

Are the DUP for turning? When the Union is perceived to be at risk, all options are on the table

*The UK government's latest attempt to push a deal through Parliament failed when the DUP withdrew support. **Mary C. Murphy** explains the DUP's thinking and options. She writes that, while they can continue to pursue a strategy which is focused on revising the deal to their satisfaction, it is also possible that they could change tack completely and re-align their position in favour of the UK remaining in the EU.*



DUP leader, Arlene Foster. Picture: [DUP photos](#) under a [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#) licence.

Notoriously insecure about Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom, the Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) sense of betrayal following agreement on the latest Brexit plan was palpable and revenge was swift. The party's support for the Letwin amendment during Saturday's House of Commons sitting has bought the party some time to consider its options. The choices facing the DUP, however, are highly limited and politically difficult.

Where other political parties can be readily situated on the left-right spectrum, Northern Ireland's DUP defies neat categorisation using this measure. Instead, the party is best understood in terms of its position on the constitutional question. To put it bluntly, the party is defined by its support for Northern Ireland remaining a part of the United Kingdom. It is a party position which is rigid *in extremis*. Every other aspect of the political sphere is secondary to the DUP's overriding goal of protecting the UK's constitutional status quo. And in pursuit of this objective, other DUP policy positions are invariably malleable.

In 2016, the DUP chose to support a vote in favour of the UK leaving the European Union. This position was linked to the party's traditional opposition to the EU. However, it was also [influenced by pan-nationalist support](#) for the Remain position as expressed by the Irish government and nationalist political parties on the island of Ireland. A case of 'if they're for it, we're agin it'.

The Remain position adopted by Irish nationalists however, was a political position reflecting (for the most part) long-held, principled support for the EU. It was motivated by a desire to see Northern Ireland remain aligned with the Republic of Ireland through continued shared membership of the EU. It was ostensibly about maintaining the constitutional status quo. It was not a surreptitious nationalist constitutional trap or trick. It was [not a sneaky bid to engineer a united Ireland](#).

As Brexit has unfolded, unionism's ingrained siege mentality has led them to misinterpret what were, in effect, innocuous and constitutionally benign formulas for dealing with the Northern Ireland quandry. Prime Minister Johnson's latest attempt to push a deal through Westminster stalled when the DUP supported the Letwin amendment. The party's objection hinges on an interpretation of the deal which equates it with a broader united Ireland agenda. Viewed through this [unionist prism](#), the current version of the UK-EU withdrawal formula weakens Northern Ireland's union with Britain.

In responding to this perceived threat, the party confronts difficult strategic choices. Firstly, they can continue to pursue a strategy which is focused on revising or clarifying the deal to their satisfaction. Or secondly, they change tack completely and re-align the party position in favour of the UK remaining in the EU.

Both choices are politically tricky. Any further revision of the Withdrawal Agreement is highly unlikely. The EU barely has an appetite for a Brexit extension, never mind re-opening negotiations. The UK government cannot unilaterally alter the text of the Withdrawal Agreement, but it can perhaps provide looser non-legally binding domestic clarifications and guarantees which may satisfy unionists. The loss of trust between the DUP and the British government, coupled with a lack of time, suggest that this option is highly problematic.

Secondly, the more radical option is for the DUP to support a second referendum and shift from supporting Leave to supporting Remain. A Brexit realignment of this magnitude would be quite the political u-turn and a dramatic party policy reversal. Given its political riskiness, it is clearly an option of last resort – but it is one the DUP is capable of deploying, if all else fails in the party's attempts to secure the Union through changes to the Withdrawal Agreement. If a DUP policy u-turn can be sold as the *only possible means* of meeting the party's overriding objective to safeguard Northern Ireland's place in the UK, then it is a position which is politically credible and ultimately sellable to the unionist electorate.

In the event of a DUP volte-face, hard Brexiteers will decry the 'betrayal' and some of the party's pro-Brexit supporters in Northern Ireland may feel duped. The party however, will be able to withstand the backlash because a cross-community majority in Northern Ireland (which voted in favour of Remain) will ultimately welcome the DUP's re-positioning. And crucially this will include [key business and farming interests](#) which form part of the party's own constituency and which had previously supported the backstop.

As the UK's Brexit theatre plays out, a late dramatic twist is possible. When the DUP's 'precious union' is perceived to be at risk, all options are on the table, even the most unlikely.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published on the [LSE British Politics and Policy blog](#).

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