Democracy in Northern Ireland Since the Good Friday Agreement: A Post-Brexit Reappraisal

La démocratie nord-irlandaise depuis l'Accord du Vendredi Saint: une analyse critique au lendemain du Brexit

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Introduction

Almost six years after the Brexit referendum, very few people would dispute the fact that Northern Ireland is currently undergoing its worst political crisis since the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was signed and ratified. In the wake of the results of the 2016 Brexit referendum, Northern Ireland has seen renewed communal tensions and quasi constant political instability. For the nationalist side, the results of the Brexit referendum and the referendum itself, were considered as an attack against the principle of consent enshrined in the GFA¹ whereas, for the Unionist camp, the decision to leave the EU was just a purely democratic decision made by the sovereign people of the United Kingdom. Conversely, once London had signed the Northern Irish Protocol with the EU,² a sudden reversal of attitudes and positions was visible. Amidst violent riots, the unionist bloc as a whole attacked the Protocol.³ They saw it as an undemocratic decision made by the UK government which undermined the Union and the GFA. For the Nationalist side, the Protocol was largely accepted as a necessary move to make Brexit compatible with the principle of consent as defined in the GFA. Since the Brexit referendum, local institutions have been suspended twice. The first suspension lasted three years after Martin McGuinness' resignation in January 2017. The second suspension took place when Paul Givan, the First Minister, resigned in early February 2022. As this paper is being written, his party, the DUP, the main unionist party, refuses to say if it will take part in the Executive should the May 2022 Assembly
election make Sinn Fein the first party in Northern Ireland, as some commentators expect.  

This paper argues that the UK’s decision to leave the EU or the implementation of the UK/EU Protocol on Northern Ireland are not the fundamental causes for such political deterioration. When Martin McGuinness resigned in January 2017, it was not over Brexit but over a purely internal Northern Irish question, i.e. Arlene Foster’s mismanagement of the RHI programme. This is symptomatic of the fact that, though Brexit was undeniably a political shock, the problems of post-Brexit Northern Ireland are not new in nature. The underlying causes which have led to the current crisis have been present since the peace process and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. To say this in other words, the post-Brexit post-Protocol crises in Northern Ireland result from various democratic weaknesses which have not been corrected since 1998. Although the GFA can legitimately be seen as a historic democratic breakthrough – the establishment of a new and agreed democratic order in Northern Ireland founded on the twin principles of cross-community consent and parity of esteem – it contains three crucial democratic weaknesses which have hindered a fully-fledged democratic transformation and stabilisation of Northern Irish society and politics. These deficits are identified and analysed in the three following sections. First, the peace process was partly justified by the promise of the dawning of a new European post-national post-sovereign democratic order, a promise which the Brexit referendum has dramatically proved wrong. Second, the establishment of consociational power-sharing democratic institutions within Northern Ireland has entrenched and consolidated the communal divide instead of bringing about the oft-promised cooperation between the two conflicting Northern Irish communities and their representative elites. Thirdly, as both the Northern Irish peace process and Brexit are examples of what can be called referendum democracy, questions on the democratic value of referendums in the post-GFA Northern Irish context necessarily emerge.

The lure of a new post-national and post-sovereign European democratic order

One of the main arguments used to justify the peace process, and later to justify the Remain vote, was that the European integration process could serve as a template for the peace process in Ireland. It was argued, by certain politicians and analysts, that since Europe was creating a new post-national and post-sovereign order, it could be used as a model to allow a positive transformation of the conflict and of communal identities in Northern Ireland. During the Peace Process, John Hume, one of the main architects of the GFA, a convinced Europeanist himself, systematically used such arguments to explain that globalisation and Europeanisation provided an opportunity for superseding old antagonisms as state sovereignty could now be disconnected from national identity and from exclusive territorial control. In many statements and writings, he repeated that European integration had made the nation-state obsolete. According to him, in the borderless Europe which was emerging at the time of the peace process, state and sub-state actors involved in the Northern Irish conflict had no other choice than to reframe their respective political and territorial projects.

