



The Centre for
Cross Border Studies

MEDIA WATCH

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Stormont parties united in welcoming Brexit phase two negotiations

THE north's main parties have welcomed the EU leaders' agreement to move Brexit talks on to their second phase.

The first issue to be discussed early in the new year will be an expected two-year transition period after the UK's exit in March 2019.

Talks on trade and security cooperation are set to follow in March.

DUP MEP Diane Dodds said the next phase was the "crux of negotiations" and called for speedy agreement on the implementation period of the new EU-UK trading relationship.

"It is important that the withdrawal agreement reached is a holistic deal covering all areas and not done in a piecemeal manner," she said.

Sinn Féin's Martina Anderson said Ireland and continued north-south relations needed to be at the heart of the next phase of the negotiations.

Speaking from Brussels, she said it was "essential" that the talks address

"the border, protecting north-south co-operation and trade, and citizens' rights".

SDLP MLA Claire Hanna commended the Dublin government for its "firm but fair approach" and its desire to protect the entire island from the worst impacts of Brexit.

"London has discovered and begun to accept over recent months that several of their aims are incompatible and we hope that their position continues to evolve in phase two," she said.

Alliance deputy leader Stephen Farry said while Brexit was a "deep and fundamental error" it was important that the negotiations progressed smoothly.

"If the UK as a whole does not opt for a very soft Brexit, then Northern Ireland must remain with the single market," he said.

Source: The Irish News

18 December 2017

Belfast Agreement binds the UK to Europe; The true import of the agreement is only now becoming clear to many in Westminster

At the bottom of the famous stairs in Downing Street - the ones that made the Taoiseach gush earlier this year - next to a globe in French that François Mitterrand gave to Margaret Thatcher, is a family photo taken at the 1926 Imperial Conference. It is a formal portrait of assembled ministers of the crown from dominions, such as Australia and Canada, that were not yet fully independent states.

In the front row sits WT Cosgrave, then president of the executive council of the Irish Free State, another one of the king's dominions. In the row behind him is Kevin O'Higgins, his deputy. The photograph is a relic of that sliver of history, after the Civil War but before the first Fianna Fáil government of 1932, when the Irish State had won a form of separation, albeit on a partitioned island, but still operated within the ambit of the British empire.

A decade before the summit Cosgrave was sentenced to death for his part in a rising aimed at winning an Irish republic. By 1926 he was meeting King George V as one of his heads of government. Those were, after all, the terms of the 1920 Anglo-Irish treaty which Cosgrave was pledged to uphold.

I don't know whether Theresa May is aware of Cosgrave's predicament - it never came up when I worked there - but she can probably empathise. She too is bound by the terms of an Anglo-Irish treaty which she did not sign but which limits her freedom of action.

In her case it is the Belfast Agreement. This document was commonly understood in Britain as a means of pacifying Northern Ireland's warring tribes. In 2008, 10 years after the agreement, then shadow Northern Ireland secretary and now Brexit-ultra Owen Paterson said it "served a vital purpose in getting bitter opponents to work together".

Smudged the boundaries

Lots of people understand why the Belfast Agreement is important. What is less understood, particularly on the right of British politics, is how it works.

For a start it binds Britain to something bigger than simply refereeing the Sharks and the Jets in the North. It was the culmination of an approach to conflict resolution which deliberately, but subtly, smudged the boundaries of nation states. In that way it was European in nature.

It created treaty obligations on both Britain and Ireland to uphold, for example, Northern Ireland's have-cake-eat-cake citizenship rules and, most distressingly for harder Brexiteers, it codified areas of North-South co-operation that cannot plausibly continue with entirely alien economic and regulatory models on different parts of the island.

Many parliamentary sovereigntists disliked the Belfast Agreement, but they could console themselves that Jesuitical formulations about the "totality of relationships in these islands" were cover for the blunt truth that Ireland was still partitioned, and would remain so until the majority in Northern Ireland wished it to be otherwise.

But that consolation must now feel cold. Because in the cruellest of ironies, those Jesuitical curlicues, and that European hint of smudged sovereignty, form part of the institution that Brexit was supposed to restore to glorious primacy: Britain's diffuse and uncodified constitution.

And what is more the Irish Government has made clear that it will use the Brexit process as an enforcement mechanism for the terms of the 1998 agreement.

Not only that, last week's joint report from the European Commission and UK negotiators included expansive commitments. The supposed backstop option - the now-infamous "full regulatory alignment" option - applies to rules "now or in the future" which support "the all-island economy".

Some of this chimes with what the UK was committed to anyway. Its position paper on Ireland, published in August, said it would uphold the Belfast Agreement "as a whole and in all its parts".

Perennial feud

But here we get to the fiendish heart of the problem. In order to agree on the parts that need to be assembled, you need to agree on what the whole looks like.

Is it a settlement aimed at containing Northern Ireland's perennial feud within the UK but with a consultative role for the Republic and a few statutory rights for the minority?

Or is it a text which expands and contracts to fit the necessary space in the mind of whoever is reading it, allowing both the United Kingdom and the "Irish nation" to exist in the territory of Northern Ireland?

The clear implication of last week's agreement is that it is the latter - and that any regulatory or economic divergence that disrupts that spirit will be a problem.

This definition of the Belfast Agreement's purpose, and the eventual settlement it suggests, sits in direct contradiction to the sovereigntist version of Brexit promulgated by many in the cabinet and on the Conservative backbenches.

In 1926 the declaration Cosgrave and others signed at the imperial conference stated that dominions, including the Irish Free State, were autonomous communities within the British empire, and not subordinate to the United Kingdom. But this was not enough for those who felt the sacrifice of Easter 1916 demanded the fullest possible realisation of Irish national sovereignty.

Impractical dreams

Cosgrave, like Theresa May today, was an instinctively conservative figure trying to make good on the impractical dreams of a revolution while operating within the practical constraints of reality.

In case she needs inspiration, his image is conveniently nestled in the heart of Downing Street, less than 10 seconds away from her desk.

Much like the Belfast Agreement, an Irish contradiction nestled in the heart of the British constitution, and is threatening to undermine Brexit from the inside out. Matthew O'Toole was chief press officer for Europe and economic affairs in the British prime minister's office from September 2015 to August 2017. He now works for Powerscourt Communications

Source: The Irish Times

18 December 2017

Eye patients get all aboard cataract bus

A GROUP of pensioners waiting up to seven years for HSE cataract operations yesterday became the first to use a new express service.

They all took the 1,000km roundtrip from Bantry in Cork to Belfast, on what is being dubbed the Cataracts Express.

It is believed to be the first bus service of its kind specifically set up to get people with cataracts, who are on long waiting lists, operated on.

The group included a 72-year-old pensioner who has waited seven years for his cataracts to be treated.

Patrick Carey, from Tralee, last night told the Irish Daily Mail: 'I jokingly asked a receptionist at a HSE hospital, where I was looking to be treated, if I needed to wait until I start using a white stick.

'She didn't laugh. Instead, she shrugged and said that I might as well, as that is the way things are going.' The bus is the brainchild of independent TDs Michael Collins and Danny Healy Rae. But the inspiration for it was John Patrick Harrington.

The 90-year-old had to endure the 1,000km round-trip from Bantry to Belfast because he faced a four-year wait, despite going blind.

His son Jerry has since devoted much of his time to helping other pensioners get up to Belfast under a little-known HSE-funded treatment abroad scheme called Cross Border Directive on Healthcare (CBD).

Source: The Irish Daily Mail