Fractured identities : how Brexit threatens an agreed Ireland

Fractured Identities: How Brexit Threatens an Agreed Ireland

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Brexit has been exceptionally unsettling in Ireland, North and South. It has caused discord within Northern Ireland, exposed the highly contentious Irish border to fresh dilemmas, and strained Anglo-Irish relations more than any period since the 1980s. This essay explores the unique challenges that Brexit presents for Ireland and for Ireland's relations with the UK. As against narratives that localize the origins of Brexit to internal Conservative Party politics, this essay argues that the impetus of Brexit is also bound up with the instability that Northern Ireland has brought to the United Kingdom since the establishment of Northern Ireland in 1920. This analysis of Brexit is therefore situated in the *longue durée* of Anglo-Irish relations: historical perspectives are offered to problematize the radically different attitudes towards membership in the European community in Britain and Ireland. In the backdrop of Brexit's upheavals, this essay explores how Brexit has irreversibly reconstituted the interlocking 'three strands' of relationships – within Northern Ireland; between Ireland, North and South; between Great Britain and Ireland – that were essential to securing the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

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Brexit analysis is reminiscent of Sovietology: it is impossible to forget that the field of enquiry was created in the context of a highly capricious political development; and equally impossible to ignore that that politi-

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cal reality is susceptible to sudden disintegration, largely bringing the field of study down with it. Still, the transformative impact of Brexit socially, culturally, and constitutionally cannot be denied. Britain's project of exiting the EU, or indeed the UK's project of exiting the EU (each of the component parts of the UK leaving the EU together, and on the same terms) is so shambolic as to make it almost impossible to advance an analysis that does not require immediate revision. It is so hard to fully anticipate where Brexit is going mainly because, as the flailing attempts to effect it have shown, the planning behind it is so slipshod and the reasoning for it so absurd.[1]

Brexit has been the biggest political earthquake that England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales (what Norman Davies has termed 'The Isles') have experienced so far this century. With any political earthquake comes a profound cultural unsettlement – in this case, a re-examination of identity across the Isles. As with the enormous Tōhoku earthquake in Japan in March 2011, the damage wrought by the UK's decision to leave the EU without adequate forethought as to its full implications spawned a tsunami in the manner in which negotiations have been conducted, and it could yet precipitate a meltdown in the fabric of the UK. Those realities will be keenly felt in Ireland, North and South. It is the effect on Ireland that is the focus of this essay, with particular attention to Brexit's impact on the delicate peace and stability brokered through the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, which was endorsed on both sides of the Irish border. That agreement was negotiated between the Irish and UK governments and by all of the main political parties (except the DUP) in Northern Ireland.[2] The Good Friday Agreement provided for

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[1] I have, in some particulars, revised the text of the lecture delivered in Basel on 4 May 2019 to reflect current political realities such as the replacement of Theresa May by Boris Johnson as Prime Minister of the UK, the displacement of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) from its central position in the House of Commons as well as the agreement on the 'Northern Ireland Protocol' between the UK and the EU. Still, any updated analysis of Brexit is almost immediately dated. Suffice to say, as Benjamin the donkey in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* might have put it, Brexit has gone on as it has always gone on – that is, badly

[2] The cornerstone of Ulster Unionism since the foundation of Northern Ireland has been a non-negotiable 'guarantee' of Northern Ireland's position in the United Kingdom. Negotiating a new political settlement with nationalists was historically dogged by a perception that negotiation entailed the near-certainty of a diminution of that guarantee and thus was a threat to unionist political identity. The Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985) was negotiated between officials of the Irish and UK governments without the involvement of Northern Irish politicians precisely because of the refusal of unionist leaders to countenance alternatives to the constitutional position; as Dublin's lead negotiator of that agreement Michael Lillis wrote, "unionists were at that time [...] immured

a Northern Irish Assembly, a power-sharing arrangement based on devolved power from the UK Parliament. Among its other provisions were an open border in Ireland; the right of Northern Irish people to be British, Irish, or both; and the right of the people of Northern Ireland to hold a plebiscite in the future on whether to unite with the rest of Ireland (commonly termed a 'border poll').

The June 2016 referendum's verdict registered profound differences of outlook in Britain, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, as reflected in the vote to leave in England and Wales and the vote to remain in Scotland and Northern Ireland. As the spheres widen – Britain, Great Britain, and the entire UK – the political fissures deepen. What is routinely referred to as 'Brexit' is in fact a misnomer. The difficulties in effecting a UKexit, as Brendan O'Leary has labelled it (vii), constitutes a central problem with the entire process from conception to implementation. The nub of UKexit's problems is Northern Ireland. When Britain sneezes, Northern Ireland catches a cold – which, in this case, has developed into pneumonia. Half a year after the UKexit referendum was held in June 2016, the Northern Ireland Assembly ceased to function.[3] This difficulty of governing Northern Ireland was exacerbated in June 2017 when Theresa May called an election to consolidate her majority in the House of Commons – losing it instead. Subsequently, in her search to form a government, she entered a confidence and supply pact with Northern Ireland's DUP which, from a Northern nationalist perspective, obliterated her government's credibility as a neutral co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement. Irish negotiator of the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985) Michael Lillis has argued that Margaret Thatcher, by contrast, had "faced down the unionist hysteria that followed the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. It is doubtful if she would have conceded what Mrs. May conceded to the DUP in 2017" ("John Hume").

