



CNI

Press Watch - Sinn Féin's Brexploitation may secure border poll within years

Speaking in Washington last week on the subject of Brexit and a united Ireland, Gerry Adams said: "History has presented us with an unprecedented opportunity to advance this entirely legitimate and logical objective. Let's not waste it", Newton Emerson writes in The Irish News.

Fair enough, although walking out of Stormont now looks like a bit of a stroke. The problem for Sinn Féin is that its new strategy needs Brexit to be a disaster - yet even if Brexit is a disaster, it will not be the kind of disaster most people notice.

Projections for the economic impact of leaving the EU are of lost growth, rather than outright recession. The Institute of Fiscal Studies reckons the UK economy will be 4 per cent smaller by

2030 than it otherwise would have been, after which it will return to its long-term trend.

That would make the average Northern Ireland employee £1,000 a year worse off - but this is money they will never see, rather than money taken away. Spread that loss over 13 years and everyone would be completely oblivious.

In practice, Brexit will not have a uniform effect. Almost all the pain will be borne by the unemployed.

But the toll on jobs will mainly come through investments not made or business not conducted, rather than through headline lay offs. The unemployment rate may not rise much at all.

Effects on individuals will be unknowable and hypothetical, such as not getting a better job that never existed, remaining long-term jobless or economically inactive, or not entering the workforce in the first place.

Even where it is quite obvious that jobs have been lost, it is very hard to know it has happened to you.

Pharmaceutical firm Almac has announced the creation of 100 jobs in Dundalk rather than

Craigavon. Who are the 100 people not employed in Craigavon? It is impossible to say.

Northern Ireland's agrifood sector is calamitously vulnerable to Brexit. However, direct employment in farming is surprisingly small, while food processors have told Westminster that nobody from Northern Ireland will work in their plants regardless. With apologies to those affected, this is not going to sustain the anger required to agitate for Irish unity.

Perhaps that is why Sinn Féin is setting so much store by the spectre of customs posts along the border. These would be physical evidence of what nationalists feel to be a breach of the Good Friday Agreement, in spirit if not in letter.

London and Dublin are determined not to provide focal points for fury, however, and thanks to how the EU actually works they are likelier than not to prevail.

In fact, the most likely outcome is new inspections between Northern Ireland and Britain, which will only infuriate unionists.

Clever exploitation of Brexit - Brexploitation - may enable Sinn Féin to secure a border poll

within the next few years, but the prospect of winning one remains two to three decades away.

Even the most pessimistic economists and legal experts believe most of Brexit's difficulties can be addressed on this timescale.

How much future is there in playing crisis politics with an issue that may be barely noticeable at its worst, then solved long before it is useful?

Adams could simply be putting us all through disruption that will not even serve his own ends.

The trick Sinn Féin is missing on Brexit and a united Ireland is comparing them as equally painless.

Scottish nationalists are stumbling towards this already, dismissing criticism of the SNP's currency confusion by noting how much the pound has dropped since the EU referendum.

For the moment this has not risen above jeering that two wrongs make a right but there is a great point in there if the SNP can find the right words to make it - some gentler form of: "Everyone in the UK got 20 per cent poorer in months and it hardly hurt a bit, so stop fretting about Scotland's 10 per cent deficit." (There might be inflation to come, although all the other

economic damage Brexit does helps to delay it - and travel abroad is noticeably more expensive, although that is only an occasional nuisance to the bulk of the population.)

It would be better for Irish republicans, looking back on Brexit 10 years from now, to say: "There was an economic shock and major constitutional change and it hardly hurt a bit, so stop fretting about a united Ireland."

Of course, given Sinn Féin's opportunism and flip-flopping over Europe, it will presumably say that anyway.

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