

Brexit in Northern Ireland: Consequences and Political Divisions

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The implications of Brexit are profound for the UK as a whole and especially so for Northern Ireland, whose trade, border and internal political structures are all affected. Efforts by the UK government to reach a bespoke deal with the EU, on the basis of the sensitivities accruing to the British border on the island of Ireland, may not meet with universal approval from remaining EU member states beyond the Republic of Ireland. Objector states may be resentful if the (cherry-picked) benefits to the UK are not accompanied by any fulfilment of obligations. The Interlaken Principles of trade relations between EU and non-EU countries make clear that the EU will a) prioritise internal integration over relations with non-member states and b) the EU will always safeguard its own decision-making autonomy. The Principles declare that any relationship with the EU must be based on a balance of benefits and obligations. Non-member states will not be able to choose what aspects of EU integration they particularly favour. As such, prospects for a bespoke, tariff-free Northern Ireland-EU cross-border trade arrangement appear slim, although the non-trade base relationship, a continuing Common Travel Area between the UK and Ireland, will surely continue. Northern Ireland is in a very weak position in shaping Brexit. The UK-EU relationship is not a matter devolved to the Northern Ireland legislature. The Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, assuming it can be re-formed, may have some modest input *after* Brexit over which items of EU legislation are retained or repealed. At this point, withdrawal from the EU could conceivably increase the competences of the devolved administration in that policy formulation would not be subject to EU law.

Brexit also means that sections of Strand 2 of the Good Friday Agreement will require alteration, the physical status of the border may change slightly and the improvements in cross-border trade evident in recent years may be reversed. Tariffs on trade arrangements between Northern Ireland, as part of the UK, and the EU (including the Republic of Ireland) appear inevitable. Prior to Brexit, relations between the UK and the Irish government had never been better and the cooperative bilateralism which emerged during the peace process was abetted by shared EU membership. The pragmatic logic of continued cooperation will see attempts to maintain British-Irish exceptionalism, in terms of free movement and no checks on goods, across a soft land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The unionist versus nationalist faultline was rendered even more acute by the Brexit referendum vote. Nationalists overwhelmingly oppose Brexit; Unionist opinion, although less united, is broadly supportive of Brexit. Given some of the challenges facing Northern Ireland as a consequence of Brexit, it might be asked why so many unionists are in favour. There are several reasons. As the data in our paper shows, ideology-as-identity trumps other concerns. Unionist or Nationalist self-identification was the most important determinant of referendum choice on Brexit. Ideology as identity is paramount.

For Unionists, what matters above all is the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. UK sovereignty over their country is of greatest import. Unionism triumphs over other considerations, of greater significance than the demographic variables which shaped the

referendum outcome in England and Wales, of age, social class and of more importance than attitudes to immigration (which is at a much lower level in Northern Ireland compared to England). Although social status had some influence, given that the Unionist working-class was the likeliest sector to vote for Brexit and attitudes to immigration were not insignificant, it was traditional unionist priorities of UK sovereignty that held sway. The next most important marker for Unionists was religious – identity as Protestant. Thus it was little wonder that appeals to Unionists to vote to remain in the EU on the basis of economic logic made little headway – and in any case such appeals did not come from the main unionist party, the DUP, which has long campaigned against any dilution of the Britishness of Northern Ireland and placed issues of sovereignty and control of decision-making at the heart of its campaign, regardless of Northern Ireland's status as a beneficiary of EU finance.

In voting to remain EU citizens, many nationalists also prioritised another Union – that of the unity of the island. Amongst nationalists, it was their nationalist ideological self-identification that usurped alternative explanatory variables. This Irish nationalism might be viewed as 'soft'; in terms of opposing Brexit, SDLP rejection was great than that of more militant Sinn Fein and it is doubtful that many of those nationalists are demanding – or expecting - a united Ireland in the very near future. What they will not accept, however, is a border on their island being upgraded from a fact to a fence, even of an electronic customs variety.