This vision directly influenced certain parts of the GFA, more particularly Strands 2 and 3, which deal with intergovernmental relations (i.e. cross-border relations and
cooperation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland plus British-Irish relations). Strands 2 and 3 of the GFA were very much inspired by the various forms of multi-level governance networks which developed in the EU. They were part of a wider project aiming to de-territorialise both the way Ireland and the UK conceived their respective state sovereignty and the way Northern Irish communities defined themselves. Writing just after the signing of the GFA, philosopher Richard Kearney, who had worked with John Hume, produced a piece entitled “Beyond Sovereignty” in which he wrote:

The Council of Isles ultimately promises a network of interconnecting regional assemblies guaranteeing parity of esteem for cultural and political diversity. The challenge is surely to abandon our mutual reinforcing myths of superiority (largely British) and purity (largely Irish) and face our more mundane post-imperial, post-nationalist reality.

Such a post-national deconstruction of nationalism and of the nation-state, was founded on a very particular theoretical interpretation of the European integration process, namely constructivism. Constructivist theory developed in the eighties and nineties, originating mostly from Scandinavian countries. Even if major nuances exist within constructivism, it can be broadly defined as a theory which stresses how structures can help transform border conflicts by constructing and deconstructing individual and collective identities. For instance, certain analysts used the Northern Irish peace process to develop such a constructivist interpretation of the transformative influence of European integration. According to them, the peace process itself and, more especially, the SDLP’s Europeanised discourse on national identity showed that European integration induced “a long-term transformation of identity scripts, the reconstruction of identities [through] completely new discursive frameworks for constructing and expressing identities”. EU integration was represented as “an alternative frame for identity constructions in Northern Ireland to such an extent that cooperation with the other side, once unthinkable, became a reality”.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is now obvious that such theoretical and philosophical conceptions were wrong. What the Brexit referendum and the chaos it has caused have demonstrated so far, is that European integration did not deconstruct the sovereignty of the British state at all, nor has it deconstructed communal identities in Northern Ireland. Even if the European institutional environment was certainly helpful in the search for a negotiated peace agreement between the Irish and the British governments, in the UK, state sovereignty is still conceived and constitutionalised as the exclusive and monopolistic authority of the British state over the entire sovereign territory of the UK, understood as one single undifferentiated democratic unit. The rhetoric of the Leave campaign was itself obsessively focused on Europe’s infringements on the British state’s sovereignty and on taking back control, including democratic control, from Brussels. The Supreme Court’s Miller rulings confirmed that according to the British constitution, devolved parliaments have no say on reserved/excepted matters in which only London can exercise sovereignty for the entire UK. In spite of devolution and of the potential constitutional conflicts generated by the decision to leave the EU, the Supreme Court ruled that devolved parliaments, whatever the local results of the referendum were, had no constitutional right to oppose London’s sovereign decision. To quote Michael Keating, the Brexit referendum and the political havoc it caused in Northern Ireland show the dramatic resilience of “the
The same can be said of the two communal identities in Northern Ireland. Northern Irish Nationalist and Unionist communal identities have not been deconstructed by European integration. What the multiple post-Brexit and the post-Protocol crises have exposed is that the central problem for both communities to be solved has not changed since the very foundation of Northern Ireland: it is still the question of the Irish Border. It is still the conflict between those who favour reunification with the Irish Republic and those who favour the maintenance of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom. Though many have mocked the DUP for its very poor political tactics since Brexit, what is striking too is their unchanging claim that Northern Ireland should remain an equal and undifferentiated part of the UK’s democratic state. Northern Irish Unionists’ frustration with the Protocol has hinged on this very question, causing riots in the spring of 2021 and leading Unionists, from all partisan backgrounds, to challenge the legality of the Protocol in court.\(^7\) On the Northern Irish nationalist side, the initial opposition to the Brexit process was founded on a rejection of any form of hardening of the Irish Border which was assimilated to an illegitimate reassertion of exclusive British territorial sovereignty in Northern Ireland.\(^8\) The Brexit referendum itself, and its ongoing repercussions, prove that such post-nationalist philosophical and theoretical deconstruction on which the GFA was partly justified, were fundamentally mistaken. The Brexit referendum and the developments it has brought about are an obvious demonstration that the European institutional environment did not produce the post-national and post-sovereign borderless democratic order that some actors involved in the Northern Irish peace process had foreseen. Whatever changes the Good Friday Agreement did introduce, both within Northern Ireland and in intergovernmental relations, such changes cannot be understood as a process of post-sovereign and post-national democratic transformation. Traditional conceptions of democratic sovereignty and traditional communal identity scripts have proved extremely resilient: membership of the EU has not undone the sovereignty of the British state, nor has it undone the self-definitions of both Northern Irish communal groups.\(^9\)

