Northern Ireland: Remaining United

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Northern Ireland is a region of the United Kingdom, or UK, located on the Northeast part of the island of Ireland, neighbouring the Republic of Ireland. It is a divided state that went through a great deal of political turmoil based around what their national identity should be and what nation they should be a part of, the UK, the Republic of Ireland or an independent country. The citizens of Northern Ireland have a very distinct identity from the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland and as such, have developed their own culture.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, the culture of Northern Ireland is not so different from the rest of the UK that it is impossible or uncomfortable for them to stay. This essay argues that although they have a different culture from the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland should remain as part of the union because they receive sufficient political accommodations and because it is the politically practical wish of the citizens to do so.

The first reason why Northern Ireland should remain a part of the United Kingdom is because they have received political accommodations. These accommodations allow them to stay distinct and maintain some additional control whilst staying within the United Kingdom. Home Rule, set up in Ireland in the 1870’s is a policy where the Irish people elect officials to deal with issues that are the concern of only the Northern Irish people, such as British Absentee landlords.[[2]](#footnote-2) At the conception of Home Rule, although people liked it, they also did not wish to be fully independent from the UK.[[3]](#footnote-3) Having a British connection had many economic advantages such as increased trade options, and the region was offered military protection, making it safer as part of a larger nation as they have a small population and territory.[[4]](#footnote-4) Home Rule is a way of governing that is similar to Canadian provinces in that they have specific areas that they have sovereignty over and that the federal government cannot interfere with, while receiving the benefits of belonging to a larger nation.[[5]](#footnote-5) Home Rule continued to be controversial as time moved on as people in the south (which is now the Republic of Ireland) wanted more independence from the UK, whereas many people in the North did not see the need for the increased independence offered by the Home Rule policy.[[6]](#footnote-6) This splintering of ideas also occurred along religious lines with the minority Catholics wanting increased control of the Irish island with the Protestants wanting to be protected by the UK as the rest of the UK had a Protestant majority.

The second political accommodation that has been offered to Northern Ireland is a Unique system of citizenship. This system allows for people born in Northern Ireland to choose their citizenship.[[7]](#footnote-7) The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement recognizes “the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both”.[[8]](#footnote-8) This is a very unique system and is in place to allow people to identify with whichever nationality that they choose as well as the benefits associated with having each nationality.[[9]](#footnote-9) This system was created to appease the Nationalists, or those who wanted a United Ireland and are typically Catholic, and the Unionists, those who wanted Northern Ireland to stay in the United Kingdom and are typically Protestant.[[10]](#footnote-10) This system also allows them to individually choose a national identity.

Some people may argue that Northern Ireland should simply join up with the culturally similar Republic of Ireland as they would automatically receive Home Rule and Irish citizenship. This idea, however, does not acknowledge the Unionists. The Unionists in Northern Ireland are those who identify as British and wish to remain in the UK.[[11]](#footnote-11) The views of the Northern Irish people on their identity can be seen in a study that asked them which ethnic label they identified with; British, Irish or Northern Irish. The results were that 39.89% of them identified as British, 25.26% as Irish and 20.94% as Northern Irish.[[12]](#footnote-12) The rest of the percentages which were small parts of the population were people identifying as a mix of those or other national identities.[[13]](#footnote-13) This survey shows that the majority of people do not identify as Irish and therefore it is oversimplifying the matter by saying that they should join Ireland. In fact, the greatest number of people had some sort of connection with the current state of things. If Northern Ireland were to join with the Republic of Ireland, this is not only breaking the peaceful status quo, it is also not acknowledging the fact that Northern Ireland has a sub-national identity that is not the same as either country. Joining with a new country may stir up conflict and it may not allow them to remain as a politically protected minority group. This may be because Ireland may choose to continue to be a unitary political system and not allow the political protections that they currently enjoy.[[14]](#footnote-14) This also does not acknowledge the wants and opinions of the people.

