

Unprecedented power-sharing between Catholics, Protestants in Northern Ireland

5 A Catholic has become the first minister of Northern Ireland, something unprecedented in the more than 100-year history of this territory that's part of the United Kingdom and has long been tormented by a civil war between Irish republicans (mostly Catholics) and British unionists (mostly Protestants). Michelle O'Neill, the Sinn Féin leader, was appointed to the post on February 3, 2024 after her Irish nationalist¹ party's victory for the first time in local elections. She shares power with Emma Little-Pengelly, protestant, Deputy² First Minister.

In her inaugural speech, she called her appointment "a historic day". O'Neill emphasized that it would have been "unimaginable for her parents' generation" for a Catholic republican in favor of the reunification of Ireland to lead the British province.

15 Just over 25 years ago, the Good Friday peace agreement ended the civil war between mainly Catholic republicans and primarily Protestant unionists³, which had resulted in several thousand deaths since 1968.

O'Neill's own father had been imprisoned due to his membership in the IRA, the Irish Republican Army, while the father of Emma Little-Pengelly, had been arrested for attempting to procure weapons for a Protestant paramilitary group. Growing up as children of the conflict, the two women represent a new generation that seems to have turned the page on violence. Their power-sharing at the top of the government signifies a historic turning point in Northern Ireland.

25 When Northern Ireland was created in 1921, the founders of the new state drew its borders so that Protestants would always be in the majority. However, the 2021 census revealed that, for the first time in Northern Ireland's hundred years of existence, there were more Catholics than Protestants. Some see this as a situation favorable to reunification with the Republic of Ireland. But reunification is not really on the agenda, experts point out. "Thinking that it would be a natural consequence of the demographic progression of the Catholic community is misleading, since 20% of Catholics still vote for the continuation of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom," explained Pierre Joannon, a historian.

30 "The 'peace lines' – the walls that separate Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods – show the distance yet to be covered to achieve a true inter-community peace. The current government, in which the prime minister and deputy prime minister have equal power, would indicate, according to him, a situation of balance between the communities.

35 The primary challenge of the new Northern Irish government is to address a difficult socio-economic situation. O'Neill said there was the need for unionists and republicans to "act together".

40 The religious leaders welcome the end of the political stalemate. Since 2022, the unionists had refused to sit in the local Assembly dominated by their fellow republicans. It was only after lengthy negotiations with the British government that the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) ended the boycott, allowing O'Neill to head up the government. (480 words)

¹ An Irish nationalist Republican is in favour of a unified Ireland, Northern Ireland becoming independent and linked to the Republic of Ireland.

² Deputy First Minister = vice-Prime Minister

³ A unionist in Northern Ireland is in favour of loyalty and alliance to the United Kingdom. Great majority of unionists are protestants.