



The Centre for
Cross Border Studies

MEDIA WATCH

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Establishment running away from Brexit plan truth; Ireland and the UK are described as 'inescapably intertwined' in Britain's new plan for Brexit: Bruce Arnold

NO document presented to the Irish people in respect of our membership of the EU has greater current importance than Brexit: UK-Ireland Relations.

It originated with the British House of Lords, a committee of which published it, rather eccentrically, in Dublin on December 12 last year, obviously aimed at a well-informed Irish audience. It put three issues before Irish readers: the urgent need for a bilateral deal between the two countries; the maintenance of a Common Travel Area within these islands; the finding of a solution to the continued existence of a border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, a situation that could become a barrier to progress between Britain and the Republic.

As an Englishman who has worked in Irish journalism, and at the heart of Irish political affairs in Dublin for the past half-century, I greet the document with great relief and total endorsement. However, I have many misgivings about how it will turn out.

The weight of British purpose is well thought out and logical, fitting in with the decision already made to break off EU membership. Irish purpose, however, reflects uncertainty over what to do, and a wish to have it both ways. In short, there is a failure of leadership.

The document has been widely misunderstood in Irish policy-making circles. As is often the case, when faced with a direct and indisputable truth, Irish political leaders take action - if they do - when it can no longer be ducked.

The manner in which the Irish Government, State and people worked their way out of the disaster of 2008 was eventually managed with Europe's help, but the price we paid was heavy. The lack of leadership, the low levels of control and the bringing in of EU watchdogs should never have happened.

It would never have happened if Ireland had stayed out of the euro as the UK did. The decisions made by the Irish Government in the years leading up to the crash of 2008 could be described as giving policy-making a bad name.

The Irish Government is giving every impression of making a mistake of a similar magnitude in how it proposes to deal with Brexit. The House of Lords Report on the consequences of Brexit for UK/ Irish relations, which was published in Dublin, is, I understand, the first such British Parliamentary White Paper ever to have been published outside the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the anchor man on RTE's 6pm news the day it was published suggested to one of the peers who prepared the report that it was directed at the British Government. Why would the House of Lords publish a report in Dublin directed at the British Government? Brexit: UK-Ireland Relations was not so aimed. For all the attention it got here, however, it might as well have been. To say that the Irish establishment, at the time this document landed among them, was running away from the truth as far as the EU was concerned is something of an understatement. They have been doing so for years but are now running out of time and road.

The document's fundamental purpose was to focus the minds of our political leaders, and of the Irish Government, on two key national problems: the land border with Northern Ireland and the Common Travel Area (CTA) within these islands as a whole. And it did just that.

The CTA is important for the British Government and people, but it is vital for their Irish counterparts. This is the principal reason why the House of Lords took the extraordinary step of publishing its report in Dublin. And we should be grateful for that, and for the main message: that there has to be a bilateral deal between the UK and Ireland to protect the interests of both States, but particularly Ireland, following Brexit.

It cannot be something imposed by, or agreed with, the other 26 member states of the EU. In a rather scatter-brained way, wringing its hands for pity's sake and for help, the Irish Government is going round Europe trying to drum up support for a complicated 'Ireland Only' arrangement.

The aim of this, ludicrous in its impossibility, is to keep us within the 27 remaining countries while at the same time allowing for the bilateral deal - an act of faith in Britain - with the vital trading implications. Within this conundrum are the far deeper ties between Britain and Ireland that will inevitably focus on the land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

Ian Paisley Jnr grasped this nettle firmly and unequivocally in the Brexit debate in the House of Commons. Needless to say, Sinn Fein ran away from this challenge and it is still running. They cannot face the emotional slap in the face represented by a bi-lateral deal. Sinn Fein has, until recently, always opposed the surrender of Irish sovereignty to the EU. Now, at the very moment Brexit has provided an opportunity to restore that sovereignty by following the UK out of the EU, Sinn Fein has joined the political parties in the Republic that have sold their souls to the EU and for whom there is no way back. Brexit is a decision that would, moreover, hasten the re-unification of Ireland that the IRA's campaign has otherwise been put back by generations.

The more positive side of this debate is not altogether clear. David Davis, the Secretary of State for Britain Exiting the EU, claims that London, Belfast and Dublin want the open border maintained. However, the UK leaving the Customs Union will not support that wish. In that regard, John Bruton, a

former Taoiseach, told the House of Lords Inquiry that the Republic would have to fulfil its EU obligations.