The confidence and supply pact put the DUP in the cockpit where it steered (or, more accurately, obstructed) government policy on UKexit. The DUP leadership went to considerable lengths to present Ireland's European dimension as an encroachment upon their cultural and even

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in their veto-proofed immunity from any other reality" ("Emerging"). Hard-line unionism's refusal to accommodate the nationalist identity in Northern Ireland was the central reason that the DUP repudiated the compromise that the Good Friday Agreement represented.

[3] Under the leadership of the adroit former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Julian Smith and with the threat of an Assembly election in which the electorate could express its frustration, Sinn Féin and the DUP agreed on a deal to return to the Assembly after a three-year hiatus in January 2020.

religious identity – and this critique has a long tradition: DUP Euroscepticism dates to its stance on Ireland and the UK joining the European Economic Community in the early 1970s. The word 'ecumenism' appeared at the top of a list of nefarious effects of joining the common market on a DUP political poster at that time, urging against accession to the European Economic Community in the referendum held in 1975 to endorse the UK government's decision to join the EEC in 1973. Thus the DUP unblushingly campaigned for a culture premised upon sectarian division.

It is possible to trace the filiation of these quasi-religious objections of association with Europe to an identification with the Protestant Reformation. The political and religious leader principally responsible for conflating membership of the burgeoning European community with a betrayal of the purity of the Protestant Reformation was the then DUP leader, Ian Paisley. If these claims sound off the wall, that is because they do in fact exist as murals in East Belfast. One such mural references the 400th anniversary of Martin Luther's ninety-five Theses, which ironically originated in 'the continent' of Europe, and bears a putative quotation from The Book of Revelation 18:4 ("Come out of her [Babylon], My people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues") rendered into the modern Northern Irish vernacular thus: 'Vote Leave EU.'

1972/1973 and the EEC

Enormous upheavals in the relationship between Northern Ireland and the UK had occurred the year before the UK and Ireland joined the EEC in 1973. In 1972 the UK Parliament had exercised its sovereignty over Northern Ireland by proroguing the Parliament of Northern Ireland and instituting direct rule of Northern Ireland from London. Throughout the period of direct rule – a period that closely mirrors the duration of the Northern Irish Troubles (1968-98) – Great Britain could, and did, negotiate with Europe, and with the Irish government, on matters of far-reaching concern to Ulster unionists without so much as consulting them.

1972 also saw the publication of a seminal pamphlet, *Towards a New Ireland: Proposals by the Social Democratic and Labour Party*. This new party, the SDLP, was pro-European, and it substantially emulated the politics of post-WWII German parties in its attempt to purge tribalism from Northern Irish politics, and replace it with an emphasis on practical pol-

itics. The concept of a New and Agreed Ireland existed in contradistinction to the catch-cry of a 'United Ireland' which was perceived by Unionists as a threat to their identity. In essence, the proposals for a New Ireland were:

1 That Britain declare it had no strategic interest in remaining in Ireland;
2 The creation of a power-sharing government within Northern Ireland (in contrast to The Parliament of Northern Ireland which had presided over half a century of discriminatory laws and rigged elections);
3 The need for the agreement and consent of the people of Ireland, North and South, as an essential precondition for constitutional change.

The union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland that existed throughout the Troubles was, on the face of it, similar to the union that existed from 1921-72. Yet in important particulars it was a diminution of union because after 1972, since Northern Ireland no longer had a parliament, unilateralism became the default mode of the UK government in its administration of Northern Ireland. Labour Leader Harold Wilson had even formulated what he termed a '16 point plan' in November 1971, to facilitate a total British withdrawal from Northern Ireland, which was extremely alarming from a unionist perspective, and helped to radicalize resistance towards London. Astute English observers of Northern Ireland have always understood that the ultimate face-off in Northern Ireland could see Northern Irish loyalism turn its aggression towards England should it violate the Union.

The UK and Ireland joining the EEC in 1973 was a necessary vaccination for the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to survive. It was a shot of reduced sovereign autonomy which helped to immunize the UK against the ideological contradictions of that Union and the deepening fragility of its economic and political commitment to Northern Ireland. UKexit, however, has exposed the burden of that commitment again, which had been alleviated by the UK joining a wider comity of nations since 1973.

