

# British-Irish Relations, Northern Ireland and Europe:

## *An Historical Perspective on a Contemporary Political Problem*

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2021 brings many anniversaries with significance to British-Irish and cross-border relations. Most obviously, it is Northern Ireland's centenary, and the same for the Anglo-Irish Treaty which gave birth to the Irish state. Thus, it is 100 years since the border between the two parts of Ireland was confirmed. This article will reflect on the legacy of such events, and the broader historical patterns of British-Irish relations, including their wider European context, to show how they continue to interact and to shape contemporary politics in these islands.

## British-Irish Relations and Europe

An anniversary less noted, of an event which projected a powerful image of reconciliation between Britain and Ireland, is that of Queen Elizabeth's visit to the Irish Republic in May 2011. Pictures of the Queen laying a wreath in Dublin's Garden of Remembrance, then bowing her head in respect to those who died fighting against the rule of her own grandfather over Ireland, had an enormous impact on nationalist opinion. But this gesture was balanced by the visit that the Queen and President McAleese then made to the city's War Memorial Gardens, where they jointly honoured those Irishmen who died fighting in British uniforms in two world wars. Their sacrifice did not fit the traditional narrative of Irish nationalism, and so was not acknowledged for many decades after independence. These shared acts of commemoration, following the stabilisation of Northern Ireland's political institutions in the preceding years, seemed to mark the end of a history of conflict between Britain and Ireland.

The choreography of these events also suggests a European influence.<sup>1</sup> They echo the images of Chancellor Kohl and President Mitterrand holding hands at the war graves of Verdun in 1984, or their predecessors, President de Gaulle and Chancellor Adenauer, praying together at Reims Cathedral in 1962. Such acts sought to simultaneously acknowledge the pain of the past in Franco-German relations, and show resolve that this should not be repeated. The gestures of Queen Elizabeth and President McAleese in 2011 said much the same for British-Irish relations.

The Franco-German analogy is also apposite given the EU dimension to British-Irish reconciliation. When Britain and Ireland joined what was then the EEC<sup>2</sup> in 1973, the Northern Ireland Troubles were at their height, and relations between the two countries had reached their nadir. In response to the Bloody Sunday killings 12 months earlier, the Irish government recalled its ambassador to London, and the British Embassy in Dublin was set ablaze by protesters. The withdrawal of Irish representation in Britain, and the physical destruction of British representation in Ireland, powerfully demonstrated the breakdown in diplomacy at this point. Despite this, the entry of Britain and Ireland into the EU both obliged and created a context for their rapprochement. Numerous scholars have noted the multiple influences of European integration on peace-building in Northern Ireland,<sup>3</sup> from the generous funding provided to support cross-border and cross-community reconciliation projects, to the adoption of the D'Hondt method



to elect Stormont's power-sharing executive.<sup>4</sup> But the most important impact of the EU on the region was arguably indirect. By transforming British-Irish relations, European integration helped establish the basis for the joint-stewardship of the peace process by London and Dublin.

This transformation came by various means. Firstly, joining the EU created greater equality between the UK and Ireland. For many decades after formal independence, Ireland remained economically dependent on the UK. EU membership changed this situation, greatly advancing the Irish economy, and diversifying its markets. In 1971, 61% of Irish exports went to the UK; by the time of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998, this figure was reduced to 25%.<sup>5</sup> At the EU table, Ireland was, formally, an equal partner to the UK, its voice holding equal weight in decision-making. And Dublin used this voice to great effect, shrewdly lobbying and successfully operating the EU institutions to serve its interests. This enhanced Irish self-confidence, and earned British respect. It helped end Ireland's post-colonial inferiority complex, and Britain's post-colonial superiority complex.<sup>6</sup> The greater balance that now existed between the UK and Ireland allowed them to co-manage the peace process.

In more practical terms, the EU also brought the British and Irish elites closer together, providing a neutral forum for their frequent interaction. Away from the glare of the British and Irish media, they could more freely discuss Northern Ireland. As a result, European meetings often led to important breakthroughs on this matter. Beyond Northern Ireland, British and Irish elites found they had common interests in an EU context, with similar objectives regarding taxation and trade regulation, for example. Their collaboration in pursuit of these interests also increased trust and understanding, with positive feedback effects for Northern Ireland. Finally, the practices and ideas of EU membership, and particularly the move away from absolutist notions of national sovereignty, made the cross-border and intergovernmental innovations of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) and later GFA more "thinkable".<sup>7</sup>

From a broader historical perspective, the EU's effect on British-Irish relations makes much sense. There has always been a significant European influence on the dynamics between the two islands, primarily resulting from British security concerns. The plantations of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were influenced, and certainly enhanced, by concerns that Spanish forces would use Ireland as a base from which to attack England. Irish chieftains' efforts

to enlist the aid of their fellow Catholics to overthrow the yoke of Protestant England showed that such concerns were not unfounded. The defeat of Ulster's Gaelic Lords led to their exile in Europe from 1607, the confiscation of their lands, and then the plantation of the province that still shapes modern Northern Ireland.

