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North of Ireland

The Orange card trumps the Green: Austerity wins the election

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A local writer once remarked that the new Northern Ireland reminded him of nothing so much as the old Northern Ireland. This truism was confirmed by May's Westminster election, which could easily have been taking place in 1955.

It was an exercise in sectarian head counting, used effectively by the unionists through "unity" candidates to force the Alliance party out of East Belfast and Sinn Fein out of Fermanagh/South Tyrone. The end result was triumph for unionism, with the DUP holding 8 seats. The British result means that dreams of being king makers in a hung parliament are gone, but this hardly matters, given the level of support that Cameron has offered Unionism. The re-appointment of Theresa Villiers as secretary of state means a continuation of existing British policy – contempt for Sinn Fein, demands for a level of austerity that will plunge many below the poverty line and an insistence that the political settlement here depends on its acceptance by the DUP, who now have a veto on any form of political progress. The other element of the unionist vote is the recovery of the Unionist Party with two seats, although they flatlined on votes. The result indicates that the DUP will never succeed in wiping out the unionists and that the unionist all-class alliance of the 1950s will never be re-established. Current stability rests on nationalist capitulation rather than unionist strength.

Catholic card

Sinn Fein played the Catholic card, with Gerry Kelly publishing statistics on the religious composition of North Belfast in an unsuccessful attempt to force unity behind himself [see box below]. Many liberals expressed shock, but this was not the first nor the only attempt to play the sectarian card – for some time Sinn Fein have been proposing Catholic unity candidates to the middle class SDLP. Of course the whole Good Friday agreement which Sinn Fein signed up to, is based on sectarian division.

Sinn Fein has little choice but to play the Catholic card. The Stormont House agreement means that they are no longer able to claim that there will be a democratization of civil society or of the state and a gradual decline in sectarian conflict. Many of their supporters believe that they are fighting against the implementation of austerity, but they have already agreed 99% of the measures in Stormont. All that is left is to call for a vote to keep “the other side” out.

Orange card

But the Green card has nothing of the strength of the Orange. The dynamics of a sectarian society are such that it is impossible to unite the underdog in a sectarian cabal. To support sectarianism is to underwrite your own second class status, so there is always a minority supporting a democratic solution and anxious to overcome the existing order.

In fact the main outcome of the election was that the institutionalisation of sectarianism has reached its limit. There is a growing dissatisfaction with the status quo, in part because of the unending demonstrations of sectarian supremacy. The Sinn Fein vote has fallen, dramatically so in the key seat of West Belfast. The SDLP have held 2 seats to Sinn Fein's 4 – a disaster for a party that aimed to have nationalist hegemony in the North as a springboard for a place in a coalition government in the South.

Their support will fall more sharply in the near future. The last vote had just been counted when Secretary of state Villiers called for the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement. [1] Peter Robinson agreed, saying that Sinn Fein had been given a free run at the elections and now had to get down to business. The hollowness of the election process was led bare. It was only a sideshow, clearing the way for a predetermined austerity. McGuinness's response to calls to sign off on the deal was an incoherent suggestion that he and Robinson unite to ask Cameron for more money! The current crisis is a search for cover for his party, but austerity will be imposed in any case.

Peak Sinn Fein

The election marks a watershed. We have had a peak in Sinn Fein support and a growing realization of the disaster the Stormont administration represent for workers. In the short term that means more reaction, but it is also true that the barricade that Sinn Fein presents to the advance of a working class movement must be removed.

The new round of austerity will hit harder in the North of Ireland than anywhere else. The Stormont parties have racked up extra charges and the measures will apply in a very short timeframe to areas suffering multiple deprivation. 20,000 public sector jobs are to go with the insane idea that what passes locally for private industry will take up the slack.

The major loser was trade union credibility. The local trade unions called a truce while they waited for Labour to be elected. Local politicians (Sinn Fein) were to intercede for them. Now they are without a strategy.

It is an extremely dangerous situation. The new austerity measures, with the extra cuts in the Tory manifesto and the possibility of even further cuts if corporation tax is reduced, will hit like a lightning bolt. There will inevitably be social unrest. There will be desperation within Sinn Fein, seeing their entry into southern government slipping away. In the DUP there is vicious infighting, with Robinson forming a laager of loyal supporters and excluding conspirators further to the right.

However, in the absence of a coherent socialist current op-posed to all the aspects of Stormont House, the attack dog of sectarianism is at heel to divide the working class further and suppress the possibility of a united fightback.

Count the Catholics Kelly: Sinn Fein's sectarian ploy exposed

The angry response to their sectarian ploy in the Westminster election took Sinn Fein by surprise. In the North Belfast constituency they printed a bar graph based on the 2011 census in the area. It was labeled: "Protestant - 45.67%; Catholic - 46.96%. Make the change, Make history".

