

There is no doubt that Brexit has destabilized Northern Irish politics. In 2015, Northern Ireland had a stable if unimpressive form of power sharing which had lasted for several years. The Catholic population was growing but the nationalist vote – rooted in that community – was not. There were other major issues – disagreement over the public role of the Irish language, and the fallout from the renewable heating scandal (“cash for ash”) which is not alone the Democratic Unionist Party’s responsibility but has hit that party harder than most. But above all, it is Brexit which has reignited the argument about the clash of two great “rights” – the unionist and nationalist case in Ulster – as W. F. Monypenny called it in his classic *The Two Irish Nations* published in 1913.

Brexit has reignited the border issue – in principle, because the EU is desperate to sustain the integrity of the single market while the “peace process” forbids the normal checks for border controls which normally do that work. So a new solution has to be found and it is that Northern Ireland, in effect, remains in significant ways in the EU without any democratic representation in that European political configuration. A difficult enough issue in itself made more fraught by the differing imaginative universes of the two communities on the subject of the partition. More precisely, the problem is that the two Irish traditions have completely different narratives on the border. For the nationalist community it offends, in principle, against Ireland’s nationalist unity and, for example, tends to cut towns on either side of the line from their hinterland. The ease of crossing it which has been a fact of life for decades now seems to reduce this evil; any possible change of status can only lead to disruption of normal social and family activity. Worse, this local inconvenience is a result of the whim of the British electorate.

There has been much talk of a danger to the peace process as a result. Michel Barnier, the EU’s chief negotiator, very early on in the Brexit fiasco urged the Irish to campaign on this basis in the other twenty-six capitals of the EU. It has proved to be a successful strategy. Nationalists say they have been stripped, against their will, of their EU citizenship which made it easier to tolerate partition. The various acts of mitigation – for example, offering Irish citizens superior rights in the UK labour market, required as recently as 2010–14 but not required today as Ireland’s economy surges again, have barely registered. The effect of Ireland taking Barnier’s advice is that EU leaders still denounce Boris Johnson as an unelected leader who is endangering the peace process.

It is important to note that the inflaming effect of Brexit is more noticeable in the previously more moderate Catholic middle class than it is on the traditionally more militant working class. It is also the case that many sections of the Irish intelligentsia, more cautious during the Troubles, have exploded with rage and disbelief. The belief that the UK has lapsed back into a chauvinistic mentality is widespread and is, of course, supported from outside Ireland by many British intellectuals who believe the same. Anglo–Irish relations, which had become so mellow in recent years, are now more bitter than they have been since the days of Ireland’s neutrality in the Second World War and, more particularly, de Valera’s offer of condolences on Hitler’s death.

# On the edge

## Brexit and the Irish border

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When the Irish Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney, says that there can be no checks anywhere on the island of Ireland he is hugely popular. Of course, there are police checks on foreigners trying to enter the Dublin labour market on cross-border public transport but everyone knows that he means there can be no checks for Irish people.

Ireland rightly believes that even a soft Brexit will do it economic harm. A hard Brexit endangers, it is widely believed, tens of thousands of jobs on the island. In short, Ireland believes it has no choice but to throw its lot in with the European Union as a whole. Above all, it has to preserve its position as a favoured destination for foreign direct investment even if that is to the detriment of the agricultural sector, no longer hegemonic in Irish society. The early direct talks between Belfast and Dublin officials in technical matters were stopped under the government of Enda Kenny – even before Leo Varadkar took over – and there has been no public criticism of that decision.

On the other side of the communal divide, Professor Henry Patterson in his authoritative book *Ireland’s Violent Frontier* (2013) provides the historical experience which underpins a different view of what is at stake. Patterson points out the border security installations did not exist in 1969 – they had to be built to deal with the fact that the IRA campaign, which had begun as an urban campaign in Belfast and Derry, was pushed out to other parts of Northern Ireland after the British Army’s Operation Motorman, which reclaimed the no go areas. The border fortifications were built to try to control the Provos’ use of the border as a means to bring in men and explosives to Northern Ireland from the relatively safe haven of the Republic, to escape to after attacks in the north and as somewhere to plan operations and manufacture explosives and weapons.

In 1988 the British Army believed that ten of the IRA’s main Active Service Units were based in the Republic. The Irish state had used the British desire for security cooperation to gain the political concessions in the Anglo–Irish Agreement in 1985. Some in Varadkar’s government are pursuing a similar strategy by talking up the dissident attacks near the border as a product of Brexit, when they are nothing of the kind. They predated Brexit and even if Brexit does not happen, they will continue.

There is much talk now about “border communities” threatened by a hard border. But the very phrase has a differing resonance, even though the most militant DUP types do not want a hard border and believe it’s now impossible. Nevertheless, the phrase has a less negative ring in Protestant ears.

At the height of the Troubles in 1977, the Irish Premier Liam Cosgrave sent a document to the British: “by far the greatest proportion of violence is indigenous. In fact, of all incidents of violence, only two per cent have any connection with the border”. The Irish government maintained this line until the very end of the “Troubles”, even in the aftermath of the

death of Stephen Restorick, the last British soldier to die near the border in 1997 just before the return of the IRA ceasefire. The British were exasperated by this claim and pointed out that it referred only to IRA attacks in the immediate vicinity of the border. The British pointed out that the IRA trained mostly in the Republic and received most of its weapons from the south. But there is a substance of truth in Cosgrave’s reply: the root cause of violence in the north arose out of the indigenous clash between the two communities in the north.

