

Sinn Féin's election victory: implications for Brexit and the EU

The success of Sinn Féin in the Irish general election took everyone by surprise, including Sinn Féin itself. Dr Ray Bassett, a former ambassador in the Irish diplomatic service who helped negotiate the Good Friday Agreement as part of the Irish Government Talks Team, provides a dispassionate evaluation of the implications of Sinn Féin's victory for Britain and our ongoing disentanglement from the European Union.

The election result in the Republic of Ireland was a major surprise. The emergence of Sinn Féin as the largest political party in terms of the popular vote and the heavy losses suffered by the ruling Fine Gael party, (and to a lesser extent the main Opposition Fianna Fáil), was not foreseen by political commentators, even a few weeks ago.

Given the prominent role that Ireland – and in particular Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and his deputy Simon Coveney – have played in the Brexit discussions, it is only natural to ask what the implications are for Britain and its ongoing disentanglement from the European Union.

Firstly, we should remember that Sinn Féin have yet to secure power in Dublin. Despite their excellent election result, this is still problematic. The party only holds 37 seats in the Dáil (Irish parliament) out of a total of 160. It did not put up enough candidates in Ireland's proportional representation (PR) election system to get more – something which in itself demonstrates the surprise nature of the result.

In addition to Sinn Féin's 37 seats, there are a whole

plethora of small left-wing parties and independents who are broadly compatible with Sinn Féin's approach. However, they are a fairly disparate grouping, which will make the formation of a coalition difficult. If Sinn Féin manages to cobble together a left-wing administration, it will be the most radical change of government since 1932 and the arrival of Eamon De Valera to power.

Regarding Brexit, Sinn Féin has been the most hard-line party in Ireland on the issue, both North and South. It has a long history of opposition to British rule in Ireland and is pressing for a reunification referendum within the next five years.

However, that hostility to Brexit has focused heavily on the issue of the danger of a physical border in Ireland. The party's primary objective is the achievement of a united Ireland, and absolute opposition to anything which further divides the island of Ireland. Sinn Féin has huge support along the border areas – four of the five Westminster constituencies along the Irish border have Sinn Féin MPs. That position is mirrored on the southern side as Sinn Féin has emerged as the dominant political force locally in recent times. Hence Sinn Féin will oppose any re-establishment of controls on North-South movements of goods or services.

Despite this, Sinn Féin's victory will be very unwelcome in Brussels. Michel Barnier visited Ireland during the election campaign in a blatant move to bolster Brussels' favourite Irish politician, Leo Varadkar. Barnier even clashed with the leader of the Opposition Micheál Martin, in support of Irish European Minister Helen McEntee. There was no doubt that the EU establishment wanted a Varadkar victory.

The Sinn Féin party has traditionally been Eurosceptic; it campaigned against the Maastricht, Nice and Lisbon treaties. In recent years it has softened its attitude to EU membership and now describes itself as in favour of membership but

'eurocritical'. The party's manifesto for the election stated:

"Sinn Féin is fully committed to the EU. However, huge democratic deficits exist within its current structures. It is time to end the Brussels power grab, to rein in the Commission and return powers to the member states."

It further commits the party to oppose any militarisation of the EU, including PESCO.

Will any of these sentiments survive a period in government? It is hard to say, but I have no doubt but that the party will come under huge pressure from Brussels to drop its opposition to euro-federalism in return for Brussels' support on avoiding any hardening of the border in Ireland.

One area where the EU Commission will be worried is on the issue of border controls in Ireland in the event of a breakdown of the assurances in the Withdrawal Agreement. While Leo Varadkar was initially declaring that there could be no hard border in Ireland in any circumstances, in recent times he softened that rhetoric to speak about the need to safeguard the EU's Single Market. In the end there was little confidence that should Brussels demand a border in Ireland, that Varadkar would have done anything other than comply with the EU's orders. Varadkar was often perceived as putting the interests of Brussels before that of Ireland. He had once declared himself a Euro Federalist, hence the great support he has received from Juncker, Barnier etc.

Sinn Féin, because of its history and commitment to a united Ireland, could never compromise on the border in this way. This is something which will greatly worry Barnier et al. Sinn Féin's lukewarm attitude to Brussels is also reflected in many of the left-wing independents in the Dáil, and any Government headed by Sinn Féin would be the least enthusiastic Irish administration for the 'European Project' since accession in 1973. In contrast, the three most pro EU parties, Fine Gael,

Fianna Fáil and the Labour party all suffered poor elections results.

Therefore, if the British Government want to lessen Dublin's hostility to their Brexit plans, they need to satisfy any Sinn Féin administration that there is no question of interfering with the present frictionless operation of the Irish border.

In theory, Sinn Féin should be more sympathetic to British desires to regain its independence. But there is a long historical legacy to overcome. The key to achieving that should be a joint commitment from Dublin and London to ensure a frictionless border. This would accommodate the single most important issue on Brexit for any Sinn Féin administration.

Dr Ray Bassett's address to the 2019 Campaign for an Independent Britain Annual Rally can be viewed [here](#).