The limitations of consociational democracy in Northern Ireland

A second component of post-GFA democracy in Northern Ireland which has hindered the democratic transformation of communal identities is the choice to establish consociational power-sharing institutions within Northern Ireland.

The philosophical premise of consociations is that ethno-communal identities are impossible or quasi-impossible to deconstruct. Therefore, instead of trying to undo these communal ties and allegiances in order to end conflict, consociationalists consider it to be far more preferable to work with them and around them. In the Northern Irish Assembly, parties register either as Nationalist, Unionist or other. Governmental coalitions between parties on both sides of the communal divide are mandatory. The parties representing each community can block or veto any bill if they consider it to be a threat to their sectional interest (petition of concern). Consociational
democracy is based on proportionality and by breaking with majoritarian democracy, it aims at limiting the capacity for one community to monopolize power at the expense of the other. Such a model of democracy pre-supposes that by institutionalising cooperation between representative elites from both communities, violence becomes unnecessary and cross-community consensus can gradually be forged through cooperation at the institutional level, which in turn could transform the whole society of Northern Ireland. The practical interest of such a model is that it does not require communities to change as a precondition to making peace. Political parties, and the communities they represent, are simply required to abandon violence in exchange for equal and proportional participation in power-sharing political institutions.  

On the positive side, it can be said that, in Northern Ireland, violence was globally abandoned thanks to these power-sharing consociational institutions. However, on the more negative side, the logic of cross-community cooperation at institutional level has never really proved to be working. As demonstrated by the failure of the Shared Future programme, by the multiple suspensions of local institutions, communities and their respective elites have not been brought closer to each other. Participation in institutions, far from building cross-community cooperation and consensus, has been instrumentalised to maximise the parties' communal interests. Ministers in Northern Irish Executive coalitions do not really cooperate. They represent parties who accept to exercise institutional political power only as long as they consider it useful for their communal electoral basis or if it weakens the opposite side. When McGuinness resigned in 2017, Sinn Fein blocked the restoration of institutions by insisting on the passing of an Irish Language Act which they knew could not be acceptable to the DUP. By the same token, since the Protocol, the DUP has used the same method to obtain comprehensive amendments to or even the repeal of the Protocol, which they know cannot be acceptable to Sinn Fein. It is self-evident that such decisions are not aimed at creating long-term cross-communal consensus. They are aimed at gathering communal electoral support or at weakening the opposite party: Martin McGuinness resigned just before the Northern Ireland Assembly elections of 2017 and Paul Givan’s resignation is part of the DUP’s preparation for the coming 2022 Assembly election. 