Furthermore the act of the Republic of Ireland and UK together joining the EEC in 1973 helped to expunge a dilemma from Anglo-Irish relations in regard to Northern Ireland. Ireland and Britain began a process of pooling their sovereignty which, ultimately, was a necessary step towards stabilizing Northern Ireland. That enabled a series of agree-

ments: the Sunningdale Agreement in 1973, the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, and the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Each agreement was fortified by its predecessor and inched closer towards a negotiated settlement. The moment that misalignment between the UK and the EU occurs, which is inevitable with UKexit, the degree of difficulty of realigning the intricacies of those agreements becomes clear.

The Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Through the ingenuity of the Good Friday Agreement, the ultimate determination of the fate of the people of Northern Ireland lies with the people of Northern Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement enabled a glide towards a united political structure in Ireland, just as it provided for a retention of Northern Ireland for as long as its people decide. UKexit, by contrast, has unsettled these coexistent impulses and reinforced the binary relationships – unionist and nationalist – in which they had traditionally been cast: something that has caused a great deal of societal division and political antagonism. The impulse to reconfigure the relationship with the EU entails the UK first reconfiguring its relationship with Northern Ireland. UKexit has forced England to confront something that many in London had hoped was fully diffused and sectioned off: Northern Ireland. Denial of that fact constitutes the kernel of the disastrous handling of UKexit negotiations from the UK side during the 2016-19 period, and it begs the following questions: why was it so hard for the UK to acknowledge the centrality of Northern Ireland in negotiations? What was it that the UK cabinet and large swathes of politicians on both sides of the aisle in the House of Commons were so determined to avoid seeing?

Theresa May repeatedly stated that 'Brexit means Brexit,' a truism that was yet another avoidance strategy. What UKexit actually means is this. That Great Britain could, at high price, agree to a deal to self-regulate outside the EU, but not the entire United Kingdom. The reality of the choice between accepting two regimes in the UK instilled terror in proponents of UKexit. Theresa May was emphatic that "no British Prime Minister" ("PM Brexit") could sign up to such a compromise, and her effective coalition partner, DUP leader Arlene Foster, resorted to hundred-year-old rhetoric of the Solemn League and Covenant (1912) to invoke 'blood red lines' ("DUP Leader"). The difficulty of unyoking Northern Ireland from the EU in turn vitiated the possibility of Great Britain leaving the EU for as long as the UK refused to accept

two regimes. The impact of such acceptance was magnified, and presented by the Conservative Party and the DUP almost as though the British state was being asked to amputate a limb or remove an organ from its constitutional body, and to do so in full knowledge that it still may not survive the surgery.

Ireland was (and is) so interlinked with the United Kingdom – the main binding element being Northern Ireland – that the UK can scarcely disengage from its union with Europe for as long as Ireland remains engaged to it. Theresa May's repeated insistence that *Britain* must regain control of its borders was a sleight-of-hand response to the fact that, after leaving the EU, the *UK*'s borders would have been uncontrollable while the Northern Irish state remains in the UK. This is substantiated in Article 49 of the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated by Theresa May on 8 December 2017: "In the absence of agreed solutions, the United Kingdom will maintain full alignment with those rules of the Internal Market and the Customs Union which, now or in the future, support North-South cooperation, the all-island economy and the protection of the 1998 Agreement" (European Union and the United Kingdom Government par. 49). This is known as 'the backstop.'[4]

Absent that condition, Theresa May may well have gained majority support for the Withdrawal Agreement. Instead, it was defeated in the House of Commons three times by historic margins. Agreement between the UK and the EU centred on the issue of the Irish border – and its implementation in the UK Parliament was blocked until it did a volte-face and accepted regulatory alignment in an all-island Irish economy.[5] Both Northern Ireland's particular constitutional status, as well as

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[4] Boris Johnson, in an impressive political somersault, effectively activated the backstop by agreeing that Northern Ireland would be treated as a different customs regime to the rest of the UK and the customs border would move to the Irish Sea. Johnson and the then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar agreed on a customs border in the Irish Sea at a seminal meeting near Liverpool on 10 October 2019 which was the basis for a revised Withdrawal Agreement.

[5] Even two months after meeting Varadkar in Liverpool in October 2019 and after agreeing to a revised Withdrawal Agreement with the EU the following week, Johnson insisted that "[t]here will be no checks on goods from GB to Northern Ireland or Northern Ireland to GB" (Strauss et al.). Construction of customs infrastructure is currently underway in three of Northern Ireland's main ports: Warrenpoint, Larne, and Belfast. Northern Ireland will remain in the UK's customs territory but – alone among the constituent parts of the UK – Northern Ireland will be subject to the EU's customs code. Minister for the Cabinet Office Michael Gove published the UK's plans for the Northern Ireland Protocol in a May 2020 report. Article 34 acknowledges that "[e]xpanded infrastructure will be needed" (Cabinet Office 13) on goods entering

its location at the prospective EU-UK frontier, gave rise to the backstop.

