



## **Migration at the Northern Ireland (Brexit) Border: Identities, Commodities and Connections**

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[This paper focuses on the relative significance and import of migration in current debates on the position of Northern Ireland in a post-Brexit UK. With the future nature of the border with the Republic of Ireland central to those debates, resolution of the issue of *who* will be able to cross the border and *how* will determine the extent to which Northern Ireland as a region becomes a borderland of the UK and the European Union. While policy-makers' concerns to protect the Common Travel Area between the UK and the Republic of Ireland have implications in Northern Ireland in terms of self-identification as British or Irish that marginalise migrant identities, arguments in favour of legitimising continued migration to Northern Ireland may be seen as largely based on a desire to maintain access to a (particular EU) market of human commodities. However, as this paper will propose, the tendency to commodify migrants within a "supply and demand" regulatory framework contrasts with interpretations of continued post-Brexit inward migration as a marker of openness and connectivity. The extent to which future migration serves either a purely mechanical function that dehumanises the individuals concerned or one that prizes it as a human connection to other worlds and cultures, will determine the degree to which Northern Ireland is bordered within the concept of a "Global Britain" that excludes both this part of the United Kingdom and those who have been judged as so burdensome as to make the departure from the European Union a guarantee of future prosperity.]

I would like to begin with a note of thanks and an apology. My thanks go to Paulo and his colleagues for inviting me to be here today, while my apology is extended to all of you present for the lack of

scholarly rigour in what I am about to present. Having been an academic in the not too distant past, I am now the Deputy Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies based in Armagh, Northern Ireland, and – for my sins, including perhaps the decision to leave academia – heavily involved in the analysis of policy related to Brexit and in the development of our own proposals for possible ways forward. I also have to confess that I only belatedly took fully on board that my contribution was being billed as a keynote lecture. Well, as someone once said, I may play all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order.

The focus of the Centre for Cross Border Studies' Brexit proposals has been safeguarding the relations between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland, and between the island of Ireland and Great Britain. This is in line with our Centre's core mission, which is to contribute to the increased social, economic and territorial cohesion of the island of Ireland through cross-border cooperation. It could be said that our approach to Brexit and our engagements with policy-makers on this subject is driven by a degree of selfishness – the desire to protect what we have. I suppose the same could be said of the different nations and regions that make up the United Kingdom, different local authorities, different parts of our society, including business and different sectors within business, and even academic institutions – we are all looking at what we currently value and for ways to keep those things when we eventually emerge from the stormy waters provoked by the outcome of the referendum of June 2016.

The question arises, however, as to whether we drift apart or come together as we cling to our sectoral or regional rafts held together by the patchworks or sticking plasters of the particular mitigations or opportunities we have each managed to find, and how many of these rafts will remain afloat in the new post-Brexit seas. Perhaps more importantly, what or who will we have jettisoned or have jettisoned on our behalf in an effort to be seaworthy, and who will make up the crew?

Returning to what is more familiar territory for me, I would like to now focus on the debates surrounding the implications of Brexit for the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and more specifically on who may be able to cross it, in what capacity and for what reasons. Therefore, as I discuss the border for the next few minutes, I will be concentrating on the movement of people across it, and not on the movement of goods, services or capital, as important as they are for the future of relations between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland, and between the island of Ireland and Great Britain.

Ireland and the UK's joint membership of the European Union and, therefore, of its Customs Union and Single Market has undoubtedly played a significant part in making the Irish border what it

currently is – a largely invisible phenomenon – although the end of “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland also led to the dismantlement of the significant security presence along it. However, it is important to understand from the outset that the absence of permanent controls at the Irish border does not mean the movement of people across it is entirely unsupervised. Buses in particular are liable to being boarded by Irish immigration officials when they cross the border from Northern Ireland, and passengers asked to present documentation proving their eligibility to be on the island of Ireland.