The lack of cooperation can be explained by the fact that, to a certain extent, consociational democracy has contributed to maintaining and reinforcing the communal polarisation of the democratic political process in Northern Ireland. Through consociational institutions, the communal division has in fact been institutionalised and conflict has continued, albeit without guns. Consociational arrangements have proved to be electorally advantageous for the more radical parties within each community, marginalising the more moderate ones which could be more likely to cooperate and strike deals with their counterparts across the communal divide. Since 2007, Sinn Fein and the DUP, the two parties that were the most reluctant to be involved in the peace process, have continually reaped the largest electoral benefits, and have co-governed Northern Ireland although they are the least inclined to cooperate with one another. 

By establishing consociational institutions in Northern Ireland, the GFA has created a type of democracy in which both communities are equally and proportionately represented in the institutional decision-making process. They can equally give or refuse their consent to legislation and political decisions. Yet consociational democracy has dramatically limited the capacity for communal political elites to forge wider cross-
community consensus. Instead, it has led parties on both sides of the communal divide, into instrumentalising political power to protect and defend their respective communal and sectarian interests. The post-Brexit and post-protocol stalemates are simply signs that this highly polarized and confrontational logic, induced by consociationalism, has never disappeared since 1998. In Northern Ireland, since the GFA, the defence of separate ethno-communal interests has always prevailed over the defence of the general interest, even at the cost of institutional paralysis or collapse.

The limits of referendum democracy in Northern Ireland

14 Thirdly, the fact that the crisis developed in Northern Ireland after a UK-wide referendum initiated by London raises issues about another problematic feature of Northern Irish democracy, namely referendum democracy. Yet, to propose a comprehensive reflection on the place of referendums in Northern Irish democracy, one cannot reduce the scope of analysis to the sole case of the 2016 Brexit referendum. Referendums have long been used in Northern Irish politics. The very first referendum ever organised in the UK, was the Northern Irish Border Poll, initiated by Edward Heath's government in 1973 and boycotted by the Nationalist community. Twenty-five years later, the Good Friday Agreement, however innovative it was, was yet another example of referendum democracy. The GFA was ratified by two referendums, both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, and it provides that the reunification of Ireland can take place after two concurrent referendums in Northern Ireland and in the Republic. Since Brexit, nationalist circles, moderate and less moderate, have systematically called for a reunification referendum as the only democratic solution to the stalemate. Hence there are two main aspects to be developed in this reflection on referendum democracy in Northern Ireland: the first is about the Brexit referendum itself and its (in)coherence with the general architecture of the Good Friday Agreement. The second is a more general reflection on the use of referendums to settle the Northern Irish question democratically.

London as a neutral guarantor of Northern Irish democracy vs London's constitutional prerogative on referendums

15 Historically, the conflict between Irish nationalism and the British state over the Northern Irish question revolved around conflicting definitions of the *demos*. For Irish nationalism, the *demos* is the majority in the island of Ireland whereas for the British state and for Northern Irish Unionists the *demos* is the majority within the UK. The Peace Process and the GFA were the end result of a long and broad negotiation to find an agreed definition of the *Demos*. Since the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, the British state accepted to become a neutral guarantor of Northern Irish democracy. It accepted to recognise the principle of reunification by consent whereby only the majority in Northern Ireland can decide the constitutional future of Northern Ireland. As a neutral guarantor, London accepted that a change in Northern Ireland's constitutional status was possible if it was the wish of the Northern Irish majority. The Good Friday Agreement itself was ratified by a referendum in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, but it was not submitted to a referendum in the rest of the UK.
In this context, the Brexit referendum of 2016 marked a clear rupture with the principles of the Peace Process as it represented a direct intervention of London against the wish of the majority of voters in Northern Ireland who voted to remain in the EU. However, the Brexit referendum cannot be deemed unconstitutional as Northern Ireland is part and parcel of the UK's sovereign territory and as only London is constitutionally entitled to make decisions on matters of foreign relations. In other words, although the Brexit referendum was a radical departure from the democratic principle of London's neutrality agreed since 1985, it was totally constitutional and democratic for London's government to have a UK-wide referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, even though such a referendum implied the risk of a clash between the majority in Northern Ireland and the UK-wide majority.\(^\text{16}\)

