

The Rise of the Nationalist Vote and Unionism losing Stormont Majority

On Thursday March 2, 2017 – there was a huge tidal shift in the North of Ireland political landscape. Unionism suffered one of their heaviest defeats in recent elections culminating in the loss of their untenable Unionist majority in Stormont something they have held for the last number of decades.

The last power sharing executive collapsed in January 2017 because Arlene Foster leader of the DUP refused to step aside to allow an investigation of the flawed “cash for ash” renewable energy scheme* which she oversaw. The scheme could cost the tax payers over 500 million pounds sterling over 20 years.

This election was a fierce and bitter battle in both Unionist and Nationalist/Republican camps. Hateful campaigns and slogans emerged playing each party against one another. The outcome of the full result was not known until shortly after 3 am on 3rd March where the DUP may have once more emerged as the top party in the North, but its share of the first preference vote has slipped for the third election in a row, now down to 28.1%. Sinn Fein’s in contrast, has risen to its highest ever share of 27.9%. The gap between them across the whole of Northern Ireland is now fewer than 1,200 votes, and there is only a one seat difference between them in the slim lined 90-seat assembly.

The number of Assembly seats was reduced from 108 to 90 under new policy changes in Stormont. This was to try and reduce the over wage bill at the assembly where some MLAS and their staff can earn from £40-80,000 per year. Turnout was the highest since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 at over 64.8% up ten points from last May’s Assembly election.

So why did Sinn Fein’s vote surge?

In short the DUP "radicalised a younger vote for Sinn Fein". Young people were more likely to ditch tribal lines and vote for more progressive policies, but something about Sinn Fein resonated this time. The RHI heating scheme debacle, the arrogance of the DUP for not implementing the St Andrew Agreement terms i.e. the Irish Language Act, and ultimately Sinn Féin advanced because its campaign centred on the demand to be treated equally and with respect by unionists such as Arlene Foster. Sinn Fein’s overall vote increased by 4%.

Also the loss of party stalwart Martin McGuinness who resigned from office and shortly thereafter politics in January meant Sinn Fein ran a campaign in Northern areas building on the work Martin McGuinness had started in his 20 years at the Stormont Assembly. Sinn Fein elected a new Northern Leader – Michelle O’Neill who brings a less militant more progressive approach to the party’s politics.

Other losses at the election that will have a huge impact on Unionism are:

UUP leader Mike Nesbitt Resigns after having lost a number of prominent figures including former deputy leader Danny Kennedy and Jo-Anne Dobson. He leaves his party facing an uncertain future.

It has also been a difficult election for the DUP. Party Chairman Lord Morrow and former minister Nelson McCausland are among those who lost their posts.

For the SDLP Alex Attwood who has served as an Assembly Member in West Belfast for nearly 20 years had lost his seat to the rising stars of People before Profit – Gerry Carroll.

So what does this mean for the Future of the North of Ireland?

In recent days Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Fein has called for dialogue to start on a United Ireland. The change of voting strategy has reinvigorated the All Ireland Question again.

The election has shown nationalists that a goal of Irish unity is achievable said Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams.

He was speaking a week on from what he has described as a “watershed” election.

The new assembly parties have been meeting at Stormont from Monday to discuss a way forward since the collapse of the assembly. They have three weeks to reach an agreement on forming a new executive. If no executive is formed, another election can be called, and ultimately power could return to the UK parliament at Westminster for the first time in a decade.

We will watch this space

The final split of the 90 assembly seats was as follows:

28 Democratic Unionist Part - Will hold First Minister post

27 Sinn Fein – Will hold Deputy First Minister post

12 Social Democratic Labour Party

10 Ulster Unionist Party

8 Alliance Party

2 Green Party

1 Traditional unionist Voice

1 People before Profit

1 Independent

*For further information of the Renewable Heating Scheme and the impact this had on the election please see this link: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-38307628>