The same pattern was evident in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, though now revolutionary France was Britain's chief concern. Again, the alliance of Irish rebels with its European rival, culminating in the rising of 1798, had profound political effects, leading to the abolition of the Irish parliament and the 1801 Act of Union between Britain and Ireland, this to bring the latter more firmly under the Crown's control. Into the twentieth century, again war in Europe provided the context for an Irish rebellion. And again, the support of Britain's enemy, now Germany, for the Easter Rising of 1916 triggered a cycle of repression and radicalisation that made the partition of Ireland, already mooted, both more likely and more permanent than originally envisaged.

Some of the most important markers in the political evolution of the British-Irish relationship – the Ulster plantation, the Act of Union, and partition – were thus shaped by broader European dynamics. It is understandable, then, that it took radical changes in political relations on the Continent, and with this the transformation of security concerns across Western Europe, to aid similar shifts in the British-Irish relationship, and thus the peace process. It makes the echoing of European gestures of reconciliation in Queen Elizabeth's visit to Ireland in 2011 more fitting, and the destabilisation of British-Ireland relations since 2016 more comprehensible.

## **The Challenge of Brexit**

2021 is also the fifth anniversary of the Brexit referendum. And though it took much of the intervening time to enact, Brexit has already had an enormous impact on Northern Ireland. The vote itself saw polarisation along communal lines, with most unionists opting to Leave, and most nationalists to Remain. The DUP ignored warnings that supporting the Leave campaign would destabilise the peace process, and Sinn Féin immediately responded to the result by calling for a border poll. Thereafter, the issue of the Irish border – little considered in the debate in Great Britain – gradually came to dominate the Brexit process. It became clear – as it had been to most Irish commentators from the outset – that this was the primary obstacle to any

meaningful Brexit, though Brexiteers remained in denial of this reality for some time.

Power-sharing at Stormont collapsed in January 2017 for a variety of reasons, but tensions over Brexit certainly contributed. Brexit also explains why the assembly remained inoperative for so long,<sup>8</sup> and was promptly restored after Boris Johnson's victory in the 2019 British election, which created a Westminster majority willing to support the withdrawal deal that he had negotiated with the EU. By keeping Northern Ireland largely under EU regulation, this deal averted the threat of a hard border in the Irish countryside, but merely by moving this to the Irish Sea, with controls now placed on goods entering from Great Britain. Again, this was a solution foreseen by many from the outset, but the arrangement has angered unionists, who feel it separates them from Britain, and pushes them towards a united Ireland.

Before considering the political implications of this, it is worth returning to explore further the reasons for the swift return of power-sharing at Stormont after Johnson's electoral victory. At this time, though it would be another year before the Brexit deal came into force, its implications for unionists were well-known. Nonetheless, the DUP, like Sinn Féin, felt obliged to accept the terms of the 'New Decade, New Approach' (NDNA) agreement – essentially a package negotiated between the British and Irish governments to address the key concerns of both parties, and offering a balanced compromise sufficient to compel them to return to sharing power.<sup>9</sup> The fact that this deal was made just weeks after Johnson's electoral victory, but following three years of failed efforts to achieve the same end, shows the importance of co-operation between the British and Irish governments. Up until that point, the former had been focused on efforts to achieve a breakthrough on Brexit. In addition, Theresa May's government had been in the awkward position of requiring DUP support after she lost the Tories' majority in June 2017. This meant that London could not press the DUP towards compromise with Sinn Féin. Johnson's landslide thus changed the game for both Brexit and the return of power-sharing. The two governments could now jointly press the local parties to accept the terms of a compromise which London and Dublin had fashioned.

In this regard, the NDNA agreement is no different to any accord made during the Northern Ireland peace process. Since the AIA of 1985, all progress in the region has been based on a version of McGarry and O'Leary's famous

formulation: “coercive consociationalism”.<sup>10</sup> Local parties have continually been obliged to accept agreements essentially constructed by the two governments. London and Dublin would listen to their respective demands, agree on a package or political framework that balanced these, and then jointly pressure the parties accept this. In the absence of local approval, the two governments would either press on to implement what they could of agreements they had reached, threaten to proceed further with the measures opposed by the most recalcitrant local actor, or wait, sometimes months or even years, until all parties were ready to move forward with the same basic deal. With slight variations, this pattern has characterised the entire peace process. In order to have any power, the local parties have always been obliged to share power – hence coercive consociationalism. This approach may sound terribly paternal, but it has been remarkably effective, leading from the AIA in 1985, to the Downing Street Declaration in 1993, the GFA in 1998, and the St. Andrew’s Agreement in 2006. The NDNA accord was yet another example of the same successful strategy being used to edge the peace process forward.

This interpretation does not diminish the efforts of local politicians. Their leadership abilities have been essential in bringing their communities to accept the terms decreed by successive governments in London and Dublin. Nor is it to deny that the local parties have had some agency in modifying the details – though not the essential terms – of these accords. Nor is it to deny the importance of civil society efforts to improve inter-communal relationships and thus create a more favourable context for local political leaders to move their supporters towards successive compromises. However, all such efforts have been based upon, and certainly fundamentally shaped by, the prior determination of the two governments to pursue a certain course of action, and to implement an approach which they had firstly agreed constituted the best way towards a fair and workable agreement. Put simply, British-Irish co-operation is the bedrock on which all progress in the peace process has been built.