Theresa May, on 14 January 2018, when proposing the Withdrawal Agreement to the House of Commons asked: "[W]hat would a no deal Brexit do to strengthen the hand of those campaigning for Scottish independence – or indeed those demanding a border poll in Northern Ireland? Surely this is the real threat to our Union." She proceeded to speak of "changes to everyday life in Northern Ireland that would put the future of our Union at risk" ("PM Statement in the House of Commons").

Similarly, DUP deputy leader Nigel Dodds said in the House of Commons on 15 November 2018, in response to the Withdrawal Agreement, that this would be the case if the Withdrawal Agreement were passed: "The choice is now clear: we stand up for the United Kingdom – the whole United Kingdom and the integrity of the United Kingdom – or we vote for a vassal state, with the break-up of the United Kingdom" (col. 441).

What Is It All About?

Many prominent advocates of leaving the EU have maintained that the UKexit is not about the EU. The question arises, then, what is it about? In David Hare's play *Time to Leave*, performed by Kristin Scott Thomas, the playwright attempts to identify the motive behind the UK's vote to leave the EU:

> [H]aving decided to leave, it doesn't feel any different, does it? I thought it would. I thought we'd be less angry. But we're not. You see, it's the anger, isn't it? That's what it's about. It's about the anger. [...] it's made me wonder: "What's the anger about?" But the other day I was in the garden, tying in the roses and suddenly I understood. From nowhere. I realised. "Oh that's why it hasn't worked. That's why we're all so unhappy. We voted to leave Europe. But that's not what we wanted. We wanted to leave England.

I would like to argue against the conclusion of *Time to Leave*: indeed it was not the EU that English Brexiteers were trying to leave, but neither, ultimately, was it England. The vote to leave was motivated in large part by a will to leave the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern

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Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK. Article 35 pertains to the UK's proposals for implementing the same, which remains contentious in negotiations with the EU (14).

Ireland. Seen from this perspective, it is all the more comprehensible why a matter external to England, such as the Irish border, blocking Brexit became so neuralgic. When Theresa May spoke of spending money on "our priorities" ("PM Statement on EU Negotiations"), it was to the United Kingdom that she referred. Notwithstanding her repeated statements in defence of the 'precious union,' that steadfast commitment, even within her Conservative Party, is rapidly declining.

An Institute for Public Policy Research report, *The Dog That Finally Barked: England as an Emerging Political Community*, published in 2012, found an ongoing tension between devolved parliament and assemblies in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales on the one hand, and the UK Parliament on the other:

> During the years since 1999 – and, indeed, at various points during the preceding decades when devolution was on the political agenda – more or less dire warnings have been issued about the likely impact of all this on opinion in England. The people of England, it was claimed, would become increasingly resentful of the anomalies that inevitably arise in the context of a system of asymmetric devolution. (Jones et al. 4)

Asymmetric devolution refers to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland having a voice in both their own parliaments/assembly as well as in the UK Parliament where they can also determine policy for England,[6] whereas English MPs have a voice in the UK Parliament only. Another source of asymmetry is that per capita public spending is "higher in the devolved territories than in England itself" (4). These asymmetries, engendered or aggravated by the devolution of power, have created huge problems in the management of the UK political structure a generation after the Government of Wales Act in 1998, the Scotland Act in 1998, and the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

Irish and UK Attitudes to the EU

English and Irish attitudes towards the EU are fundamentally different. That divergence antecedes the UKexit referendum; the referendum merely revealed it in an undeniable way, and placed it at the centre of Anglo-Irish relations. A Red C poll taken in May 2019 found that fully 93% of the Irish electorate endorse Ireland remaining in the European

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[6] The Welsh Assembly, the Senedd, became the Welsh Parliament on 6 May 2020.

Union. Set against the June 2016 referendum, in which 46.6% of the English electorate voted to, Irish support for EU membership is exactly double that of England. Granted, there are variables: during the banking crisis a decade ago Irish support for the EU waned considerably. Still, the divergence is remarkable. Ireland is among the most fervid supporters of the EU, while England is among the most avowedly Eurosceptic. English separatism was the root of the UKexit vote while, conversely, Irish attachment to the European project makes an Irexit foredoomed. So in what lies the source of the disparity in attitudes?

As former Irish ambassador to the UK Bobby McDonagh has argued in the *Irish Times*:

> In Ireland and Britain, we increasingly perceive reality in quite different ways. The reasons a majority in the UK voted to leave the EU are, paradoxically, the very same reasons that an overwhelming majority in Ireland want to stay. This is true of each of the six main arguments of the Brexiteers.

