**BELFAST TELEGRAPH**

**DEBATENI**

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**The 1918 general election in Ireland**

This month sees the 95th anniversary of the 1918 general election which some say was effectively a referendum on Ireland’s status.

It certainly changed the political landscape for ever. Sinn Fein almost eradicated Redmond’s Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP). Out of 105 seats in Ireland, it was left with six, all but one in the north. Unionists won 26 seats taking a majority in the province of Ulster. A Unionist actually won Dublin Rathmines and another was a close runner-up in South County Dublin.

Twenty-five of Sinn Fein’s 73 seats were however uncontested by the home rule IPP as the lines between the two parties had become blurred since the Easter Rising. On conscription, the main issue for nationalists, they basically agreed. The colossal geopolitical repercussions from the 1st World War also played their part.

But it wasn’t a referendum on separation. It was a general election and billed as such. No unit of self-determination had been agreed as is often the case. The electorate in the north certainly recognised that the vote would determine the level of Ulster’s exclusion from home rule but those in the south were not presented with a clear choice on their future. None the less for eighty years the IRA took its legitimacy from the result in justifying their campaigns.

Cardinal Logue brokered an electoral pact in Ulster between the two nationalist groupings, after nomination day. Catholic electors showed an iron discipline in that whichever party agreed to stand aside got fewer than 140 votes in each of six constituencies. Where the home rulers did fight Sinn Fein there was no clear cut winner while Joe Devlin even defeated de Valera in the Falls constituency. West Belfast was not to be Republicanised for another 65 years.

It was indeed the last all-Ireland vote, until 1998, when the southern electorate voted for the abolition of the constitutional claim to Northern Ireland by an astonishingly overwhelming 94%. (The south could usefully have dropped the claim in 1985 or even 1974 and still got a majority). In Northern Ireland, in a simultaneous referendum, the Belfast Agreement was accepted by 71% of voters - with a small majority of Unionists assenting. United Kingdom sovereignty was thus reinforced.

Once those votes happened, the 1918 myth on which the IRA was basing its legitimacy (it claimed to be the legal Irish government!) was swept away for ever. This is a strong reason for believing the Dissidents can never – well not in this generation – get a significant popular base in the Catholic community. At the same time, Sinn Fein will not advance in the south while there is any lingering element of paramilitarism.