



The Centre for  
Cross Border Studies

# MEDIA WATCH

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**29 September 2017 – 6 October 2017**

**30 September 2017**

## Labour believes Northern Ireland can have its cake and eat it when it comes to Brexit and the border

Northern Irish affairs didn't get much of a mention on the main stage at the Labour Party's recent annual conference in Brighton, but featured heavily in a series of fringe events.

On a positive note, the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Development got heavily commended for not allowing a badger cull in Northern Ireland. Instead, the animals are captured and vaccinated, in an approach that protects the entire ecosystem.

There was praise too for the continuing success of the Good Friday Agreement, even if the present situation is far from perfect.

There was also discussion on the margins about the Labour Party's role in Northern Irish politics. Should the party stand candidates in elections, as a further non-sectarian alternative to conventional unionism and nationalism?

Though that question wasn't answered, it threw up plenty of healthy discussion, and caused a few ripples of debate beyond the fringe. But it's not a question that's going to get mainstream attention at this moment in time. That's because there's one obvious burning issue that the party needs to address, and it's the topic that's likely to dominate politics for the next five years.

Brexit dominated discussion in many of the fringe events as a whole at the conference. Consistently, speakers insisted that Brexit must not be allowed to threaten the Good Friday Agreement.

Colum Eastwood, in one fringe event alongside Owen Smith and Shadow Brexit minister Jenny Chapman, made an impassioned plea to keep Northern Ireland within the customs union for the sake of peace, progress and prosperity.

Though acknowledging that this 'sea border' might be seen as threatening the Union, the arguments offered by this panel came across as apolitical on the national question and economically convincing.

On the whole, the Labour Party has no more interest in an Irish nationalist agenda than it does in an Ulster Unionist one.

After some initial divisions at the time of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership victory, this is a party that is growing in confidence and is very much grounded in reality.

Right now, the reality is that there seem to be no plans for what is going to happen as regards the border on the morning after Brexit. That, for most people at this conference and probably for the people of border communities north and south in Ireland, seems far more important right now than big questions about what happens constitutionally in the future.

However, it is important to note that the Brexit debate has shifted the conversation towards reflections on the possibility of a united Ireland, in a way that has never been seen before in England. Once upon a time, such discussions probably only took place at Labour Conferences in marginal events organised by those with sympathies for Sinn Fein. Now, people from Stranraer to Shrewsbury, and Middlesbrough to Milton Keynes are discussing what should be done about the Irish border issue. But the intention of this was not to send Unionist parties and people rushing towards panic stations. The mood was one of coming to an arrangement within the terms of the Good Friday Agreement.

That, for many delegates at the conference, means that an argument is made for Northern Ireland being treated as a special case within the existing union.

In adopting this position, the society here can be ahead of the game, just as with the badger situation. After all, the two things are linked. This is a society that is very much shaped by its agriculture and beautifully diverse natural environment.

This supports a whole range of industries, from tourism to food production, and there's a realisation that those industries need to be protected.

Time and time again in discussions, people from England seemed to feel a duty of care to look after Northern Ireland's interests because Brexit, as they agreed, was triggered by the English vote - 56% of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU.

The abiding mood of this conference was the positive way that the Labour Party wants to change the conversation around so many issues. Maybe Northern Ireland can learn a lot from these new ways of re-imagining old problems, because other ways of doing things are possible.

If there was one sentiment that really came across in this conference, it was that it is possible for Northern Ireland to be a part of the Customs Union in the EU, and the political union of the UK for as long as people want that. That is what's written down in the legal agreement of the Good Friday deal and that, above all else, is what Labour party politicians and ordinary members seem determined to protect.

**Source: The Belfast Telegraph**

4 October 2017

## EU special status vote splits Northern Ireland parties

A European Parliament vote in favour of Northern Ireland being granted special status has been welcomed by nationalists but strongly criticised by unionists.

Strasbourg also backed a resolution declaring that negotiations between the EU and the British Government hadn't made sufficient progress to move to the next phase of talks, which will centre on trade.

Welcoming the motion in favour of Northern Ireland remaining in the single market and customs union after Brexit, Sinn Fein MEP Martina Anderson said: "It is a clear indication of the growing support for special status for the North within the EU across Europe.

"This resolution is an important step forward in recognising that the needs of the north of Ireland are different to those of Britain."

However, DUP leader Arlene Foster told Cabinet ministers at a reception hosted by the Conservatives at their annual conference last night that her party would not accept any solution that involved a border being effectively drawn in the Irish Sea.

"We really, really believe in the single market - the single market of the United Kingdom," she said. "That is the one that is most important to us. So all of this talk about a border down the Irish Sea is a complete non-starter to the people and the business community of Northern Ireland."

Earlier, DUP MEP Diane Dodds said: "Let us be clear, Northern Ireland's Brexit solution will be part of the UK's solution.

"There can be no question of a deal that cuts us adrift from our most important market and erects barriers within the UK single market.

"The interlinked nature of the Brexit negotiation means that we need to move swiftly to the second phase of the negotiation for a full resolution.

"Northern Ireland is not a bargaining chip in these negotiations. The genuine concerns in my constituency should not be exploited in pursuit of every British pound."

UUP MEP Jim Nicholson said the EU was no longer impartial in the dispute between unionists and nationalists and was now "essentially calling for an international border to be placed between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK".

"This is a sad day for me. By backing this text, it feels as though Europe is turning its back on decades of good relations with all communities in Northern Ireland. That is a huge mistake," he added.

But welcoming the resolution, SDLP MLA Claire Hanna said the EU's commitment "to defending the interests of this island, north and south, had remained steadfast".

Alliance deputy leader Stephen Farry said: "The surest way to avoid a hard border is for the UK as a whole agreeing a fresh customs union with the EU."

**Source: The Belfast Telegraph**

**5 October 2017**

## Key north-south body 'mothballed'

A "FAILURE of political leadership in the north" is robbing the region of a key cross-border forum as Brexit looms, the leader of Fianna Fáil has said.

Micheál Martin was speaking after it was revealed that the North-South Inter-Parliamentary Association has not met for 10 months.

A response from Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Coveney to a Dáil written question from Mr Martin said the cross-border body, which links members of the Oireachtas with their counterparts in the Stormont assembly, had not been convened since December 2 last year, when it met in Belfast.

The 48-member association was conceived as part of strand two of the Good Friday Agreement but did not hold its inaugural meeting until 2012.

"At present, the North-South Inter-Parliamentary Association is unable to meet and this will remain the case until the Northern Ireland Assembly is fully reconvened," the minister said.

"I am continuing to work with the secretary of state for Northern Ireland and each of the political parties to support an agreement as soon as possible, on the formation of a new power-sharing executive within the mandate of the current assembly."

Mr Coveney said the Fine Gael government was determined to get the institutions working "fully and effectively". Mr Martin said he was disappointed to learn that the cross-border body had not met.

"The fact that the north south inter-parliamentary body hasn't met at all for almost 10 months is further evidence of the north-south agenda being undermined by the ongoing failure of political leadership in the north," he said.

"This body should be playing a central role in exploring and advancing issues of concern, around Brexit in particular – instead, it has been mothballed and is doing nothing."

SDLP MLA Claire Hanna said that in the absence of the North-South Ministerial Council, which also has not met since last year, it was critical that every cross-border mechanism "is put to full use to protect the people of this island from Brexit".

"The North South Inter-Parliamentary Association, the British Irish Parliamentary Association and the joint ministerial council have a significant role to play bringing parties together across these islands," she said.

**Source: The Irish News**