



The Centre for
Cross Border Studies

MEDIA WATCH

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Irish border deal must be in place by this October, says Taoiseach;

Otherwise a backstop option will mean Northern Ireland would continue to follow EU regulations after Brexit involving the all-island economy and North-South cooperation, he added.

Unionists have opposed any solution which would create differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, and Prime Minister [Theresa May](#) is reliant on DUP support in key Westminster votes.

Ahead of a meeting with European counterparts in Brussels, Mr Varadkar said: "Everyone takes the view that we will have to have the withdrawal treaty agreed by October because it will have to be ratified by the British parliament and the European parliament, and potentially by some national parliaments. So October is the deadline.

"Would I like to have it done by June? Yes, absolutely. But I would rather have the right deal in October rather than any deal in June."

He envisaged a really close trading relationship between the UK and the EU, "so close that many of measures in the backstop may become unnecessary".

London is facing increased pressure to find a solution to the border, one of the most vexed issues of the Brexit negotiations on which there has been little detailed agreement with the EU.

Avoiding a hard border is generally defined as one without frontier checks on goods and services but there has been no evidence of a technological solution for frictionless trade anywhere else in the world, a committee of MPs said.

Yesterday, the President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, said: "The onus is now on the British Government to propose such a solution. But I want to make it clear once again that the European Parliament will not give its consent to a withdrawal agreement that does not incorporate

solutions to rule out hard borders between the two parts of the island and which can be implemented immediately.

"We must heed the principle that 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed', not least in order to ensure that the discussions on future relations are not hijacked by this delicate question."

Mr Varadkar reiterated his firm stance on the importance of the backstop arrangement if no other solution is found.

But he said that was not his preferred option and envisaged a "deep" free trade agreement between the UK and EU.

He added: "A customs union partnership between the UK and EU that would be so close to the customs union that it would not necessitate some of the elements that are in the backstop."

Mr Varadkar's political opponents in Ireland said letting talks drag on to October put an open border at risk amid hopes a deal could be clinched by June.

Fianna Fail Brexit spokesman Stephen Donnelly said it would be a serious miscalculation, putting Ireland in a weaker negotiating position.

"Ireland's leverage on the border issue is rapidly declining the further the talks continue between the EU and Britain.

"As the talks progress, many other important issues for other EU member states will come to the fore, with the border becoming one of many competing priorities."

The Taoiseach met [Theresa May](#) before the evening session of leaders in Brussels.

They spoke about Brexit, Northern Ireland, and Russia.

The Prime Minister reassured the Taoiseach of her commitment to the December Brexit blueprint.

They both looked forward to the negotiations next week at official level in Brussels on the border and will discuss Northern Ireland again after Easter.

The Taoiseach also expressed solidarity and support following the chemical attack in Salisbury.

The Prime Minister also congratulated Ireland on winning rugby's Six Nations Grand Slam.

Source: The Belfast Telegraph

29 March 2018

The Good Friday Agreement brought much-needed normality... but the unresolved question of identity still haunts this island; Ed Curran, the Editor of the Belfast Telegraph in 1998, reflects on a

deal that meant breathing space for a land asphyxiated by violence, but which left more questions than answers

On Good Friday evening, 20 years ago, the scene before me on the Stormont plateau was surreal. Dozens of television presenters sheltered from the biting cold in their makeshift canvas booths, all chattering at the same time in different languages, their satellite dishes pointing to the night sky, beaming news of the Belfast Agreement to the world.

No story that weekend was bigger globally. Northern Ireland was top of the news hour coast-to-coast across the United States.

The involvement of President Bill Clinton and the soft-spoken senator George Mitchell guaranteed American interest, as did the presence of so many international media assembled in what looked like a Bedouin encampment on Stormont's lawns.

Among them was CNN's globe-trotting Christiane Amanpour, seeking to make sense of what had just been agreed, interrogating me, as the-then Editor of the Belfast Telegraph, in the hope of simplifying the complexity of it all for her worldwide audience.

I remember thinking that, when Ms Amanpour and her colleagues had departed our shores, we would be left to struggle with the undotted "i"s and uncrossed "t"s in the Belfast Agreement.

For all that Easter's elation and the Telegraph's optimistic headline on that weekend - "An Easter of Hope" - the agreement still had the potential to fall apart. And eventually it would and did.

In the euphoria of the moment, any sense of pessimism was not to be countenanced. Relief that a deal had been struck belied any concerns that the settlement might stick. That Easter week of intense day and night hot-house negotiation had the virtue of knocking heads together until the early hours of Good Friday morning, but at the cost of brushing over fundamental issues.

The handshakes masked the glaring failure to extract the guns from loyalist and republican groups in return for the prison release of killers, some of whom had hardly served any penalty for committing crimes of which today's Isis terrorists would be proud.

