the Tsarist Empire, by landward expansion. However, pre-First World War, British Imperial Federalists also wanted the UK to incorporate the white colonies. They would have direct political

representation at Westminster, although the non-white territories would have no such direct representation, and still be subject to colonial governors, or imposed treaties (the latter also existed in Tsarist Russian Turkestan). But the British Imperial Federalists did not succeed in their aims.

Instead, the British ruling class has settled, at different times, on a UK state of three nations – 1801-1921 (England, Scotland and Ireland), two and a bit nations – 1921-1998 (England, Scotland and Northern Ireland), and then after 1998 four, in reality three and a bit, nations (England, Scotland, Wales, which had only been partially recognised as a nation, up to this time, and Northern Ireland). For the upholders of such a Union, these constitute a shared English speaking, or for some a ‘Greater English’ UK state. The Welsh language has official status in Wales, the Gaelic language in Scotland, but Irish has only very recently been granted such official status in Northern Ireland. These languages’ official status is not constitutionally guaranteed, but dependent ultimately on Westminster.

The White dominions, followed by most of the other former imperial territories, have gained political independence. This has left a few overseas Crown dependencies, the key ones being tax havens – the British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands and Bermuda. These serve the interests of the City of London. This is analogous to the way Kaliningrad, which lies outside the Russian Federation’s contiguous territories, serves the military and economic interests of its kleptocratic oligarchs.

In both the UK and USSR, administrative and political devolution have provided opportunities for subordinate cultural nationalisms and for niche markets (e.g. for admirers of ‘folk art’ and for tourists). So, support for these two union states has been found amongst some of the cultural practitioners in these subordinate nations or nationalities. The jobs provided in the administratively and politically devolved institutions of these states have provided the most lucrative and privileged careers. This is why some of the most ardent unionists have come from the subordinate nations, e.g. David Lloyd-George, a Welsh

speaker from North Wales, Ramsay MacDonald from Scotland, Josef Stalin and Lavrentiy Beria, both from Georgia.

Pro-unionist attitudes have also become deeply embedded amongst the officials of the political parties and trade unions whose organisational structures mirror these states, and whose careers depend on their continued existence. It is also revealing that as the British and Soviet empires went into decline, their leaders resorted to the same language to try and retain as much control as possible – the British Commonwealth and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

And in the UK, an engrained Left unionism has also very much penetrated the non-Labour British Left. They have equated the defence of the unity of the British working class with maintaining the unity of the UK state, or at least Great Britain. And these British Socialists take sustenance from the history of the CPSU (although often divided over which period to draw their examples from), or even from the Chinese Communist Party, to argue for the maintenance of the Great Britain's state territory.

One beneficial effect of the 1916-23 struggle for Irish self-determination, though, has been that most British Socialists no longer claim Ireland as part of the UK and can also envisage a UK minus Northern Ireland. Although there are still a few who would like to extend the British Labour Party to Northern Ireland, since they still believe that UK state with its 'class politics' is on a higher political plane than the 'tribalism' they see in Northern Ireland.

But many British Socialists who have abandoned any claim to Ireland or Northern Ireland have, in effect, relegated these to detached or a semi-detached status, reflecting their constitutional positions in the UK since 1921. The British ruling class has always treated Ireland/Northern Ireland far more seriously, seeing the Irish Free State, which it helped to impose, as key to maintaining the British Empire and Northern Ireland as key to maintaining the Union. Today, the British ruling class is still not prepared to let Northern Ireland go. This would confirm the UK as the third-rate power it is. Putin also wants to reassert Russian power over Ukraine, to restore as much of the Russian Empire

as possible. Northern Ireland represents the UKs Luhansk and Donetsk enclaves within Ireland.

The USSR was based on the sovereignty of the one-party (CPSU)-led, All Union Government of the Soviet Union, with its draconian police powers. Unlike the UK, the USSR's 1936 constitution did concede the right of self-determination to its constituent nations. But the only mechanism for raising this in the one-party state was the CPSU. Raising such an issue in the CPSU was seen as bourgeois nationalism or treason, punishable by prison, internal or external exile and execution. Many of the constituent 'nations', either as full SSRs or autonomous SSRs, were bureaucratically created or terminated from above.

The UK state is based on the anti-democratic sovereignty of the Crown-in-Westminster, buttressed by its draconian Crown Powers. This is very much linked to the UK's specifically unionist form, which has covered England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland since 1921. Sections of the British ruling class – British (often 'Greater English'), Welsh-British, Scottish-British and 'Ulster'-British – use various features of this unionist state, including the House of Commons and the House of Lords, to jointly protect their class interests domestically, within the Union and what is left of the British Empire. But these hybrid-British sections of the ruling class also have their own class-based national self-determination in the administratively and politically devolved institutions of the UK state. And just in case the politically devolved institutions become too uppity, they can be ignored or even closed down by Westminster. There is no wider democratic right to national self-determination.

In relation to Scotland, before the 1996 Westminster general election, Tony Blair gave the game away about its relationship to the UK under the Union. He said that "the Scottish Parliament would have no more power about this unionist relationship than a parish council"[\[10\]](#). The key thing is that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland remain subordinate to Westminster. At times, liberal unionists amongst the Lib-Dems (following a long Liberal tradition) and in the British Labour Party (particularly Gordon Brown] have dangled the prospect of

‘federalism’. But this remains a constitutional impossibility under the sovereignty of Crown-in Westminster. Any subordinate assembly can always constitutionally have its powers rolled back. Ever since Brexit we have seen this happening with the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Senedd. Or subordinate assemblies can be abolished altogether as happened with Stormont mark1 in 1972 (not a sad loss, but its replacement by British direct rule through its military and security forces was no gain either).

For the 50 years, from 1922-72, the old Orange ‘Ulster’/Northern Ireland statelet achieved an authoritarian stability after Partition. Pogroms had to be resorted to in 1936 in order to re-establish Orange supremacy following the Belfast Outdoor Relief Protests in 1932. But nobody, either at Stormont or in the UK government, thought that this regime should be ended or even reformed. However, since the setting up of the GFA in 1998, Stormont and the NIE have been suspended from 2002-7, from 2017-20, whilst the NIE is suspended again today, with the walkout of its Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) members.[\[11\]](#)

Thus, the British ruling class and its UK state have faced continued instability in Northern Ireland over the 24 year period since the GFA was first introduced. We are now living in the aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crash, which ended neo-Liberal hegemony, and unleashed the Hard (and Far) Right). In the UK, this led first to Johnson’s authoritarian populist and reactionary unionist government, stepped up chaotically by Liz Truss., before being fronted by the less bombastic Rishi Sunak. We are also witnessing increased inter-imperialist rivalry and wars. So far, these have been fought mainly by proxy forces. But since Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, these wars threaten to become direct conflicts between imperial powers. So ‘Brexit Britain’ does not provide a context, in which the post-GFA order in Ireland can easily be sustained.