## **Carry On Brexiting**

Though the challenges that Brexit created for the Irish border were bound to affect British-Irish relations, the NDNA appeared to suggest that normal working order had been restored. However, the argument made here is that we are much less likely to see a return to any sustained pattern of co-

operation between London and Dublin on Northern Ireland for the foreseeable future. Whilst the Irish border was and remains a highly significant and highly challenging issue, the changes entailed by Brexit are more far-reaching than this. The British state has now set course on a very different political trajectory to Ireland and all its close European neighbours. Whatever challenges this might bring, and whatever the changes in government in London, it is unlikely that we will see any significant deviation from this course in the near future. Project Brexit remains the overriding focus.

Signs of this were evident in the shifts, or seeming shifts, that first led to agreement on the terms of the UK's withdrawal from the EU. When Johnson met with Leo Varadkar in the North-West of England in October 2019, commentators were shocked that they took three hours to negotiate a way around the problem which had gridlocked the Brexit talks for three years. Even more surprising was that Johnson appeared to accept pretty much everything that the Irish government, the EU, and all reasonable commentators had argued from the outset – Northern Ireland would need to remain essentially under EU regulations in order to avoid a hard border in Ireland and still allow the rest of the UK to pursue its own political path with Brexit. Varadkar seemed to have effected a diplomatic *tour de force* in this short meeting.

However, whilst discussions between Johnson and Varadkar had obviously centred on the issue of Northern Ireland, in retrospect it is clear that, for the British government, the agreement made had very little to do with this. The accord that was achieved was not like those previously made between London and Dublin on Northern Ireland – the AIA, GFA, or St. Andrew's Agreement – which both governments overwhelmingly adhered to in order to force eventual acceptance by the local parties. Indeed, it seems that the only agreement Johnson had made was to say and do whatever was necessary in order to “Get Brexit Done”, the lead slogan for the election he subsequently won. This explains the short nature of the meeting between Johnson and Varadkar, and the rapid breakthrough. Johnson was happy to sign off on whatever was required to secure a Brexit deal, with no considered resolve to honour the commitments he was entering into.

As much was suggested when, just a month later, and now in electoral campaign mode to sell his Brexit deal, Johnson told a meeting of Northern Ireland business leaders that they could bin any proposed paperwork



concerning the movement of goods across the Irish Sea: “There will be no forms, no checks, no barriers of any kind”.<sup>11</sup> Had Johnson actually read the agreement he had signed up to? Did he understand it? Did he care either way? The same questions were raised when Johnson’s government threatened to effectively override those aspects of his Brexit withdrawal agreement that applied to Northern Ireland, the so-called “Protocol”, through its Internal Market Bill of autumn 2020. The Northern Ireland Secretary was obliged to admit that this would break international law by contravening the Protocol,<sup>12</sup> but the move was purely a gambit to force the EU to concede ground in the ongoing talks over a new UK-EU trade deal. London eventually removed the offending articles from the bill, but not before damaging trust with the EU over its commitment to the Protocol. Again, Northern Ireland was not the concern here. The aim was still to “Get Brexit Done” by securing a trade deal with the EU on terms that suited the UK and before the end of the transition period when it would actually leave the bloc on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020.

It should have come as little surprise, then, that once a trade deal was secured just a week before that deadline, and when this and the related Protocol came into effect in January 2021, Johnson’s commitment to the latter again wavered. As loyalist tensions over the new arrangements quickly and predictably escalated, instead of working to address these, Johnson made the unilateral decision to delay the implementation of aspects of the Protocol. Arguably, this served only to stoke loyalist opposition by suggesting that further defiance could wholly overturn the Protocol, with extensive rioting following across Northern Ireland in the spring. If the aim was to cool tensions, it would also have been sensible for Johnson to seek the EU’s approval for a delay in implementation of the Protocol – something that the EU later agreed to with other aspects of the accord. Again, this would have avoided damaging trust with the EU. However, to suggest that Johnson should pursue a more consensual relationship with the EU after leaving the bloc is to misunderstand his political rise.

“Battling with Brussels”, we must remember, is what brought Johnson to Number 10. And as noted, whatever criticism might be made of his approach, his achievement of a Brexit withdrawal deal with the potential to win majority approval at Westminster is what won Johnson his landslide victory in December 2019. It makes perfect sense, therefore, that he will continue to use the issue of Europe, even after Brexit, to maintain the level of support that he won in that election and so keep himself in power. It should also be



noted that, for a leader renowned for inconsistency, antagonism with the EU has been the one constant in Johnson's career, even before he entered into politics. Indeed, criticising the EU is what first brought him into the public consciousness as *The Daily Telegraph's* Brussels correspondent, and made him a darling of the Tory right, then battling John Major over the Maastricht Treaty, when the seeds of Brexit were arguably sown.<sup>13</sup>

As well as establishing his reputation, Johnson's time in Brussels provided him with a repertoire to regurgitate when he did finally decide he was opposed to EU membership – or, more accurately, that this posture was the best one to aid his path to Number 10.<sup>14</sup> Thus, from the outset of the Brexit campaign, Johnson recycled the old myth that Brussels dictated the shape of bananas that could be imported to the EU.<sup>15</sup> The complete absence of truth from this claim is immaterial. As Johnson knew from his own days creating such stories, the more farcical the notion, the more it captures the headlines,<sup>16</sup> and this is what would lead the Vote Leave campaign to victory.

