

Political turmoil again in Northern Ireland, but not as we know it: understanding the dynamics of the 2022 election



[Clare Rice](#) discusses a number of factors which have served to produce an all too familiar yet entirely unusual set of circumstances ahead of the impending election in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland is back in the midst of a political crisis. With the [resignation](#) of First Minister, Paul Givan, on 3 February on the direction of his party leader, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, the power-sharing Executive has effectively been collapsed, and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) is at the centre of the storm.

The road that led to this point is a complex and nuanced one, with [multiple factors](#) meshing in building towards it. It was a step that Donaldson had been [warning](#) was on the agenda since his election as leader in June 2021, to a point where he was facing [ridicule](#) for not following through on the threats. With an Assembly election due to happen within less than a year, the task that lay ahead for Donaldson as leader was unenviable: steady and reunify the DUP; stymie electoral flows towards the TUV, UUP, and Alliance Party; and tackle the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Following Givan's resignation, the DUP tweeted a [graphic](#) with the caption 'Enough is enough' and five reasons for the decision, summarising the content of Donaldson's [speech](#) which was entitled 'Restoring Fairness'. They represent a series of frustrations – with other political parties (Sinn Féin in particular), with the Northern Ireland Protocol, and with perceived attitudes towards Unionism and unionists.

On the one hand, the reasons cited by the party for the resignation read like a list of ways in which the party is differentiated from the others, both in terms of what it represents and its place in the political spectrum. With an election pending, this is unsurprising, and a clear attempt to position the party ahead of it. While electoral competition for unionist voters is pertinent, it is especially so in light of election results and opinion polls which point towards the potential for Sinn Féin to overtake the party in size in May and take the role of First Minister. Part of the focus on Sinn Féin is an indirect attempt to encourage a consolidation of the unionist vote in a fractured field through projection of such a scenario as being detrimental to the community's collective interest.

On the other hand, the reasons are also ambiguous in failing to present a clear basis upon which post-election discussions on a return to power-sharing could be conducted. The election will be an opportunity for the DUP to test public support for their position and their gamble with collapsing the Executive. With the party having taken the step to remove the First Minister from post, there is little reason to expect that it would nominate to the post after an election. Donaldson himself has [cited](#) the potential challenge of doing so. With dialogue and negotiation the only routes to overcoming such a situation, it is unclear at this point what these would need to achieve as a base level for the party to return.

This uncertainty is unsurprising given that the primary factor for the First Minister's resignation is the Northern Ireland Protocol, something which rests beyond the parameters of what can be achieved through any talks between the local political parties. Part of the rationale behind the resignation was that it would be an act of protest at the Protocol that would jolt the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss (who is tasked with leading negotiations with the EU), to take heed of the party's demands. It has been evident for some time that the position of the UK is one of trying to find [consensus](#) with the EU, and this is at odds with the extent of what is being sought by the DUP. Effectively, if the EU and UK cannot reach agreement on the operational aspects of the Protocol that is sufficiently different enough for the party to be able to claim or sell it as a win, Northern Ireland has the potential to be caught in limbo indefinitely.

For the DUP, there is no way it can back down from this position without appearing to be weakened and teeing itself up for even greater electoral challenges in the time ahead. This stance will only be exacerbated should there be a Sinn Féin First Minister – a position that is held jointly with the deputy First Minister and holds no difference in the functions or duties involved – given the emphasis being placed on this as a point of concern presently.

However, the resignation has not sent the shockwaves through Westminster that have been previously seen with political crises in Northern Ireland. Donaldson has himself [noted](#) this, calling for Johnson to pay attention to what is currently going on in Northern Ireland and to visit. With his own political turmoil to contend with, the Prime Minister is occupied with what is happening on his own doorstep.

The weight of the DUP's move has failed to land with the intended clout in this regard. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Brandon Lewis, was also notably absent in the aftermath, with his most significant contribution being to [confirm](#) that an early election would not be happening and that the planned date of 5 May would remain.

What has to be pondered as well is whether or not the timing is linked to the progress of legislation in Westminster relating to institutional stability in the event of a situation such as this arising again. The 'New Decade, New Approach' ([NDNA](#)) deal outlined steps to enable Northern Ireland's institutions to operate in a caretaker form following Executive collapse.

The legislation for this – the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) [Act 2022](#) – provides *inter alia* for an extension of the time that must pass following the resignation of the First or deputy First Minister before an election can be called by the Secretary of State to six weeks. Executive Ministers remain in post with limited powers during this time, and the Assembly is able to proceed with business that was already in progress at the time of resignation. Following an election, the new legislation also extends the window of time available for the appointment of a new First and deputy First Minister, in an effort to provide space for talks between parties where there are issues to be resolved.

Over two years after NDNA was agreed, this legislation was scheduled for completion on the 7 February. Former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Julian Smith, [noted](#) during this final stage that it was a question of coincidence that the inclusion of a clause to retrospectively apply the legislation had been added in the later stages of its progression. Regardless of the motivation, without it, Northern Ireland would otherwise be facing another indefinite stint back on the fringes of devolution in the wake of the resignation.

On the same day, the Speaker of the Assembly [shared](#) that all Executive legislation in motion should be able to be completed ahead of the institutions dissolving for the election. This, however, means that there is lingering uncertainty, and an increased likelihood, that Private Members Bills in progress will fall due to time constraints. There are expected to be a number of late and additional sittings in the coming weeks in order to get through the workload. While the Executive has collapsed, the Assembly can continue, meaning that governance will continue in a shadow form until the election.

However, the resignation means the Executive is no longer meeting and so cannot agree new policy or fulfil Executive actions. This denies a long-awaited [apology](#) for victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse, which was due to be delivered in March and was already postponed due to the 2017 collapse. Institutionally, Givan's resignation may not produce the same cliff-edge that was created in 2017, but the impact still remains severe.

For the DUP, there is an acute awareness of all these nuances at play and the timing of the decision to follow through on removing Givan from the Executive will have taken stock of this picture. There was little for the DUP to lose in taking this gamble.

Across the political spectrum, parties are already in campaign mode and the recent events will undoubtedly be at the forefront of conversations on the doorsteps. But so, also, will be issues including healthcare, increasing cost of living, education, COVID-19, dealing with the past – a long list of matters, all of which parties will also need to be able to address. The election will be an interesting one to watch for many reasons, but it will be what comes afterwards that will be the most crucial outworking of the current debacle.

Both extremes of the political spectrum are facing criticism for their inability to work together, and this is something that other parties appear to be tapping into in a way that wasn't possible before. Energised by multiple elections between 2017 and 2019 which saw a growth in turnout for other parties, and particularly the Alliance Party in the centre ground, the dynamics of the 2022 election are very different. For the DUP, which can no longer rely on the electorate voting along traditional sectarian lines to the same extent, this is new territory and one that is more likely to work against the party if it is not embraced in the longer term. This election will be the first real test at an Assembly level of how the traditional DUP approach to election strategy will map onto a changing playing field.

All of these factors have compounded to produce an all too familiar yet entirely unusual set of circumstances ahead of the impending election. It is a return to the political turmoil that we are familiar with in Northern Ireland, but not as we have seen or experienced it before.

About the Author



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