McDonagh was referring to sovereignty, the taking back of control, immigration, expenditure, international trade, and independence. Arguably, the Irish state has similar objectives to England's when it comes to international trade, sovereignty, and independence. So, again, why is there such a difference in how each polity has resolved to deliver its objectives and advance its interests?

A clue to this conundrum comes from Irish playwright Brian Friel. In an interview before his play *Translations*, which explores how language is used to construct identity, opened in Derry in September 1980, Friel said:

> You and I could list a whole series of words, for example, that have totally different connotations for English people than they have for us. Words like loyalty, treason, patriotism, republicanism, homeland. So that in fact there are words that we think we share and which we think we can communicate with, which in fact are barriers to communication. (2:56-3:20)

We could now add the word 'Europe' to that list.

The prevailing narrative for the Irish in regard to Europe is that attaining a European identity did not come at the price of jettisoning Irish identity, and that out of the matrix of both identities has emerged a national narrative hospitable enough to accommodate the traditionally hostile micro narratives, particularly in the contested space of Northern Ireland. There has been a thoroughgoing failure on the part of Britain to grasp the full significance of Europe for the ongoing arrangements in

Northern Ireland, whereas almost ineluctably Ireland has viewed them within this configuration.

A political leader who understood the value of this new configuration intimately was John Hume, who continually referred to an epiphany early in his political life during a visit to Strasbourg. In a study of his political life I describe that when he walked across a bridge from Strasbourg in France into Kehl in Germany, he saw in Franco-Germany post-war construction a model for Northern Ireland:

> These two European nations had slaughtered each other for centuries until finally, through building post-war European institutions, they had found a way to make common cause: to "spill their sweat not their blood" as Hume put it. Through that partnership, crossing from France to Germany had become as simple as walking across a bridge. France and Germany had come to respect each other's culture, language and identity and agreed that they shared an overarching European identity which did not in the least impinge upon their regional or national identities. [...] In the shape of this successful bi-cultural environment, Hume found inspiration for the divided people of Northern Ireland. (155)

On 8 January 2019 German foreign minister Heiko Maas, speaking in Dublin, said, "we insisted, and still do, that a hard border dividing the Irish island is unacceptable. [...] It is a matter of principle, a question of identity for the European Union" (qtd. in Federal Foreign Office). Similarly, Emmanuel Macron told former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar on 2 April 2019 that "this solidarity is the very purpose of the European project" (qtd. in McCormack). New brooms such as Maas and Macron have perceived the overarching function of the European project in Ireland, and yet their British counterparts largely have not.

The Border

The Irish border generally means the boundary that demarcates the North from the South, which separates Derry from Donegal, wends past Tyrone and Fermanagh with Cavan to the South, abuts on Monaghan and flows into the sea in Louth. 'A hard border,' in UKexit negotiations, denotes a superstructure with tangible manifestations of a border (such as CCTV cameras, customs officers) which further delineates a division between the two jurisdictions in Ireland. Yet the idea of resisting the hard border is part of what makes the border hard. The groundswell of hostility towards a hardening of the Irish border, and the

violence liable to be aimed at any tangible materiality delimiting the border, are constituent elements of the hard border itself. To adapt philosopher George Berkeley's immaterialism to political constructs such as a land border between two jurisdictions, the border itself is void of matter: it exists as an idea, and insofar as a critical mass of minds agree that they perceive that idea (Berkeley 407). Therefore the framing of the border as a matter of political arrangement, whether contested or consensual, only partially conveys the epistemological foundations of the border. The border did not cause the division in Ireland; the division helped to cause the border. Fear of the hardening of the border emanates from insecurity about the ability of people on the island of Ireland to coexist in peace.

The Irish border was instituted by fiat of the UK Parliament after Prime Minister Lloyd George threatened "immediate and terrible war" on Ireland lest the Irish negotiators agree to the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921), and it forms part of a long history of Ireland being a bugbear of Britain's domestic politics and its parliament. As far back as the nineteenth century, Prime Minister of the UK William Gladstone, speaking in the Commons, maintained that "the Irish Question is the curse of this House. It is the great and standing impediment to the effective performance of its duties" (col. 1605). That impediment endures.

Given that UKexit makes the Irish border a European border, London has had, for the first time, to accept that the right of people in Northern Ireland to have rights qua citizens of the EU supersedes the UK's bid objective of 'taking back control.' The geographical anomaly that is Northern Ireland has made it so difficult to extricate from Europe: Northern Ireland is not in the Irish state, but it is on the island of Ireland; Northern Ireland forms part of the British state, but it does not form part of the island of Great Britain. The state is founded on a series of paradoxes, and EU membership has helped to modulate the political conflicts that they have engendered.