The other common feature in the claims of Brussels' obsession with bent bananas and crooked cucumbers is the not-so-subtle sexual innuendo. The current "sausage war" with the EU – again relating to the Protocol, which would introduce controls on chilled meat goods entering Northern Ireland from Great Britain – fits perfectly with this theme. Johnson could only have dreamed of such a gift when he was a journalist, but as Prime Minister he can thank the entire British media establishment for promoting this "Oo, er, missus!" / *Carry On Brexiting* style of commentary.<sup>17</sup> It supports the archetypal image of Johnson as the cheeky Eton schoolboy who never grew up, but is somehow actually running the country, and combines with the other favourite trope of the Brexiteers – war with Europe and particularly the Germans. Put simply, the EU, and Brexit specifically, is the gift that keeps on giving for Johnson.

In more serious terms, Johnson understands that the energies which propelled the UK from Europe, and which he successfully steered towards his own ends, have far from dissipated. Rather, they have now fused with the UK's "culture wars" to reinforce a broader cleavage in British politics. This does not wholly mirror the Leave-Remain divide, but it is remarkably similar, and the cleavage helps explain the continued woes of the Labour Party, particularly its astonishing loss of the Hartlepool by-election in May 2021. Voting for the Tories, despite the region suffering some of the worst effects of the party's austerity policies, and its 11 years in office, proves the powerful

combination of Johnson having “delivered” on Brexit and refusing to submit to the “woke brigade” on issues like Black Lives Matter. It also suggests that, whatever the ineptitude of his handling of the pandemic, Johnson may be Prime Minister for longer than many commentators predict. Those on the right of his party criticise the extended lockdowns, those on the left his slowness to enact and seeming haste to end them. Both, however, see that he reaches parts of the country no other Tory could, gets away with more than any other leader would, and remains a vote-winner. It may be his own boredom, or pursuit of higher earnings, that finally sees Johnson leave Number 10. Meantime, Labour also sees that any route back to power will involve somehow reconciling itself with the many “Red Wall” voters who supported Brexit and were so alienated by the party’s ambivalence on the subject that they turned to the Tories. As suggested, Project Brexit is unlikely to be derailed any time soon.

This brings us back to Johnson’s handling of the Protocol crisis, where the popular narrative of a looming “sausage war” is particularly helpful to his government, providing a comedic commentary on what is a very serious issue, and distracting from the very dangerous game that it is playing here. Not all British commentators are taken in, of course. Rafael Behr of *The Guardian* provided a cynical but persuasive account of the Prime Minister’s approach:

“Johnson’s calculation doesn’t prioritise peace in Northern Ireland. If it did, he would spend time telling the Unionist community that customs checks at Irish Sea ports were an administrative fact of life after Brexit but not a precursor to severance from the UK. [...] Instead he has gamed and inflamed the grievance in the belief that the threat of conflagration puts pressure on the EU to make concessions. If Northern Ireland is on fire, any insistence from Brussels on maximum implementation of rules on sausage imports will look callous and disproportionate”.<sup>18</sup>

Suggesting that Johnson has “gamed” the situation is maybe an overstatement. Behr perhaps gives the Prime Minister more Machiavellian cunning than he is due. It may be that Johnson has just done his usual, taking the easiest option open to him at any one point, and worrying about the consequences later. His approach to the Protocol crisis shows the same laziness and slapdash that characterises all his policies. As long as the British – and for this read mainly English – electorate continue to accept this

attitude, or indeed endorse his stance on the Protocol as another example of “standing firm against the Brussels bureaucrats”, so it will continue, with obvious implications for Northern Ireland and London-Dublin relations.

## **Forging New Relationships:**

### **The Irish Government and Ulster Unionism**

For the main, this article has stressed the vital importance of close co-operation between London and Dublin as a way to successfully manage the peace process, and emphasised the European context for their alignment, itself reflecting the influence of Continental politics and rivalries on British-Irish relations over many centuries. For this reason, it has suggested that Brexit was bound to fundamentally destabilise the pattern of increasing alignment between London and Dublin after they joined the EU. However, this is a result not only of the issue of the Irish border, challenging though that is. More broadly, Britain and Ireland are now pursuing fundamentally different political pathways. For the first time since the early 1960s, when the two countries initially applied to join the EU, they are moving in very different directions. When the UK originally moved to join, Ireland was obliged to do likewise. Such was its dependency on the British market at that time that it could not conceive of being outside a trading bloc that the UK was part of. In its stance since Brexit, Ireland has shown that its economy and political interests have so evolved that now it cannot conceive of a future outside the EU. Meanwhile, for the reasons argued above, it is clear that the UK’s departure from the EU will not result in any fundamental rethink as soon as Remainers, now Rejoiners, hope. The early signs from the post-Brexit UK-EU relationship suggest that there is still plenty of political capital to be gained from stirring traditional British animosities towards the Continent. For all these reasons, it is hard to see how London and Dublin will be able to maintain the kind of closeness they once enjoyed, and which so successfully served the peace process in Northern Ireland. Even if a fudge can be found to reconcile all parties to the Protocol, new difficulties will no doubt emerge, particularly if Brexit increases support for an Irish border poll, or leads to Scottish independence – a result which would also destabilise Northern Ireland given unionist kinship with the Scots, and the further unbalancing of the Union towards outright English domination.