The second reason why Northern Ireland should remain a part of the UK is that the political opinions of the people and the political turmoil would make it difficult to separate. The people of Northern Ireland, in a referendum, voted to remain in the UK and their wishes should be honoured. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, reached in Northern Ireland on the 10th of April 1998 outlined a new government in which the Unionists, or those who want to remain in the UK and the Nationalists, those who want Northern Ireland to be independent of the UK, could share in power and in the ruling of Northern Ireland.[[15]](#footnote-15) This agreement was given to the people in a referendum and they voted 71% in support of this agreement.[[16]](#footnote-16) One of the key tenets of this agreement is that it cannot be changed or disbanded without the support of the majority through a referendum.[[17]](#footnote-17) This means that in order for the status of Northern Ireland to change in any way the support of the majority must be behind it.

It also does not politically make sense for them to separate at this time as the ability to come to a consensus, however, would be quite difficult to do in the current political climate in Northern Ireland. This is because there are many viewpoints in Northern Ireland and their ability to govern is questionable as they have been without a government since January 9th, 2017.[[18]](#footnote-18) The devolution of government in Northern Ireland is caused by the inability of the largest Unionist party, the Democratic Unionist Party and the largest Nationalist party, Sinn Féin, to rule together in the joint office that the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement calls for.[[19]](#footnote-19) This ruling together also is a check on the more radical elements of the parties, particularly Sinn Féin. A second election was called but resulted in an even more divided assembly and Northern Ireland continues to not have a government as they were not able to reach a deal that allowed anyone to rule causing the country to be run by bureaucrats and the federal government.[[20]](#footnote-20) The federal government in the UK is able to act as a stabilising force when Northern Ireland is in political turmoil speaking to its importance. If a referendum on the Belfast/Good Friday agreement were to be called the country would be too divided to give a clear result and too divided to rule, regardless of the outcome. Calling a referendum now would likely create further tensions between the Unionists and Nationalists.

Those who want Northern Ireland to separate from the United Kingdom argue that Northern Ireland has not been given an independence referendum for a long time. During the European Union Referendum (Brexit), the people of Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU, whereas the overall UK voted to leave. In the UK, 51.9% of people voted to leave the EU.[[21]](#footnote-21) In Northern Ireland, 55.8% voted to remain in the EU.[[22]](#footnote-22) Some people argue that Northern Ireland should be offered another independence referendum as the results of the referendum were not consistent with the results of the UK as a whole, thus demonstrating a splintering of viewpoints and because leaving the EU is more difficult for Northern Ireland as it has the only land border in the UK. This is not a strong argument because of the closeness of the results of the referendum results throughout the UK. The difference between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK’s results was less than four percentage points, therefore, the referendum was a close percentage vote everywhere, rendering it not an effective measurement tool of public opinion.[[23]](#footnote-23) This referendum can also be taken as a warning against a Northern Irish independence referendum because of the controversy that it has stirred up. The EU referendum left few people happy and this result would likely be seen in an independence referendum. In a poll, the Northern Irish people said that they would vote 45% in favour of staying in the UK with 42% voting to leave and 13% being undecided.[[24]](#footnote-24) If a referendum were to happen, then the results would be swung by undecided voters and would leave over 40% of the population unhappy similar to the unhappiness felt after the EU referendum.[[25]](#footnote-25) This could stir up political tensions and could result in further conflict in Northern Ireland.[[26]](#footnote-26) This political instability is dangerous and it could be avoided by not doing a referendum.

In conclusion, Northern Ireland should remain as part of the United Kingdom. Being part of the union is not a burden on the Northern Irish people because they have been given political accommodations that allow them to maintain their unique identity. Leaving the union may jeopardize this protected identity. Although there are people that wish Northern Ireland to simply join up with the Republic of Ireland or to treat the EU referendum as a referendum on Northern Irish independence this should not occur. The people of Northern Ireland receive deals that are beneficial to them: are satisfied with the current state of things, and their identities are tied within this system. If they were to separate there would be too much political uncertainty and dissatisfaction with no clear political party with enough support ready to form a government. These arguments suggest that although Northern Ireland possesses its own identity it is still compatible with the identity of the rest of the UK. A country needs citizens that are content with the systems currently in place and this essay shows that these citizens are content, and it would be unjust to take that away from them.

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