This contradiction illustrates the very problematic constitutional and democratic status of London and, more especially, of Westminster-initiated referendums since the GFA. As London's government is constitutionally entitled to initiate referendums on certain questions, why should it refrain from using the referendum? As Northern Ireland is an integral part of the UK's sovereign territory, how can London really be the neutral guarantor it is supposed to be while keeping an exclusive constitutional prerogative on referendums? Whatever neutrality the GFA requires on the part of London, the executive in London has remained constitutionally entitled to exert direct and indirect influence in Northern Ireland, most particularly through referendums. Hence, it can be argued that, as a new constitutional settlement to restore democracy in Northern Ireland, the GFA failed to provide for sufficient constitutional safeguards against the possible interference of UK-wide referendums in Northern Ireland's democratic regime. Those who drafted the agreement were naively blind to this potential conflict between the spirit and letter of the GFA on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the unwritten British constitution and its political instrumentalisation by the central government.\(^\text{17}\)

**Referendums and democracy in Northern Ireland: from 1973 to the future**

However, the question raised by the role of referendums in Northern Irish democracy goes beyond the simple question of London's neutrality. Since 1973, there have been two referendums on the Province's constitutional status (1973 and 1998). In addition, the 1998 GFA provides that another future reunification referendum can be possible. Yet continuing internal instability and escalating communal polarisation despite such a multiplication of referendums in Northern Ireland begs the question of the capacity of referendums to bring about an agreed and stable democratic order based on the consent of the governed and on parity of esteem.

Academic literature has demonstrated that the democratic value of referendums is only relative and contingent. Depending on the constitutional, political and social contexts in which they are decided, referendums can reinforce or undermine democratic processes.\(^\text{18}\) In the case of Britain, the introduction of UK-wide referendums since 1975 has considerably weakened representative democracy and has shown that the choice of referendums was more motivated by partisan tactics than by democratic ideals. In 2016, just as in 1975, the decision to have a referendum on the UK's European Membership was not founded on the conviction that a referendum was the most
democratic procedure to decide whether to remain in the EEC/EU or to leave it. Not only did Wilson and Cameron choose the referendum because both believed they would obtain a popular majority through a referendum procedure but, more fundamentally perhaps, because it was a way for them to short-circuit internal opposition in their own parliamentary majorities. Harold Wilson and David Cameron, both pro-Europeans, were weakened by anti-European MPs in their own parties. They used the referendum not as an instrument to make British democracy more democratic but as a tactical ploy to obtain an extra-parliamentary majority and to silence divisions in their own parliamentary majorities. The same was true of the 2011 referendum on alternative voting which was one of the bones of contention within the Lib-Dem/Conservative coalition. Thus, in the UK, the three nation-wide referendums have tended to undermine parliamentary debates and pluralism which are the essence of any representative democracy.

A similar phenomenon can be identified in Northern Ireland where past referendums and the constitutional possibility of a future reunification referendum/Border Poll, provided for in the GFA, have tended to stifle and undermine local consociational representative democracy. The Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive established in Northern Ireland after the GFA are representative institutions. They were made consociational to avoid the problems caused by majoritarianism. The aim of these institutions was to give equal recognition to both communities, their ethos, identity, and aspirations (cross-community consent and parity of esteem). Yet, simultaneously, the GFA also contains provisions for a referendum procedure to reunify Northern Ireland and the Republic (Border Poll). So, on the one hand, through the local representative consociational institutions, the GFA rejects majoritarianism and requires cross-community consent. On the other hand, the long-term solution to the constitutional question it provides for relies on a strictly majoritarian and direct democratic instrument to make reunification possible.