Despite and indeed because of this, the most important political relationship for Dublin right now is not with London, but rather with Ulster unionism. For a long time, southern sympathies have been with northern nationalists. This sympathy was merited, and helped press the Irish government in its efforts to reform Northern Ireland and secure equality for the minority. However, that community is now in its strongest position since partition, and indeed no longer faces an overall unionist majority. For the same reason, unionists feel they are at their weakest. Their anxiety seems exacerbated by the fact that this was meant to be a year of celebration for unionism, but the turn of events has certainly spoiled the party. The implementation of the Protocol; the related infighting and embarrassingly frequent turnover in unionists' political leadership; the loss of their majority status, with the First Minister role possibly soon to follow; the unceasing momentum of republicanism, and particularly the prospect of Sinn Féin holding power in both parts of Ireland; the constant debate about border polls and Irish unity; and the fact that there is an Irish-American in the White House, who unionists feel would happily facilitate that end – all have provided a uniquely unsettling combination of circumstances for this community. Though the human and economic costs of Covid are obviously not unique in their impact on unionists, their effects, and those of extended lockdowns, have also contributed to their loss of confidence, build-up of anxiety, and overspilling of frustration.

In spite of all this, many commentators have limited sympathy for unionists, seeing their current predicament as being largely of their own creation. First came the DUP's support for Vote Leave, and the party aligning with the May government to facilitate Brexit, but then repeatedly voting against May's deal, which would have avoided any of the controls now seen between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Then there was the willingness to believe that Johnson was the solution to their problems. It seems that only the DUP could not see that he would betray the party at the first available opportunity, which he did just three months into his premiership. However, the current anxiety and instability within unionism should be a serious concern for all on this island.

This is hard, of course, when unionists seem willing to repeat the same errors, time and time again. For example, there is incredulity that the DUP still supports Johnson's approach to the Protocol, with Jeffrey Donaldson welcoming the UK government's most recent proposals as a "significant step in the right direction".<sup>19</sup> It is hard to believe that unionists still trust the British government, and particularly this British government. However, one

commentator with insider understanding of unionist politics, the former *director of communications for the UUP*, Alex Kane, is adamant: “Party-political unionism doesn’t trust Johnson”. Rather, Kane explains, “the prime minister is the only key player who could be described as even a little sympathetic to the dilemma it faces. But I doubt if you could find one leader or influential voice in unionism who would tell you, on the record, they trust him.” Indeed, Kane concludes that Johnson “is the worst possible ally unionism could have right now”.<sup>20</sup>

If so, surely this creates an opening for Dublin. This sounds paradoxical, and to be clear the aim is not to suggest that the Irish government renounces its aspiration to reunification, nor that it can persuade unionists to join a unitary state and thus, in effect, renounce their unionism. Rather, it is to argue that the Irish government needs to show unionists that, whatever their different objectives, it has kept its word in its commitments on Northern Ireland, unlike its British counterpart. Also, if, as Kane suggests, Johnson is “the only key player who could be described as even a little sympathetic” to unionists’ plight, Dublin needs to step up its game.

One crucial advantage that the current Irish government has in unionist eyes is that it does not include Sinn Féin. On the basis of all recent evidence, it is hard to see a situation where Sinn Féin will not be in government in Dublin at some time in the next decade. Unionists also know this, and it has already been noted as one of the many factors driving their fears. However, this prospect should also encourage pragmatism. It will be far harder for unionist leaders, psychologically and politically, to strike a deal and create workable relations with an Irish government involving Sinn Féin. The current coalition must work to encourage such pragmatism.

This brings us back to Kane’s assertion that unionists only feel sympathy for their position coming only from Johnson. Greater recognition by Dublin of how bewildering recent months have been for unionists will help. As noted, it is not just the implementation of the Protocol and resulting destabilisation of unionist politics, but what McEvoy et al call the “mainstreaming” of the debate on Irish reunification.<sup>21</sup> Barely a week went by in the first half of 2021 when there hadn’t been a newspaper column, televised discussion, or high-profile public lecture that in some way addressed the issue of constitutional change on the island. However, within this debate, survey evidence suggests that, whilst there is increasingly openness to the idea of a border poll, there has not been an overly significant shift in voting preferences in Northern



Ireland at this point. That important fact is not heard by many unionists, and does not matter to many. It is the very fact that this discussion is happening, and that there could even be a border poll, that scares unionists. A perfect example of this comes from Peter Cardwell, a former special adviser to two Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland. Reflecting on the debate he was hearing in the early months of 2021, he found it hard to fault the tenor and reasonableness of this discussion, but explained that psychological dissonance nonetheless prevails for unionists:

“I was struck by the intellect and maturity of Fianna Fáil’s Jim O’Callaghan and intrigued by his thoughtful proposals on how a united Ireland might work. But I was also deeply uneasy ... quite simply, unionism is not emotionally ready for the conversation about a united Ireland”.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, this does not mean the conversation should stop. It is nationalists’ right, enshrined by the GFA, to pursue Irish unity, and indeed it is quite sensible to begin discussing such a hugely challenging issue, long before any move is made to hold a border poll, and not least because of the lessons learned from Brexit, and a referendum wherein so many people did not fully understand the issues at stake. However, continued appreciation of the difficulties of this debate for most unionists will be required, as will respect for the fact many will still refuse to engage.