e) Changing contexts, changing politics

A key thing missing, both from John’s account of the decline of Irish Socialism, and of the demise of the Provisionals (to be replaced by

‘New’ Sinn Fein) is an assessment of the impact of the wider international political context, especially the forward surge, then the ebbing away of the 1968-75 International Revolutionary Wave. Ironically, when the Provisional IRA split from the Official IRA, it was the Official wing which claimed to have a political strategy for obtaining a 32 county Irish Republic. This was to win civil rights within the existing Stormont, and to promote better access to housing and jobs for Nationalists, with the backing of the leadership of Northern Irish Committee of the Irish Trade Union Congress. It was argued that once Unionist and Loyalist workers were persuaded to accept a reformed Stormont, they would become readier to join the Republic of Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association appealed for the civil rights enjoyed elsewhere in the UK to placate the Unionists and Loyalists. The Black Civil Rights Movement (CRM) in the USA provided much of the inspiration for the most radical wing of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland, which including Peoples Democracy. The Provisional IRA, though, originally emerged from a long-standing Defender tradition. Following Nationalists/Catholics’ long historical experience, this tradition had developed a much more sceptical attitude towards the possibilities of reforming the existing Orange Stormont order. Those from the Defender tradition fought for the immediate protection of Nationalist communities against the brutal actions of forces from both the official and unofficial wings of the Orange statelet. These Loyalists opposed any meaningful reform. The Defender tradition, like Loyalism, has seen the struggle for jobs and housing under the existing system as a zero-sum game – either Loyalists or Nationalists win; or Loyalists or Nationalists lose. The difference was that those from the Defender tradition were in the position of the oppressed under Stormont, which backed the oppressors, the Loyalists.

Many early Provisional IRA leaders, who emerged from this Defender tradition, were Catholic traditionalists in their political thinking and social values. When they turned to Republicanism, this was often in celebration of the role of heroic military leaders, or as John puts it “their mechanism for victory... was the individual members of the nation

exerting maximum force.”[12] They were suspicious of politics, and the only role they saw for political organisations was to act as cheerleaders for the armed struggle. This remains true of some amongst the military wing of the dissident Republicans today. So, this rules out any commitment to building the autonomous democratic political organisations needed to assert the original wider Republican principle of the sovereignty of the people.

However, unlike the IRA’s 1956-62 Border Campaign, led by socially conservative thinking leaders, the Provisionals’ post-1969 campaign took place in the context of the widely supported ‘communities of resistance’. These grew out of, and developed beyond the CRM, following the defeat of its leadership’s initial reform Stormont strategy. And as John states, “rather than leading to a lull, the violence intensified as {Republicans} retained mass support”[13]. It was this new mass movement, linked to the initial impact of the 1967-75 International Revolutionary Wave, which transformed the politics of the Provisionals, and also contributed to the creation of PD and later SD(I)

Catholic conservatism has remained a feature of some leading figures involved in Republican politics (and such thinking is still to be found in sections of post-GFA ‘New’ Sinn Fein, particularly its Aontu breakaway and amongst some Dissident Republicans). However, many in the Provisional Republican Movement took on some of the more advanced economic and social thinking of the 1968-75 International Revolutionary Wave. They also began to look to wider anti-imperial struggles and beyond the traditionalist Right wing Irish émigré community in the USA.

Socialists could engage in more meaningful debates with other anti-imperialists than with those Irish Catholic traditionalists who often fully supported the state suppression of Socialists, women’s rights and other ethnic minority rights. The Republican Socialist, Bernadette McAliskey had to face traditionalist Irish-American, anti-Black racism when she toured the USA[14]. As a result of the interactions between Republicans and Socialists there was a movement from Republicanism to Socialist Republicanism; but as the autonomous ‘communities of

resistance' ebbed, there was also movement in the other direction towards a more Defenderist way of thinking. A changing Sinn Fein later gave this a political and organisational form, under the slogan 'the ballot and the bullet'.

The resultant 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) with its political recognition of the Nationalist/Republican community, within a neo-Partitionist Stormont, represented the latest update of Defenderism. The GFA wasn't seen as a shared political gain by the leaders of either the Nationalist/Republican or the Unionist/Loyalist blocs. The GFA's announcement was accompanied by a triumphalist Sinn Fein-led cavalcade from West Belfast to the city centre. Meanwhile the leaders of the Unionists/Loyalist bloc, particularly Paisley's DUP, correctly feeling the Loyalists (not the wider Protestant community) had lost out, began to devise ways of undermining the GFA.

f) Defeat or setback to an unfinished revolution?

Following the three decades of Civil Rights and Republican struggle, John offers his own view of the situation in Northern Ireland in 1998 invoking the "scale of the defeat." back in 1923[15]. But this 1923 "defeat", with its creation of the Irish Free State, was not like that which John identifies in the North immediately after Partition had been brutally enforced from 1920, which led to 50 years of Orange rule. If, in Northern Ireland today, there has been "betrayal {of the struggle due to} suppressed class differences"[16], this has led to a situation more like that which arose from the 1921 Treaty in the South.

Back then, despite the Irish Republicans' military defeat in the Civil War, neither the British government nor the Southern Unionists believed the old order had been restored. In the new post-1921 Northern Ireland, it is also true that the pre-1914 Unionist order hadn't been restored. But if anything, such was the scale of undoubted defeat there, that the new Orange Partitionist order in the North was a step further back, more resembling pre-1801 Ireland. It seemed as if the old Ascendancy of the Anglo-Irish, now augmented by the Scotch-Irish, joined together in the Orange Order, had been restored. Or as John

argues, “Before partition the North was an area where sectarianism happened and was used by employers to divide the workforce. But the same was true, on a smaller scale in many British cities {e.g. Liverpool and throughout Scotland’s Central Belt}. After partition {Northern Ireland} became a sectarian state, defined by repression of nationalists and orange triumphalism”[17].

But, in the Irish Free State, even after Partition, the Republicans continued to be a political force. This was shown by the increase in Sinn Fein’s vote in the 1923 Dail election, despite their military defeat. Nobody living in the Irish Free State, except the most wistful Southern Unionist, would have suggested that the pre-1914, pre-1916, pre-1918 or the pre-1921 Union would be a better starting point than the highly flawed Irish Free State. This despite the “poor {fleeing} for work {often to Britain}[18], and the rebels and intellectuals {fleeing} the stranglehold of the church”[19]. John does recognise that the nature and degree of reaction was different ‘North’ and ‘South’. “Despite the counter-revolution, the end of British occupation was the cornerstone of society and a step towards democracy”[20]. But he does not make the connection to today’s situation.

