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The Closer You Are, the Harder it Gets: Sinn Féin and the Reunification of Ireland

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The Closer You Are, the Harder it Gets: Sinn Féin and the Reunification of Ireland**

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Abstract (Ita): Sinn Féin è attualmente una forza importante nella politica dell'Irlanda e dell'Irlanda del Nord. Al di là di questo successo, la Brexit ha cambiato radicalmente il discorso pubblico sullo status costituzionale dell'Irlanda del Nord. Se già prima della Brexit, pur appartenendo al Regno Unito, l'Irlanda del Nord si collocava su un confine "quasi invisibile" con l'Irlanda, a seguito del ritiro della Gran Bretagna dall'Unione Europea, i pericoli in senso "secessionista" sono aumentati. In questo contesto, dunque, Sinn Féin ha avuto l'opportunità di provare a perseguire il suo obiettivo politico fondamentale: la riunificazione dell'isola d'Irlanda come Stato indipendente. La realtà, tuttavia, è che l'Irlanda unita rimane un'ambizione indefinita e che gli sforzi di Sein Féin per raggiungere il suo obiettivo principale potrebbero comportare al partito un notevole costo elettorale.

Abstract (Eng): Sinn Féin is now a major force in politics in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Alongside this success, Brexit has radically changed public discourse over Northern Ireland's constitutional status. An arrangement where Northern Ireland was part of the United Kingdom, but enjoyed an all-but invisible border with Ireland for many purposes, had been achieved whilst the United Kingdom was part of the European Union, and was imperiled by the United Kingdom's withdrawal. This confluence of electoral success and constitutional upheaval has provided Sinn Féin with the opportunity to advance its core political aim; the reunification of the island of Ireland as an independent state. The reality, however, is that many aspects of a united Ireland remain to be defined, and Sinn Féin's efforts to get closer towards achieving this most cherished of its political aims could come with considerable electoral costs.

Parole chiave: Irlanda; Irlanda del Nord; Riunificazione; Principio del consenso; Autodeterminazione dei popoli

Keywords: Ireland; Northern Ireland; Reunification; Principle of Consent; Self Determination

Sommario: Introduction; Sinn Féin and the 1998 Agreement; The Cusp of Change; The Challenge Intensifies; The Realities of Reunification; Conclusion

Introduction

The logistics of attempting to run a political party across two states are daunting. Separate party funds, different legal rules for party organisation and different messaging and priorities on either side of a border all come into play. Sinn Féin, however, is a cross border party which aims to remove the border between the polities in which it operates by bringing about the end of over a century of partition and bring about a united and independent Ireland (inherent in the party name, which literally translates as Ourselves Alone). From the rise of the contemporary party as the mouthpiece of the Provisional Irish Republican Army's (IRA) violent revolutionary campaign to bring about this end in the 1970s, to the gradual eclipse of the *«armed struggle»*[1] amid the peace process which centred upon the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998, and on to the increasing electoral success of

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[1] J. Tonge, *"They haven't gone away, you know". Irish republican 'dissidents' and 'armed struggle'*, in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 16, n. 3, (2004) pp. 671-693.

Sinn Féin in both Northern Ireland and Ireland (the state, rather than the island), this end has been the *raison d'être* of the movement. This article explores the political and constitutional challenges that lie ahead for these reunification efforts, and the difficulties faced by Sinn Féin in accommodating its ultimate goal within a quest for political power.

Sinn Féin and the 1998 Agreement

In the 1980s the Northern Ireland conflict had raged for over a decade and appeared more intractable than ever. Outrage heaped upon outrage had hardened rival narratives about the conflict and restricted the space for negotiation. In this context, Sinn Féin took two transformative steps towards organisational reinvention. The first, building on the success of Bobby Sands' election to the Westminster Parliament, while taking part in the 1981 hunger strike in the Maze Prison, was the adoption of the *«armalite and ballot box»*[2] strategy. This saw the republican movement seek to combine political violence and electoral politics in its efforts to advance reunification. This involved Sinn Féin organising as a political party and held out the possibility that, after a peace process, the ballot box aspect of the strategy would come to predominate as Sinn Féin transitioned into an organisation committed to achieving political power by constitutional means. The second element involved Sinn Féin's leadership, then Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, actively seeking to build a *«nationalist coalition»*[3] to pursue shared political goals, rather than acting on them in isolation, beginning with the talks between John Hume and Gerry Adams in 1998.