The Good Friday Agreement would prove to be a ticking time-bomb under the leaderships of the Ulster Unionist Party and SDLP for all the efforts of their Nobel prize-winning leaders, David Trimble and John Hume, to reach that historic deal.

Memories of how the Good Friday Agreement was achieved are easily distorted today - not least by the two principal parties in power now, the DUP and Sinn Fein.

The DUP did absolutely nothing to engage in the talks, did all in its power to sabotage the unionists who did and now presents itself as a bastion of power-sharing devolution, even though that lay at the very heart of the agreement it rejected 20 years ago.

Sinn Fein speaks in such unquestioningly revering terms about the Good Friday Agreement as if it was the primary architect and not, as was the case, the most difficult of all the parties to bring to the

table of agreement. Even then, it continued for many more years to balk at the requirement for the decommissioning of IRA weapons.

In so doing, it aided the DUP to its position of unionist dominance which ended the political career of one of the agreement's chief signatories, David Trimble.

Time has a habit of blurring memories, so I decided to jog mine by looking back through the Belfast Telegraph pages in the week running up to Easter two decades ago. The front pages of the paper show that, day after day, the talks were a rollercoaster of optimism and pessimism, mostly the latter.

Let's start with Sinn Fein and recall what it really wanted. It demanded powerful, all-Ireland, north-south bodies, immune from any veto from a Northern Ireland Assembly and with ability to grow. It wanted no dilution of the Irish territorial claim to Northern Ireland and an all-Ireland constitutional court with a remit to include policing, the legal system and justice.

The IRA went further, rejecting "participation in any partitionist assembly", a far cry from the reality of what really happened when, within weeks of Easter 1998, Sinn Fein voted to take its seats at Stormont.

The DUP played no role in the talks other than to condemn them at every opportunity. Ian Paisley Jnr was reported in this newspaper as rejecting any north-south institutions and described the talks as "fraudulent".

His father, along with Peter Robinson and the body politic of the DUP, stalked town and country, denouncing David Trimble and his Ulster Unionists as "traitors".

Also forgotten as the talks entered their last 72 hours is that a 65-page draft document, drawn up by Senator George Mitchell, summarising the various party positions, almost scuppered the entire deal. Just as the DUP took cold feet recently over the draft Irish language proposals, the Ulster Unionists did the same when they read Mitchell's draft and found the Irish Government was not delivering sufficient change to its constitution.

Without that, the unionists could not sign up to the controversial north-south bodies and the entire deal was on the point of collapse.

The Belfast Telegraph reported a private, 10-minute meeting between Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and the-then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, with all officials and advisors excluded. Those few minutes salvaged the fortunes of the negotiations from likely failure to probable success.

The Telegraph front pages from Easter week reflect the ups and downs of the last-ditch talks, one day a breakthrough, the next a setback. In the midst of all the cliff-hanging drama, Ahern's 87-year-old mother had died suddenly of a heart attack, requiring her son to abandon the talks and return to Dublin.

It was as if fate was conspiring against any agreement at a stage when the unionists said the chances of success were only 5%.

Gerry Adams said of the negotiations: "It is like stew. You have all the ingredients, but you have to cook them properly."

In the end, the stew was cooked, though it could have done with a lot more seasoning.

The world's media waiting outside ate it all, while those inside at the negotiating table enjoyed the taste.

In those heady days, the stakes were so high that lobby groups intensified their efforts. Blair's chief aide, Alastair Campbell, thought nothing of ringing the Telegraph to inquire what the editorial might be saying.

Others were even more direct. After editorials questioned whether any deal could stick without the decommissioning of terrorist arms, an Alliance figurehead wrote to me personally, saying, as Editor, I should be ashamed of the paper's policy.

When the Telegraph published the results of an opinion poll which showed that a majority in the unionist and nationalist communities wanted accountable government at Stormont, the Rev Ian Paisley accused the paper and the pollsters of a "conspiracy" with the Northern Ireland Office.

In unionist eyes, the Good Friday Agreement was supposed to draw a line in the sand.

While one side saw it as the endgame, the other took it as only the beginning of a process. To some, a peace and political settlement; to others, a peace and political process with no end in sight even today.

On Friday, April 10, 1998, the Belfast Telegraph editorial said: "After all the bloody days, today is truly Good Friday. The potential and promise of a new era for our divided communities is staring us in the face. All we need is the will and courage to take it."

Twenty years on, we know the current crop of unionist and nationalist leaders have failed to take that opportunity. The agreement of 1998 was far from perfect. It was laced with ambiguity, but it did provide an essential breathing space for a land asphyxiated by violence.

Northern Ireland has benefited through that peace, though not through stable efficient government, as is evident in Stormont's empty Assembly chamber.

The 1998 deal helped to bring peace and normality in our time, but it has not resolved - and, perhaps, even exacerbated - the question of identity which still haunts this island.

Source: The Belfast Telegraph