In relation to the outcome of the most recent Irish Republican struggle, such a “a step towards democracy” could yet form the launching pad for a future democratic revival, or the ‘unfinished revolution’ as Robbie McVeigh and Bill Rolston persuasively term it [21]. Tommy McKearney has also provided an understanding of the difference between defeat and unfulfilled hopes. Tommy was a one-time active member of the IRA, imprisoned in Long Kesh (sentenced for 20 years, served 16), hunger striker for 53 days in 1980, who became a member League of Communist Republicans whilst in prison.[22] Despite Tommy and his family’s tremendous personal sacrifices, and whatever his own disappointments at the outcome of that Republican struggle, he does not think it was an unqualified defeat.

In Tommy’s book, *The Provisional IRA – From Insurrection to Parliament*, he writes that the war “broke the foundations of Orange state sectarianism – anti-Catholic discrimination in housing, welfare, the economy and politics. This was a transformative war”[23]. Thus

Catholics from whatever class are no longer as marginalised as they were under the old Orange Stormont regime. Back in the 1960s, you couldn't fly an Irish tricolour, without it and its bearer being seized by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Nowadays, there are tricolours, Gaelic street names and Republican murals all over West Belfast; Belfast has had a Sinn Fein mayor, whilst Derry & Strabane, Fermanagh & Omagh, Mid Ulster and Newry, Mourne & Down local councils have passed to Sinn Fein/SDLP control. This was inconceivable under the old Orange Stormont order. Tommy is not in denial about the nature of Stormont mark 2. "Something that has not changed, though, is the sectarian division of the Northern Irish working class... The Orange state may have been brought to an end, but in its place is a {new} sectarian entity"[24].

However, today, the impact upon the working class of falling real wages, worsening conditions of employment, and cuts in public services in the Nationalist/Republican communities, is not the product of deliberate Stormont policy. These attacks flow from post-2008 Crash Austerity policies, relayed from the UK state and Westminster to its devolved Northern Irish administration and Northern Ireland Executive (NIE) (when it is running). These attacks impinge upon the Unionist/Loyalist working class too. Any attempts by Unionists/Loyalists to divert their impact onto Nationalist/Republicans are much less effective under the new bi-sectarian, post-GFA Stormont. This fronts a Northern Irish administration in which the UK government is able to exercise behind-the-scenes control. This is done for wider British unionist and imperial interests; not to implement Loyalist demands, which can work against these. Thus, as Tommy writes, "If ever the Marxist dialectic of one contradiction giving way to a fresh contradiction was evident in any situation, it is surely visible in the Good Friday Agreement"[25].

And Tommy makes quite clear today's relationship between Stormont, which could largely do what it wanted under the pre-1973 Orange regime and Westminster. "The Northern Ireland assembly has about the same relationship with the House of Commons in London as the management in Tesco in Belfast has with the head office in the UK"[26]. And Johnson's wooing of the DUP in 2019, to help him

become UK prime minister, followed by quickly dropping them when he had achieved his aim, underscores the DUP's peripheral role in this relationship.

g) The DUP – from ‘No Surrender’ Loyalism to a new accommodation with the UK state

Ian Paisley's DUP had provided a ‘master class’ in how to prioritise the aims of the Loyalist base and to subordinate the DUP's electoral activities to these. This was shown in the DUP involvement with Northern Ireland local councils, the 1973 Assembly, the 1975 Constitutional Assembly, the 1982 Assembly, the 1996 Forum, the Northern Ireland Assembly (Stormont mark 2), Westminster and the European parliament. To maintain Paisley's ability to organise autonomous and extra-constitutional action, he also had his own Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster; he founded and long dominated the DUP; he had close links with the Independent Orange Order; and he helped to found two paramilitary organisations, the Ulster Third Force and the Ulster Resistance Movement.

But just as revealingly, when Paisley finally decided to remove himself from the front line of ‘No Surrender’ Loyalism in 2006, to work within the post-GFA St. Andrews Agreement set-up, this immediately created the political space for DUP insider cronyism and corruption. The post-GFA order had been designed to subordinate Ireland, North and South, to the needs of corporate profitability, offering special opportunities for political insiders. This was soon made evident by the corrupt activities of Ian Paisley Junior, and Iris Robinson, wife of new DUP leader Peter Robinson; and in the Cash for Ash scandal, presided over by the next DUP minister, Arlene Foster. The DUP, previously used by Ian Paisley Senior, to advance the interests of his Loyalist base, provided no opportunity for Loyalist members to develop an alternative to his new turn under the St. Andrews Agreement.

Certainly, Paisley's retreat from the front line of ‘No Surrender’ Unionism/Loyalism, created dissent in DUP ranks. But this found organisational expression in the breakaway Traditional Unionist Voice

(TUV) and in renewed Loyalist paramilitary violence. Successive DUP leaders have tried to contain this and have so far been successful in maintaining the DUP as the majority Unionist/Loyalist party. But with so many MPs, MLAs and local councillors having ‘their noses in the trough’ of the post-GFA order, which is financially underwritten by the UK state, there are limitations to how far the DUP can go, in appearing to act as ‘outsiders’ against the post-St. Andrews Agreement regime.

John outlines the DUP’s most recent attempts over the Northern Ireland Protocol “to recover support through the traditional mechanism of unionist unity and sectarian mobilisation with the threat of violence. {But these} have attracted little interest.”[\[27\]](#) And this is likely to be the case unless such activities gain open backing from the British government and clandestine backing from the UK state.

But the British ruling class is unable to impose (or even think of) a commonly agreed solution, in the face of mounting problems, not only in Northern Ireland, but in Scotland and Wales too. Their continued attempts to roll back the limited democracy we have, shows they no longer believe they can rule by majority consent. This means there is the political space for alternatives, rooted in the immediate conditions we face today. This includes the possibility of restarting that “Unfinished Revolution”.

h) Post-GFA Ireland – Sinn Fein helps to police Stormont mark 2.

Following a decades long-struggle in Northern Ireland (and to a much more limited extent in the Republic of Ireland), the UK’s post-1998, administratively devolved, Northern Irish state machine and its politically devolved, NIE and Stormont, were designed to provide a political, economic, social and cultural space for Irish Nationalists, whilst keeping the Ulster Unionists on board. This had been denied to Irish Nationalists under Stormont mark 1. In an uncanny update of Michael Collin’s claim that the UK-dictated 1921 Treaty provided “the freedom to achieve freedom”[\[28\]](#) i.e. an Irish Republic; in 1998 the

‘New’ Sinn Fein leadership claimed that the GFA and its successors provide the mechanism to build support for the reunification of Ireland.