The issue should be hotly debated in the Northern Ireland elections. As one friend put it to me, "Britain and Ireland are separate, Ireland is not part of Britain, Britain is not part of Ireland. Yet in practical terms there is very little between the two: it seems a very sensible arrangement." He added: "Last year witnessed year-long celebrations of the 1916 Rising here at home, while at the same time the Irish Government found itself going around European capitals begging for the right of people to be able to travel from Donegal to Derry without a passport."

As an Englishman permanently part of Irish journalism and comment, I found it hard to understand how citizens wishing to commemorate 1916 for the right reasons (not guns and glory but political freedom) were unable to see that EU membership has almost brought us back to where we were in 1916.

I confess there were times when I thought that the 1916 commemorations were in fact a cynical attempt by the Irish State to disguise the betrayal of sovereignty by Ireland since 1972. And I had lived through, and written about, all the occasions of that series of betrayals.

The House of Lords members brought to Ireland the elegant and detailed explanation of how the history of our more recent past has become a guidebook for our futures in unpicking the loose and questionable commitments to the EU. That explanation currently binds us in unwelcome fetters. We need to see and understand that and take action on it.

Brexit: UK-Ireland Relations is the first paper of its kind. Perhaps it is also the most important for all of us on these islands who are concerned about what Irish people see as the damage and upheaval to the lives of ordinary people in the UK and Ireland in their interaction with each other arising out of Britain's decision to leave the EU.

The hardening nature of how that might work, and how it will affect Irish men and women north and south of our border, is ameliorated by the care with which the White Paper tells us of the special status of UK and Irish citizens in each other's countries, the free movement between Britain and Ireland, and the magnitude and diversity of trade between the two countries.

Though we are so different, nevertheless Irishness is part of Britishness, Britishness part of Irishness, as I see it. Our much larger neighbour - also our friend and ally - has determined on a new course and we are faced with an important choice about how we respond to this highly significant development in Irish, British and European history. A bilateral deal between the UK and Ireland presented to the other 26 Member States as the price of Ireland remaining in the EU is the only rational way Ireland can protect its vital relationship with the UK and, if we so wish, remain in the European Union.

What the British are asking of us is a simple acknowledgement of the entire package of relations between Britain and Ireland, between North and South on the island of Ireland, and between East and West in the framework created by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

Source: The Sunday Independent

February 20 2017

Cost hikes the biggest challenge for firms

COST inflation is the biggest challenge facing Irish businesses on both sides of the Border, according to a new report by InterTrade Ireland.

With almost a third of businesses at break-even, and nearly 80pc at or close to capacity, there is a vulnerable tier of the economy that could be exposed to inflationary pressures, InterTrade strategy and policy director Aidan Gough said.

But the overall picture from the cross-Border trade body's latest quarterly economic monitor is of a "robust economy, with companies going into potentially challenging times from a position of relative strength".

"We are seeing a resilient, sustained recovery and notable symmetry in challenges faced by firms both north and south. The number of companies across the island reporting stability or growth in the last quarter has remained fairly constant at 84pc; however, exporters continue to fare better than non-exporters," Mr Gough said.

He said there is an emerging trend of skills shortages in the construction sector, with nearly four in 10 respondents reporting difficulties in finding skilled labour. The findings echo recent statements from the Construction Employers Federation in Northern Ireland and the Construction Industry Federation in Ireland.

"An emerging skills shortage in the construction sector is obviously an obstacle to continued growth," Mr Gough said.

"This may lead to building firms beginning to feel the pinch in terms of the acquisition of new contracts and servicing the needs of fuller order books."

However, 82pc of construction firms said they were stable or growing. More than three-quarters said they were profitable or very profitable.

Source: The Irish Independent

February 21, 2017

Encouraging EU Brexit statement

At a time of enormous apprehension for all the people of Ireland, north and south, as the UK prepares to withdraw from the EU, the firm statement issued by the senior European Commission figure Frans Timmermans will be warmly welcomed.

Mr Timmermans, the commission's first vice-president, who arrived in Dublin for an official visit yesterday, said whatever else happens, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement remained of central importance and deserved to be protected "with all the political clout we can muster in Europe".

The contrast between the determination expressed by the former Dutch foreign minister and the equivocal messages sent out from London over the Brexit crisis will have been widely noted, and the stance of Mr Timmermans provides at least some room for optimism during an exceptionally difficult period.

Source: The Irish News