Within the organisation this approach was controversial. In the course of talks towards a peace deal in the 1990s, Sinn Féin's ultimate goal of reunification had to be deprioritised. The party leadership's acceptance that the conflict had become a *«military stalemate»*[4] and that political violence was therefore not going to advance the cause of a united Ireland did not necessarily translate easily to a movement in which many people felt that they had made the sacrifices demanded by a revolutionary struggle, and who did not see the end point of those sacrifices as being a role for Sinn Féin within a set of power sharing arrangements managing powers devolved to a Northern Ireland that was still very much part of the United Kingdom (UK). Gradually, however, over the course of successive ceasefires between 1994 and 1996 and between 1997 and the conclusion of the 1998 Agreement, even many of the republican movement's *«hard men … bade a psychological farewell to terrorism»*[5].

Power sharing, when it functioned, became the most prominent outcome of the 1998 Agreement. The possibility of reunification was undoubtedly part of the Agreement; indeed, Sinn Féin would not have assented to it without it. But the principle of consent meant that it would only come about as a result of an expression of the majority will of

[3] P. Taylor, *Provos: The IRA and Sinn Fein*, London, Bloomsbury, 1997, p. 304.
[4] G. Adams, *Before the Dawn: An Autobiography*, New York, William Morrow, 1996, p. 317.
[5] E. Mallie, D. McKittrick, *The Fight for Peace*, London, Heinemann, 1996, p. 370.

the people in Ireland and Northern Ireland[6]. This prospect was so far distant in time in 1998, given the state of public opinion at the time, that it required the parties engaged in power sharing to prioritize day-to-day politics over Northern Ireland's perennial *«constitutional question»*[7]. Within Northern Ireland, this saw Sinn Féin having to work together in an Executive with parties with a diametrically opposed vision for the constitutional future and to develop policies for the benefit of a polity that it had long insisted was unworkable. Even though power sharing was stop-start in the aftermath of 1998, major acts of IRA decommissioning in 2005 and Sinn Féin's support for policing after the St Andrews Agreement of 2006 marked further breaks with overt paramilitarism[8]. In Ireland, Sinn Féin gained some support from those disaffected with the traditional parties, especially as IRA decommissioning underlined the republican movement's shift behind constitutional politics. This electoral platform involved Sinn Féin seeking to provide a hub for an alliance of fringe causes, including intense scepticism towards the EU, as part of its effort to accumulate vote share[9]. Reunification, for much of the two decades after 1998, seemed a distant possibility.

The Cusp of Change

The June 2016 UK referendum vote to withdraw from the European Union (EU) suddenly intensified debates over Northern Ireland's status[10]. Shared EU membership had done much to standardise significant aspects of law across the land border, and for many people the border could be crossed on a regular basis with no evident disruption. This was not fertile ground for a reunification campaign, but the Brexit vote threatened to upend these arrangements. The common EU law foundation which provided the basis for the open border in terms of goods movements, and extensive aspects of the operation of North-South bodies under the 1998 Agreement, looked set to be swept away[11]. Even though significant elements of EU law would ultimately be protected in the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement, the special arrangements covering Northern Ireland continued to appear insecure in the years after Brexit, with the UK Government repeatedly seeking to renegotiate terms[12]. Businesses had little confidence in investing in Northern Ireland and power sharing lurched from crisis to crisis.

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[6] *Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland (with annexes)* (1998) 2114 UNTS 473, Constitutional Issues, para. 1.
[7] C.R.G. Murray, 'The Constitutional Significance of the People of Northern Ireland', in O. Doyle, A. McHarg, J. Murkens (eds.), *The Brexit Challenge for Ireland and the United Kingdom: Constitutions under Pressure*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 108-128, 108-109.
[8] See R. Wilford, 'Northern Ireland St Andrews–the long Good Friday Agreement', in J. Bradbury (ed.), *Devolution, Regionalism and Regional Development: The UK Experience*, Routledge, 2007, pp. 81-108.
[9] See M. Frampton, *Sinn Féin and the European Arena: 'Ourselves Alone' or 'Critical Engagement'?*, in *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 16, n. 1, 2005, pp. 235-253.
[10] See M. Murphy, J. Evershed, *A Troubled Constitutional Future: Northern Ireland After Brexit*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Agenda, 2022, pp. 12-17.
[11] See S. De Mars, et al., *Bordering Two Unions: Northern Ireland and Brexit*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2018, pp. 19-20.
[12] See C.R.G. Murray, *From Oven Ready to Indigestible: The Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland*, in *The Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly*, vol. 75, n. S2, 2022, pp. 8-36.