Discussion of the Protocol also needs to be mindful of this context. It is not so much that unionists fear their ability to purchase a certain type of sausage will affect their rights as British citizens, but rather what this foreshadows. Again, it is about psychology – the sense of separation from Great Britain, that Northern Ireland is now more aligned with the Republic, that this is a mere precursor to reunification, and they have no say in this – that is creating such panic within unionism, and a resulting inability to engage constructively in the important debates that are ongoing. This is why all discussion of the Protocol, and indeed of a united Ireland, has to lead, end, and have repeated throughout, one key commitment: the principle of consent. This principle, central to the GFA, is unchanged by the Protocol, and as suggested, survey evidence shows limited movement in the numbers required to produce constitutional change – something else that unionists need to be continually reminded of.



As well as repeating its continued commitment to the principle of consent, *ad nauseum*, the Irish government needs to do everything it can to engage with unionism at every possible level. The establishment of its Shared Island Unit last October, following on from its All-Island Civic Dialogue on Brexit, confirmed this intent, though the continuation of the pandemic since then will obviously have hindered face-to-face discussions – the most important medium for any diplomatic effort. However, with improving conditions for interaction across this island in the coming months, Irish emissaries should be eager to get out and talking with Protestant church leaders, educationalists, trade unionists, journalists, and many more besides. In doing so, they need to continue the patient efforts – for this is something that most senior Irish politicians have already been trying – of explaining why the Protocol is the only reasonable solution that anyone has so far devised to allow the UK government to pursue a meaningful Brexit, avoid a hard border in Ireland, and protect the integrity of the Single European Market (SEM). If unionists have more practical solutions to achieve these ends, or improve the Protocol's operation, they should be encouraged to present them. Equally, Dublin should continue urging the EU to allow maximum leeway in its arrangements for Northern Ireland – again acknowledging that this is something that the Irish government has dedicated enormous energies to since 2016 – and every possible flexibility in its application of the Protocol.

Meantime, through their engagements with unionists, Irish officials must continue to emphasise what has already been said by Dublin on the Protocol: that although there will undoubtedly be persistent challenges in the transition towards its full implementation, Brexit was always going to create some such difficulties, and yet the special arrangements secured for Northern Ireland will likely deliver many economic benefits. For example, the major supermarkets serving Northern Ireland recently sent a formal letter to both the British government and EU stating that they will not be able to maintain current supplies to the region after the full implementation of the Protocol comes into force in October.<sup>23</sup> Switching to EU suppliers, including in the Republic, would be required, which would increase prices. However, surely some of the new suppliers could come from Northern Ireland, too, cutting costs and creating business and employment opportunities. And this only hints at the huge potential that Northern Ireland will enjoy under the Protocol. More of its goods will certainly come from the EU, but it can also freely trade with this bloc, one of the world's largest. This is something that the rest of the UK cannot do, and many businesses have endured significant

losses, with some losing half their trade to the Continent.<sup>24</sup> This raises the possibility of companies based in Great Britain relocating to Northern Ireland to restore unfettered access to EU markets, and investors from outside the EU choosing to establish new businesses here for similar reasons, again creating more jobs. Any short-term challenges for Northern Ireland are thus likely to be dwarfed by the economic gains over the long term – as long as the stability essential to investors is assured.<sup>25</sup> Business leaders in Northern Ireland are already well aware of this, but the Irish government needs to make sure that ordinary unionists are also constantly told of the huge advantages that will come after the costs of transition.

This is particularly important, as it is something the UK government cannot and will not do. If the Johnson administration was to stress the significant economic advantages that the terms of the Brexit agreement bring to Northern Ireland, voters in Great Britain would wonder why they did not have the same. In short, they would ask why Brexit was pursued, or May's deal – which would have secured the same terms for all of the UK – was not endorsed. Again, this shows the fundamental problem that, post-Brexit, the requirements of the peace process conflict with the British government's need to show that Brexit was worthwhile. In the absence of Johnson selling the Brexit Protocol to unionists, Dublin will need to redouble its efforts to this end.

The Irish government also needs to continually explain to unionists how, as an EU member, it can help shape European economic policies in ways that suit their business interests – again, something which the UK government can no longer do. Some unionists see this dynamic creating an “economic united Ireland”, with Northern Ireland businesses pursuing their interests via Dublin rather than London, and there is no denying the fact that Brexit increases the logic for increased economic co-operation on the island. But this is not the same as constitutional change, where again the principle of consent prevails, and should regularly be repeated.

