

# Far from having viewed Brexit as an opportunity for constitutional transformation, Sinn Féin has instead viewed it as a threat to be managed



[Jonathan Evershed](#) and [Mary C. Murphy](#) examine how Sinn Féin responded to Brexit. They argue that its pursuit of ‘Special Status’ for Northern Ireland represented an attempt to mitigate Brexit’s risks, rather than to leverage its opportunities. This approach came with political costs for the party, whose recent electoral surge has arguably been in spite of rather than because of it.

On 31 January 2020, during a [speech](#) to the Institute of International and European Affairs in Dublin, Sinn Féin Party President, Mary Lou McDonald, described Brexit as the ‘opportunity of a lifetime’ to complete the Republican project of Irish (re)unification. The speech came in the midst of a dramatic and transformative general election campaign, which would eventually see Sinn Féin returned to the Dáil with 37 members of parliament – just one less than the largest party, Fianna Fáil – and, for the first time, the highest share of first preference votes in an [Irish general election](#).

Sinn Féin is now the lead party of opposition in the Republic of Ireland, and it is a [prevailing assumption](#) within and beyond Leinster House that it will enter government following the next general election, to be held no later than 2025. It is already a party of government in Northern Ireland. And with the DUP floundering following the denouement of its confidence and supply relationship with the [Conservative Party](#) and the imposition of a new ‘border’ in the Irish Sea, [current polling](#) suggests that Sinn Féin could well be returned as the largest party in the Assembly when Northern Irish voters go to the polls next year. Concurrently, in the wake of Brexit, support for Irish unity is polling at all-time highs in Northern Ireland (albeit that such polls must always be taken with a [pinch of salt](#), and that across them, Northern Ireland’s remaining part of the UK emerges more-or-less consistently as the preference of a majority).

Including by destabilising the [UK’s territorial constitution](#), Brexit has presaged a step-change in the tempo and tenor of discussions about a referendum on Irish unity, which the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is mandated by the Good Friday Agreement to call if it appears likely that a majority in Northern Ireland is liable to favour unification. The new urgency of these constitutional conversations has given rise to a number of recent [academic projects](#), which have sought to bring a degree of clarity to what is at stake in any post-Brexit ‘border poll’. To put it plainly, Brexit has made a united Ireland – though far from inevitable, and, according to some polls, only at the margins – an increasingly immediate and concrete proposition. As the form that Brexit has (both potentially and actually) taken since 2016 has increasingly hardened, this has become [ever more the case](#).

On the face of it, despite Sinn Féin’s having campaigned against Brexit, it has nonetheless left the party in a position of political strength unprecedented in its history, and its primary policy goal of Irish unity closer than at any time since Ireland was partitioned 100 years ago. Indeed, some of its most vocal critics have, sometimes to the [point of farce](#), sought to characterise Sinn Féin as having actually favoured and even pursued a hard or [no-deal Brexit](#). That ‘[England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity](#)’ is certainly a long-running rhetorical trend in Irish Republican politics, and there is [some suggestion](#) that this may have had a degree of influence on the vigour of Sinn Féin’s campaign and the voting behaviour of its supporters during the Brexit referendum in 2016.

However, far from having viewed Brexit as a wedge issue, to be leveraged in the pursuit of constitutional transformation, [we have found](#) that it has instead been overwhelmingly viewed within Sinn Féin as a threat to be managed. Especially in its potential to disrupt the openness of the [Irish border](#), Brexit has represented grave political, economic, social and existential risks, which have been most acutely felt by nationalist voters in sections of Sinn Féin’s core constituency, including in the border counties and multiply deprived communities in Belfast and Derry. Throughout the Brexit process between 2016 and 2019, the party was principally concerned with contesting Brexit policy rather than with using Brexit as an opportunity for [polity contestation](#). As one former Sinn Féin MLA neatly summarised:

We are in this dilemma that actually the harder Brexit is, I suspect, the more support there will be for a United Ireland. But *despite* that, we are trying to mitigate or ameliorate the worst aspects of Brexit.

Sinn Féin's approach on Brexit has been framed by its policy of '[Designated Special Status within the EU](#)' for the North of Ireland, which it sought to promote in Brussels through a 'diplomatic offensive', spear-headed by then MEP for Northern Ireland, Martina Anderson. Anderson was an effective spokesperson, and several of Sinn Féin's key Brexit priorities were indeed upheld by the EU. But this was primarily owed to a wider Irish effort, [led by the Irish government](#), into which Sinn Féin's approach was largely subsumed. Indeed, Sinn Féin's policy of Special Status was only minimally distinct from the approach on Brexit adopted by both the Fine Gael-led government the Fianna Fáil opposition in the South, and it diverged little from the policies of the SDLP and Alliance Party in the North. Pulling on what one Sinn Féin member of parliament described as the 'green jersey', the party largely '[rallied to the flag](#)' on Brexit, with electoral costs across a series of difficult elections in 2018 and 2019.

Critically, and despite claims to the contrary by Sinn Féin's political opponents, Special Status was a blueprint for protecting the political-legal *status quo* rather than a plan to accelerate processes of constitutional change. It was a strategy for managing and mitigating risk, rather than for hastening Irish unity at all costs and by any means necessary.

In the final analysis, Brexit has posed more problems than it has represented opportunities for Sinn Féin, and it is ultimately unclear that the party has benefited from it *per se*. The new-found and unprecedented strength of the party's current position owes much to the weaknesses and tactical mistakes of other political actors (particularly in the DUP), and of decidedly non-Brexit-related domestic political factors, which includes an ongoing housing crisis in the Republic of Ireland. And it comes with its own [political risks](#). On the cusp of holding office on both sides of the Irish border, Sinn Féin continues to face a number of tough [organisational challenges](#), strategic decisions and policy compromises.

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## About the Author

This blog draws on the authors' [published work](#) in the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*.



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