Sinn Féin rode the crest of this wave. A majority of voters in Northern Ireland had rejected Brexit, and amid the rolling uncertainty of the aftermath of the 2016 referendum and the persistent challenges of making Brexit workable, Sinn Féin could now make the increasingly effective offer of reunification bringing Northern Ireland back into the EU to woo voters who were hitherto unaligned on the issue of Northern Ireland's constitutional future. It also helped that Sinn Féin simultaneously refreshed its leadership team. Gone were Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, both of whom being indelibly associated with the conflict in the minds of many voters, and in their place came Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O'Neill, who did not carry the same associations.

The appeal of Sinn Féin's post-Brexit pitch to voters was heightened by gradually shifting demographics in Northern Ireland. The typically-unionist voting Protestant population is declining, and the typically-nationalist voting Catholic population increasing[13]. With the increasing fragmentation in the unionist vote as a result of recriminations over the mishandling of Brexit and this aging and declining population of voters who would have likely traditionally identified as unionist, Sinn Féin was able to become Northern Ireland's largest party at all levels of government by 2024. On the other side of the border the political parties which had dominated Ireland's governance since independence, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, had become discredited in the eyes of many voters for their roles in the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent imposition of austerity governance respectively. In the 2020 general election Sinn Féin capitalised upon this discontent to achieve the largest vote share of any party.

After the 2020 general election Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, parties which had historically defined themselves against each in a split connected to their respective approaches to the terms of Ireland's independence, chose to enter a coalition to stave off the prospect of Sinn Féin entering government. Leading figures in both parties have publicly expressed their disdain for Sinn Féin's politics and their doubts over its post-1998 commitment to democratic politics. These shared concerns that a *«smell of Sulphur and cordite»*[14] lingers around Sinn Féin generated the necessary pressure to create this firewall against it entering government, akin to the *brandmauer* within German politics which the major parties established to exclude The Left Party and Alternative for Germany. There was, however, always something quixotic in the senior figures in Ireland's establishment fulminating about Sinn Féin's connection to political violence whilst helping to put in place and sustain a governance system in Northern Ireland which obliges Unionists to share power with the party. The Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael coalition government has, perhaps more significantly, allowed Sinn Féin to assume the role of the major opposition party in national politics, and to cast itself as a government in waiting.

[13] See L. Cooley, *Census politics in Northern Ireland from the Good Friday Agreement to Brexit: Beyond the 'sectarian headcount'?*, in *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 23, n. 3, 2021, pp. 451-470.
[14] B. Feeney, *Surviving the split: Sinn Féin's long road to independence from the IRA*, in *The Observer*, 24 April 2022.

The Challenge Intensifies

Brexit, for Sinn Féin, was like landing on a ladder in *Snakes and Ladders*; suddenly the journey time towards reunification seemed to have dramatically decreased and its policy platform was making an impact in Irish politics as never before. This prominence, of both the party and its agenda, was nonetheless accompanied by new challenges. Some of these challenges relate to party organisation. Its breakthrough with the electorate in Ireland was so unexpected that it did not run enough candidates in 2020 to capitalise on its vote share, and the party thus did not *«reap the full benefit of its vote»*[15]. Since that election, moreover, the party has been plagued by scandals relating to a number of its representatives; vetting and party management processes had not been adequate to the task in the context of its sudden electoral breakthrough.