From the point of view of Sinn Fein, this was just another ploy from a party of spindoctors and tallymen. It was part of the rough and tumble of just another electoral campaign. They are mistaken. This is the resolution of a long standing contradiction, a historic moment when the mask falls completely and Sinn Fein nua is exposed.

The contradiction stretches back to the beginning of the peace process. Republicanism had traditionally balanced between socialism and capitalism. Under the pressure of defeat it entered a "nationalist family" with Irish capital and embraced a settlement that enshrined British rule and a local administration based on sectarian rights.

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This opened a new contradiction between their constant jockeying for confessional rights in the corridors of power and an historic base that believed in the broadly democratic and left-facing policies of the past.

The solution was simple. Push former IRA figures to the fore and use their credibility to reassure supporters. Constantly remember to always have two stories - one for the loyal follower, the other for your partners in government.

But everything changes with time. The credibility of the IRA figures declines. When there is no change in the nationalist areas, which experience levels of deprivation that have stayed the same over four decades, people move back from the party, which itself becomes insulated by a layer of paid functionaries. The majority of time is taken up by interacting with other capitalist politicians, businesspeople and governments. The middle class flood into Sinn Fein and are unaware that any left wing gobbledygook has to be dispensed.

However there are more immediate and material reasons for the collapse of this Janus-faced policy. This election has taken place in the shadow of the Stormont House Agreement. Sinn Fein have hesitated over one section and been savagely attacked by the Unionists, the British, Dublin and the US administration. The attacks have stopped during the election campaign, but Sinn Fein has been told that the British will close down the local administration if they do not agree the full package.

The battle is not centered on the Stormont House agreement. Rather it is about finding a way to preserve their claims to be an anti-austerity party. Sinn Fein unreservedly support 99% of the austerity budget and have signed up to the political aspects of Stormont House, which absolve the unionists from any requirement to row back on sectarian triumphalism or to implement outstanding elements of the Good Friday agreement.

The Westminster election will be followed by a political and economic offensive against the workers, with Sinn Fein lined up with the bosses. Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that they play the Catholic card and rely on sectarian rivalry to hold their vote.

The party hope to pass off this sectarian appeal as a one-off incident, part of the rough and ready tactics used in an electoral struggle. They are mistaken. In fact they have a great deal of form in this area. The initial shot in the election campaign was a unity offensive aimed at the SDLP to ensure a single Catholic candidate in each electoral area. The SDLP refused, not out of any principle, but because they did not want to be swallowed up by the larger party and in the end held their own with 2 seats. The Sinn Fein election material in the West Belfast constituency carried a shy graphic of a Sinn Fein protest to "Save St. Mary's," referring to a campaign some months ago to prevent the amalgamation of the local catholic teacher training facility with Stranmillis college – a campaign based on asserting sectarian rights to a separate educational system.

The biggest fall in votes – mopped up by People Before Profit candidate Gerry Carroll – was in the West Belfast constituency. The Good Friday Agreement initially contained provision for shared sporting facilities. The unionists refused to implement the deal and Sinn Fein then agreed to the money being divided in a sectarian carve-up. It was earmarked for West Belfast's GAA facility at Casement Park. Sinn Fein and the GAA tried to ram through the development in the face of local opposition and tales are now emerging of massive corruption, the ripping up of planning regulations and dismissal of major health and safety concerns.

By playing the Green card the Shinnerys play to their middle class support. Their main concern is to get their share of privilege. The traditional working class supporters get nothing and see the slogan of the "unity of Catholic, Protestant and dissenter" central to the traditional republican programme, swept away.

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However it is not only nationalist workers who are betrayed. In the name of “equality of the two traditions” Protestant workers are handed over to utterly reactionary loyalist gangs. Divisions in the working class are presented as not political but cultural. When Gerry Kelly called on North Belfast Catholics to vote for him, he was in effect inviting Protestants to vote for Nigel Dodds of the DUP.

Sinn Fein is a capitalist confessional party. They sell sectarian division to the workers because they have nothing else to sell. All the promises of democracy and prosperity claimed for the Northern settlement have come to nothing. The task before us is one of constructing an alternative based on democracy and socialism and built on the power of an independent and united working class.

[1] The Stormont House Agreement is a political accommodation between the British and Irish Governments, and a majority of parties that make up the Northern Ireland Executive. The Agreement was published on 23 December 2014. The Stormont House Agreement is intended to bind the parties and communities closer together on resolving identity issues, coming to a settlement on welfare reform, and on making government finance in Northern Ireland more sustainable. See [Wikipedia](#).