

Policy Memo: The Irish Problem in the Face of Brexit

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The island of Ireland's history has been plagued with instability. Beginning in the 1400's with the initial colonization by the British Crown, continuing through the 1970's during the height of the Troubles. Although, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 was the most successful attempt at bringing peace to the island, it was widely understood that the peace was fragile. Considering this, it becomes clear how frightening Brexit is for the Irish people, both those in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Economically and politically, Brexit brings a new wave of highly consequential realities to those who live in Northern Ireland. As the date of Brexit is rapidly approaching, it is crucial to understand the economic and political consequence that the exit of the United Kingdom's (UK) government from the European Union (EU) will have on the Northern Ireland.

BACKGROUND

In 1920, the island of Ireland – which was still under the control of the British Government – was partitioned into two separate states, Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State. The separation was made based upon religious demographics. The Protestant majority (PUL), often referred to as Loyalists or Unionists, was centralized in the six counties of Ulster, also known as Northern Ireland. This group then controlled the devolved government of Northern Ireland for the following fifty years. The Catholic majority (CNR), also referred to as Nationalists or Republicans, was then centralized in the south, eventually known as the Republic of Ireland. After the Anglo-Irish War of Independence, the south of the Ireland was no longer under the control of the British Government and became an independent nation. The idea was that the CNR populations would all reside in the south and the PUL populations would be located in the north. When the governments attempted to enact theory into practice, it was not as successful as they had hoped; nearly 30% of Northern Ireland identified as CNR, with those populations centralized around the border and in the capital of Belfast. Similarly, about 30% of the Republic of Ireland was PUL and most of that demographic was found in the border region (Northern Ireland 1920-2016). This, understandably, led to tremendous levels of tension and violence – Belfast was equated to a war zone and the border between the two countries was referred to as “bandit country.”

The Troubles were a result of clashes between these two groups beginning in the 1960's and lasting until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The Troubles began concurrently to the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland, or the NICRA. The movement's goal was to increase equity in Northern Ireland by the removal of gerrymandering, labor restrictions, and housing restrictions that primarily impacted the CNR community; therefore, PUL groups saw this as a nationalist uprising that was an attempt to de-legitimize Northern Ireland's place in the UK. Attempts by the government of Northern Ireland to address the concerns of the movement, were overshadowed by the violence of the time. During the height of the Troubles in 1972, 476 individuals were killed, and many more were injured (“North Ireland”). The IRA led a vicious bombing campaign across the UK, while the UDA and UVF had active militia groups stationed across Belfast and at the Irish border. There were countless massacres, such as Bloody Sunday and Poppy Day, and assassinations were conducted by both sides. The violence was brought to a fragile peace with the ceasefire and the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Both of these actions were assisted by the United States' Government in conjunction with the UK, Northern Ireland, and Irish governments, it was then sustained with the

support of the EU (Reynolds). The international involvement with the Good Friday Agreement was crucial to the success of the deal; therefore, the continuation of that involvement is key to sustaining the peace in Northern Ireland. Brexit though, threatens the international involvement in Northern Ireland which could prove to be detrimental to the stability of the nation.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

- *Protestant, Unionist, and Loyalist Communities*

Politically, the dominating parties have been the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the more radical Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Definitionally, unionist political parties were against Irish nationalism, believing that there was never an Irish state and the first nation on the island of Ireland were the British colonies. Historically, these groups are against a united Ireland and are loyal to the crown – at their most extreme they were against Home-Rule. Given that this block of individuals controlled the government of Northern Ireland up until the 1970's, they put in place many discriminative practices against CNR individuals. Such practices included gerrymandering, under-representation in government and security forces, barring access from public housing, and employment discrimination. The most radical individuals of the PUL community joined paramilitary groups, either the Ulster Defense Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). The UDA was larger compared to the UVF, furthermore, it was extremely localized to different neighborhoods and heavily involved in vigilante justice. The UVF although it was smaller, it was much more politically aware and much more violent than the UDA – most loyalist attacks have been attributed to the UVF (“Unionism and Loyalism”).

