



SIGHTS ON FIRST MINISTER POST: Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill. A border poll can only be called if it seems 'likely' a majority would vote in favour of Northern Ireland leaving the UK

O'Neill has not made convincing case for border poll

JUST a few weeks away from Scotland's parliamentary elections it seems certain that the SNP will remain – and comfortably so – the largest party. But that isn't going to be enough for Nicola Sturgeon.

She wants an overall SNP majority: Over 50 per cent of the votes cast and over 50 per cent of the MSPs elected.

She wants to be able to tell Boris Johnson – who has said he isn't minded to grant another referendum – "Look, Brexit has changed everything and a majority of people voting have backed the party that wants an independence referendum."

He's hoping that her ongoing spat with Alex Salmond (who, just to complicate matters, intends to contest the elections with his new party, Alba) will damage the SNP.

Not enough, probably, to provoke an electoral meltdown; but enough to deprive Sturgeon of her dual SNP majorities and weaken her demand for a second independence referendum.

Sinn Féin (unionists too, of course) will be watching Scotland very closely.

Northern Ireland's next election is due in the spring of 2022 and Sinn Féin also wants to send a message to Johnson.

They know they can't win an overall majority of the votes cast, or an overall majority of MLAs elected; but they have a reasonable chance of winning more seats and votes than the DUP, which entitles them to the role of first minister.

That would hurt the DUP, even if it remained the largest unionist party.

The assembly's overall unionist majority was lost in March 2017, under Arlene Foster's watch.

The reverberations of that result still ripple across and within unionism.

It was a psychological blow.

Michelle O'Neill as first minister would be an even greater blow.

Confirmation, if you like, that party political unionism had become the minority stakeholder at the centre of

Alex KANE



local government.

But that still wouldn't be enough for Sinn Féin. A border poll can only be called if it seems 'likely' a majority would vote in favour of Northern Ireland leaving the UK. Nationalism (SF and the SDLP) winning a majority of assembly seats – 46 – would be, along with the title of first minister, another significant political/psychological victory.

But at the moment SF/SDLP have only 39 MLAs and 40 per cent of the vote.

Barring a miracle – and I don't believe in miracles – I don't see how their combined seat/vote tally is raised to 46 and 50.1 per cent.

So, while an increase is possible, it isn't going to be enough to make a convincing argument for a border poll.

And even if the next assembly election doesn't produce a unionist majority, SF can't

simply top up the non-unionist seats and cite that as an argument for a border poll: not least because Alliance and the Greens are, to the best of my knowledge, agnostic on the constitutional question.

My present reading of the word 'likely' in the GFA and subsequent legislation is that both the British and Irish governments would be looking for hard evidence of a 'united Ireland majority'.

A combined nationalist vote of around 40 per cent in council, assembly or general elections isn't hard evidence of such a majority.

If Alliance declared itself in favour of Irish unity and still won around 15 per cent of the vote at the assembly election, that would be viewed as hard evidence.

But Alliance isn't going to do that.

As a caveat, I would say that the word 'likely' is deliberately vague: so vague, in fact, that both governments could easily reach their own understanding of what it means, and when it suited their joint interests.

Writing in Monday's Irish News, Michelle O'Neill said: "The British secretary of state has a legal duty to hold a referendum. And it is clear that society in the north is moving and the people's views on the constitutional position of the north are changing. [It's] time for the SoS to announce the intention to hold a referendum..."

She may have a point about people's views changing, but in the absence of clear, hard, unambiguous electoral evidence demonstrating a substantial growth in the overall nationalist vote I'm not persuaded she has made a convincing case for a border poll just yet.

None of this means unionists should breathe easy and not prepare for a poll at some point in the next decade (always remembering that anything is possible with someone like Boris Johnson). Proceed on the basis it is more likely than not by 2030; but be ready for it earlier than that, too.

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ON THIS DAY

April 9 1921

'Act of Cowards'

MR A C LEITCH, Coroner, Omagh held an inquest on Thursday in Dromore on the bodies of three young men, Daniel O'Doherty, Charles Slevin and John Devine who were taken from their homes the previous night and shot. Mr A E Donnelly and Mr John O'Hanrahan, solicitors, Omagh, appeared for the relatives and D I Gilhooley represented the Crown. After the jury had viewed the bodies, which presented a horrible sight, the Coroner said he was told that a party of armed men hauled them from their homes and shot them on the street. The idea of armed men entering a house and dragging defenceless men out to the street to shoot them was horrifying. It was only the act of cowards. In the case of Daniel O'Doherty, Mrs Sarah Breen, his sister gave evidence of identification and said that the deceased was unmarried and about 24 years of age. She last saw her brother alive the previous night and that morning she saw his dead body lying on the road a short distance from the village. Bernard Campbell, watch-maker and jeweller, Omagh identified the body of Charles Slevin (24), his brother-in-law. James McCanny, civil bill officer, identified the body of John Devine as his brother-in-law who was about 42. On Thursday evening the majority of the Catholic residents of Dromore went to the surrounding towns and district to reside with friends. A large body of Specials were drafted in.

Nationalist Electoral Pact

AN AGREEMENT has been ratified between the Nationalist and Republican parties in connection with the forthcoming election contest in the six NE Ulster counties and Belfast. It is signed on behalf of the United Irish League by Joseph Devlin and on behalf of Sinn Féin by Eamon de Valera and dated April 6, 1921.

Death of Irish Prelate

WE REGRET very deeply to announce the death of his Grace the Most Rev Dr William Walsh, Archbishop of Dublin and Prime of Ireland which took place yesterday at his palace, Drumcondra. Born in Dublin in 1841, he was appointed Archbishop of Dublin in 1885. For many years he was a consistent, though often critical, supporter of the National Movement. (As partition approached, Devlin and de Valera sought to unite the divided forces of Northern nationalism on a joint platform of abstentionism and Irish self-determination in the forthcoming PR elections. Sinn Féin nominated its leaders – de Valera, Collins and Griffith – for Northern seats while Devlin reported great difficulty in arousing any enthusiasm among his supporters. Archbishop Walsh's last intervention into politics in 1917 had been to attack the embattled Redmondites over partition.)

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