

Will Ireland be United?

by Michael Curtis



Double, double, toil and Trouble. People have burned and political parties bubble. But in the lilt of Irish laughter you can hear the angels sing, and all the world seems happy and gay.

Political earthquakes are rare but the result of the parliamentary election in the Republic of Ireland on February 8, 2020 stunned the political establishment by the surprising performance of Sinn Fein, (We Ourselves), the former political wing of the Irish Republican Army, IRA. Though it had run only 42 candidates, Sinn Fein, SF, gained 14 seats, 24.5% of the vote, and won 37 of the 160 seats while Fianna Gael (Tribe of the Irish) the party of prime minister Leo Varadkar got 35 seats and 20.9% of the vote and Fianna Fail (Soldiers of Destiny) got 38 seats and 22.2% of the vote.

SF had run a good electoral campaign with proposals for positive programs for mass housing, rent freeze, better health

system, increases in public spending, and climate change. Yet, whatever the sincerity of these promises the real objective of SF is Irish unity, and a referendum as the means to secure it. The SF is now important in the parliament of the Republic, and it is the second largest party in Northern Ireland. It therefore puts the unification of Ireland on the political agenda.

The election result was disappointing for the 41 year old Leo Varadkar, prime minister, Taoiseach, openly gay, of mixed race, (Indian-Irish), bought up as Catholic, trained as a doctor. Under his tenure, Ireland had rapid growth and is close to full employment, after some years of austerity and lack of affordable housing. His opponent in the SF was the party president Mary Lou McDonald, 50 years old, a charming personality and good speaker who had replaced Gerry Adams who had been president since 1983 and was for long the face of the SF, and almost certainly in spite of his continual denials, probably Commander of the IRA. Gerry Adams had also stepped down as leader of SF in Northern Ireland in 2018. The SF did particularly well among younger voters who presumably had no personal memory of the Troubles of the past. The party got a third of the vote of the young, but only 12% of those over 65.

How does one restore stability after an earthquake? There are three possibilities. One, though unrealistic, is for SF to form a minority government. A second is to call another election to get a clearer picture. A third, more realistic, but unlikely, option is for SF to be part of a coalition government with one of the other major parties. But this has been rejected by the other parties as not being compatible for political reasons and historic memories. At the core is the fundamental difference; the SF in the Republic is the only party resolutely committed to the unity of the whole island of Ireland. It is also the party historically linked to the IRA, some of whose members, calling themselves "Continuity IRA,"

planned to carry out a terrorist bomb attack using a truck on January 31, 2020, the day of Brexit.

The political outcome has been different in the two political entities in Ireland. On April 10, 1998 the Good Friday Agreement ended twenty years of the Troubles, the civil war that cost 3,600 lives, in the six counties in the area now Northern Ireland, if not completely the more than two hundred years of hostility between Ireland, now the Republic of Ireland, and Britain. The long hostility stems from opposition to the violent repression of the Irish people that began in the 16th century and continued especially under the conquest by Oliver Cromwell beginning in 1649. Cromwell is still a hated figure because of his brutality and massacres at Drogheda and Wexford, and the consequences of famine, which led to the spread of diseases, the plague, decimation of the population, and destruction of the economic infrastructure.

Political developments are complex and complicated between the various parties, and the fact that SF exists in both parts of Ireland. Hostilities between Britain and Irish nationalists who demanded some form of Home Rule continued for centuries leading to the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 which was crushed, and further agitation with a guerrilla campaign against the British until the 1921 cease fire and the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1922. The Treaty set up the Irish Free State, IFS, of 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland, a unit with Dominion status and able to make its own laws, but not an independent Republic.

SF, the radical nationalist party, has always wanted to go beyond some form of home rule, and have a completely independent state. On the 1922 Treaty it was divided. One group, which became the majority, led by Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins were for compromise and acceptance of the Treaty, while a minority led by Eamon de Valera were opposed. The differences led to terrorist activity and alternative

consequences. This group refused to take the Oath of Allegiance to the Crown before taking seats in Parliament. Griffith was acting president of the Dail (the lower house of Parliament) 1919-21, while de Valera was touring the U.S. Michael Collins, appointed chair of the Provisional Government of the Irish Free State in January 1922, was assassinated in an ambush in August 1922. In contrast, De Valera became Taoiseach, prime minister, and then President 1959-73. The other main result of the Treaty was that six of the 32 Irish counties opted out of the IFS and remained under British rule.

In 1931 Westminster gave up all remaining authority for the IFS and thus the IFS became the independent Irish state. A new constitution came into force in December 1937, and the state took the name *Ireland* (Eire in the Irish language), a sovereign, independent, democratic state, in which a President replaced the position of Governor General of the IFS.

In 1949 the remaining ties of the Republic with Britain were severed. At the same time the six counties, popularly known as Ulster, became "Northern Ireland," and its Assembly, Stormont, can make decisions on various devolved issues, while other issues are reserved for the UK. The reality is that the majority of the population in Northern Ireland, mainly Protestants, were Unionists wanting to remain part of the UK, but a minority, mostly Catholics, want a united Ireland independent of the UK. Northern Ireland, which at present has a population of about 1.9 million, flies the Union Jack as its flag, and English is the de facto, though not official language.

The starting point to resolve the sea of Troubles is to assess the present and future actions of the SF, the radical nationalist party, founded in 1905 and which declared it had reshaped its form in 1970, a party active in both the Republic of Ireland, ROI, and Northern Ireland. Two factors are important: SF has been the most the most radical of the

existing political parties, and it has embodied or linked to the IRA , the Irish Republican Army that has had different names. Unlike other parties, the SF from its beginning has gone beyond the cry for home rule, has opposed the existence of a separate political entity and any British rule, and has called for a Republic of the whole of Ireland.

However, in the 1980s the SF mainstream began to take a more moderate position, becoming part of the working system, taking seats in parliament, agreeing to a IRS ceasefire in 1994, and then to Good Friday, power sharing in Northern Ireland, and entering a government coalition. It still favors a referendum on Ireland. The SF feeling is strong that Northern Ireland should be part of the Irish Republic, not part of the UK.

Yet in spite of the impact of the Good Friday Agreement and the generally peaceful atmosphere since 1988, the two communities, Protestant and Catholic, remain separate if not totally divided, in schools and housing. Two facts are pertinent in consideration of unification of the two Irelands. One is that the Republic has 4.8 million residents and is mostly Catholic, while Northern Ireland has 1.9 million and a population in which for the first time Catholics probably outnumber Protestants. The other factor is the unpredictable effect of Brexit: Northern Ireland voted against it, while the Unionist party voted for it.

Differences are apparent, on issues like abortion, contraception, gay rights, constitutional changes, a flag and national anthem, economic disparity. Sinn Fein may no longer be a political pariah, and its leader Mary Lou McDonald is a formidable, attractive, warm personality personifying a peaceful approach, and is not a prisoner of the past as was her predecessor Gerry Adams. She has broken the duopoly of Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, and has staked a claim to political office and strongly criticized as "arrogant" her political rivals for denying her a place in the Irish government. All the same, considering the differences, it is unlikely that a

united Ireland will emerge in the near future. Someday the unity will come and how thrilling that moment will be, but at the moment it doesn't stand a ghost of a chance.