The message sent to Northern Irish representative elites within both communities is that the old historic self-determination question can only be settled not through cross-community cooperation within representative consociational institutions, but rather by the quantitative victory of one community over the other. Hence, for a very large proportion of political agents participating in the post-GFA democratic and constitutional process in Northern Ireland, the long-term goal is not to have working representative institutions in which cross-community cooperation and cross-community consent are required. It is either to create the conditions to delay the reunification referendum if you are a unionist, or to create the conditions to make it happen and to make it successful if you are a nationalist.

Such tactical instrumentalisation of the referendum is clearly visible for instance in the way each community has defended or attacked the democratic value of Border Polls depending on the demographic and socio-political context. Today, in a Northern Irish society where the Catholic population is growing faster than the Protestant population, Sinn Fein, the SDLP and wider nationalist circles, argue that the reunification referendum is the priority and the only legitimate democratic instrument. Symmetrically, for Unionists, the democratic emergency after Brexit is not the future Border Poll but the undoing of the Northern Irish Protocol. In 1973, at the time of the first Border Poll in Northern Ireland, it was the exact opposite: as Protestants had a clear demographic majority at the time, Unionists used that referendum against the
Catholic-nationalist minority, who boycotted it precisely because the referendum was, in that particular demographic context, deemed undemocratic and politically advantageous only to the majority. What this comparison with 1973 shows is that, in Northern Ireland, referendums are not accepted as an intrinsically legitimate democratic instrument. Arguments for or against the democratic value of reunification referendums are themselves part of the struggle between the two communal groups and their elites. As support for referendums is highly contingent and depends on its expected outcome in certain socio-political and demographic contexts, referendums have never been accepted as an unquestionable and absolute democratic guarantee by communal parties. Hence, far from shaping a shared understanding of the Demos, referendums have undermined the democratic legitimacy of representative power-sharing democracy and fuelled polarisation between Northern Irish communities and their spokesparties. Instead of allowing the direct expression of the sovereign people, referendums in Northern Ireland are an instrument for Northern Irish communities and their respective parties to keep rehashing their clashing definitions of democracy and to obstruct the local institutionalised democratic process.

Conclusion

All in all, what appears from all this, is that the crisis which Northern Ireland has been undergoing since the 2016 Brexit referendum is the result of several weaknesses and contradictions in the democratic order established in 1998. Although the GFA institutions were aimed at guaranteeing both cross-community consent and parity of esteem in Northern Ireland, more than twenty years after, it seems Northern Irish democracy is still suffering from the same problems and deficits. Three crucial democratic deficits can explain this post-Brexit crisis. The peace process was partly justified as a Europe-wide post-national post-sovereign transformation of democracy when in fact traditional conceptions of state sovereignty and rigid definitions of national identities have proved extremely resilient. Hence, strands 2 and 3 of the GFA were founded on profoundly mistaken assumptions. The resilience of traditional notions of state sovereignty and fixed definitions of national identities can be largely explained by two further deficits in post-GFA Northern Irish democracy. The choice to devolve powers to consociational institutions in Northern Ireland has proved partly counter-productive. Consociation, instead of sustaining cross-community cooperation and dialogue, has favoured more radical parties on both sides of the divide and has institutionalised and fuelled ethno-communal polarisation, albeit with much less violence. Northern Irish consociational democracy has not delivered the normalised, shared, and de-polarised democracy which was promised by political leaders and pro-consociation theoreticians. In addition, referendums have also contributed to obstructing and undermining local democratic arrangements. As demonstrated by the Brexit referendum, London’s constitutional prerogative on referendums is plainly inconsistent with the neutral status it had agreed to adopt in 1985. Parallel to this, the strictly majoritarian logic of the referendum, despite its democratic limits, has remained the only procedure constitutionally available by which reunification can be obtained or stopped. In Northern Ireland the referendum is just an additional instrument by which communal parties strive to impose their definition of the Demos against the will of the other community.
All this has far-reaching and profound implications. It shows that profound democratic reforms are needed in Northern Ireland. First, if states must redefine their conceptions of sovereignty and if communal identities need to be transformed, such changes will not come from exogenous post-national and post-sovereign influences. Change and transformation have to be decided by both states and by the two Northern Irish communities themselves. In this perspective, consociational democratic institutions need to be adapted as existing rules and procedures (petition of concern, designation blocs in the Assembly, mandatory coalitions etc) have entrenched and institutionalised communal polarisation and confrontation. Reforms are needed in order to allow a real dialogue and negotiation between the representative elites of both communities and a more flexible and de-polarised democratic process. Thirdly, the question of referendums must be solved as referendums are not, by essence, the most democratic instrument. London’s constitutional prerogative on referendums should be reconciled with its role as a neutral guarantor of Northern Irish democracy. And if parity of esteem and cross-community consent are still paramount democratic ideals, then the constitutional status of Northern Ireland (reunification or maintenance in the Union) cannot be decided by a strictly majoritarian referendum procedure. Paradoxically, existing provisions contained in the GFA, requiring only a Border Poll in Ireland and in Northern Ireland, would entail a major risk: reunification without the consent of Northern Irish Unionists...

