

Jeremy Corbyn's republican and socialist sympathies add even greater uncertainty into Northern Ireland politics

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Northern Ireland government is in crisis, with the resignation of the First Minister Peter Robinson potentially seeing the power-sharing agreement between republicans and unionists heading for collapse. **Neil Matthews**, **Christopher Raymond**, and **John Garry** place recent events in the context of Jeremy Corbyn's elevation to Labour leader, and argue that his status as being pro-republican, and a socialist add an even greater degree of uncertainty to recent events.*



Credit: [William Murphy](#), CC BY NC 2.0

That Stormont is on [the verge of collapse yet again](#) will surprise few – whether they have an intimate knowledge of politics in Northern Ireland or not. In addition to lingering divisions regarding the [Stormont House Agreement](#) reached in December 2014 that was partly designed to reach a consensus on the implementation of welfare reforms demanded by the Government at Westminster, much of the disagreements fuelling this latest crisis are firmly rooted in Northern Ireland's centuries-old conflict: the displaying of flags, the holding of parades, and how to deal with the past. Even the spark that set fire to this latest crisis – the [conclusion reached by the Police Service of Northern Ireland](#) that members of the IRA (who were [supposed to have disbanded](#) in 2005) were behind the murder of a former member in August – is deeply rooted in the longstanding tensions between the two communities.

What is perhaps most interesting – and with what may have the most wide-reaching consequences – during this latest period of crisis is what is taking place in Westminster. Since the [election of Jeremy Corbyn](#) as leader of the Labour Party, an entirely new dynamic has been thrown into the already complex Northern Irish fray. In addition to the clear move toward a more statist approach rooted in Labour's early socialist tradition, Corbyn has openly sympathised with nationalist concerns, generally (and the IRA, specifically), making his support visible not only during the height of the Troubles, but [very recently as well](#).

Corbyn's strident leftist leanings give hope to those holding out against implementing the welfare reform measures contained in the Stormont House Agreement. Both nationalist parties in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin and the SDLP, remain firmly opposed to this aspect of the agreement. Many suspect that [Sinn Féin's decision to withdraw their](#)

[support](#) of the accord was due to concerns regarding how the rolling out of cuts in Northern Ireland would be perceived in the Republic of Ireland. Because the party is competing in next year's Irish general election – in addition to next year's (scheduled) elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly – Sinn Féin's anti-austerity message in the south might have been undermined by the implementation of welfare cuts in the north. Whatever the actual levels of awareness and interest among the Irish electorate of political machinations across the border, the party is wary of the optics of appearing Janus-faced on austerity. Until Corbyn's election, Sinn Féin – and others opposing the cuts – had little in the way of support from a Labour Party seemingly resigned to the Government's welfare reform program. The fresh possibility of a Labour government firmly opposed to welfare cuts offers the chance (however remote) that continued opposition might outlive those seeking to implement it. This in turn, provides incentives to those opposed to the cuts to drag their heels all the more.

In that sense, Corbyn's election – and any succour it provides to Sinn Féin and the SDLP – could have a potentially detrimental impact on the current round of inter-party talks at Stormont. For this latest venture to be successful much depends on some common ground being established between parties on welfare reform – most crucially whether Sinn Féin and the DUP, the two biggest parties, can strike a deal. Sensing that Corbyn's election may pressure the Conservative government into a rethink on forcing austerity on the most volatile – and [public sector dependent](#) – corner of the United Kingdom, Sinn Féin could retreat to their trenches. With Stormont operating without an agreed budget and thus quickly running out of public finance, the next few weeks will be telling on this front.

Also, Corbyn's election has unionists sceptical, [if not fearful](#), that he and those in his administration might not be able and willing to serve as fair, bi-partisan negotiators in disputes such as those facing Stormont at present. As past attempts at deal-making in Northern Ireland have shown, much depends on the British government assuming and performing the role of neutral arbiter. Although much was made in the run-up to the 2015 general election of the possibility that the [DUP might serve as kingmaker](#) for either the Conservatives or Labour, Corbyn's presence has undoubtedly soured relations between the DUP and Labour's leadership. There is now an observable level of criticism being directed towards Labour from within unionist quarters. The DUP's leader in the House, Nigel Dodds, used Question Time [to decry support](#) shown by Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, for the [IRA's armed campaign](#). While McDonnell has since [apologised for his remarks](#), suspicion is still likely to linger amongst unionists. Should unionists lose trust and confidence in the Labour Party completely and permanently, it would make the resolution of future crises at Stormont all the more difficult. As yet, Corbyn – whose principles are many and long-standing – [has done little to distance himself](#) from his own previous stances on republican action in Northern Ireland.

What is becoming clear is that Corbyn's presence has already led to clearer divisions between the Conservatives and Labour over the future of the United Kingdom (or at least Northern Ireland's place in it), and these divisions may intensify further still. The Conservative Party's response to the past statements by Corbyn and McDonnell on Northern Ireland has been intriguing. Although (to date) expressed only via the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Theresa Villiers, [in the House of Commons last week](#), the partisan tinge of some of her statements – unchallenged by colleagues within the party – suggests the party are broadly in agreement. Pair this with last year's Scottish independence referendum and the fact that Cameron has [openly stated](#) that he does not want to be the Prime Minister on watch as the Kingdom dis-unites, and one can easily see a possible avenue for Northern Ireland to become a partisan issue.

Northern Ireland's fractious politics is typically kept at arm's length by British politicians, who become embroiled in it reluctantly and typically wearing a referee's jersey. Corbyn's accession to prime minister in waiting (and despite all the derisory comments about his electability, this is what leaders of the Opposition are) is a jolt to the system. His socialist and republican sympathies place him squarely in Sinn Féin's ideological space, upsetting wary unionist observers and adding even more uncertainty to the fragile mix that is Northern Ireland politics.

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