Currently, eligibility to enter and work on the island of Ireland without specific visas is reserved for citizens from two sets of interrelated spaces: those from the Common Travel Area on the one hand, and those from the European Economic Area and Switzerland on the other. They overlap as the Common Travel Area contains the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, which are both members of the European Union, therefore its citizens are also EU citizens and within the European Economic Area (although it should be noted that there are also territories within the Common Travel Area, such as the Isle of Man, that are not within the EU). Membership of the EU and of the European Economic Area entails acceptance of the fundamental principles of the freedom of movement of goods, capital, services and people between its constituent Member States. It also entails controlling entry into that space and denying it where necessary to goods, capital, services and people coming from elsewhere.

Whereas it is currently those from outside the EU who are the more likely target of immigration checks at the Irish border, visions of the post-Brexit future are forcing us to confront who else we are willing to sacrifice – to jettison – through exclusion in order to hang on to the notion of an open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. In the run-up to the June 2016 referendum and in its aftermath, many of those arguing that the nature of the Irish border will remain unaltered in terms of the movement of people have pointed to the longstanding existence of the Common Travel Area. However, in our view in the Centre for Cross Border Studies not only does its legislative standing lack solidity,<sup>1</sup> post-Brexit it will not prevent us from making decisions on who will enter this Area that will determine the extent to which Northern Ireland is bordered within itself.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the core pieces of legislation referring to the Common Travel Area is the Immigration Act 1971, which states: “Arrival in and departure from the United Kingdom on a local journey from or to any of the Islands (that is to say, the Channel Islands and Isle of Man) or the Republic of Ireland shall not be subject to control under this Act, nor shall a person require leave to enter the United Kingdom on so arriving, except in so far as any of those places is for any purpose excluded from this subsection under the powers conferred by this Act; and in this Act the United Kingdom and those places, or such of them as are not so excluded, are collectively referred to as ‘the common travel area’”; <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1971/77> [last accessed 18/08/2017].

To clarify what I mean it is important to remind ourselves of two crucial aspects of the Common Travel Area, before highlighting some of the assumptions being made either explicitly or implicitly in arguments surrounding its post-Brexit future. Firstly, while the main features of the Common Travel Area have been largely subsumed under Ireland and the UK's common membership of the EU, Brexit will remind us its scope only extends to UK and Irish citizens (as well as to citizens of the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands, although with some differences). Whereas currently all EU citizens (but not non-EU citizens, remember) may move freely between the UK and Ireland, including across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, once the UK has left the EU that automatic freedom may only be available to UK and Irish citizens. This could be said to reflect some of the origins of the Common Travel Area in UK law, which betray a certain "domestication" of Ireland and the Irish that simultaneously underlines the alterity of those coming from elsewhere.

Two pieces of UK legislation illustrate this. The first is the 1949 Ireland Act, which states that "the Republic of Ireland is not a foreign country for the purposes of any law in force in any part of the United Kingdom".<sup>2</sup> The second is the 1981 British Nationality Act, which explicitly places Irish citizens outside the definition of "alien", stating: "'alien' means a person who is neither a Commonwealth citizen nor a British protected person nor a citizen of the Republic of Ireland".<sup>3</sup>

Domestication of the Irish in UK law that alienates those from elsewhere survived even as both Ireland and the UK joined what would become the European Union, meaning there was a certain element of discrimination privileging Irish citizens above those from other EU Member States. An example of a very belated attempt to rectify this discriminatory approach is the 2014 amendment to the Immigration (Control of Entry through Republic of Ireland) Order 1972.<sup>4</sup> Section 4 of the original order exempted Irish citizens alone from certain requirements for leave to enter the UK, but the 2014 amendment replaced that exemption for one that included EEA and Swiss nationals and their family members, in line with the EU principle of free movement of EU citizens.<sup>5</sup> However, a reversal of this latter-day conversion to a fundamental principle of the EU will no doubt have to be considered following Brexit, putting an end to the current ability of non-Irish EU citizens to enter the UK through the Republic of Ireland, including via the border into Northern Ireland.

