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PRESS WATCH - Brexit will not break up the Union

So the EU has pronounced on the future of the island of Ireland; if there is a Border Poll – or referendum – in Northern Ireland in favour of Irish unity, then the Province can duly join the Irish Republic inside the European Union, writes Paul New on Policy Exchange

Sensational news? Hardly. In the immediate aftermath of the Brexit vote, I argued at the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly that such an arrangement should actually be encouraged. Let me explain why. There was no opposition from any of the Unionists present. To argue otherwise would be to close off a possible democratic path to Irish unity – which the Belfast Agreement explicitly supports. The consent principle of that Agreement underlines the right of a Unionist majority to remain within the United Kingdom. It must inevitably apply to Nationalists as well if they were to become a majority. Moreover, to

say otherwise would be explicitly to deny Ireland a right already granted to Germany.

The context of the EU's pronouncement on the future of Northern Ireland cannot be stressed enough. Much of southern and northern nationalist opinion – from establishment figures to radical journalists who otherwise have little else in common – has reacted with rage and disbelief to Brexit. Brexit undoubtedly played a major role in the sharp boost given to the Sinn Fein vote in the Northern Ireland Assembly elections earlier this year. This has, in effect, given an incentive to Gerry Adams and Sinn Fein to mobilise and be increasingly aggressive in their demands. The Irish government has made the mistake of denouncing direct rule when it should be telling Sinn Fein that unless it compromises on devolution there is no alternative to direct rule.

The Irish government is also nervous about the economic future. The Irish economy, currently doing very well, is threatened by the emerging situation post Brexit. There is a fear in Dublin that London post-Brexit will adopt a Singapore-esque low tax regime.

But there are other changes afoot in Ireland's relations with the EU – even without Brexit. The

Dublin media is filled with reports of the threat to the Irish development model in which very low corporation tax has boosted foreign direct investment. The EU is now setting its face against these ‘sweetheart’ tax deals and threatening multi billion dollar fines. Eighty seven percent of Irish export earnings in 2015 were generated by these foreign companies.

To make matters worse, Team Trump is determined to change American tax laws in order to attract some of these companies back to the US; significantly, White House spokesman Sean Spicer, a proud Irish American, did not deny any of this in an important recent interview with the Dublin press. There has even been explicit talk of taking back tens of thousands of Irish jobs.

Brexit constitutes a nightmare for middle Ireland not so much because of the Belfast Agreement, but because it throws into sharp relief the Republic’s dependence on the UK: no longer can the Republic eat its cake and have it. For Irish owned companies, Britain remains by far the most important market and it is the jobs which are at stake here which have paramount importance. At this moment, no less than 37% of Irish agricultural exports — worth 4.1 billion Euros— go to the UK each year.

Much is made of the loss of EU money in Northern Ireland. This cannot be sniffed at – but it needs to be kept in perspective. EU money constitutes a mere 1% of the UK Exchequer's expenditure in Northern Ireland. So to suggest that the loss of EU funding attendant upon Brexit might be a trigger for some emotional orientation towards Irish unity on the part of the hard headed Ulsters is fanciful in the extreme.

Oddly, Brexit may result in a reversion to the traditional economics of Partition that obtained between 1921 and 1972. This was based upon different tariff regimes – and underpinned much of Unionism in the last century (and was a point that would also have been well understood by such mainland supporters of the Union in an earlier era, such as Joseph Chamberlain).

Unionists then mobilised on the basis that Irish Nationalist demands for protection -promised by Parnell and eventually implemented by de Valera – would have detached Northern Ireland from its integral and beneficial place within the UK economy. At the moment, UK expenditure in Northern Ireland amounts to £10 billion a year – something which the Republic of Ireland could only take on by engaging a huge debt obligation at a highly vulnerable moment in its history.

These enduring *structural* realities should give contemporary Unionism of all hues renewed heart – notwithstanding the *cyclical* psychological hit which Unionists took in the recent Assembly elections. For the moment the British Government – faced with a talks stalemate driven by a possibly over confident Sinn Fein – has opted for a period of ‘indirect’ direct rule.