Today, however, it is the Republic which emphasizes above all the potential role of the border in destabilizing the peace process. Leo Varadkar circulated a photograph of a 1970s attack on a border installation as proof that the “backstop” was necessary to avoid a return to the bad old days. Amazingly, one of the officials close to Simon Coveney was quoted as saying that a dissident IRA attack near the border had the effect of cooling Boris Johnson’s rhetoric on Brexit. It should be noted that Irish opposition leaders strongly denounced this comment.

There is also a problem of perception as this is made worse by the limited interaction between the high politics of Westminster and grass roots tensions in Northern Ireland. The absence of any SDLP representatives in Westminster has meant that the tedium of the weekly Belfast/London journey which made say, Robert Bradford, MP for South Belfast, and Gerry Fitt, MP for West Belfast, unlikely friends no longer operates in that way. SDLP and Unionist representatives have less contact than in earlier, darker years. The moderate nationalist SDLP is convinced that the DUP has an “aggressive no deal strategy”. But in fact the majority of DUP MPs have had no such strategy in Westminster. They expected a longer extension than the one granted by the EU and they expected too that Parliament as a whole was moving towards a softer Brexit. For the time being, these calculations – shared by many – are not operative, but the DUP is perfectly aware that even the briefest no deal Brexit will have some costs which will be laid at their door. That is why on the floor of the House of Commons, the DUP has openly contemplated a time-limited backstop, despite their obvious difficulties with any backstop or, more obviously, the Irish protocol in the withdrawal agreement.

One community (the nationalist) supports the backstop, which sets up a joint body (UK/EU) to oversee large swathes of commercial life in Northern Ireland. It has a dynamic and expansive remit – although it nervously concedes possible suspension of initiatives which provoke economic and social disorder. Nationalists like it because it tends to drag Northern Ireland away from the UK, though the UK, of course, will still have to subsidize it. The business community and the centre more generally in Northern Ireland support it as opposed to the potential chaos of a no deal Brexit – though some in this group are aware of the dangers of a long-term backstop placing them in a different regulatory environment from the UK, their main market.

The unionists, on the other hand, dislike the backstop. They say they realized a deal with Dublin in 1998 in the Good Friday Agreement – subsequently endorsed by the DUP in the St Andrews Agreement of 2006 – in opening up a new relationship with Dublin which is consensual and “bottom up”. Now they are confronted by a top-down deal giving Dublin influence in the north to which their consent is essentially irrelevant.

Neutral observers – writers like Newton Emerson and Andy Pollak – acknowledge that the “mapping exercise” which supposedly underpins the backstop is a thin piece of work. They also acknowledge both sides can make a case as a defender of the Good Friday Agreement. Again, there is a kind of consensus that the island economy – a core concept in the withdrawal agreement – exists only in agrifood. Everyone now appears to accept that special and unusual measures will be required to protect this.

The most acute problem here is the aftermath of a no deal Brexit. The UK has said that in no circumstance will it introduce checks on goods flowing from the Irish Republic. Some doubt that this can be maintained but it is possible that the UK can maintain this position longer than the EU on the other side. In that case, the EU will have to have some sort of “hard” border on the island of Ireland to protect the integrity of the single market. In other words, the prospect of the backstop will have brought about exactly the situation it was intended to avert. That is why Angela Merkel asked Barnier for a fall-back plan to replace the backstop in March – but we have not heard what it is – and that is why there has been increasing talk about a time-limited backstop as the obvious benign compromise between the EU and UK.

Lucinda Creighton, Ireland’s Europe Minister from 2011 to 2013, has suggested a five-year limit to the backstop: “A lot can happen in five years which might change the complexion of Brexit and British politics entirely ... Sticking rigidly to our current position could well lead to the outcome that the withdrawal agreement was supposed to avert – a border between North and South, a return to political unrest and violence and economic devastation for people across Ireland”. Ireland’s current Europe Minister was quickly out of the traps to reject her predecessor’s argument.

Remainers have eloquently argued that Brexit and a no deal Brexit, in particular, have the capacity to destroy the Union in short order as erstwhile pro-EU unionists vote to rejoin the EU by voting for Irish unity in a border poll. Perhaps. But the most reliable poll, the *Life and Times* survey, in its most recent results shows a straight spike in pro-Irish unity sentiment since the Brexit referendum, which is now falling back. A no deal exit could alter that. Much depends on how long the crisis lasts. But the realities remain unchanged. The Republic is frightened of such a dramatic development. The UK subvention is essential to normal life in Northern Ireland. The union, as far as Northern Ireland is concerned has lasted 219 years: imagine the turmoil involved in unpicking the complexity of that arrangement. The UK performance in leaving the EU – an arrangement of a few decades – suggests that the process would be even more dramatic and many would wish to avoid it. The truth is that the bulk of the harm to community relations may already have happened.