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<sup>2</sup> HM Government, Ireland Act 1949, [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1949/41/pdfs/ukpga\\_19490041\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1949/41/pdfs/ukpga_19490041_en.pdf) [last accessed 14/08/2017].

<sup>3</sup> HM Government, British Nationality Act 1981, [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/61/pdfs/ukpga\\_19810061\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/61/pdfs/ukpga_19810061_en.pdf) [last accessed 14/08/2017].

<sup>4</sup> HM Government, The Immigration (Control of Entry through Republic of Ireland) Order 1972, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1972/1610/made/data.xht?wrap=true> [last accessed 14/08/2017].

<sup>5</sup> HM Government, The Immigration (Control of Entry through Republic of Ireland) (Amendment) Order 2014, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/cy/uksi/2014/2475/contents/made> [last accessed 14/08/2017].

The second crucial aspect of the Common Travel Area to be borne in mind is that its principle focus is on the movement of people across its constituent parts – it is not, at its core, about *what* people can or cannot do, or what entitlements they may have once they move from one part to another. However, there are a number of bilateral arrangements between the UK and the Republic of Ireland associated with the Common Travel Area, and these also perhaps tend to point to a certain sense of discomfort on the UK's part in relation to its membership of the EU (or perhaps a greater propensity to view Irish citizens as less “alien” than those from other EU Member States). In essence this translates into the fact, for example, Irish citizens in the UK are treated as being habitually resident for some social welfare benefits, which means that unlike citizens from other EU Member States they are automatically eligible.

This distinction between Irish citizens and those from other EU Member States is manifest in the UK Government's approach to the current negotiations with the EU over its departure – and if the Government's proposals become a post-Brexit reality, we may anticipate much of the burden of managing this distinction falling on employers and the providers of public services, including local authorities and institutions of higher education, for example. Crucially, by shifting management and control of non-Irish EU migration to the UK to employers and public service providers, the Government may avoid the need to impose controls at the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic in relation to the movement of people if not to the movement of goods.

The UK Government's position paper setting out its proposals on the post-Brexit rights of EU citizens in the UK and of UK nationals in the EU not only makes clear that the principle of free movement will no longer apply, but also how the operation of future immigration policy is likely to be implemented.<sup>6</sup> For EU citizens living in the UK at the point at which the UK leaves the EU, the process they must follow if they wish to remain includes completing a period of five years' continuous residence before applying for what is termed “settled status”, and if successful they will be issued with a residence document. Acquisition of this document is not just a legal requirement but, as the Government argues, it also has “an important practical reason” (p.7):

The residence document will enable EU citizens (and their families) living in the UK to demonstrate to third parties (such as employers or providers of public services) that they have permission to continue to live and work legally in the UK. Following the UK's exit from the EU, the Government may wish to introduce controls which limit the ability of EU citizens (and their

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<sup>6</sup> HM Government, “The United Kingdom's Exit from the European Union: Safeguarding the Position of EU Citizens Living in the UK and UK Nationals Living in the EU” (26 June 2017), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-the-position-of-eu-citizens-in-the-uk-and-uk-nationals-in-the-eu> [last accessed 21/08/2017].

families) who arrive in the UK after exit to live and work here. As such, without a residence document, current residents may find it difficult to access the labour market and services (pp.7-8).

Here the role of employers and public service providers in ensuring that non-qualifying EU citizens do not access the labour market and services is clear. Of course, this is not an entirely unfamiliar role as many of you will be aware, including those within academic institutions, as the Government already requires monitoring of access to employment and services and denial of that access to non-EU citizens who do not qualify. The novelty lies in the fact that EU citizens will now face equivalent hurdles and restrictions as their status is fundamentally changed in the post-Brexit context, and employers and service providers will have to administer a larger constituency.