These issues are compounded by the transition which has been required in many of its policies, with Conor Kelly identifying two areas as being particularly challenging for the party. Sinn Féin was, and is, a party focused on achieving national sovereignty over the island of Ireland. This, historically, had brought with it a deep scepticism towards the EU. Nonetheless, in defining itself against Brexit, the *«party has noticeably softened its approach to European issues»*[16]. Second, as they were during the Brexit debate within the UK, issues of immigration policy have become intertwined with questions about the restrictions placed upon states by EU membership in this regard. As a result, an *«emerging threat for Sinn Féin ... appears to be the increased prominence of debates around Ireland's intake of migrants and asylum seekers»*[17]. As a party which has developed deep connections with revolutionary struggles elsewhere in the world from the 1970s onwards, it thus has an internationalist outlook at odds with the overt racism of many anti-immigrant groups, and many of its core supporters would not tolerate a direct pivot towards policies which would indulge such groups[18]. Many establishment figures, happy to laud the absence of a major far-right presence in Ireland's politics, at least prior to the widespread disturbances of 2024, would refuse to acknowledge that Sinn Féin has long occupied such a prominent anti-establishment place in Irish politics as to stymie the development of far-right parties and relegate them to the political margins[19]. But, for Sinn Féin's purposes, these shifts now place it in a policy trap. The anti-EU and anti-immigration policies which have propelled far-right populist parties into the political mainstream across Europe are not open to it. Whereas it once seemed like a radical alternative for disaffected sections of voters, there is now much less to differentiate it from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael on certain significant issues.

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[15] A. Moore, *The Long Game: Inside Sinn Féin*, London, Penguin, 2023, p. 267.
[16] C.J. Kelly, *The Multilevel Implications of a Sinn Féin Government in Ireland*, in *The Political Quarterly*, Advanced Access, 2024, pp. 1-7, 6.
[17] Ibid., 2.
[18] It is worth noting that there is a prominent strain of rhetoric from the era of the conflict, such as Gerry Adams' proclamations that *«[w]e want Ireland for the Irish»*, which for a long time played to nativist audiences; G. Adams, *The Politics of Irish Freedom*, Dingle, Brandon, 1986, p. 167.
[19] For acknowledgment of this point, see F. O'Toole *Sinn Féin was the shock absorber of Irish politics. It's worn out*, in *The Irish Times*, 10 June 2024.

The more that Sinn Féin has come to threaten the place of these parties, moreover, the harder they have pushed back. In the context of Ireland's PR-STV electoral system, the 2020 formation of a coalition led by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, two parties which have traditionally opposed each other, improves the chances of each of these parties gaining transfer votes from each other's supporters, and thus buttresses their electoral position. The longer the period from the 1998 Agreement and IRA weapons decommissioning the harder it is for these parties to sustain a narrative that Sinn Féin is not a genuinely constitutional party with the electorate. But even if there is a growing section of Ireland's electorate which is not perturbed by talk of shadowy figures in Belfast pulling the strings, these claims still perform a function of suppressing transfers of votes to Sinn Féin. If they did not, the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael leadership might well have to confront what it is about their own stewardship of the country, at a time of exceptional headline economic figures, which sees such a large proportion of the electorate willing to vote for such an alternative to them.

A favourite attack line has become Sinn Féin's record in government in Northern Ireland. There are, undoubtedly, challenges and even absurdities to trying to run a cross-border party. As one frustrated party member recounted to Aoife Moore for her recent study of the party:

> *«Basically Sinn Féin in the South wants to [get] fluoride out of the water system and Sinn Féin in the North wants to [keep] fluoride in the water system, and we were two hours in [to the meeting] and I couldn't take it anymore»*[20].

Around issues such as reproductive rights, the party long struggled to calibrate a position which appealed to different voter bases on either side of the border, with efforts to strike a liberal tone ahead of the 2018 referendum in Ireland generating fears within the party that it would alienate what was regarded as a more conservative voter base in Northern Ireland. This becomes a pressing issue for the party, however, when it seeks to pursue a radical reform of public services and housing policy in its pitch to voters in Ireland. These are perceived to be a major point of distinction with the other major parties; Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have, *«through chronic neglect, allowed a housing crisis to reach catastrophic proportions»*[21]. In this policy area, where the record of the major parties is so weak, their response has been to attack Sinn Féin's record in Northern Ireland:

> *«Compare [the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael-led coalition record] with the last year in which there was a Sinn Féin housing minister in Northern Ireland … and there can be no doubt that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael housing ministers build more social housing than Sinn Féin ones, even adjusted for population»*[22].

