

# There is no 'anti-English' sentiment in Ireland in the wake of Brexit

*There is no 'anti-English' sentiment in Ireland in the wake of Brexit. The success of Sinn Fein in the recent Irish general election was built on a deep-seated public dissatisfaction with the quality of social provision in health, housing, childcare and other 'quality of life' issues at a time of a booming economy. The party's traditional nationalism is certainly an issue of concern, but it played simply no role in its electoral success, writes Ben Tonra (University College Dublin).*

The curse of social science can be our pursuit of comparability. Every event of political significance must be immediately labelled. We reach unhesitatingly for well-established concepts that are within easy reach and which allow us to pop such events into its appropriate conceptual box. When you marry that overwhelming impulse with limited empirical knowledge and the need to publish something – anything – in short order, you get the kind of article published in *The Atlantic* on Ireland's recent parliamentary elections.

The cardinal error of the article is to assert that Sinn Fein's rise owes anything to a 'nationalist moment.' Not a scintilla of hard evidence is proffered to sustain the claim – largely because none exists – simply the assertion that Brexit has fomented 'anti-English' sentiment. The only informed analysis provided – by a fellow political scientists at Dublin City University and Technological University Dublin – underline the wholly marginal role nationalism played in the election. Yet that does not restrain an analysis which quantifies nationalist moments in the heretofore unknown measurement unit of 'upticks'.

Brexit has been widely viewed in Ireland as a lamentable lapse of British (more particularly English) political and economic judgement which has the potential to impose serious and deleterious costs on the Irish economy and, much more dangerously, to threaten a fragile peace project on the island. That anxiety, however, was immediately translated into political agency as the state successfully marshalled the support of its 26 EU partners in defence of maintaining an open border on the island of Ireland. Tensions there were, moments of high drama too. But at no stage was 'anti-English' sentiment evident anywhere across the mainstream political spectrum – including Sinn Fein. Schadenfreude there was, frustration certainly and plenty of abject amazement. There was also on occasion real irritation as senior British Conservative politicians first dismissed and later traduced the concerns of border communities at the prospect of a reinforced border. Resentment too when many of the same politicians proposed 'solutions' for the border which had no basis in reality. At no time, however, was that anger directed at the 'English' or the UK per se – where many politicians and parties were stalwart advocates for Irish concerns.



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For its part, Ireland's diplomatic success created a frenzy of British tabloid vitriol fed from some quarters in the Conservative Party. Ireland was – at one and the same time – an unthinking pawn of Brussels determination to punish Britain for Brexit while also being a bitter nest of unreconstructed nationalists outbidding one another to leverage Brussels in pursuit of revanchist goals. The thought that a small state might successfully engage its EU partners in a shared endeavour to defend peace on the island could not apparently be accommodated in their mental universe.

Sinn Féin has very successfully (and much to its own surprise) capitalised on deep-seated public dissatisfaction with the quality of social provision in health, housing, childcare and other 'quality of life' issues at a time of a booming economy. That success was enabled by a conservative two-party duopoly (Fianna Fail and Fine Gael) seen as unresponsive to addressing those needs. Sinn Féin's traditional nationalism is certainly an issue of concern – not least the impact any role for it in government may have on bilateral British-Irish relations; but it played simply no role in its electoral success. Indeed, both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael sought to stem the Sinn Féin tide late in the campaign precisely by referencing its past – with little evident success. For good or ill, the electorate, or at least a solid 25 percent of it, paid little or no attention to Sinn Féin's nationalism. As copious poll data shows, voters were instead mesmerised by the prospect of real and substantial social change. In a large exit poll conducted on behalf of the national broadcaster and University College Dublin, what might be described as 'nationalist issues' did not even register. Immigration and Brexit itself, the closest possible proxies for nationalism, animated a grand total of 1 percent of voters. A 'nationalist moment' it most certainly was not.

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