- *Catholic, Nationalist, and Republican Communities*

Similarly, the CNR community has two political parties, the Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin, which is active in both the Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. These political groups identify as Republicans or Nationalist, believing in a united Ireland. The SDLP is often viewed as having a more moderate view of Irish nationalism, while Sinn Féin has historically taken a much more extreme view on the issue and has been more popular within the CNR community. Until the 1990's, Sinn Féin was well-known to be the political arm of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). The IRA was the violent, paramilitary wing of the nationalist movement on the Island of Ireland (Bosi). Their goal was to make it nearly impossible for the British to effectively rule on the island of Ireland through the use of guerilla warfare and terrorist attacks. More simply, their goal was to establish a united Ireland.

- *International Assistance: US, UK, EU, and the Republic of Ireland,*

Northern Ireland's place on the global stage has often been in between the shadows of the UK and the Republic of Ireland; this was most clearly demonstrated in negotiations for the Good Friday Agreement. UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and Minister to Northern Ireland Mo Mowlam were crucial in the negotiation process. They were able to wrangle the PUL parties and bring them to the table to participate in discussions. This was highly crucial because it was the responsibility of PUL's parties to pressure dissident, and violent, unionist paramilitary groups into a ceasefire. Similar, the Irish Taoiseach – Prime Minister – alongside the leaders of Sinn Féin, were able to pressure the IRA into complying with the ceasefire. Most importantly though, the United States was a moderating force within the negotiation. Senator George Mitchell was the US Special Envoy to Northern Ireland; he was instructed by President Clinton to bring the

two sides to an agreement of peace, which he successfully accomplished (Kennedy). The Good Friday Agreement rested upon international cooperation and agreement in order to be create, and it relies upon the continuation of cooperation to ensure its success. At its core, Brexit threatens the stability of the region because it inherently reverses the foundation of the Good Friday Agreement – the removal of the Irish border.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF BREXIT

Brexit, in its simplest terms, is the withdrawal of the UK from the EU (Harvey); considering this, the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland would have to be reinstated once the UK exits the EU. This contradicts the foundations of the Good Friday Agreement. The central idea of the treaty was to combine the Irishness and the Britishness of the island into one working identity; the removal of the border was one of the largest efforts made to accomplish this task (Stevenson). Currently, the border between the two nations is non-existent: there are no checkpoints, there are no guards patrolling, and there are no signs delineating an international border. This has allowed for the free movement of people and goods for the past twenty years, but more importantly it has alleviated tensions within Northern Ireland. As the UK government moves forward on finalization to a draft Brexit deal with the EU, it is crucial to incorporate Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement into the conversation in order to comprehend the economic and political implications that Brexit holds for the island of Ireland

The economies of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland are highly agricultural and are extremely intertwined. For example, cows in Northern Ireland produce milk, which is then shipped across the border to be pasteurized in the Republic of Ireland, but then is shipped back across the border to be sold in Northern Ireland. Presently, there are no tariffs at any point during this process; Brexit, though, would require the application of a tariff each time the milk crosses the border. When the UK leaves the EU, trade between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland would no longer follow the EU rules, but instead would be beholden to the rules the EU has when member countries trade with non-member countries. This then requires the application of tariffs (Goldstein). Tariffs, or taxes placed on imported groups, are a form of protectionist policies because tariffs restrict imports. Therefore, since neither Northern Ireland nor the Republic of Ireland are self-sufficient, tariffs would hurt their economies by harming free trade. The agricultural industry would experience the highest amount of negative consequences, due to its omnipresence on the island. The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland rely on agriculture but mainly rely on each other to trade materials, goods, and machinery with. Therefore, both of countries will be adversely impacted, with Northern Ireland experiencing the worst of it (Mac Flynn). Furthermore, with the removal of opened borders, the labor market of Northern Ireland will suffer. No longer could a citizen of the EU freely come into the nation and work on the same terms as a citizen of the UK. The most dramatic consequence that would occur due to this change would be seen at the border. No longer could citizens of Northern Ireland live in the north but work in the south – and vice versa. This removal of labor opportunity would severely injure the economies of both nations since this is an extremely common practice on the island of Ireland.