“Indirect direct rule” is a new term of art referring to the fact that we do not have full direct rule at the moment and we await the outcome of negotiations on devolution – but the London government has already started taking decisions such the passing of the Northern Ireland (Ministerial Appointments and Regional Rates) Bill last month.

Indirect direct rule is a significant development. Over twenty years ago it was said widely that the Framework Document of 1995 threatened joint authority between the British and Irish governments in the event of a collapse of the institutions such as is currently happening. Even ten years ago at the time of the St Andrews Agreement of 2007, which brought the DUP into partnership with Sinn Fein for the first time, it was widely held that Britain could never again move towards direct rule in any circumstance.

In the event, such fears have been disproved. The Government headed by Theresa May has made it clear it is not neutral on the Union. And there are signs that, following a period of political incoherence, Unionist political leadership is getting its act together faced with the General Election. The Unionist performance at Westminster has improved: the days when a friendly journalist like Bruce Anderson would say that six out of ten of the least impressive MPs were always Unionists have gone. They are beginning to shift their argument away from the merits or demerits of the individual Unionist parties towards the importance of the Union. They are attempting to project a broader United Kingdom case – of which DUP leader Arlene Foster's [speech last month](#) in Glasgow was a significant example. There is also evidence of a more sophisticated Unionist position on the Irish language.

It is too early to say that Northern Ireland can check the march of Nationalism in the way that some experts claim the Scottish electorate soon will. Indeed, if Unionists are not seen visibly to halt the forward march of Nationalism in Northern Ireland, then the argument for a Border Poll will grow louder.

Nonetheless Unionists have nothing to fear here either. The Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland is like the National Health Service in the sense that whilst the Party that brought it into being may currently be weak, the support for the institution is nonetheless widespread for reasons both of self image and material advantage. The Union in material terms amounts to a £20,000 subvention *per annum* for every family of four in the Province. It ensures economic stability and for a majority it constitutes the imagined community of national belonging.

The last border poll in 1973 showed a substantial pro Union vote, well beyond that of the totals achieved by the various Unionist parties. It is likely that any vote in the next decade would repeat the result. Anyway, as wise Irish statesmen like Bertie Ahern have argued, if there is to be a vote on the status of Northern Ireland it should await clear evidence that substantial blocs of former Unionists have changed their allegiance. The danger for Nationalists is that the Belfast Agreement forbids another border poll for at least seven years; in other words it precludes precisely what Nicola Sturgeon is currently attempting in Scotland.

So be careful what you ask for. To fight a Border Poll in Northern Ireland anytime in the next few years when the British Prime Minister and the dominant political party in the United Kingdom strongly supports the Union – and certainly would be unwilling to make transitional payments for Irish unity- looks like a losing proposition. It would settle the Constitutional status quo in Northern Ireland for another generation.

The Union may be safe – but is the Belfast Agreement? Yes. The EU was a vestigial theme both in its negotiation and in the final text. It is also true that the cross border institutions of the Belfast were predicated upon both the UK and Republic being part of the EU. But these cross border bodies can easily work in the context of Brexit as well. The Belfast Agreement of 1998 has anyway proven surprisingly malleable – permitting far greater surgery to the original text, notably the changes introduced in the St Andrews Agreement of 2007 to permit DUP participation in a revised deal with Sinn Fein.

The real problem of the moment is that the Irish Government has expended its chips within the EU on securing formal rhetorical obeisance towards an old nationalist shibboleth – on achieving a formal ideological parity with the

unrepeatable precedent of German reunification in 1989-90 – when it in fact should be using all its energy on the future challenge of a particular form of hard Brexit.

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Lord Bew has previously: – served on the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege – chaired the independent review of Key Stage 2 (SATs) provision in England – served on the Joint Committee on the Defamation Bill, which addressed key issues of academic freedom – served on the Local London Authority Bill Select Committee acted as historical adviser to the Bloody Sunday Inquiry. He was appointed as a non-party-political peer by the independent

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