However, irrespective of the Republic of Ireland's continuing membership of the European Union and whatever the future path chosen by the United Kingdom, Irish citizens will not be included in that constituency and are spared the need to apply for settled status or acquire a residence document. This is made clear from the outset of the UK Government's paper on citizens' rights, which begins by affirming that its proposals in this area are "without prejudice to Common Travel Area arrangements between the UK and Ireland [...], and the rights of British and Irish citizens in each others' countries rooted in the Ireland Act 1949", before making the assurance that "Irish citizens residing in the UK will not need to apply for settled status to protect their entitlements" (p.3).

I would argue that this distinction speaks of a British capacity to divorce the UK's membership of the EU from the idea of European citizenship, which it is then able to transpose onto Irish citizens whose own continuing EU citizenship is not seen as an obstacle to offering them preferential treatment over fellow EU citizens in the post-Brexit context. I would also add that, in turn, this attitude means the notion of "migrant" is more readily applied to those entering the UK from countries other than Ireland, and perhaps even more so when we include attitudes to social class or type of economic activity (in other words, the distinction between skilled and unskilled labour), as well as race and religion.

But returning to the theme of individual sectors or regions within the UK searching for mitigations or opportunities as they face the challenges presented by Brexit, I have to note that we in the Centre for Cross Border Studies have also made use of the distinction applied to Irish citizens as we have formulated our own proposals. Thus, for example, our October 2016 submission to the House of Lords inquiry into Brexit and UK-Irish relations anticipated the possibility of the introduction of

administrative procedures to control migration as we suggested how the nature not only of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic could be preserved, but also that between Northern Ireland and Great Britain:

In terms of movement of non-Irish EU citizens across the Ireland-Northern Ireland border, there may be no need to establish permanent passport control posts. Instead, an approach could be taken that would permit the entry of non-Irish EU citizens into Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland in the knowledge that those who do so without the requisite entitlement would not legally be able to reside, seek employment, study or gain access to social welfare and healthcare services or benefits. Moreover, in order to avoid the political instability that would be caused in Northern Ireland if any passport controls were to be imposed that would be discriminatory in nature between UK citizens, this approach could be extended to movement of non-Irish EU citizens from Northern Ireland into other parts of the United Kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

Although, in our defence, the Centre for Cross Border Studies has expressed elsewhere its concerns over the post-Brexit rights of non-Irish EU citizens,<sup>8</sup> here we appear to have thrown them overboard as we seek to keep afloat the raft of the Common Travel Area and its associated bilateral arrangements between the UK and Ireland, which contribute to the openness of our border. To complicate matters further (and without entering into any detail given the time we have left), even with what we see as the likelihood of the Northern Ireland-Ireland border remaining open to the movement of people, there is the question of what rights some people gain and lose as they move across it.

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement that marked the end of the conflict guaranteed the right of those in Northern Ireland to identify themselves as British, Irish or both. With the prospect of Brexit we are now confronted with the as yet unresolved question as to how those living in Northern Ireland but with Irish – and therefore EU – citizenship can access their full EU rights. Without resolution, this could lead to a situation where those from Northern Ireland would potentially gain and lose rights as they move back and forth across the Irish border, depending on whether they self-identify as Irish or British. This would do nothing to contribute to the state of social cohesion within Northern Ireland,

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<sup>7</sup> Centre for Cross Border Studies, “Submission to the House of Lords European Union Select Committee’s Inquiry on Brexit and UK-Irish Relations” (4 October 2016), p.2, <http://crossborder.ie/site2015/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/CCBS-submission-to-House-of-Lords-EU-Committee-Inquiry-Brexit-and-UK-Irish-Relations.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Centre for Cross Border Studies, “Response to the UK Government position paper: Northern Ireland and Ireland” (18 August 2017), <http://crossborder.ie/site2015/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/CCBS-Response-to-the-UK-Govt-position-paper-18.08.2017-2.pdf>.

which could be further threatened if migrants became post-Brexit scapegoats for any economic downturn caused by the UK's departure from the EU.

