



North of Ireland's First Minister on the emerging Celtic alliance

Description

default watermark

michelle o'neill celtic

Michelle O'Neill doesn't mince words: the first nationalist First Minister for the North of Ireland's six counties sat down with [Scottish paper the National](#). She had plenty to say about culture, reunification, Scottish independence, and the arrogance of Westminster.

Politics trickles through culture

Something huge is shifting in the North of Ireland.

You can feel it in the music, with establishment-baiting [Belfast hip-hop trio Kneecap](#) packing out venues across the world. You can see it on TV as *Derry Girls* made the six counties a cultural export. And you can measure it in the polling: [63% of people in the North](#) now want a united Ireland inside the European Union.

Michelle O'Neill is not surprised. "Young people have it in spades," she says of the new cultural confidence coursing through a nationalist Ireland.

That generation have a real, confident view of who they are, confident in their Irishness, very happy to assert it. They will not accept second-class citizenship.

Their parents endured it. Their grandparents endured it. This generation doesn't plan on more of the same.

Unionists are losing the culture war

The confidence is undoubtedly real. But so is a hard, enduring, sometimes dangerous resistance to it.

O'Neill is unsparing about the [forces lining up](#) to suppress it. Political unionism, for example, she says:

blocked the Irish language at every turn.

The North still has no Irish language strategy. They fought for years just to get an Irish Language Act.

For those in political unionism trying to block that, they're saying to young Irish Gaeilgeoirs [Gaeilge speakers] that you don't have a place here.

What message does that send in 2026? It's one of disrespect and intolerance and arrogance.

Young people, she says, have not truck with it. If Kneecap have done anything they've certainly rocked the boat politically and culturally. Gaeilge very cool. And the new vibrancy on the streets is the proof.

default watermark

[British government fails yet another Palestine prosecution as Kneecap man goes free](#)

Give us our Referendum

The cultural moment and the political moment are inseparable. When 63% of people in the North want reunification, the Good Friday Agreement's constitutional logic demands a response.

Under its terms, the Northern Ireland Secretary holds the power to call a border poll when they believe a majority favours it. But Hilary Benn has refused. O'Neill is direct about what that refusal means.

Give us a referendum. If they're so strong in the strength of the Union, what have they got to fear? Live up to the commitment.

She frames it, correctly, as a democratic right one explicitly enshrined in the Agreement that ended thirty years of bloody conflict. Westminster signed that Agreement and should honour it.

An Ireland within Europe that is the big prize.

(This is a sentiment certainly shared with the majority of [SNP politicians](#) and voters. Some 62% of [Scots voted to remain in the EU](#) and that figure has likely only risen since. Brexit is still felt sorely in Scotland.)

But O'Neill knows the prosaic questions matter too. Taxes, pensions, healthcare, etc. She doesn't want to simply dodge them. She flips them and, yes, perhaps weaponises them. But why shouldn't she?

She's right to point out, for example, that the six counties don't have devolved fiscal powers of anything like the scope that Scotland has, which is still far below the scope of Westminster. (Although this scope is also limited by Rachel Reeves's rigid OBR fiscal rules.)

Reunification, O'Neill argues, is an opportunity: a stronger economy, free education across the island, a roof over everyone's head. The research backs her up too, where people in the Republic already earn more have higher living standards and face shorter healthcare waiting lists. (Not that the south is without problems, however – particularly Dublin's notorious housing crisis.)

Untied Kingdom: anti-unionist parties take power across the Celtic nations

default watermark
The new Celtic Alliance
O'Neill watched last week's Scottish Parliament vote on independence referendum with keen interest. She watched Westminster's response with something closer to fury.

The very quick response from Whitehall was that they would completely disrespect and disregard that mandate. That's a mandate from the people.

She sees Scotland, Wales, and the North of Ireland as part of the same story.

The recent elections in Scotland and Wales really add to that message. The people want self-determination, they want to take their future into their own hands.

The SNP and Plaid Cymru taking power in Edinburgh and Cardiff, in her words:

Demonstrates a real, seismic change in terms of our politics, collectively, here. â?

The nations on the periphery of this broken union are moving. Westminster is not listening. That is no longer sustainable and it looks like major change is coming, sooner than later.

People are tired of the mess of Westminster. They're tired of the disregard shown towards them. The austerity agenda, the revolving door of British prime ministers, Brexit – we have never been top of the agenda. We never will be. Our interests will never be served by Westminster.

That is not, despite SW1â??s imagination, mere Celtic bitterness â?? it is serious political analysis. And it is shared, increasingly, from Belfast to Edinburgh to Cardiff.

Oâ??Neill wants power-sharing in Stormont to work â?? she has even put her own partyâ??s veto on the table to make institutions function. She can, she believes, make devolution work today while arguing unapologetically for constitutional change tomorrow.

But the direction of travel is clear. The nations are watching each other and drawing the same conclusions. Westminsterâ??s continued disregard built this moment â?? it has no one else to blame.

Featured image via [Getty/Charles McQuillan](#)

By [Cameron Baillie](#)

[Source link](#)

CATEGORY

1. News

POST TAG

1. alliance
2. celtic
3. emerging
4. first
5. irelands
6. minister
7. news
8. north
9. the

Category

1. News

default watermark