

Forum:	Political Committee
Issue:	The future of the Irish land border
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Position:	Deputy Chair

Introduction

Ever since the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union (EU) on the 23rd of June, 2016, the issue of the UK's only land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has been a pressing issue with no clear solution in sight. A region that has been home to historic conflicts, the Irish border was made possible with the Good Friday Agreement, an agreement for which the terms are about to change as the border goes from a crossing between two countries in a common market to a seemingly hard border between the EU and a non-EU country.

As the thirty year period of conflict between Catholics and Protestants known as the "Troubles", led to many casualties and violent acts performed by paramilitaries, the future of the Irish land border became an immediate problem as it is feared that violence on the border may resurface if a hard border is put into place, seeing that border crossings and checkpoints used to be targets in bombings. (BBC History - The Troubles) The border issue is one of the main reasons behind the British Parliament's inability to form a Brexit deal that everyone agrees to, because of the challenges that each alternative brings to a historically volatile region.

Definition of Key Terms

Hard border: A border between countries which is strictly protected and regulated by police, officials or military personnel (Cambridge)

Common Market: A collection of nations who have agreed to have free trade between each other and make unanimous decisions about industry and agriculture, also the former name of

the EU

Customs Union: A group of nations promoting free trade within themselves and putting common tariffs on trade with nonmember nations

Reunification: One of the terms of the Good Friday Agreement where Northern Ireland may vote to join the Republic of Ireland and forming one Irish country

Paramilitary: A paramilitary is being or relating to a force created with a military order, specifically as a subsidiary military force

Dominion: states that used to be a part of the British Empire but possessed their own government, dependent on Britain for external affairs but free to govern themselves externally

General Overview

General Historical Background

In the 1700s, the English forces suppressed many rebellions and subdued the Irish island, and sent Scottish and English Protestants to the north on a colonization conquest. Thus, the area was named Ulster. Unlike the rest of Ireland which was predominantly Catholic, Ulster became a Protestant area due to the influence of the British settlers.

In the 19th century, economic differences brought the North and the South of the island apart. Those living in the North had higher living standards due to the flourishing manufacturing and industry. In the South, however, was an uneven distribution of land and resources. Anglican Protestants were in possession of the majority of the land, leaving the majority Catholic demographic with a lower standard of living.

Northern Ireland only achieved its political separation from the rest of Ireland in the 1900s, when the issue of Ireland becoming a dominion grew Protestants and Catholics apart into two different groups. Although the majority of Irish Catholics wanted to be fully independent from the British Empire, Irish Protestants did not carry the same sentiment, as they were afraid of living under a Catholic majority rule and were happy to remain under British influence.

The Troubles

The Irish Republic's constitution laid claim to the whole island of Ireland, which gave rise to tensions between the leaders and governments of two Irish states. The year 1966 saw the start of violent activities, as it marked the 50th anniversaries of the Battle of the Somme, one of the largest offensives in the First World War that resulted in large casualties, and the Easter Rising, which was the proclamation of the new Irish Republic via a rebellion against the British in Ireland started by Irish nationalists - milestones for both religious communities in the region. As the Irish Republic was still newly independent from Britain, the turmoil had not died down and both sides had unresolved feelings about the anniversaries that were being celebrated.

Two Catholics and a Protestant were murdered in riots in May and June by a 'loyalist'/unionist terrorist organisation that referred to itself as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). The Prime Minister of Ireland was quick in banning the UVF, but the damage had already been done, and the sectarian violence of the thirty-year troubles had its first victims, with many more to come.

Afterwards, the Northern Irish government made many reforms, establishing several governmental bodies to provide council housing and investigate newly arising violence. Angry loyalists stirred up even more civil unrest and violence, with increasing attacks on Catholic areas, such as arson.

Irish Republican Army (IRA) was a republican paramilitary organization that aimed to put an end to British influence in Ireland, start an Irish republic and reunify Ireland. It succeeded the nationalist militant organization Irish Volunteers, and had the goal of using arms in order to deter British rule in Ireland and subsequently achieve the broader goal of an independent Irish republic through their political extension, the Irish nationalist Sinn Féin party. In 1969, a more militant sect called the 'Provisional' IRA (PIRA) separated from the 'Official' IRA, which was in favour of civil rights, defending Catholics and reunification, but was prepared to use violence in every way. In contrast with the IRA, however, it was prepared to pursue unification in defiance of Britain and was not hesitant to use violence to achieve its aims.

At the time, unionist paramilitaries were also organising. The UVF started joining forces with the Ulster Defence Association, a popular vigilante group attempting to defend its land by murdering Catholics in retaliation.

The events of Bloody Sunday took place on 30 January 1972, when the army was set to

suppress riots at a civil rights march in Derry, where thirteen demonstrators were killed by the military, and another died later due to wounding. Nowadays, the Bloody Sunday remains a highly controversial event, with one paratrooper soldier being prosecuted just this March 14 (Bowcott).

Afterwards, the IRA rose in popularity and recruitment increased significantly for decades, due to the fact that Republicans believed the events of Bloody Sunday to have been covered up by the British government as the soldiers involved were exonerated. The Republicans felt that they were treated unjustly, and more British troops were deployed to the area. Another atrocity was 'Bloody Friday' - where about 20 bombs were simultaneously detonated by the PIRA in Belfast, killing nine people.