According to the 2011 census,<sup>9</sup> 11% (or 202,000) of Northern Ireland's total population of just over 1.8 million were born outside Northern Ireland.<sup>10</sup> Of those, 2.5% (or just over 45,000) were from EU countries other than the Republic of Ireland, with the majority (35,700) coming from countries that joined the EU after 2004.<sup>11</sup> By comparison, in 2001, three years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, less than 1% (0.61%) of the Northern Ireland population came from EU countries other than the Republic.<sup>12</sup>

In what constitutes the only formal position on Brexit established by the Northern Ireland Executive prior to its demise, the then First and Deputy First Ministers set out their concerns regarding access to the EU labour market. Their joint letter of August 2016 to the Prime Minister, Theresa May, noted how:

it is critical to our economy that our businesses [...] retain their competitiveness and do not incur additional costs. We therefore need to retain as far as possible the ease with which we currently trade with EU member states and, also importantly retain access to labour. Policies need to be sufficiently flexible to allow access to unskilled as well as highly skilled labour. This applies not only to businesses and the private sector but also to public sector employers who are heavily dependent on EU and other migrant labour.<sup>13</sup>

Economic competitiveness is the order of the day when considering the human dimension connecting Northern Ireland to Europe and beyond. There is no recognition of the potential migrants from the EU and elsewhere have in moving Northern Ireland beyond a two-dimensional concept of

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<sup>9</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, "Census 2011: Key Statistics for Northern Ireland" (11 December 2012), <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/2011-census-results-key-statistics-statistics-bulletin-11-december-2012.pdf> [last accessed 22/08/2017].

<sup>10</sup> This includes those born in Great Britain (4.6%), the Republic of Ireland (2.1%), and non-EU countries (2%).

<sup>11</sup> In comparison, and bearing in mind that the categories used were "Commonwealth countries" and "Other countries and at sea", the population in Northern Ireland born outside the island of Ireland and Great Britain was 17,299 or 1% of the total population according to the 1991 census – the last one prior to devolution. Those born in Great Britain totalled 64,734 (4%), while 35,380 (2%) were born in the Republic of Ireland; Department of Health and Social Services, Registrar General Northern Ireland, "The Northern Ireland Census 1991 Summary Report" (1992), <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/1991-census-summary-report.pdf> [last accessed 22/08/2017].

<sup>12</sup> According to the 2001 census, 1.2% of the total population were born in non-EU countries; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2001 Census – Key Statistics, "Key Statistics Tables" (19 December 2002), p.16, <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/2001-census-results-key-statistics-report-tables.pdf> [last accessed 22/08/2017].

<sup>13</sup> The Executive Office, Letter to the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Theresa May MP (10 August 2016), <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/letter-prime-minister-rt-hon-theresa-may-mp> [last accessed 22/08/2017].

itself founded on conflictual nationalist and unionist narratives. In contrast, and although also highlighting the economic drivers requiring continued access to migrant labour, the Scottish Government's approach acknowledges other benefits that underpin a vision that assumes a two-way flow of people:

As an economy we need the inward flow of people not just to support the growth of our businesses and services, but to provide diversity and vibrancy to our communities. These benefits are mutual. Over the years many Scottish and UK employees have enjoyed the opportunity to work in other EU countries, develop skills and often bring back much needed expertise and ideas.<sup>14</sup>

In the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive able to present a united position on the negotiations over the UK's withdrawal from the EU (an unlikely possibility given the existing divides on the matter), what political discourse currently takes place on Brexit subordinates any vision of migrants' future place in Northern Ireland within arguments where Europe is largely the foil for the rehashing of long-running enmities. This is not to in any way to dismiss genuine concerns underpinning them – some of which we at the Centre for Cross Border Studies share, particularly in terms of the future of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement – but much of the current political debate in Northern Ireland can be distilled into two opposing visions, each with their own post-Brexit border: an “Orange” one between Northern Ireland and the Republic cementing Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom, and a “Green” one in the middle of the Irish Sea separating Northern Ireland from Great Britain and seen as a price worth paying to maintain relations with the Republic and, by extension, with Europe. The two are mutually incompatible in the eyes of their respective proponents, and migrants are of secondary concern.