Although, as John makes clear, such reunification, even if it were possible, would very likely not lead to a new Republic. ‘New’ Sinn Fein and many of those who tail-end them politically view “the task of achieving Irish unity... defined as the conciliation of unionist culture rather than the defeat of an imperialist power.”[29] There are already forces on the Right of Irish nationalism who foresee Irish reunification under the Crown and Commonwealth, and within NATO.

Back in the days of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), which Sinn Fein (before it split in 1970) and the Communist Party of Northern Ireland (before the party’s reunification also in 1970) had helped to set-up, it campaigned for civil rights within a democratised and de-sectarianised Stormont mark 1. The British drowned this prospect in blood in Ballymurphy in 1971 and Derry in 1972. IRA attempts to target British forces in Northern Ireland from ‘the mainland’, in order to emphasise the anti-imperialist nature of the struggle, were later undermined by the UK government policy of ‘Ulsterisation’[30]. This placed local Northern Irish forces, overwhelmingly recruited from sectarian Loyalists, in the frontline; supplemented by British behind-the-scenes collusion with the Loyalist death squads.

The greater use of smaller elite British military forces, e.g. the SAS, and security force penetration of the Republicans also had a big impact on the IRA’s armed struggle. But these British actions failed to win over many Nationalists, who showed their opposition to both targeted and arbitrary repression by increasing their electoral support for Sinn Fein. This continued opposition forced the UK state to come up with the Downing Street Declaration in 1993 to incorporate, what would become in practice, former Republicans, now constitutional nationalists, into the running of a reformed Stormont.

By this time, ‘New’ Sinn Fein argued that things had changed enough, as a result of the Provisional Republican struggle (and others tend to be airbrushed out of ‘New’ Sinn Fein history), for Stormont mark 2 to

provide a new road to Irish reunification. This is meant to be achieved through the post-GFA's constitutionally bi-sectarian Northern Ireland statelet. But its parameters, like those of the 1921 Treaty agreement, are determined by the UK state. As John points out, the GFA is "an amendment to the {1920} Government of Ireland Act that asserted British sovereignty"[31].

The British army is no longer visible on the streets of Northern Ireland; but the reformed Royal Ulster Constabulary, now known as the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), is. The PSNI recruits from both communities. This also occurred within the old Royal Irish Constabulary when the whole of Ireland was still part of the UK. However, the PSNI is still under senior commanders who have first served in Great Britain. And much less visible, but no doubt just as central for the UK state, MI5 operates out of Palace Barracks, Holyrood, County Down. Its senior officers are also going to be from Great Britain. In a clear indication of who is still in charge, the UK state retains the official monopoly of force – the Brits 'they haven't gone away you know!'

If 'New' Sinn Fein has accepted the delegitimation of the IRA, then the government of the Republic of Ireland has abandoned its constitutional claim to Northern Ireland. These concessions leave the UK in overall control. The UK state is now quite happy to accept military recruits from the South, attracted by an alternative to the post-2008 economic hardships in the Republic of Ireland. Anywhere else these recruits would be considered mercenaries. But despite Brexit, the citizens of the Republic of Ireland are free to become the subjects of the UK.

And when 'New' Sinn Fein made its deal with Paisley and the DUP, under the St. Andrew's Agreement, they also subordinated their politics to the structural purpose of the GFA. The Provisionals had already paved the way for their incorporation through their earlier marginalisation of the autonomous 'communities of resistance'. Today, as John points out, "At the council level there is a quiet and business-like sharing out of funds {by Sinn Fein and the DUP} and moves to

exclude the smaller parties from decision making, alongside economic policy which sees public resource transfers to private hands.”[32]

Sinn Fein is particularly assiduous in policing any possibility of the ‘communities of resistance’ re-emerging. Disputes have arisen over the running of Culturlann language and arts centre on the Falls Road and the Gaelic Athletic Association’s social club at Casement Park in Andersonstown, both in West Belfast. Opposition to Sinn Fein was shown on the 5000 strong Irish language rights protest organised by An La Dearth in Belfast[33]. Such is the level of alienation amongst many in the former ‘communities of resistance’, now policed by Sinn Fein officials, that an emphasis on cultural self-determination[34] remains part of the wider political struggle. Such resistance forms the seeds of the renewed ‘communities of resistance’ vital to the unfinished revolution.

i) The playing out of liberal unionism from 1998-2012 and the mainstreaming of reactionary unionism in ‘Brexit Britain’ since 2016

Most of the Irish and British Left tend to see a specifically Ulster Unionism and Loyalism as the main immediate political obstacles to change in Northern Ireland/Ireland and to Irish reunification. As has already been shown, they do not appreciate the wider unionist nature of the UK state. The most significant promoters of the maintenance of the UK as a unionist state are the British ruling class. And they can give their backing to a variety of unionist parties throughout the UK – conservative, liberal or reactionary – depending on political circumstances. And when their backs are against the wall, they will fall back on constitutional nationalists too to help them out.

Back in the period of Irish Republican struggle from the early 1970s, the SNP and Plaid Cymru, which had emerged as the leading parties within the growing movements for Scottish and Welsh self-determination, also wanted to highlight their nations’ differences from Northern Ireland. They emphasised their own entirely constitutional methods. But violence was reintroduced to Northern Irish politics

when “in 1966... the Ulster Volunteer Force killed a Protestant pensioner and two Catholic civilians {and} in 1969 they carried out a false flag operation by bombing the Silent Water reservoir”[35] in County Down. And when it came to the Loyalist pogroms in West Belfast in 1969, B-Specials, part of the official Orange statelet’s forces, took part out of uniform. It was the violent way the Orange statelet and its Loyalist backers conducted themselves that led to the growth of extra-constitutional, including armed forms of struggle in Northern Ireland.

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement has been characterised by Seamus Mallon of the SDLP as just the 1973/4 “Sunningdale Agreement for slow learners”[36]. But back then the Ulster Unionists were not prepared to concede those reforms. They actively encouraged Loyalist violence to prevent them being implemented. It took nearly 30 years of armed struggle before the Ulster Unionists reluctantly conceded the GFA reforms in 1998. And the shift in the Nationalist vote from the SDLP to Sinn Fein showed that many Nationalists understood this.

In Northern Ireland, right from the start, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the DUP, have used the GFA’s constitutionally underwritten, bi-sectarian, nature to strip away as much of the liberal coating as possible. The aim was to end the notion of ‘parity of esteem’ between Unionists/Loyalists and Nationalists/Republicans. The DUP, with growing electoral and continuing extra-parliamentary support from other Loyalists, initially still led a ‘No Surrender’ opposition. In 1998, this led to the killing of three children following the Unionist and Loyalist Drumcree protests.[37] This, and other violent activities, formed part of wider organised Loyalist provocations. The DUP only reluctantly accepted the watered-down St. Andrews Agreement as late as 2006. In the process, the post-GFA deals have diluted even the limited powers of the original GFA.