In all, Northern Ireland's economy as it currently stands, is not able to withstand Brexit. It is fragile considering the nation has only been relatively stable since 1998, it relies heavily upon trade with the Republic of Ireland and assistance from the EU as an added level of support in order to keep the economy functioning (Purdue). If Brexit does happen, the UK government would have to be prepared to fill the gaps left behind by the absence of the EU's involvement in

the Northern Irish economy; but the UK government has already stated that they are not willing to meet the level of support the EU has. The information that has been presented is only a summary of the economic factors at play in Northern. When all the factors are examined, it becomes clear that Brexit will hurt the economy of Northern Ireland, setting them back years.

POLITICS OF PEACE AND BREXIT

Briefly mentioned has been the EU involvement in funding the peace process in Northern Ireland. The EU has been providing enormous amounts of funding for the Irish peace process; since 1989, the EU has given Northern Ireland over eleven trillion euros in funding to be used to support economic and political programs whose goals were to strengthen peace. The EU has restored infrastructure, organized neutral spaces for dialogue, provided economic support, and help to maintain the Good Friday Agreement. When the UK exits from the EU, all of this funding would disappear (“Northern Ireland Task Force”). This could prove detrimental to the continuation of peace in the region. The EU has been widely considered a neutral party in the dialogue between CNR and PUL communities in Northern Ireland, therefore, both sides have been willing to participating in such programs because they believe that both communities are receiving equal treatment - not that one is being treated better than the other. If another party was to take over the funding of the peace process, it is probable that one side would feel disenfranchised. For example, if the UK was to replace the EU’s involvement in the peace process, it can be assumed that the CNR communities of Northern Ireland will feel that the PUL communities are at an advantage since they support the UK government in Northern Ireland. It is even more likely though that the funding will just disappear leaving the future of the peace process to be uncertain.

A final debate remains, whether or not Brexit pushes the island to unification. A united Ireland could only occur after a referendum occurs in Northern Ireland, and the majority decided to leave the UK and join the Republic of Ireland. But, there is no clear definition for “majority,” whether it be over 50% or another form of the concept. As negotiations for Brexit continue, there have been no calls for a united Ireland referendum by the general public of Northern Ireland as a solution to Brexit, but the leaders of Sinn Féin have seen the current politics as an opportunity to push the issue to the fore front (Laffan). Regardless, the Republic of Ireland is not prepared to incorporate the population, and economy, of Northern Ireland. They themselves are a relatively small country that remains out of many of Europe’s disagreements; most of their international interactions involve foreign direct investment with other EU member states. If the Republic of Ireland was to unify with the North, the standard of living could decrease by as much as 15% in the south. Furthermore, the Republic of Ireland would have to take over the grants given to Northern Ireland by the UK, but they are in no position to do so (Fitzgerald). As it stands, the Republic of Ireland is not prepared nor capable to integrate Northern Ireland into the nation. Consequently, the future of peace in Northern Ireland appears uncertain.

CONCLUSION

Research has shown that Brexit will be disastrous, both economically and politically, for the island of Ireland. Economically, the agriculture industry will be hurt on both sides of the border due to the implementation of tariffs in the absence of the free market. Furthermore, the decrease in the removal of the free flow of people that comes with the removal of the UK from the EU will hurt the economies of both nations of Ireland. Politically, Northern Ireland will suffer from the cessation it financial support for the peace process by the EU. Moreover,

questions surrounding the Irish border still remain. Therefore, the economic and political foundations of Northern Ireland are not prepared for Brexit. With greater deliberation and support from the government of the UK, it is possible that Northern Ireland could withstand Brexit, but currently, that is not likely. Although, this is just a minimal examination of Northern Ireland's place in Brexit, it proves that further consideration is needed on the issue. Still, the facts remain: as it currently stands, Brexit threatens the peace and stability of Northern Ireland.