There are multiple problems with this position. Parties in Northern Ireland's power sharing Executive enjoy limited freedom of action to promote favourite policies in the ministerial portfolios they hold, because of the nature of consociational governance. Devolution to Northern Ireland, moreover, provides for much more limited capacity to raise funds to

[20] Moore, n 11 above, p. 88.
[21] Ibid., p. 295.
[22] L. Varadkar, Dáil Éireann Debates, 18 April 2023, Speech 2.

support such projects than the Dublin government enjoys. It is a crude analogy, but an effective attack line.

The traditional major parties have also sought to co-opt some of Sinn Féin's language around reunification. Leo Varadkar, soon after stepping down as leader of Fine Gael, has been promoting active preparations for a reunification process. The coalition government's Shared Island initiative, promoted by Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin, channels an increasing amount of money into cross-border projects[23]. Sinn Féin might well be flattered by all of this overt imitation of its policy platform, but there are also key elements of the coalition's programme for government which have fallen by the wayside, most notably the pledge for a referendum to enable Irish citizens living outside the territory of the state to vote in presidential elections, a proposal which would most obviously affect the large numbers of Irish citizens living in Northern Ireland. In the context of Ireland's November 2024 general election, this again set a trap for Sinn Féin. The more Sinn Féin is seen by the electorate to be focused on the interests of Irish citizens living in Northern Ireland, by pushing on issues like this undelivered referendum, the less voters in the 26 counties would recognise that the party's focus really was on improving housing and public sector provision in Ireland. Ultimately the party could not build on its 2020 electoral performance; its first-preference vote share slumped in the 2024 election and although it saw a comparable number of representatives elected, it looks set to be locked out of government by a renewed Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael coalition. This electoral setback, however, does not necessarily derail a reunification project which will continue to be constructed over the next decade.

The Realities of Reunification

If the 1998 Agreement pushed the question of Northern Ireland's constitutional status into the future, to allow time for society to recover from the conflict, Brexit brought all of these discussions back to the forefront of the political agenda much earlier than might otherwise have been expected. Unionist parties are no longer dominant in Northern Ireland, but that does not mean that there is yet majority support for reunification. Even though support for maintaining the Union dropped below 50 percent for the first time in polling in the Autumn of 2024, support for reunification stands at just under 34 percent. This latter figure has steadily ticked upwards in recent years, but voters who are either undecided or do not want to commit to such a binary constitutional divide hold the balance. In these circumstances, even if Sinn Féin did enter government in both Ireland and Northern Ireland *«it would not fundamentally change the demographic and political realities of Northern Ireland's divided politics»*[24]. Given the current trends, however, it would provide an additional impetus towards preparing for a vote.

Sinn Féin's approach to such a potential opportunity has been to promote a citizens' assembly to tackle the issues posed by reunification. This addresses the party's need to be

[23] N. Richmond, *Towards a new Ireland*, in *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 94, n. 1, 2023, pp. 115-121.
[24] Kelly, n 12 above, 3.

seen to set the agenda on reunification, but also tacitly recognises that the time is not yet ripe for reunification referendums, even if it publicly couches this multi-phase approach as providing for a necessary planning period. Such assemblies have become a regular part of Ireland's constitutional apparatus, intended to provide a deliberative forum for addressing potential issues for constitutional reform and thereby shaping both the terms of reform proposals and public discourse around them[25]. The challenge, however, is *«how to link together different forms of popular participation, deliberation and policy making across states and borders»*[26]. Even if these processes could be initiated in Ireland, it would be much more difficult to organize them on an official basis in Northern Ireland given the cross-community veto under power-sharing arrangements. Moreover, notwithstanding Sinn Féin's eagerness to proceed with such deliberative planning processes, and to influence the initiation of such proposals by the Irish Government, such processes are more likely to have broader buy-in if they are not seen to be managed by Sinn Féin.

There is a second, substantive, challenge for Sinn Féin in this process towards reunification advancing apace. At the moment, what is meant by reunification is very much in the eyes of the beholder. Some regard it as a process by which Northern Ireland is subsumed into Ireland, with some minor resultant adjustments to Ireland's governance order, whereas others foresee a much more far-reaching process by which a new governance order is formed. A broad spectrum of possible outcomes is thus encompassed by reunification, and for as long as the concept is nebulous, it can be packaged to appeal to different audiences and maximise support for the concept of reunification. As soon as preparations start to pin down what the post-reunification polity might look like, notional support for reunification might become more difficult to maintain. Changes to the flag and national anthem of a reunified country might bring some people onboard with the idea of reunification, but might alienate others who want to see no such changes to the existing paraphernalia of Ireland as a state. A moment of decision will inevitably come at which the people of Ireland and the people of Northern Ireland will need to be able *«to make an informed choice on the polity's future, accepting or rejecting developed (re)unification arrangements which are offered to them»*[27]. But, first, the nature of the reunification on offer to them will have to be developed.