Without a more generous vision capable of viewing migrants as more than simply units of productivity, Northern Ireland risks condemning itself to isolation within both the “Orange” and “Green” borders. As the post-Brexit process of attempting to realise the notion of a “Global Britain” advocated by Theresa May and the Conservative Party gets underway, what may currently be an

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<sup>14</sup> Scottish Government, *Scotland's Place in Europe* (2016), p.18, <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/12/9234> [last accessed 22/08/2017]. For its part, the Welsh Government acknowledges “that a wish to address concerns arising from EU migration was part of what stimulated support for leaving the EU”, recognises “the very positive contribution EU migrants make to our economy and communities”, believes “that Wales will continue to need migration from EU countries to help sustain our private sector economy and public services”, and proposes “ensuring a stronger link between employment and the right to remain for new EU migrants”; Welsh Government, *Securing Wales' Future: Transition from the European Union to a new relationship with Europe* (January 2017), p.9 and p.18, [https://beta.gov.wales/sites/default/files/2017-01/30683%20Securing%20Wales%2%B9%20Future\\_ENGLISH\\_WEB.pdf](https://beta.gov.wales/sites/default/files/2017-01/30683%20Securing%20Wales%2%B9%20Future_ENGLISH_WEB.pdf) [last accessed 23/08/2017].

unintended omission of Northern Ireland in that shorthand term for the UK – a Global *Britain* – could become a reality. Unless Northern Ireland’s political classes begin a genuine engagement with the European question that is outward-looking and welcoming of voices originating from elsewhere, and not one based on antagonistic desires to either privilege the region’s position within the UK or its relationship to the Republic of Ireland, they are likely to find themselves in a post-Brexit world where Dublin, London, as well as Edinburgh and Cardiff will have left them marooned in a desert-island of their own making.

There are already possible signs that this desert-island will be increasingly inhospitable to those from outside. Open displays of a form of British nationalism hostile to those of other nations, races and religions (particularly Islam) appear to have found more fertile ground in Northern Ireland since the June 2016 referendum. In this sad fact, Northern Ireland may not be any different from other parts of the United Kingdom where manifestations of a virulent nationalism have drawn renewed vigour from the approaching reality of Brexit. But in Northern Ireland these are bound up with the native sectarianism that not only has a history of connecting itself to far-right British movements, such as the relations between Loyalist paramilitary groupings and Combat 18, but also finds new platforms in its attempts to attract new converts. A recent example of this was the rally in Belfast city centre organised by a new group called Northern Ireland Against Terrorism, which offered a platform to the leader and other members of the far-right Britain First movement. Cloaked under the auspices of a local group whose name may initially suggest a cause worthy of widespread support, members of Britain First were able to add their anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim sentiments to those of Northern Ireland Against Terrorism whose true nature can be seen in its call for support for their rally.

In the present circumstances, those who are the primary targets of threatening graffiti aimed at private landlords, or the paramilitary flags appearing in social housing developments intended to encourage cross-community neighbourhoods, are no longer those from the opposing side of the “traditional” loyalist-republican divide. Instead, they are the migrants, mainly Eastern European, who began to move to Northern Ireland in the wake of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement that brought with it a wave of optimism and economic development.

But it is important that I place these trends within their wider context lest, because they can be seen very near to where I live, I allow my own proximity to displays of anti-immigrant sentiment to offer you an unduly distorted picture. Official figures produced by the Police Service of Northern Ireland actually show that following a steady increase in racist motivated incidents and crimes from 2011 to 2014, the overall trend since then has been generally downward.