In contrast, before 2012, UK state-backed liberal unionism had allowed some extension of powers to both Holyrood and Cardiff Bay. The Welsh Assembly was upgraded to the Welsh Senedd (parliament), following a referendum in 2011. This was held under Cameron’s Con-

Dem coalition, and was backed by the Welsh Tories, Labour, Lib-Dems and Plaid Cymru.

And in 2012, Cameron's Con-Dem government, in league with Labour, also conceded a Scottish independence referendum (IndyRef). The only reason they did this were opinion polls indicating that support for Scottish independence lay between 28-33%. But the referendum offered no liberal unionist, 'Devo-Plus' option, so that the SNP could claim any second prize. The intention was to drive the SNP from its control of Holyrood, which it had won, against expectations, in the 2011 election. And at this point, the SNP only had 6 MPs, compared to Labour's 41 and the Lib-Dems 11 (the Tories only had 1). It was only in the local council elections that the SNP emerged with the largest number of councillors in 2012, but still with no more than 32.3% of the total vote.

The refusal to offer a liberal unionist option in the Scottish independence referendum highlighted the Conservatives', Labour's and Lib-Dem's move to the Right. They now shared a conservative unionist politics, shown in their 'Better Together' alliance, which was self-termed 'Project Fear'. But Cameron still wanted to provide this campaign with a liberal unionist gloss. This was provided by Labour's Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling, the Lib-Dems being more peripheral. So, when the reactionary unionist Loyalists, many from Northern Ireland, organised a 20,000 rally in Edinburgh on the weekend before the Scottish independence referendum, 'Better Together' kept them at arm's length.

And when, in the last two weeks of the campaign, an opinion poll showed that the 'Yes' vote might win, Brown was wheeled out with his 'federal' promise. Not being in government, he was in no position to do anything to implement this. But more fundamentally, federalism is a constitutional impossibility under Westminster supremacy. By now liberal unionism had become no more than 'Project Con' and has remained so (with the partial exception of Wales).

The 2014 InfyRef result was much closer than anticipated in 2012. This amounted to a 'democratic revolution' in which 97% had

registered to vote and 85% actually did, something unprecedented in the previous century of UK history. In defiance of the state and unionist media, Scotland had been covered by large networks of ‘Yes’ supporters in a variety of different organisations, and a vibrant independent media. The Unionists’ pyrrhic ‘No’ victory with 55% of the vote was followed up on September 19th, by a Loyalist rampage, along with other British neo-fascists in Glasgow. Glasgow had just voted to secede from the Union. Now both Tories and sections of the Labour Party (particularly in Glasgow and North Lanarkshire), shocked at the mainstreaming of the issue of Scottish independence (further reinforced by the SNP’s landslide vote in the 2015 general election), made overtures to the Orange Order. When the Scottish local council election results were announced in 2017, the Orange Order claimed to have 6 councillors, - 5 Labour and 1 Tory[38].

But as far back as 2011, the Loyalist base in Northern Ireland had relaunched its own reactionary unionist offensive, this time around the Belfast City Hall Flag protests. Taking advantage of the retreats from the original GFA proposals, their aim was to undermine the ‘parity of esteem’, recognised in its bi-sectarian Unionist/Loyalist and Nationalist/Republican provisions, and to restore as much of the old Stormont order as possible. Stormont often turns a blind eye to such Loyalist activities, offering their organisations more funding to encourage ‘good behaviour’. And Westminster also takes advantage of the semi-detached nature of Northern Ireland to ignore or play down any sectarian Loyalist marches, physical attacks, riots and their regular bonfire ‘hatefests’. Loyalist pressure was soon reflected in the DUP’s behaviour.

But it was the 2016 Euro-referendum and the consequent attempts to impose a hard Brexit, which began to mainstream reactionary unionism at a UK level. David Cameron’s conservative unionist, ‘Project Fear’ appeared to have worked, if somewhat clumsily, during the IndyRef campaign. It was used again in his ‘Britain Stronger in Europe’ campaign. However, Cameron had already conceded to the Hard Right over the referendum franchise, which, unlike the 2014 Indy Ref, removed most non-UK, EU citizens and 16-18 year olds from the voting roll.

And ‘Project Fear’ was opposed not by any ‘Project Hope’, such as that which had developed in the wider Scottish ‘Yes’ movement (despite the conservative intentions of the SNP leadership). ‘Project Fear’ was confronted by the Right populist and reactionary unionist ‘Project Hate’. Douglas Carswell, UKIP MP, and Nigel Dodds, depute DUP leader and MP, were on the board of the official ‘Vote Leave’ campaign; whilst Sammy Wilson, DUP hard-line bigot, signed up for the even more reactionary ‘Leave.EU’, led by Nigel Farage and Arron Banks. And this was also given ‘Left’ cover by the arch-unionists, ex-Labour MP George Galloway and Labour MP, Kate Hoey.

The European referendum in 2016 marked the highpoint of the Right’s electoral support. There was a 72.2% turnout and a 52.5% ‘Leave’ vote, although this was on a restricted franchise compared to the 2014 Scottish IndyRef. Although the EU referendum turnout was higher than in UK general elections, it was considerably lower than the 85% turnout following ‘Project Hope’ in 2014. In the 2017 Westminster general election, where the issue of Brexit now dominated, the Hard Right also contributed to an increased turnout compared to 2015. In England the turnout went up by 3.2% to 69.1%, in Wales by 3% to 68.1% and in Northern Ireland by 7.2% to 65.6%.

But the turnout in Scotland fell by 4.7%. In 2015, the post-IndyRef effect of the mainstreaming of Scottish independence Scotland, had contributed to a turnout of 71.1% (up 7.3%) following the 85% turnout achieved in the 2014 IndyRef ‘democratic revolution’. This had led to a result completely unprecedented in UK electoral history in any constituent unit of the state. The SNP gained 56 out of Scotland’s 59 MPs in 2015. But it was the drop in the turnout in 2017 in Scotland, which led to the loss of 21 SNP MPs. But the SNP still held a majority of the Scottish MPs, something which Margaret Thatcher and Leon Brittan had once hinted, as a taunt to the SNP, to be the condition for gaining Scottish independence![\[39\]](#)

However, in 2017, although the Tories gained a 5.5% increase in their British vote, they still lost 33 MPs. This was because the Hard and Far Right still challenged the Tories electorally. They provided an even harder Brexit alternative to May’s ‘No deal is better than a bad deal’.