Although Sinn Féin has acknowledged that a broad range of issues would have to be on the table in reunification planning, it has consistently sought to avoid becoming tied down on the compromises and adjustments reunification might entail. In the words of Mary Lou McDonald, *«The single biggest issue that unionists in particular raise with me is not about flags and emblems or identity, important as they are, it's actually around the health services»*[28]. This position,

[25] See D. Farrell, J. Suiter, *Reimagining democracy: Lessons in deliberative democracy from the Irish front line*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2021.
[26] J. Todd, J. McEvoy, (2024). *Obstacles to constitutional participation: Lessons from diverse voices in post-Brexit Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland*, in *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 26, n. 1, pp. 170-186, 181.
[27] C.R.G. Murray, A. O'Donoghue, *Unity in diversity? Constitutional identities, deliberative processes and a 'Border Poll' in Ireland*, in *King's Law Journal*, vol. 34, n. 2, 2023, pp. 340-368, 363-364.
[28] F. McClements, K. Holland, Mary Lou McDonald expects vote on Irish unity 'this decade', in *The Irish Times*, 4 February 2024.

in attempting to sidestep some of these debates, flags up the other pressing challenge for Sinn Féin. It needs to enter government in Dublin to shift the public sector model, on key issues like health, to one more like that operating in Northern Ireland. This would make reunification look less unsettling for many voters in Northern Ireland, and boost the prospects of a reunification vote. The party's constitutional and public service agendas are intertwined. As a result of these complexities, the process of constructing an account of what a reunified Ireland would look like is thus likely to take time, which provides a window for Sinn Féin to effect public sector change in Ireland if it can gain office.

It is worth noting, notwithstanding the complexities of reunification planning, how prosaic some of the constitutional issues around reunification have become. When these issues were contemplated in the 1980s, for example, commentators pointed to the pronounced differences between the ethos of Ireland and Northern Ireland as polities, and how this manifested in divergent legal regimes on social issues such as divorce[29]. In the intervening decades the polities have come to align much more closely on issues from divorce, to gay rights and reproductive rights. The era of sharp divisions between the character of a *«Catholic State»* and a *«Protestant State»*[30] on the island of Ireland has passed. Substantive differences, over neutrality and NATO membership, are more remote from the day-to-day lives of people than earlier distinctions between the character of the polities. Next to these issues, discussions of flags and emblems might remain emotive, but they are more symbolic than substantive.

Conclusion

Before the 2024 general election in Ireland Sinn Féin was wracked by internal scandals and its electoral coalition frayed as, to its credit, it did not embrace the extreme anti-immigration agenda which other populist parties in Europe have adopted in pursuit of electoral success. It did not break through into government. Nonetheless, the story of Sinn Féin has been one of repeated reinvention. The party has successfully defined itself against the other major parties in Ireland and, in light of the weaknesses in their track record in government (particularly around public spending), it is not apparent that 2020 was Sinn Féin's electoral high-water mark. But even though its electoral progress has been blunted, Ireland's other parties have been obliged to recognise a reunification agenda as never before. Electoral performance, moreover, has always been a means to an end. In light of Sinn Féin's recent history of association with political violence there will be large sections of the electorate in both Ireland and Northern Ireland from whom it will struggle to gain votes. It will not, therefore, without a profound shift in its stance towards the Northern Ireland conflict, be able to advance the cause of reunification by itself. To do so, it will have to work as part of a coalition to provide a vision for reunification which can command majority support in both parts of the island. Time will tell if it is able to modul-

[29] See T. Hadden, K. Boyle, *Hopes and Fears for Hillsborough*, in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 75, n. 300, pp. 384-391, 386.
[30] C. Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland*, London, Hutchinson, 1972.

ate its vision of republicanism to fulfil this role. Not for the first time, Ourselves Alone will not translate into progress on Sinn Féin's most treasured goal.