Theresa May's mantra, in the early phases of UKexit negotiations, that 'Brexit means Brexit' was countered with a more meaningful formulation on Sinn Féin signage throughout the North of Ireland: "Brexit means Borders." The liminal space known as the Irish border has been restive and troublesome since its inception. It has been the site of trade, both licit and illicit; the site of paradoxes (such as on the Inishowen Peninsula where the farther North one travels geographically the further South one gets politically); the border has been the site of contestation over boundaries which were inadequately settled by the Boundary Commission in 1925; it has been a refuge for evacuees from Bombay

Street in Belfast in 1969, when the crossing of it signified the release from their persecution; it has been an inspiration for writers, painters, poets, and film-makers, but a nightmare for governments to administer; the southern side of the border has been perceived, in Ian Paisley's weaselly designation, a sanctuary for terrorists.

In advocating a hard border, Jacob Rees-Mogg went even further than those in the DUP who covertly support it. He was not in Ireland, or at the Irish border, to hear the depth of scorn with which his ideas were greeted. Similarly, Nigel Farage, who said on 14 May 2017 that if Brexit does not proceed he will "don khaki, pick up a rifle and head for the front lines" (qtd. in Peck). Farage could claim that this comment was frivolous – coming from Farage, it cannot but be. Yet during 2016-19 there was a front opening up, and Farage would sooner have left the UK forever than patrol it. That front was the Irish border.

Irish Unity

Since the partition of Ireland nearly a century ago, the proposition of Irish unity has been weighted both by ideological commitments and by practical obstacles – ideological fervour has by far outstripped concrete action towards the realization of unity. Indeed, ideology in favour of a United Ireland has, ironically, undermined the practical cause. Today one of the central challenges of establishing an all-island Irish republic is to reclaim from ideologues the concept of a republic free from the sectarian connotations accruing from the Provisional IRA's campaign; to establish instead a consciousness of cultural and political commitment to a republican model of government and society. With the UKexit referendum, however, the perception of the practicality, and even the necessity, of increased Irish unification has entered the national discourse more definitively than at any time since the Irish Civil War (1922-23).

A corollary of the proposition of unity of the two states on the island of Ireland is Northern Ireland ceasing to be part of the UK, thereby potentially ending the UK. It is the DUP that has been chiefly responsible for lending prominence to the disintegration of the UK in UKexit discourse, one that borders – no pun intended – on maieutics: the latency of the political strain upon the UK and shift towards a United Ireland has become more actual through articulation. That the constituency which fears break-up of the union so much is apt to articulate it is deeply ironic. The DUP's pro-UKexit stance has become a harbinger of a

unified political structure on the island of Ireland more than anything else in the past decades.

The prospect of a unified political structure on the island of Ireland presents multifarious challenges, not least a financial one. The annual subvention from the UK Exchequer to Northern Ireland runs higher than ten billion pounds sterling. Economists differ in their expectations of the financial shortfall in the event of a British severance of its political and economic responsibilities towards Northern Ireland; nobody disputes that there would be a shortfall. Europe would indubitably play a role in absorbing some of the costs of unification in Ireland, as it did when Germany reunified. Since the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Heiko Maas, has referred to retaining an open border on the island of Ireland as a matter of European identity, it follows as a logical consequence of Maas's perspective that, in the eventuality of the majorities on both sides of the Irish border voting for the elimination of the border, European support (economic and political) would flow to consolidate the unification of Ireland as a performance of European unity. This potential role of the EU also informs the hardline unionists' distrust of the EU: if the EU were to supplant the UK as the source of essential finance for Northern Ireland, then the political argument against unification, which is already weakening, would lose its economic underpinning. Unionist distrust of the EU's support for Dublin's position on UKexit is thus enmeshed with an anxiety that the EU is colluding in a subversion of the unionist political identity by stealth.

The Good Friday Agreement and National Identity

The Good Friday Agreement in 1998 engendered a consensus, particularly south of the border, that the Irish border should remain untouched for several decades, in a hope that time itself might help to lessen the political divisions of Northern Ireland. Yet the temporal floor which the Good Friday Agreement provided – 1998 as a date for the new departure – is jeopardized by UKexit.

One of the essential advances for the citizens of Northern Ireland, acknowledged in the Good Friday Agreement, was liberation from a fixed identity. The fluidity of identity, as noted above, meant that, finally, the identity water table in Northern Ireland accorded with the tilt of the political topography; this enabled the cultural space in Northern Ireland to become more absorbent of its various elements. The futile and paradoxical attempt to force consent, which characterized so many of

London's policies vis-à-vis Northern Ireland during the Troubles, was jettisoned in favour of recognition that broad-based consent was a precondition for a stable settlement. This was liberating for Britain as well as for Northern Ireland. It was an acknowledgment that the historical basis for paranoia about the position of Northern Ireland had vanished, and part of what enabled its disappearance was the European project. As John Hume argued in 1993: "The Plantation of Ulster was England's reaction to the links with Spain. The Act of Union [1800] was England's reaction to the links with France. Ireland was the back door for England's European enemies. That's all gone in the new Europe of today" (Hume and McDonald).