This somewhat limited the electoral drift back to the Tories. The willingness of the Hard and Far Right to stand, even against Tory pro-Brexit candidates, also provided a contrast to the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) (mainly the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party – SWP). After standing candidates in the 2010 and 2015 Westminster general elections, TUSC declined to stand for their ‘Left’ Brexit in 2017. They opted to tail-end Corbyn’s Labour Party instead, despite its very ambiguous stance over Brexit, and especially EU residents and migrant rights. Yet TUSC had told Socialists how much better the political terrain would be after a ‘Brexit’ victory! The Hard and Far Right had a better appreciation of the political nature and impact of Brexit and acted accordingly.

In Northern Ireland, however, People before Profit (PbP) (an Irish, Socialist Workers Party/later Network front) did stand ‘Left’ Brexit candidates in 2017. But their vote fell badly, despite doubling their number of candidates since 2015. The political nature of Brexit support was highlighted when the reactionary unionist DUP and TUV gained over 98% of the Brexit vote whilst PbP took less than 2%! The other hard Brexiteers not directly contesting the elections were the Loyalists in the PUP and many dissident Republicans.

The Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour Party certainly contributed to and benefitted from the 2017 general election rise in turnout in England and Wales. Labour’s vote went up 9.8% and they gained 20 new MPs, and in Wales Labour’s vote went up 12.1% and they gained 3 new MPs. Labour also increased its vote by 2.8% in Scotland and gained 6 MPs, all at the expense of the SNP, but here because of the decline in turnout since the 2015 Westminster General election. But the majority of Labour’s new Scottish MPs were not on the Left (and in the 2019 Westminster general election, Labour fell back to 1 MP in Scotland, Ian Murray, very much on the Right of the party).

In Northern Ireland, the DUP’s vote also increased (up by 10.3%, and 2 new MPs). However, in a society split politically and officially along sectarian lines, Sinn Fein also benefitted from this rise in electoral turnout (up 4.9% in the vote and 3 new MPs). The combined constitutional nationalist and liberal unionist opposition had led to 56%

of people in Northern Ireland rejecting Brexit. But at this stage, the reactionary unionist pro-Brexit DUP was still able to contain the liberal unionist, anti-Brexit, Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI). In 2013, Loyalists had attempted to burn out APNI's East Belfast office and threatened the lives of its MLAs and councillors, as part of their Belfast Flag Protests. The DUP was able to retake the East Belfast seat in 2015. The DUP reached its electoral highpoint in the 2017 Westminster election, holding its East and North Belfast seats and ousting the SDLP in South Belfast. This gave the DUP 3 out of Belfast's 4 MPs. The DUP also took South Antrim from the UUP.

The Loyalist base took this as a green light (although this is not a colour they like to be associated with!) for some ethnic cleansing in Belfast South[45]. They had their own interpretation of whom the 'hostile environment' should be applied to. They were becoming more ecumenical in their prejudices, now including Muslims and East European Gypsies as well as Catholics/Nationalists.

Furthermore, whatever Labour's contribution to the increased turnouts in England and Wales and to their improved electoral results in 2017, these made no impact on the continuing Rightward trajectory of UK politics in Brexit Britain. The DUP entered into a government supporting arrangement with Theresa May's Tories. This was followed by the DUP's backing for the hard Right Tory, Boris 'Get Brexit Done' Johnson. Meanwhile, Ruth Davidson, recently the 'liberal' Remain leader of the Scottish Conservatives, metamorphosed into a Tory Hard Right Brexiteer, speaking alongside Bertie Armstrong, Orange bigot, racist and chief executive of the Scottish Fishermen's {fishing boat owners} Federation[40].

However, despite the DUP's continued often covert backing for Loyalist violence, its leaders have not been able to prevent the re-emergence and growth of the liberal unionist APNI since 2017. Following the 2019 Westminster election, the DUP has been reduced to one seat in Belfast – East Belfast, losing South Belfast to the SDLP and North Belfast to Sinn Fein (which continued to hold West Belfast too). But the biggest advance in terms of voting was for APNI which, although unable to retake East Belfast, increased its vote share by 8.9%,

whilst the DUP's fell by 6.6%. Furthermore, APNI was able to retain its unionist credentials by not reciprocating Sinn Fein's and the SDLP's stand-down of candidates in any of the Belfast constituencies.

This undermines those, including Sinn Fein, who use APNI's refusal to be part of the GFA's officially sectarian-based Unionist/Loyalist bloc to deny they are unionist and suggest they might support Irish reunification. APNI has made its position on the Union quite clear. Naomi Long, its NIE Justice Minister, intervened in the 2021 Holyrood election. She criticised the SNP for raising the issue of Scottish independence, which she sees as a "disruptive force". If the ever so mild SNP represent a "disruptive force", then we can be pretty sure how APNI will react to Sinn Fein bringing forth an Irish reunification proposal.

But APNI's substantial 8.9% increase, in their vote in 2019, and its gaining of the North Down seat (traditionally held by more liberal independent Unionists) and the constitutional nationalist, SDLP's 3.1% increase, although undermining the position of both the incumbent DUP and Sinn Fein leadership of the NIE, is unlikely to provide any viable political alternative. APNI's and SDLP's moderate solutions depend upon continued EU membership and a liberal unionist government at Westminster. Neither of these conditions were fulfilled on December 12th, 2019.

The 2019 Westminster general election gave Johnson's authoritarian populist and reactionary unionist Tories a victory at the UK level. Corbyn's split Labour Party (still dominated by the Right), and his own vacillation before Right challenges (over party democracy, migrant rights and support for Palestinian self-determination) contributed to the 7.9% drop in the party's vote and the loss of 60 MPs (48 in England, 6 in Wales and 6 in Scotland).

However, this Tory Hard Right, reactionary unionist 'triumph' disguised the fact that their previous allies in Northern Ireland, the DUP lost 2 seats, leaving reactionary unionism without a majority there. In Scotland, the constitutional nationalist SNP won 48 seats (a 14 seat gain), whilst the Tories lost 7 and Labour lost 6 seats. Apart from

England, it was only in Wales that the Tories make an advance in the 2019 Westminster general election, winning 14 seats (a 6 seat gain), but liberal unionist, Welsh Labour still held an overall majority with 22 seats (a 6 seat loss), whilst the constitutional nationalist, Plaid Cymru remained the same at 4 seats.

Yet, in Wales, despite the first-past-the-post electoral system, which benefitted the Tories, the Brexit Party, which still stood candidates, was ahead of Plaid Cymru in 13 Welsh constituencies. But the Hard Right's greatest successes in Wales had been in the 2014 EU-election, where UKIP came a close second (to Labour) and gained 1 of Wales' 4 MEPs. And this was bettered by the Brexit Party in the 2019 EU election, where it came an easy first, gaining 2 MEPs. Plaid Cymru was a distant second.