The Good Friday Agreement

Both the British and the Irish governments proposed talks on the future of Northern Ireland in late February, 1995, which were to be held in three stages with the involvement of the political parties of Northern Ireland, the Irish government, and the British government, especially concerning the establishment of a form of self-government for Northern Ireland and the implementation of an Irish-Northern Irish "cross-border" bodies regulating domestic issues such as agriculture, health and tourism. Results of the negotiations would be subject to referendums in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Peace talks started in Belfast on June 10, 1996, multiparty peace talks opened in Belfast, but came to a halt when the ceasefire with the IRA was broken. The ceasefire was resumed in July 1997 and peace talks fully began on 7 October, 1997.

The agreement was signed by the primary political parties of both sides on 10 April 1998, calling for an elected assembly for Northern Ireland, a cross-party cabinet, and cross-border bodies concerned with issues of both the Republic and Northern Ireland. This enabled Catholics in Northern Ireland to have a say in politics as well as the Republic a say in the affairs of Northern Ireland. The idea of a united Irish republic was to be taken out of consideration unless Northern Ireland voted for reunification via a referendum.

Brexit & The Issues that Come Within

A main driver of the Leave campaign in the Brexit process was that the UK would have control over its borders. However, as the United Kingdom's only land border, the Irish border has

become a significant problem due to conflicts of the past. Both sides have refused the reimplementation of a hard border, which would violate the Good Friday Agreement and could potentially stir up conflict.

There is a proposed “backstop”, a policy that Ireland supports because in the case of a no-deal Brexit, it ensures that the border will remain open to trade, as well as the pass of people and services. Another option would be a new sequence of negotiations between the British government and the EU on the relations between the UK and the EU to re-discuss the terms of the deal. The EU favors “a common regulatory area” in Northern Ireland between the Republic of Ireland and the UK, which would mean that Northern Ireland remains in the EU customs union and separated from British boundaries.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Irish Republican Army (IRA): The IRA was the nationalist Catholic paramilitary organization that fought to make Northern Ireland a part of the Republic of Ireland and organised many bombings resulting in civilian and soldier casualties.

Ulster Defence Association (UDA) & Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF): These two paramilitary organizations were the unionist Protestant equivalents of the IRA, preparing protests and violent attacks to make sure that Northern Ireland remained under British influence.

Great Britain: As the occupying colonialist force in Ireland and the ones who set up the border, Great Britain is the utmost enemy in the eyes of Irish nationalists.

Sinn Fein: This party was the political extension of the IRA, and was one of the parties in the Good Friday Agreement negotiations.

Democratic Unionist Party (DUP): The major unionist party in Northern Ireland. It was one of the parties in the Good Friday Agreement negotiations.

Timeline of Events

6 December 1922	Ireland becomes a Dominion of the UK.
7 December 1922	Northern Ireland joins the UK.

29 December 1937	The Republic of Ireland gains its independence.
1968-1998	“The Troubles”
30 January 1972	Bloody Sunday/Bogside Massacre
10 April 1998	Good Friday Agreement
23 June 2016	The UK votes to leave the EU.
29 March 2019	The UK was scheduled to leave the EU.
30 June 2019	New delayed date for the UK’s exit from the EU.

Treaties and Events

Good Friday Agreement - The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement The Agreement reached in the multi-party negotiations (10 April 1998). (You can get more information on this topic in the “Good Friday Agreement” section of the General Overview)

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

As this is an issue that has resurfaced very recently, not much time has been available for any parties to take concrete steps quite yet. However, it is also true that the Irish land border has roots that reach far into the past, serving as a reminder that all previous solution attempts of the British government have failed. Brexit negotiations with the EU have not produced any results regarding the Irish land border except the backdrop plan, a safety net to prevent a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but supporters of Brexit Furthermore, the most recent Brexit deal proposed by Theresa May and the Conservative Party was struck down at the House of Commons by a historic margin (Bowcott).

The Prime Minister has expressed that she does not intend to consider three of the proposed solutions; a hard border between NI and Ireland, a hard border between Great Britain and Ireland leaving Northern Ireland in the EU Customs Union, and the UK itself remaining in the EU Customs Union. This has only made the situation more ambiguous. In order to achieve significant progress, the British government must get the House of Commons to agree on a deal

that will also be considered by the Irish government, which is something that they have repeatedly

Possible Solutions

A Hard Border Between Northern Ireland and Ireland

A no-deal Brexit currently seems imminent, given that the secession is in less than a month with no deal in sight. In this case, a 350-mile hard border with checkpoints, watchtowers and barbed wire will be set up between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland, with customs control lorries that are transporting goods in and out of the EU. This option will require stops and thorough searches.

A Hard Border In The Irish Sea

While the hard border is drawn, Northern Ireland may be excluded from Great Britain and therefore remain in the EU, which would solve the border issue. However, this option would definitely have negative effects on unionists living in Northern Ireland who do not want to be separated from the UK.

Remaining In The Customs Union

The UK itself may remain in the EU customs union, which would eliminate the need for a border but upset Brexiteers who voted leave in order to get out of the customs union in the first place. Hard Brexiteers originally wanted Brexit because the UK would regain complete control over its borders, which it cannot do while remaining in the customs union that eliminates customs checks.

Reunification

With a referendum outlined in the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland may vote to join Ireland and remove the border altogether by seceding from the UK. This would result in huge changes for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as they would have to rename themselves, change their flag, lose a portion of land and their influence on the Irish island.

Canceling Brexit/A Revote

As Brexit is an impending reality with possibly no deal, it may be cancelled or postponed until further notice, and a new referendum could take place. This option is still on the table, especially after a no-deal Brexit was rejected in Parliament and Brexit delayed altogether on March 14 this year (Brexit).

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