The Good Friday Agreement considerably succeeded in transcending, or at least negotiating, the specificity of national identity. A difficult shift in perception of national identity from whereness to whatness enabled an essential relaxation of attitudes. As Fintan O'Toole has argued, the Good Friday Agreement "deterritorialises an idea of national identity" (42:07-11). The political language started to change and, as Seamus Deane put it, when political languages change "they herald a deep structural alteration in the attitudes which sustain a crisis" (14).

In the late 1990s, for the first time in its history, the Northern Irish state had a chance to attempt to discard the lenses imposed upon its vision of polarized history. The liberation that that view affords is the only clear pathway yet found towards an Agreed Ireland in which the people of Northern Ireland have a stake in their society. By contrast, as the UKexit negotiations descended into recrimination, the either/or bind calcified again during the 2016-19 period. On the politico-economic plane, the choice became either a customs barrier down the Irish Sea or at the border, which the two largest political parties in Northern Ireland, the DUP and Sinn Féin, portrayed as a zero-sum equation. Thus the attitudes in Northern Irish political commentary are increasingly redolent of the Troubles period more than the post-Troubles period, and the cultural attitudes that prevailed during the Troubles have resurfaced. Brexit revealed that dislodging Northern Ireland from its position in Europe vitiates the meta-identity that is, as is evident with the threatened severance from Europe, central to whatever stability it has achieved in the past twenty-one years.

On 31 March 2018 the *Economist* printed an illustration in which a young boy has his jumper, in EU colours, forcibly removed – leaving a T-shirt underneath with the Irish and Union Jack flags side by side. The headline read: "Identity Theft: Britain Underestimates Brexit's Damage to Northern Ireland – Those who won the referendum on the basis of

culture and identity now seem deaf to such concerns." If, to adopt the *Economist*'s editorial language, an identity theft has occurred, it is worth specifying the essence of that identity. The reality of Northern Irish sovereignty being vested in people rather than in territorial claims or constitutional proclivities is much closer to Rousseau's concept of public sovereignty than the parliamentary sovereignty of the UK. It generated a discourse which helped to create the Good Friday Agreement. UKexit threatens to subsume the newer idiom with a reversion to the futile older discourse in Northern Ireland.

Moreover, cultural identification in Northern Ireland is underpinned by the law. As many as one quarter of Northern Ireland's 1.8 million population hold Irish passports, which automatically makes them citizens of the EU. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union is the fiat that extends to EU citizens the four defining freedoms of the single market – of goods, capital, services, and labour. That charter is as binding for Irish citizens in Northern Ireland as all other EU citizens. What authority, then, does *any* UKexit agreement have to abrogate the rights of Irish citizens in Northern Ireland as EU citizens? The EU has correctly acknowledged their case as being unique. Unsurprisingly, a lobby group dedicated to the matter of Irish citizens' rights in Northern Ireland has formed in Belfast, the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ). The CAJ has argued that the December 2017 draft exit proposal by the British (agreed to by the Irish government) provided that "no diminution of rights is caused by its departure from the European Union" (European Union and United Kingdom Government par. 53, qtd. by CAJ). It is clear that the CAJ, and other groups in Northern Ireland besides, will militate against a de facto replacement of EU legal norms with British law, and hold the UK Parliament to the commitments it made when it passed the Good Friday Agreement into law.

Futures and Outcomes

One of the triumphs of UKexit – if such a sentence can be completed – is that after a very long and bitter history the people of Northern Ireland voted to remain in a modern, cosmopolitan, and future-orientated continental alliance of states. A majority (52%) of the Northern Irish voting electorate opted to join the EEC referendum in 1975, and a majority (56%) of the Northern Irish voting electorate reaffirmed their wish to be members of the EU in the 2016 referendum. A majority of the

Northern Irish electorate voted for a different future from the future for which a majority of the UK voted. That did not, nor does not, mean that they voted to leave the UK but it certainly prompts a new discussion about Northern Ireland's place within the UK.