Instances of xenophobia, such as the Northern Ireland Against Terrorism rally, are also countered by demonstrations promoting a very different and welcoming Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, the predominant political discourse in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK is one where migrants are part of a market of human commodities – a labour market – and in which arguments are generally about the relative desirability and means of continued access to that market in order to feed the post-Brexit UK economy. And to emphasise by way of conclusion that such a discourse is operating in what I would characterise as a troubling environment in Northern Ireland, I would like you to consider the political landscape made evident by the results of the EU referendum and the recent general election.

While 55.8% in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU, not only were many of the electoral areas favouring continued membership of the EU located in the border region, they also form part of what is now a nationalist or republican belt apparently encircling a unionist or loyalist electorate based away from the border with the Republic of Ireland. The political divide could hardly be starker, and it leaves us little room for hope that politicians in Northern Ireland will consider the future of post-Brexit migration other than in economic terms.

That possibility may be even more remote given the fact that it is unlikely that we will see the return of a functioning Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive any time soon, leaving Westminster as the prime stage for the political shaping of Brexit. With none of the nationalist seats gained in the parliamentary elections being taken up due to Sinn Féin's policy of abstention, and notwithstanding the sole independent MP, the only political voice representing Northern Ireland in the House of Commons will come from the Democratic Unionist Party – the only major party in Northern Ireland to have campaigned to leave the EU, and now the party committed to ensuring the Conservative Government has the required majority to pass its legislation, including on Brexit and on the UK's future policy on immigration.

Although we in the Centre for Cross Border Studies will continue to make every effort to ensure this is not the case, I fear that whereas other regions of the United Kingdom may remain welcoming places for whatever inward migration we may have in the post-Brexit world, Northern Ireland risks becoming a hostile environment, bordered within itself. We are seeing arguments in Northern Ireland over Brexit and the nature of the border with the Republic continually returning to the customary and impoverishing politics of binary identities that leave little or no room for alternative identities.

The prospect of Brexit has revived calls from nationalist politicians for a border poll and to see the UK's departure from the EU as accelerating the path to a united Ireland. They have also called for a special designated status for Northern Ireland within the EU that would allow the continued accommodation of their Irish identities, and therefore of their EU citizenship.

For unionist politicians, any prospect of a solution for Northern Ireland that would in any way make it separate from the rest of the United Kingdom is seen as unacceptable and a threat to their own British identities. Remembering that there were those who voted to remain, the core issue for many unionists who backed the decision to leave the EU was the question of sovereignty. However, by leaving the EU it is not simply a matter of wresting control from Brussels to return it to London, but also to put an end to the concept of shared sovereignty seen as implying a dangerous dilution of the separation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Leaving the EU, in this light, is to abandon an EU citizenship those from Northern Ireland shared with their nearest neighbours across the border, and to reinforce the standing of a British citizenship linked to a UK ploughing its own independent furrow.

In both these opposing arguments the driving force is the retention of an identity – British or Irish. I would argue that, despite appearances to the contrary, all else is secondary, including the possibility of a post-Brexit Northern Ireland where migrants are welcomed as more than simply enablers of our economy. The reality is that, unlike elsewhere in the UK, immigration was not a core concern in the debates taking place in Northern Ireland in the lead-up to the June 2016 referendum, and since then it has only really featured in political arguments in terms of a source of labour. It has been a secondary issue, at best.

There are, of course, other debates occurring below the political level that could offer an alternative vision for Northern Ireland. However, unless this is taken up by our politicians, their current rhetoric may not result in a return to the border of the past physically separating Northern Ireland from the Republic, but it may instead condemn Northern Ireland to a future where its existing internal borders (the so-called “peace walls”) will multiply and gain strength, whether as actual or psychological barriers. The good ship “Global Britain” will have set sail, leaving Northern Ireland in its splendid isolation to continue rehearsing its age-old debates where those from outside have no place. Thank you.