But since 2019, the old UKIP, the Brexit Party and their successors have failed to build upon UKIP's and the Brexit Party's earlier electoral support. They have been partly dished by Johnson's 'Get Brexit Done' Tories, and partly by the national democratic challenges in Scotland and Wales. This failure became more evident in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Senedd elections in 2021. In the Scottish Parliament elections, the SNP won 61 seats (a 1 seat gain) and their soon-to-be Scottish governmental partners, the Scottish Greens won 8 seats (a 2 seat gain). In the Welsh Senedd elections, the Tories did win 16 seats (a 5 seat gain), but 4 of these were at the expense of UKIP/Brexit Party. Labour won 30 seats (a 1 seat gain). Furthermore, Labour held all the equivalent Senedd constituencies they had lost to the Tories in the Westminster general election, with the exception of the Vale of Clwyd. Labour now had enough MSs to form a Welsh Senedd government by themselves. Plaid Cymru won 13 seats (a 1 seat gain) and easily held on to Yns Mon constituency, which the Tories had gained in the 2019 Westminster election.

UKIP had already split in 2016, following Farage's departure when he formed the Brexit Party in 2019. UKIP had made no impact on the Scottish Parliament in 2016, nor in Scotland's Westminster constituencies in 2017, whilst the Brexit Party made no impact in 2019. UKIP, though, did gain a Scottish MEP in 2014 and the Brexit Party

gained one in 2019. In Wales though, UKIP gained 7 MSs in the 2016 Welsh Senedd elections, and the Brexit Party was ahead of Plaid Cymru in many seats in the 2019 Westminster election. However, all but one UKIP MSs had left the party by 2021. Four first joined the Brexit Party, before splitting again, three for the Independent Alliance for Reform and one for Abolish the Welsh Assembly Party (AtWAP). Another UKIP MS also joined AtWAP directly. The last UKIP MS became an isolated Independent.

There has only been one UK devolved assembly that the Hard Right, reactionary unionist, UKIP and the Brexit Party have ever keen on, and that is Stormont. Here reactionary unionism has dominated from 2006 until 2016. UKIP formed links with TUV and PUP, whilst the Brexit Party supported the DUP and therefore, unlike UKIP, did not stand in the 2019 EU and Westminster elections in Northern Ireland. But for both UKIP and the Brexit Party, the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Senedd have been associated with liberal unionism and constitutional nationalism. So, UKIP and the Brexit Party became conduits for anti-Scottish Parliament and anti-Welsh Senedd supporters.

Both UKIP and Farage's Brexit Party successor, Reform UK, stood 'Abolish the Holyrood and Cardiff Bay' candidates in the 2021 elections. In Wales they were joined by the Abolish the Welsh Assembly Party (another UKIP/Brexit Party breakaway) and George Galloway's Workers Party of Britain. In Scotland, the main figure in Reform Scotland was a former Tory MSP and Galloway joined its list for the 2021 Holyrood election. There were also separate 'Abolish the Scottish Parliament' candidates. But none of these candidates even saved their deposits. This reinforces the different political trajectories in Wales, and particularly in Scotland, compared to England, due to the significance of national self-determination.

There are latent 'Abolish Cardiff Bay and Holyrood' supporters in the Tory Party (and also in the Labour Party). One indication of deep-reactionary unionist attitudes in the British Labour Party was former Labour Minister, Jack Straw's call in 2014 for a Westminster act "to make the Union indissoluble"[\[41\]](#) – as much Franco as Farage. And in the 2020 Labour leadership elections, candidate Lisa Tandy, also

turned to the Spanish state, following the suppression of the Catalan Republic independence vote, as an example of how a Labour government should deal with a call for another Scottish independence referendum![\[42\]](#) She dug a deeper hole in her stuttering remarks when challenged, by saying she would support the Spanish social democratic PSOE approach, with its emphasis on social demands. The PSOE was now in office and the Catalan political prisoners remained in jail, and there have been no wide-ranging social reforms. Indeed, what few reforms there have been have depended on the support of the pro-independence Republican Left of Catalunya[\[43\]](#).

But for the moment, the Tories only want to roll back the devolved parliaments' powers, but still leave them as arenas for Tory careerists. They can provide second or third, well-paid jobs. Douglas Ross, Tory Depute Scottish Secretary of State, is an MP and MSP, as well as an international level football referee. And in Wales, even those three UKIP/Brexit Party breakaway candidates who formed the Independence Party for Reform (rather than abolish the Welsh Senedd), and also stood in the 2021 Welsh Senedd elections, had been persuaded that jobs in devolved parliaments offer easy money. There is no requirement to attend. UKIP MEPs and councillors had already become notorious for absenteeism whilst picking up their salaries or expenses.

However, it wasn't until May 2022 that there were elections to the UK's other devolved assembly at Stormont. Sinn Fein had had a poor showing in the 2019 Westminster general election, with its vote falling by 6.7% (worse than the DUP which fell by 5.4%). Sinn Fein lost votes and a seat, Foyle (mainly Derry City) to the SDLP.

In 2021 the two main unionist parties, the DUP and UUP, in the face of the ongoing political stalemate in Northern Ireland, held internal leadership elections. The response of Sinn Fein was less democratic. A leadership-organised purge in their Derry cumann was made behind-the-scenes. Sinn Fein's 2 Foyle MLAs, with their Republican associated past or family relations, were replaced by two others with no such connections. This was done to appeal to SDLP voters.

Following this, Sinn Fein conducted a slick campaign for the May 2022 Stormont elections. The aim was to oust the DUP from its position of holding the First Minister's post, as the leader of the dominant Unionist/Loyalist bloc. Sinn Fein downplayed its own Irish reunification policy and played up its leadership of the Nationalist/Republican bloc. Replacing the DUP as the lead party in Stormont was an enticing prospect for many Irish Nationalist voters.

Sinn Fein was successful in prising enough votes away from the SDLP (which along with the DUP's greater loss of votes to the APNI) put it in first place in the May 2022 Stormont election. However, ironically the Unionists increased their majority of MLAs, although now divided between the reactionary and conservative unionist, Unionist/Loyalist bloc - DUP (25, down 3), UUP (9, down 1), TUV (1, no change), Independents (2, up 1), and the liberal unionist Alliance (17, up 9) - a total of 54 (up 6). But the combination of the Nationalist/Republican MLAs declined - Sinn Fein 27 (unchanged) and SDLP (8, down 4), a total of 35 (down 4). (although PbP MLA, down 1, would also support Irish unification).

