

# Northern Ireland gets its first Sinn Féin first minister in historic shift

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By William Booth and Amanda Ferguson

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**Northern Ireland's parliament named Michelle O'Neill as first minister on Feb. 3, after the Belfast government had ceased operating for two full years. (Video: Reuters)**

BELFAST — After two full years without a functioning government, Northern Ireland's Parliament Buildings opened their doors on Saturday and lawmakers returned to work — and one of their first acts was to name Sinn Féin's Michelle O'Neill as first minister.

O'Neill, 47, makes history as Northern Ireland's first nationalist leader, from a party that wants north and south to come together, someday, as a single country.

Entering the Great Hall outside of the assembly, O'Neill was the only politician to be applauded.

After her selection as first minister, she called this a “historic day which represents a new dawn.” She added, “that such a day would ever come would have been unimaginable to my parents and grandparents’ generation.”

In earlier remarks to The Washington Post, O’Neill noted that the restoration of government “respects the result” of the May 2022 election — when Sinn Féin for the first time won the largest share of seats in the assembly and the right to hold the first minister job under Northern Ireland’s delicate power-sharing agreement.

She has waited two years.

*Sinn Fein wins in N. Ireland, a victory with big symbolism*

To the assembly, O’Neill emphasized that she would be “a First Minister for all” — including unionists and republicans, Protestants and Catholics, those who want a “United Ireland” and those who want to remain “British Forever” (alongside a growing number in the middle ground).

“To all of you who are British and unionist: Your national identity, culture and traditions are important to me,” O’Neill said in her first speech. “None of us are being asked or expected to surrender who we are. Our allegiances are equally legitimate. Let’s walk this two-way street and meet one another halfway.”

Earlier this week, Mary Lou McDonald, Sinn Féin president and leader of the opposition in the Republic of Ireland, declared that Irish unity was “within touching distance.”



Sinn Féin President Mary Lou McDonald arrives for the restoration of government in Belfast on Saturday. (Peter Morrison/AP)

O'Neill seems to be staying away from language like that this week, and experts say the prospect of a united Ireland remains some way off, more a medium-term project than imminent.

But there is no doubt that the political landscape of Northern Ireland is changing. For decades, the unionists have held the greater share of the power here — proudly declaring Northern Ireland's status as one of the four nations of the United Kingdom, alongside England, Scotland and Wales.

It was the unionists who boycotted the government for these past two years. Overtly, their gripe was with post-Brexit trade arrangements. But many people suspected they also didn't want to accept Sinn Féin playing a more dominant role.



A statue of Edward Carson, a former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, is seen in front of the Stormont Parliament Buildings in Belfast. (Suzanne Plunkett/Reuters)

And so, for 730 days, there wasn't a functioning government at the Stormont estate, the seat of power in Northern Ireland. No executive, no assembly — though lawmakers continued to draw two-thirds of their salaries.

The gift shop and the cafeteria remained open. Schoolchildren visited. But unelected civil servants were left to keep the lights on, while avoiding any major decisions.

*25 years after Good Friday Agreement, cold peace prevails in Northern Ireland*

A breakthrough came earlier this week, when Jeffrey Donaldson announced that his Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) had struck a deal with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's government to tweak some of the trade and customs arrangements for goods crossing the Irish Sea.

The changes are described by Brexit experts as minor but important to the unionists, who have argued that requiring checks and customs declarations drives a wedge between Great Britain and Northern Ireland while drawing the north deeper into an all-Ireland economy. Trade wasn't a problem when Britain and the Republic of Ireland were both part of the European Union's Common Market. But with Brexit, negotiators had to find a way to protect the integrity of the E.U.'s market without creating a visible border on the island of Ireland that could undermine the Good Friday peace agreement that ended 30 years of sectarian and state violence known as "the Troubles."



Jeffrey Donaldson, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, speaks to the media at the Stormont Parliament Buildings in Belfast on Saturday. (Peter Morrison/AP)

Donaldson claimed a win with this week's trade adjustments, saying they would "safeguard our place within the Union."

The Good Friday agreement — brokered in part by the United States — ushered in the modern age of devolved power sharing in Northern Ireland. There is no winner-take-all here today.

