



The Centre for
Cross Border Studies

MEDIA WATCH

24/02/2017 - 03/03/2017

February 24, 2017

An elephant in the room; NI elections

Northern Ireland goes to the polls next Thursday after a campaign that has not so far adequately addressed the major issues it faces. Powersharing between the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin is challenged by a collapse of trust and respect. Since other parties are unlikely to get enough seats a prolonged period of direct rule is probable. That would come just as the British government invokes Brexit, creating huge uncertainty about the Border and hence the peace process itself. This issue has not had the attention or debate it deserves in the campaign.

The election was triggered by Arlene Foster's refusal to stand aside as first minister while the Renewable Heat Incentive scheme overspend scandal is investigated. She and her party turned it into a battle of confidence, while Sinn Féin, in refusing to rejoin the Executive, focused on her increasing arrogance after winning last year's Assembly election. The campaign has certainly aired many unanswered questions relating to the scheme. Polling indicates support for the DUP and its leader is weakening despite her dire warnings that a vote for other unionists would benefit Sinn Féin's aim to become the first party.

Mike Nesbitt, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, attracted particular criticism from her for suggesting voters should give preferences to the Social Democratic and Labour Party. Were that to happen in any widespread way it could open up a cross-community dynamic alongside the growth of "others", including Alliance party, the Greens and People Before Profit candidates trying to break out of the entrenched unionist-nationalist divide. But research for the Electoral Reform Society into last year's elections indicates a mere 6 or 8 per cent support for such transfers. Turnout was only 52 per cent then and does not look like increasing. So it still looks most likely that the DUP and Sinn Féin will emerge as the dominant parties, not least because the overall number of seats is being reduced from 108 to 90.

If they can't agree on a new powersharing deal a period of direct rule from London looms. For this to happen just as the UK begins negotiations on withdrawing from the European Union would be the worst of both worlds. Even though the DUP and Sinn Féin took opposite positions on Brexit in the

referendum Northern Ireland voted against leaving by 56 to 44 per cent. The two parties in government showed some willingness to find common ground in defending the North's interests and in talking to the Government in Dublin on how best to defend them at European level.

That essential task is made much more difficult during the election and in any impasse after it, when London would be preoccupied with its own interests. It would then fall to the Government to give voice to Ireland's interests North and South in the Brexit talks.

Source: The Irish Times

February 27 2017

Brexit could destabilise the peace process, warns Mitchell

BREXIT could damage relations between the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic, the man who brokered the Good Friday Agreement has warned.

Senator George Mitchell played a key role as chairman of the talks that led to the 1998 Agreement.

Now in his early 80s, the peacemaker still takes a keen interest in Northern Ireland. In an interview with Sky News, the American diplomat said: "I believe that the European Union was an important factor that led the United Kingdom and Ireland to co-operate in establishing a process that led to the Good Friday Agreement.

"And I think the UK being out of the European Union may reduce the prospects for further co-operation."

He added: "We recognised at the time... that by itself, the Agreement did not assure peace or prosperity or reconciliation. It made them possible.

"So what I said at the time was that it would take many years and many difficult decisions by courageous leaders in Northern Ireland to attain those goals."

His comments came as it emerged Labour peers will today attempt to build protections for Northern Ireland and the Republic into the negotiations leading to the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

The peers include former Secretary of State Paul Murphy and NIO Minister Angela Smith, who want to ensure no 'hard border' between the province and the Republic emerges over the next two years.

As the House of Lords moves to the committee stage of the legislation to trigger the negotiations, amendments can be introduced.

Peers including Lord Tommy McAvoy - Labour's shadow spokesman on Northern Ireland - are tabling one today calling on the government to have regard to the constitutional, institutional and rights provisions of the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Murphy said: "We must have a commitment that the provisions of the Agreement will remain in place, and be respected both in letter and in spirit.

"There are implications for the border and the free movement of people, goods and services.