The DUP, having been ditched by Johnson after the 2019 Westminster election, still hoped to appeal to the hardest Brexit-supporting Tories, so they committed themselves to fighting the EU Protocol, the better to undermine the GFA and its 'parity of esteem'. The DUP removed itself from the NIE. Some courted Loyalist violence, thankfully without much success. But the DUP's loss of the First Minister's position, in the May Stormont election, is now the more important, if not openly admitted reason, for refusing to rejoin the NIE. For Unionists/Loyalist the whole purpose of Partition and Stormont had been to assert their majority supremacy.

The Tories would like to come to some accommodation with the EU, since they have wider capitalist interests in Ireland to protect. But they are caught between wanting to use the anti-Protocol unionists as leverage in these negotiations and the need to offer some concession to the Nationalist/Republican bloc. This is being done in an attempt to negotiate with the leaders of the Republic of Ireland, who are protective of the GFA legacy. The Republic of Ireland is backed, up to a certain

point, by the EU leaders. To show willingness the Tories have backed an Irish language act for Northern Ireland at Westminster which bypasses Stormont (also a warning to the DUP of what happens if they do not take their place within the NIE).

Today, Sunak's Tory government still faces the problem that, although the DUP may no longer be the largest party in Stormont, it is still the leader of the Unionist/Loyalist bloc there, with veto powers under the GFA. It would be interesting to know if the Tories are pursuing any behind-the-scenes talks with the liberal unionist APNI and the constitutional nationalist SDLP. Although, as with their dealings with the DUP, the Tories would determine these talks' overall direction, and these parties would be even more summarily dumped, once they had served their purpose.

Nevertheless, whereas the post-1921 UK state-backed, old-style Partition provided a Stormont 'democratic' electoral facade for an Orange supremacist substate; the UK state-backed, new-style, Partition, Stormont mark 2, can no longer provide this. This is even truer for Ulster Orange supremacy, which the DUP, TUV and Loyalist paramilitaries would like to restore. And this is also likely to be true for any reformed Northern Ireland, as APNI would like and some in the SDLP would accept. And the GFA, with its Unionist/Loyalist veto, provides no realistic mechanism for achieving Irish reunification that Sinn Fein would like.

j) Irish reunification under the Crown Commonwealth and NATO

Despite (or perhaps because of) Sinn Fein's poor performance in the 2019 Westminster election, its leadership began to put in place a longer-term plan for Irish reunification. Following Sinn Fein's much better results in the 2020 Dail elections, it set up Time4Unity/Am Le Haontach to build support for this. Sinn Fein's current thinking is based on a particular interpretation of the results of the 2022 Stormont elections and the 2020 Dail elections. And before this, the DUP had already been reduced to 8 MPs (a drop of 2). Therefore, the reactionary

unionist DUP had lost its absolute majority of MPs, leaving unionists (reactionary and liberal) with 9 MPs and constitutional nationalists with 9 MPs.

But if there was ever to be an Irish reunification referendum it is the total individual voters pledged to 'Yes' and 'No' who would count. If you turn to the 2022 Stormont election, only 41.5% of votes went to Sinn Fein, SDLP, Aontu, PbP, IRSP and Workers Party, those more likely (but not necessarily) to vote for Irish reunification. This can be compared the 43% of vote for the reactionary and conservative unionist DUP, UUP, TUV, Independent Unionists, PUP and Conservatives, all of whom would definitely vote against reunification, and the 12.5% who voted for the liberal unionist APNI, also opposed to Irish reunification. This excludes those who voted for the small non-constitutionally committed parties, many of whose supporters could well abstain in the face of such a choice.

Furthermore, any reunification referendum would also have to be backed by the Irish Dail, before also being put to the people in the Republic of Ireland. Much has been made of the 10.7% increase in Sinn Fein's vote and their 14 additional TDs in the 2020 Dail elections. However, the Dail's balance between TDs supporting any action to bring about an Irish reunification referendum is currently 37 Sinn Fein, 3 PbP, 1 Aontu and probably 1 RISE and 1 Independents4Change – a total of 43 TDs. The partitionist Solidarity has only 2 TDs and could well abstain. However, TDs opposing reunification, anytime soon, include 37 Fianna Fail, 35 Fine Gael, 12 Greens, 7 Labour, 3 Social Democrats – a total of 94 TDs. However, unlike Northern Ireland, in the Republic of Ireland's case there is majority public support for both Irish reunification and a referendum. But many of these supporters prioritise other issues, when it comes to voting for specific parties in the Dail elections.

There may be scope for Sinn Fein winning over some TDs or future candidates, particularly from Fianna Fail. But then, as John has clearly indicated, reunification would be on an anti-Republican basis. Any such reunited Ireland could join the British Commonwealth, abandon neutrality and sign up to NATO. This would just lead to a larger Irish

Free State, with new NATO air-force bases instead of the old British naval bases closed in 1938.

A possible obstacle to this, though, is the Republic of Ireland's continued membership of the EU, which could provide an opposition, as long as the Tories remain in office. Some on the Right and Left have proposed that Ireland leaves the EU. These Irexiteers include some Independents, Aontu, the Irish Freedom Party, the National Party, Renua on the Right, and Solidarity, the Workers Party, IRSP, eirigi and Soaradh on the Left. They could provide arguments, which would have the effect, intended and unintended, of subordinating a reunited Ireland even more firmly to US and British imperialism. This was the effect of what the Brexiteers, Right and Left, did in the 2016 UK EU referendum.

In the 2021 Irish Dail elections, Sinn Fein put on a Left Populist face. Seeking support for Irish reunification was not a high priority. This new turn followed the major losses it experienced in its Right accommodationist campaigns for the 2018 Irish presidential election (down 7.3% to 6.4%), in the 2019 Irish local elections (down 5.7% in the vote, losing 78 of its 159 councillors), and in the EU elections (down 7.8% in the vote, losing 2 of its MEPs). However, over both its earlier Right accommodationist and more recent Left Populist phases, Mary Lou Macdonald has been party president. So, the current leadership is quite capable of making another Right turn.

Both John's defeatist, 'abstract propagandism', and his inability to connect the struggle for Irish self-determination to those in Scotland and Wales, leaves the SD(I) without any strategy to build an alternative Republican coalition for Irish unification, which relates to the political conditions we face today.

The second part of this article, a review of *Winners, Losers and Learners* will examine *The State of Northern Ireland and the Democratic Deficit: Between Sectarianism & Neo-Liberalism* written by Paul Stewart, Tommy McKearney, Georoid O'Machail, Patricia Campbell and Brian Garvey. They make a considerable contribution to

overcoming the shortcomings of John's political approach to the possibilities of Irish unification.

Allan Armstrong, 15.3.22 (updated 7.2.23)

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Also see: [Ireland's reunification: prologue to democratic revolution](#)