*How Bono helped bring peace to Northern Ireland*

Officially, there will be no difference in power between O'Neill and the new deputy first minister, Emma Little-Pengelly of the DUP. They will be co-equals and co-leaders. One may shake the hand of a visiting world leader first, but they share duties.

Yet one is called a deputy, and here that matters.

“Like with everything in Northern Ireland, having Michelle O'Neill as first minister is mostly symbolic,” said Matthew O'Toole, a lawmaker in the assembly from the Social Democratic and Labour Party.

Then he cautioned, “Being symbolic doesn't make it unimportant.”

Síobhra Aiken, a lecturer at Queen's University Belfast, called O'Neill's rise to first minister “a sea change.”

She said that with the partition of the island in 1921, “the infrastructure of Northern Ireland was specifically designed so that this would not happen. ... Northern Ireland was created to have an Ulster Protestant majority.”



Michelle O'Neill walks past a portrait of Sinn Féin leader Martin McGuinness at Parliament Buildings in Belfast on Saturday. (Oliver McVeigh/AP)

When Martin McGuinness, a former IRA leader turned peacemaker, became the first deputy first minister from Sinn Féin in 2007, it wasn't uncommon for unionists to accuse him of having blood on his hands.

*Martin McGuinness, former IRA commander turned statesman, dies at 66*

Now, with elections in the south next year, Aiken said, "We could soon see Sinn Féin holding power in both jurisdictions on this island."

Belfast-based feminist historian Margaret Ward said this moment was "huge in terms of Sinn Féin's evolution," as well as the evolution of government in Northern Ireland. "When I was growing up, Stormont was irrelevant, because it was a male, unionist and very middle-class establishment that didn't have working-class people's interests at heart —

whether they were Catholics or Protestants,” she said. “Over a period of about half a century, you could count the number of women engaged in elected office on both hands.” O’Neill’s rise has been remarkable. A Catholic from a rural county, she was a mother at 16 and has spoken often of her hardscrabble youth. Today she is savvy speaker, with a long political track record, and is all over social media — and popular with young people wanting selfies.

She comes from a deeply republican household. Her father was imprisoned for IRA membership during the Troubles and later made the transition into politics when he became a local Sinn Féin lawmaker. Her uncle was a president of Noraid, a republican fundraising group active in the United States, which U.S. government accused of funneling money to buy IRA guns. Noraid leaders deny this.

For Jim Allister, the sole member of the legislative assembly from the Traditional Unionist Voice party, O’Neill hasn’t sufficiently distanced herself from IRA violence. After condemning this week’s tweaked trade deal by his fellow unionists as “nothing by spin and hype,” he told The Post that he would return to the assembly on Saturday, but he opposed the choice for first minister.

“Michelle O’Neill is a lady who told the people of Northern Ireland that there was no alternative to the butchery and genocide of the IRA. She justifies those acts,” he said. “So I think she is wholly unworthy to hold this high office, or any democratic office, if she thinks it was right and necessary to murder and to butcher innocent people.”

In 2022, O’Neill was asked by the BBC about the IRA violence during the Troubles.

“I don’t think any Irish person ever woke up one morning and thought that conflict was a good idea, but the war came to Ireland,” she said.

She continued, “I think at the time there was no alternative, but now, thankfully, we have an alternative to conflict and that’s the Good Friday agreement.”



On Saturday, in her speech to the assembly, O'Neill said, "I am sorry for all the lives lost during the conflict. Without exception." She added: "I will never ask anyone to 'move on,' but I do hope that we can 'move forward.'"

Alex Maskey, 72, retired on Saturday after having served as speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly since 2020. He was also the first member of Sinn Féin to serve as lord mayor of Belfast, from 2002 to 2003.

"The symbolism of Michelle O'Neill as the first republican first minister will not be lost on a lot of people. For me, that's a positive thing," Maskey said.

Maskey said he still hoped someday to live in a united Ireland.

"I want to have the dignity of my own political destination, and the sovereignty of my country," he said. "I'm working on the premise that I will see that ushered in."