**Listening comprehension on Irish reunification**

1. Michelle O'Neill, from Sinn Féin, became the First Minister of Northern Ireland in early February, which is a historica first, and she anticipates a referendum on Irish unity within the next 10 years. The party’s president thinks alike and sees the referendum as within a touching distance. Sinn Féin has been successful on both sides of the Irish border, which now brings the question of reunification under the spotlight.
2. Republicans and Nationalists both refer to the side which wants Northern Ireland to leave the UK and form a united Ireland with the rest of Ireland. Whereas Unionists and Loyalists refer to those who want Northern Ireland to stay part of the UK.
3. Back in 1921, after the 2,5-year Irish war of Independence, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed, establishing the Irish Free State, which would go on to become the Republic of Ireland. But this didn’t cover the entire island of Ireland, the British had carved out 6 counties in the North-East, which became Northern Ireland, that were in majority protestant and unionists, largely as a result of British colonization in the previous centuries. Yet, this counties still had a pretty sizeable catholic nationalist minority. In the late 1960s was the beginning of the Troubles. The frustrated catholic minority in Northern Ireland launched a civil rights movement demanding an end to things like housing or workplace discrimination. As civil rights marches were violently suppressed by the overwhelmingly protestant Ulster Constabulary as well as being attacked by protestant loyalists, riots erupted in 1969 in places like Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. And the British army was deployed under Operation Banner to counter the growing disorder and sectarian violence. However, things only escalated. The provisional IRA began its armed and violent insurgency against British rule. And on the other side loyalist paramilitaries like the Ulster Defence Association and Ulster Volunteer Force also stepped up their violent campaigns. More than 3,500 people would be killed, more than half of them civilians, over the next three decades, before the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement was reached in 1998.
4. Politically speaking, how Irish reunification could be achieved is set in the Belfast Agreement which recognized the right of the Irish people to bring about a united Ireland subject to the consent of both the Republic and Northern Ireland. Border polls, i.e. referenda, need to be held on both sides of the border.
5. The Northern Ireland Act of 1998, which implemented the provisions of the Belfast Agreement in UK law, states that border poll would be called by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if at any time it appears likely to them that the majority of those voting would express the wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the UK and form part of a united Ireland.
6. It isn’t exactly clear what the requirement for this would be so it’s effectively up to the discretion of the Secretary of State (polling results? election of a nationalist majority at the Northern Irish Assembly?). If the Secretary of State did call a referendum, then the Irish Government would presumably arrange one for their citizens too.
7. There have been some notable milestones recently, suggesting things might be going in the direction of reunification:

* The 2021 census revealed that Northern Ireland, for the first time in its history, counts more catholics than protestants. Even if religion doesn’t directly translates into political preference as much as it used to, the census also registered a decline from 40% to 32% in individuals identifying solely as British while those identifying solely as Irish increased from 25% to 29% since 2011
* Accompanying this is the fact that in the 2022 Northern Irish election Sinn Féin emerged as the largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly, earning them the right to nominate the First Minister.
* A year later in 2023, Sinn Féin won the local elections and in a rather historic result, national parties won a greater share of the vote than unionist parties.

1. Sinn Féin, a nationalist party, has topped the poll. That has never happened before in the 101-year history of Northern Ireland’s existence. Northern Ireland was literally designed, its borders were designed so that wouldn’t happen, so that there would be an in-built unionist majority. If you top up the unionist parties they’re still on top (DUP + TUV + UUV = 43%), but the nationalist party came top (29%), which transforms the political landscape in Northern Ireland.

Plus, if Sinn Féin were to enter Government in the Republic of Ireland, it would add momentum to the current trend. A Sinn Féin-led Government in Dublin would seek to boost cross-border cooperation and development in a way that might help drive support for reunification.

1. This is sort of happening already, even without Sinn Féin. Very recently the Irish Government announced an 800 million euro package to fund cross-border infrastructure projects.
2. The other important realignment that is happening in Northern Irish politics is the growth of the non-sectarian block represented by the Alliance party which rejects the nationalist vs unionist identities and says it doesn’t take a position on the Constitutional future of Northern Ireland. Alliance is now the 3rd largest party in the Northern Irish Assembly, behind Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party.
3. Actual polling for a hypothetical reunification referendum does vary but generally the status quo position, aka staying in the UK, seems to secure about 50% while Irish reunification gets relatively less support with one recent poll putting support at 39% and another at 30%.
4. When you consider that there is a sizeable “don’t know” contingent and considering the growth of the non-sectarian Alliance Party, there is evidently a group of people who could potentially be won over. They will be key to deciding the future of Northern Ireland constitutional status. Therefore campaigners on both sides cannot rely solely on identity. Increasingly important are questions over which Constitutional setup can best deliver on people’s priorities, like housing, healthcare, employment, etc.