Of course, unionists have agency too, and they also need to show more political leadership, and confidence. It would be in their interests for their leaders to engage constructively in the debate about Irish unity, not to agree with that end, but rather to reassure their community that the principle of consent remains central to this, is guaranteed by all sides, and again to point out that survey evidence does not show any significant shift towards constitutional change at this point. More than that, unionists should engage

to make the case for the other side of the argument: continuation of the Union. As part of this, they could also make a positive and specifically unionist case for the Protocol, which in combination with the Union offers truly unique opportunities to Northern Ireland. Nowhere else in these islands do people have access to both the SEM and NHS. Surely the pandemic has made clear that the latter is the greatest of all British institutions, which should therefore lead any pro-Union argument. And given the economic as well as human costs of the pandemic, surely this is the worst time to risk access to the one of the largest trading blocs in the world. In this, unionists can make a hugely positive case for Northern Ireland remaining both under the Union and under the Protocol, yet what unionist leader or commentator dares to make it?

Finally, unionist leaders also need to show more confidence in making the case for the Union through their attitudes to equality. The peace process has raised the nationalist community up to a position of effective parity within Northern Ireland, but many unionists have chosen to interpret this as weakening their own position. Unionists need to change the narrative on the peace process, too long portrayed as involving concessions only on their part. This ignores the fact that on the most fundamental issue, the constitutional position, nationalists conceded, accepting the Union on the condition that they would enjoy full equality under it. However, many unionists continue to oppose the measures to achieve that end, with the Irish language debate being the most recent example. Unionists argue that promotion of the Irish language undermines the Britishness of Northern Ireland. But why is the English language seen as the only linguistic marker of Britishness, when Scottish Gaelic and the Welsh language have long enjoyed the kind of protections that Irish now will, and when many more languages are freely spoken throughout the UK on a daily basis? Why, then, is the Irish language such a fundamental threat to the Britishness of the Union – unless your idea of Britishness is one that excludes all difference, and your sense of the Union is something uniquely fragile?

Unionist leaders need to openly argue that the peace process, and with it equality for nationalists in Northern Ireland, including such measures as protecting the language which many hold dear, can make them more accepting of the Union. Again, this is a fact often ignored, but with stabilisation of the peace process from 2007, nationalists saw that the promise of the GFA could be delivered, and Catholic support for a united Ireland fell as low as 32%, with their approval of the Union correspondingly

rising to as high as 51%.<sup>26</sup> This might seem paradoxical for unionism, but allowing nationalists to be nationalists – recognising their right to speak the Irish language, carry Irish passports, fly the tricolour, and all the other changes that have come through the peace process – their need to be part of a united Ireland actually diminished. By contrast, denying nationalists their rights encourages the sense that they will only enjoy full equality by ending partition. This was evident from the start of the Troubles, when violent suppression of the civil rights movement pushed ever more nationalists to support reunification. A less urgent version of the same trend is seen with Brexit. It suggested that unionists want to turn back the clock on the peace process, follow the Brexiteers in reasserting British sovereignty, and end the porousness of the border which had allowed nationalists to interact more freely with the Republic, and to feel that they enjoyed all the same rights as their southern co-nationals. The risk to these rights, and the possible loss of the EU rights still enjoyed by people in the Republic, has naturally led northern nationalists to question again their political future. Unionist supporters of Brexit need to recognise their part in provoking this debate.

A confident and positive unionism will embrace equality in all its forms, and argue that this is central to Britishness and the ideal of the Union. It will also have to accept that views on Irish reunification may change further as Brexit plays out, for nationalists particularly, but maybe young, liberal or pro-European unionists, too. However, this will all depend on the course that Northern Ireland now takes, and whether the Protocol can be made to work, or unionist leaders insist on both Brexit and arrangements that risk a return to a hard border in Ireland, wholly separating nationalists from the state that embodies their national identity. Unionists must accept that nationalists are Irish, and have a right to express that identity in every way. Of course, the same logic applies in reverse for Irish nationalists, and for all the talk of a new constitution in any future unitary state, they should question whether unionists can truly be accommodated under such an arrangement. Can a unionist still be a unionist if the Union ends, any more than a nationalist can be a nationalist in a purely British Northern Ireland? At the heart of the GFA – which, whatever critics say, has brought us closer than we have ever been to a normal and shared society – is an acknowledgement that Northern Ireland is not British, not Irish, but both. Continued progress towards a fuller realisation of that fact, evolving towards a truly bi-national polity, is the only way forward. That will also entail recognition that, as well as being both British and Irish, Northern Ireland is also fundamentally European. From