A majority of people in Northern Ireland want to remain in the UK, while a majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU. Given that those two propositions are true, the pre-UKexit political reality reflected the wishes of the majority of people in Northern Ireland vis-à-vis the supranational structures that overarch the state, a consent that has heightened significance in a society so characterized by communities holding mutually exclusive constitutional objectives. The post-UKexit political reality, however, has not merely straitened political identity in Northern Ireland, and upset the interlocking set of associations that enabled power-sharing to occur in Northern Ireland; it has also taken those associations out of a sequence in which they stood some chance of working and placed them into a sequence in which their workability is considerably diminished. Brexiteers have tragically underestimated what the UK leaving the EU represents in the schema of Northern Ireland's delicate composition. By contrast, Lord Chris Patten, who chaired the commission that gave form to the new policing arrangements in Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement, was not being alarmist when he likened the UK's flailing attempts to wade into Northern Irish politics as "blundering into the politics of Northern Ireland [...] with a can of petrol in one hand a box of matches in the other" (col. 2078).

UKexit may represent, for some Leave voters, a pristine possibility of utopia. However, the foundational myth for Ulster Unionists, particularly in times of political upheaval, is of an Edenic political origin, God-anointed and monarchally mandated. A political tabula rasa for England could potentially undermine the protections of the union, for which unionists fought and strove over the centuries. This point of divergence in English and Northern Irish unionist trajectories has brought nightmarish realities to Northern Ireland. In 2017 a group of people in Newtownards, presumably as a Halloween prank, placed a pig's head in front of the town's Islamic Centre. In 2019 a group of ten from the same community, dressed in Ku Klux Klan garb and masks, mustered in front of the same Islamic Centre, some making the Nazi salute. These particular emblems and signifiers are unprecedented in Northern Irish history. The lunge to embrace an authoritarian personality and evil cults is occurring against the backdrop of unionism losing its electoral majority for the first time in Northern Irish history: a desperate scapegoating

of minorities to divert attention from unionism's political and cultural dilemmas.

In his resignation speech as Foreign Secretary, delivered in the House of Commons on 18 July 2019, Boris Johnson said: "[W]e allowed the question of the Northern Ireland border, which had hitherto been assumed on all sides to be readily soluble, to become so politically charged as to dominate the debate" (col. 448). It is hard to fit so many wrong assertions into one sentence. The Irish border ab initio is politically charged, and all sides should have assumed that it would dominate the debate on UKexit. One side did assume so from the inception – the Irish side. From small farmers on the border to politicians in Dublin, a relentless stream of warnings issued. If Brexiteers had been willing to listen, they might have averted the disaster.

Coda

On 24 July 2019 Boris Johnson became Prime Minister of the UK. Johnson gained what had eluded Theresa May: the support of the European Research Group (ERG), a fervid Brexiteer lobby group in Westminster. The ERG and Johnson adopted a new-found 'realism' in regard to Northern Ireland and the Irish border. As autumn 2019 wore on, the DUP, realizing that it had been played, began to vote against the government on Brexit motions – principally the new Withdrawal from the EU bill – and a UK general election became inevitable. Meanwhile, the leaders of the Irish and UK governments, Johnson and Varadkar, reached an understanding in Liverpool (see footnotes 4 and 5 above) about the position of Northern Ireland after Brexit. That understanding formed the basis of an amended Withdrawal Agreement from the EU on 17 October 2019, which comprised two documents: the Northern Ireland Protocol and a framework document outlining the future of the EU-UK relationship. Subsequently, in a development that comprehensively neutered the DUP's influence in Westminster, Boris Johnson led the Conservative Party to a landslide victory in the UK general election on 12 December 2019. DUP MPs (down from ten to eight) in the House of Commons at a stroke became powerless to block legislation and Johnson comfortably passed his Withdrawal Agreement through parliament.

Nationalists and moderates in Northern Ireland, who in the main voted Remain, are unhappy to leave the EU. Yet certain guarantees (above all, against a hardening of the Irish border) temper the impact of leaving, and they are assured of mechanisms to protect the rights of those who are Irish/EU citizens, albeit residents of the UK.

Neither unionists who voted to leave, nor unionists who voted to remain, are reconciled to the Northern Ireland Protocol since it establishes a customs border between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, which they fear will be an entering wedge for further division from 'the mainland.' Consequently, unionists are seething over the Conservative Party's betrayal and the way in which the DUP played its hand. When the DUP held the aces in the UK Parliament they systematically stymied Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement. The result of their exertions is, from a unionist perspective, a considerably inferior deal being imposed upon them. May's warning in the House of Commons against blocking her Withdrawal Agreement ("PM Statement in the House of Commons") haunts them now.

A core concept of the Good Friday Agreement is the consent to constitutional change. Underpinning that concept is the role of the UK and Irish governments as protectors and guarantors of the consent principle. The crisis unionism now confronts is the deepening indifference of 'its' guarantor: the breaching of the union from without rather than within Northern Ireland.

The customs border down the Irish Sea is painful for unionists and awkward for everyone. Yet the re-establishment of a border in Ireland between the North and the South would have provoked immediate and enduring civil unrest. The negotiated outcome of Brexit constitutes the minimum justice that the people of Northern Ireland deserve.

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