

SHIFTING POSITIONS: Labour leader Keir Starmer has now changed his mind and agreed with shadow secretary of state Louise Haigh that his party would be neutral during a border poll

Why should any party be neutral in the event of a border poll?



Alex KANE

THERE was surprise in some political circles in July when Labour leader Keir Starmer – during a visit to Northern Ireland – indicated he would not be neutral in the event of a border poll.

Speaking to BBC NI's political editor, Enda McClafferty, he said: "I respect the principle that the decision, in the end, is for the people of the island of Ireland. I personally, as leader of the Labour Party, believe in the United Kingdom strongly, and would want to make the case for a United Kingdom strongly and will be doing that."

When pushed by McClafferty that, in the event he was prime minister at the time a border poll was called, would he be 'very much on the side of unionists, arguing for Northern Ireland to remain in the UK', he replied: "I believe in the United Kingdom and I will make the case for a United Kingdom."

Sinn Féin's John Finucane accused Starmer of arguing a unionist position, of shifting Labour from a supposed policy of being 'a neutral broker on the north', and told him not to act as a barrier to 'national self-determination in Ireland'.

Yet four months later Starmer has now changed his mind and agreed with shadow secretary of state Louise Haigh that his party would be neutral during a border poll.

But why should Labour, or any other party, be neutral? There is no requirement in the Good Friday/Belfast agreement for it to be neutral: "…it is for the people of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively, and without external impediment, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, north and south, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish, accepting that this right must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland".

The key words there are "without external impediment", meaning that neither the UK nor Irish governments (or anyone else for that matter) should seek to prevent a border poll or refuse to implement the result.

There is no specific restriction, though, on UK national parties like the Conservatives, Labour or SDP supporting the pro-union case in such a poll.

There is no restriction, either, on the Scottish or Welsh nationalist parties campaigning for Irish unity. There is no restriction on campaigning groups in Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland being formed and taking a side.

The Irish government's position would certainly not be neutral. It would have to agree to the legislation to facilitate its own border poll on unity (since consent is required on both sides of the existing border) and, I presume, also make the official case for unity to its own electorate.

It would also have to set out positions to both nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland on a whole range of societal/political/constitutional/economic changes which would flow from unity: as well as making a specific pitch to unionists on how their interests would be protected if the poll resulted in the ending of the link with the UK.

In other words, an Irish government (which might well include or be led by Sinn Féin at the time) would pursue a pro-unity position in a border poll.

Sinn Féin (even if it were in an Irish government) would seek to influence voters in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. It would seek to win support from nationalists and a section of unionism in Northern Ireland. It would seek to win support from the SNP and Plaid Cmyru.

It would, almost certainly, set up pro-unity support groups across England, hoping they would put pressure on Labour and the SDP in particular. And it would probably receive huge funding from its 'friends in America' network.

Given all of that, why wouldn't a UK Prime Minister make a pitch for the union? Labour and the Conservatives have members in Northern Ireland. Alliance has a 'relationship' with the SDP. The pro-union lobby (which would be much broader than party-political unionism, of course) would want to build a pan-UK coalition to back Northern Ireland's continuing membership of the United Kingdom.

Senior members of the government at the time, along with senior members of the official opposition in Westminster, would be invited to Northern Ireland. The national UK media would take editorial decisions, many of which would be pro-union. Senior members of Irish parties, including the government, would come to Northern Ireland during a border poll campaign.

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ON THIS DAY

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Wilson's Unity Plan

THE text of Mr Harold Wilson's speech at Westminster yesterday, in which he told of his plan for a reunited Ireland, was being closely studied in Irish political circles. In Dublin the Taoiseach, Mr Jack Lynch, said he thought Mr Wilson's proposals were 'a serious contribution to finding a way forward'.

In his speech Mr Wilson said: 'Any settlement must be by agreement. But I believe the situation has now gone so far that it is impossible to conceive of an effective long-term solution in which the agenda does not at least include consideration of the aspiration envisaged half a century ago of progress towards a united Ireland. A substantial term of years will be required before any concept of unification can become a reality – but the dream must be there. If men of moderation have nothing to hope for, men of violence will have something to shoot for.'

Faulkner Lashes 'Paisleyism'

THE Rev Ian Paisley and his Democratic Unionist colleagues were lashed by Mr Brian Faulkner, the Stormont PM, as having been 'clearly exposed as a negative force'. Speaking in Saintfield, Mr Faulkner accused the DUP of being 'concerned to pull down rather than build up, and anxious to exploit every situation to the selfish advantage of its leaders, regardless of the interests of NI.' And he charged Mr Paisley and his colleagues with trying to overthrow Unionism and of having 'engaged in all sorts of irresponsible stunts'.

Scathingly, he referred to 'Paisleyism in its various forms – 'Protestant Unionist or so-called Democratic Unionist' - and said that originally it had tried to be an imitation party with the intention of imitating 'in order to dominate'. 'They are, for example, against internment which has proved to be such an effective weapon against the terrorists… Their latest threat is to undermine Stormont by withdrawing – perhaps to join the SDLP in the wilderness'. Every week brings some new stunt such as the wildly irresponsible scare story about impending Direct Rule.

Unionist Senator Criticised

THE Liam Mellows Republican Club in Strabane has strongly criticised recent statements of Senator Barnhill [Unionist] in the Senate. Senator Barnhill claimed that he was speaking for the majority in Strabane when he called for increased patrols of the British army in the area.

HAROLD Wilson's plan for a united Ireland within 15 years took the Unionist government by surprise though Sir Alec Douglas-Home, Deputy PM in the Tory government, privately favoured re-unification. Senator Jack Barnhill was assassinated by the Official IRA in December 1971. Meanwhile, Faulkner realised that Paisley's overriding aim was to destroy the Unionist Party and replace it.

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