"Those born in and residing in Northern Ireland who choose to take up their right to Irish citizenship will, by virtue of that right, remain citizens of the EU.

"The long-standing rights of Irish citizens within the UK must also be protected, and vital institutions preserved.

"Mrs May and her ministers need to demonstrate that they understand these realities, and respect not just Northern Ireland's past but its future, too." And a second former Labour Secretary of State, Peter Hain, has argued the island of Ireland is becoming "almost daily united in everyday life".

Writing in the Observer yesterday, he said: "It has been as if the border no longer matters. Citizens on either side can and do take advantage of the health and educational services nearest to where they live on a cross-border basis. People cross the border freely to work, play and socialise.

"Northern Ireland businesses invest without hindrance in the Republic and the same occurs for businesses in reverse. The two economies are being steadily integrated: even the level of corporation tax in Northern Ireland is being cut to synchronise with the low rate in the South."

But he said after Brexit, politics in Northern Ireland will again come to be dominated by the border.

"Of course, the island of Ireland has not been united politically or constitutionally, but it is almost daily becoming united in everyday life.

"And that is welcomed by unionists as well, secure in the knowledge that there can be no change in the constitutional position without their consent. "The government disturbs that normalisation at everyone's great and grim peril. I don't say that we will go back to the murder and mayhem of the Troubles, but I do insist the process could so easily unravel.

"It requires continuous forward momentum, and a reimposed border with restrictions in any way is the very reverse of that.

"If the referendum result means Brexit at any price, it might well come at a dangerously high cost for the Northern Ireland peace process."

Source: The Belfast Telegraph

February 28, 2017

Northern Ireland's industry sectors facing heavy job losses, says report

Political uncertainty at home and Brexit concerns causing investments to be put off are among the biggest challenges facing Northern Ireland's economy, a report states.

According to Danske Bank's latest economic forecast, the region is set to grow by 0.8% in 2017. That's half the rate of the UK as a whole.

Northern Ireland is also predicted to grow by 1% in 2018.

But the forecast warns political uncertainty and a lack of productivity remain concerns here.

It predicts "800 job losses in construction and 700 in manufacturing by the end of the year".

It states: "2018 will bring mixed fortunes for these sectors, with manufacturing losses set to increase to 1,100 whilst the construction sector is forecast to return to positive growth."

It adds that "Brexit-related uncertainty is likely to persist, with some firms set to postpone capital spending until the UK's future trading relationship with the EU becomes clearer".

Speaking about the loss of access to the EU single market and "potential future barriers to cross-border trade", Danske Bank economist Conor Lambe said: "Businesses should be thinking through the implications of different scenarios now so that they are ready to act once the terms of the Brexit deal become clear."

The report stated that short-term growth is "expected to be driven predominantly by consumer spending, accompanied by a slight pick-up in investment spending from 2017".

"A weaker outlook for demand suggests we might see a slight deterioration in the labour market over the short-term," Mr Lambe commented.

"There are also a number of downside risks which could lead to lower growth than we are currently forecasting, including political instability and a larger than expected negative impact on confidence as a result of Brexit. "We think that consumer spending will continue to rise in the years ahead, albeit at a lower rate than last year.

"And the weaker pound will offer a modest boost to net exports. Therefore, we expect the Northern Ireland economy to continue growing over the next couple of years."

Mr Lambe added: "The consumer-focused sectors are forecast to continue their momentum from 2016 into 2017. However, this will be short-lived as higher inflation will have a negative impact on household purchasing power.

"Inflation has already started to accelerate and this is likely to continue through 2017 as the impact of a weaker sterling makes its way along the supply chain."

On manufacturing jobs, the report said that "rising manufacturing activity will be achieved through the adoption of new technologies and increased productivity rather than through higher employment, a feature that will be important to maintain competitiveness in international markets".

The report says agriculture employment is "expected to increase modestly in both 2017 and 2018, generating 100 new jobs as the fall in the exchange rate makes local produce more competitive".

Source: The Belfast Telegraph