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NOTES


3. A poll conducted by The Belfast Telegraph in January 2022 found that only 2% of Unionists supported the Northern Irish protocol. 43 % believed the protocol should be scrapped.
completely and the DUP should immediately withdraw from institutions. See https://facts4eu.org/static/media/belfast_telegraph_poll_220122.jpg (accessed April 2nd, 2022).


9. Gina Miller challenged the legality and constitutionality of the government's decision to trigger Article 50 without an act of Parliament. Later, she, with others, also challenged the legality of Boris Johnson’s decision to prorogue Parliament. Through these procedures, the Supreme Court had to answer questions relating to the constitutional powers of devolved parliamentary institutions and more especially, the powers the Northern Ireland Assembly as defined by the Belfast Agreement. See https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/docs/uksc-2019-0192-judgment.pdf and http://www.bailii.org/uk/cases/UKSC/2017/5.html (accessed on April 2nd 2022).


16. An additional aspect of the democratic problem lies in the fact that the results of the referendum were not constitutionally binding.
ABSTRACTS

The aim of this paper is to identify and analyse the reasons why the Brexit referendum and its results have led to a profound and lasting destabilisation of post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Irish democracy. The main thesis developed in this paper is that the post-Brexit referendum crisis prevailing in Northern Ireland should lead us to reappraise critically the democratic institutions and processes established after the GFA as they were vulnerable and perfectible. It is argued that three kinds of deficits can be found in the democratic arrangements in place since 1998 which can account for the destabilising impacts of Brexit. These deficits are: first, the lure of a new European post-nationalist and post-sovereign democratic transformation of the Northern Irish conflict, second, the limitations of consociational democracy and, thirdly, the problems raised by referendum democracy.

Le but de cet article est d’identifier et d’analyser les raisons qui expliquent pourquoi le référendum sur le Brexit et ses résultats ont déstabilisé, de manière si profonde et si durable, la démocratie nord-irlandaise établie en 1998 par le Good Friday Agreement. La thèse centrale qui est développée est la suivante : la situation de crise qui prévaut en Irlande du Nord depuis le référendum de juin 2016 doit nous inciter à réfléchir de manière critique aux institutions et aux procédures démocratiques en place depuis 1998. Depuis leur instauration, ces institutions étaient vulnérables et perfectibles pour trois grandes raisons qui expliquent la crise en cours. Premièrement, elles étaient, pour partie, fondées sur l’illusion selon laquelle le processus de paix en Irlande du Nord participait d’une transformation de l’ordre démocratique européen vers un modèle post-nationaliste et post-souverainiste. Deuxièmement, les limites et les problèmes que pose la démocratie consociationnelle. Troisièmement, les difficultés liées à la démocratie référendaire.
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