plantation to partition, the region's history has always been shaped by broader European influences. Acceptance of this reality will also help us realise that there are many more identities in the region, national and otherwise, beyond a simple British-Irish binary. Whatever the constitutional debate and arrangements that evolve from this, they will also need to accommodate these multiple and changing identities.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> President McAleese's ardent pro-Europeanism may explain this; see James Mulhall, "'We owe peace in North of Ireland to EU'", says former Irish President Mary McAleese' (15 March 2016), *The Irish Post*, <https://www.irishpost.com/news/we-owe-peace-in-north-of-ireland-to-eu-says-former-irish-president-mary-mcaleese-83148>; [accessed 29/7/21].
- <sup>2</sup> The European Economic Community. For ease, the term EU alone will be used hereafter to refer to the project of European integration in its various guides.
- <sup>3</sup> For an introduction to this literature, see K. Hayward and M. Murphy, 'The EU's Influence on the Peace Process and Agreement in Northern Ireland in Light of Brexit' (2018); and B. Laffan, 'The European context: a new political dimension in Ireland, North and South' (2005).
- <sup>4</sup> The European Parliament uses the same mechanism to allocate its political offices.
- <sup>5</sup> Laffan, 'The European context', p.168.
- <sup>6</sup> D. Kennedy, 'The European Union and the Northern Ireland question', p.177.
- <sup>7</sup> Laffan, 'The European context', p.171, p.173.
- <sup>8</sup> See Peter John McLoughlin, 'There's a reason why Northern Ireland has been without a government for more than 500 days – Brexit' (29 August 2018), *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/theres-a-reason-why-northern-ireland-has-been-without-a-government-for-more-than-500-days-brex-102297>; [accessed 29/7/21].
- <sup>9</sup> See Peter John McLoughlin, 'Northern Ireland's government is back up and running – here's how it happened and why' (13 January 2020), *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/northern-irelands-government-is-back-up-and-running-heres-how-it-happened-and-why-129831>; [accessed 29/7/21].
- <sup>10</sup> Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry, *The Politics of Antagonism*, p.220.
- <sup>11</sup> Heather Stewart, Jennifer Rankin and Lisa O'Carroll, 'Johnson accused of misleading public over Brexit deal after NI remarks' (8 November 2019), *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/08/boris-johnson-goods-from-northern-ireland-to-gb-wont-be-checked-brex-102297>; [accessed 29/7/21].
- <sup>12</sup> See Lisa O'Carroll, 'Government admits new Brexit bill "will break international law"' (8 September 2020), *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/sep/08/government-admits-new-brex-102297>; [accessed 26/7/21].
- <sup>13</sup> See Jennifer Rankin and Jim Waterson, 'The real Boris Johnson: How Boris Johnson's Brussels-bashing stories shaped British politics' (14 July 2019), *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jul/14/boris-johnson-brussels-bashing-stories-shaped-politics>; [accessed 26/7/21].
- <sup>14</sup> On this, we should recall the famous two articles that Johnson wrote for *The Daily Telegraph*, one arguing for Remain, the other for Leave. It seems he chose the latter purely on the basis that it was more likely to advance his political career; Jessica Elgot, 'Secret Boris Johnson column favoured UK remaining in EU' (16 October 2016), *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/16/secret-boris-johnson-column-favoured-uk-remaining-in-eu> ; [accessed 1/8/21].



- <sup>15</sup> See Jon Henley, 'Is the EU really dictating the shape of your bananas?' (11 May 2016), *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/11/boris-johnson-launches-the-vote-leave-battlebus-in-cornwall> ; [accessed 27/7/21].
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Even *The Guardian* has run with the phrase, as in Daniel Boffey's article, 'Sausage war truce leaves EU and UK with much to chew on' (30 June 2021), *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/jun/30/sausage-war-truce-leaves-eu-and-uk-with-much-to-chew-on>; accessed 29/7/21.
- <sup>18</sup> Rafael Behr, 'British politics is still drunk on Brexit spirit, and Boris Johnson won't call time' (16 June 2021), *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/16/british-politics-drunk-brexit-spirit-boris-johnson>; [accessed 29/7/21].
- <sup>19</sup> Gerry Moriarty, 'London protocol move "a significant step in right direction" – Jeffrey Donaldson' (21 July 2021), *The Irish Times*, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/london-protocol-move-a-significant-step-in-right-direction-jeffrey-donaldson-1.4626964>; [accessed 29/7/21].
- <sup>20</sup> Alex Kane, 'Johnson is worst possible ally unionism could have' (26 July 2021), *The Irish Times*, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/johnson-is-worst-possible-ally-unionism-could-have-1.4630067>; [accessed 29/7/21].
- <sup>21</sup> K. McEvoy et al., 'The Empire Strikes Back: Brexit, the Irish Peace Process, and the Limitations of Law' (2020), p.643ff; <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2777&context=ilj>; [accessed 29/7/21].
- <sup>22</sup> Peter Cardwell, 'Unionism not emotionally ready for conversation about united Ireland' (14 April 2021), *The Irish Times*, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/unionism-not-emotionally-ready-for-conversation-about-united-ireland-1.4536486?mode=sample&auth-failed=1&pw-orig=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.irishtimes.com%2Fopinion%2Funionism-not-emotionally-ready-for-conversation-about-united-ireland-1.4536486>; [accessed 29/7/21].
- <sup>23</sup> See *BBC News NI*, 'Brexit: Supermarkets warn of rising costs due to NI Protocol' (18 July 2021), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-57879007>; [accessed 29/7/21].
- <sup>24</sup> As reported, for example, by Celine Wadhera, 'British food and drink exports to EU fall by 47% in first quarter' (18 June 2021), *Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/british-food-drink-trade-fall-b1868346.html>; [accessed 29/7/21].
- <sup>25</sup> Scenes such as the rioting of March and April 2021 were an obvious deterrent.
- <sup>26</sup> SOL Surveys Online, 'Community Relations Issues: Constitutional issues', [https://www.ark.ac.uk/sol/surveys/community\\_relations/time\\_series/crconstit.htm](https://www.ark.ac.uk/sol/surveys/community_relations/time_series/crconstit.htm); [accessed 29/7/21].

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