

Fraught Anglo-Irish relations are about to get tenser

*Leo Varadkar was attacked by some Brexiters for 'anti-British' rhetoric. **Patrick Holden (University of Plymouth)** finds that Varadkar's language was no more emotional than that of his predecessor, Enda Kenny, though he was more outspoken about the contradictions of the British position. If Sinn Féin now enter the Irish government, Anglo-Irish tensions may continue to rise.*

Both the British and Irish electorate consider Brexit 'done', but this is clearly not so – and the next phase may take place in even more highly charged political circumstances. The UK's departure from the EU on 31 January was swiftly followed by a remarkable Irish election which pushed the government party, Fine Gael, into third place.



Leo Varadkar at the European People's Party summit in Brussels, December 2019. Photo: [European People's Party](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

A Brexit cycle seems to have emerged in which the British government adopts a hardline approach, faces pressure on all fronts and recants with some complex face-saving measures. Boris Johnson followed Theresa May in adopting a hardline policy but then reached a compromise in which he essentially agreed to the EU's main requirements on Northern Ireland, albeit camouflaged in a complex legal text. Yet there is still much to debate about how this agreement is implemented, and the Prime Minister himself denies the essence of it. So it is worth revisiting the formative period of Brexit talks, which I have covered from the perspective of the Irish government by [analysing its language in the period up until the end of 2017](#).

Framing, and language more generally, is always crucial in politics – but especially so in the case of Brexit, which revolves around complex legal issues that lend themselves to multiple (mis)interpretations. It is also particularly relevant given the sensitivity of Anglo-Irish relations and politics in Northern Ireland. This study involved a content analysis and a more qualitative framing analysis of Irish government speeches and documents (74 in total) from 23 June 2016 to December 2017.

Enda Kenny led the initial Irish government response to Brexit until June 2017 and was retrospectively lauded by some Brexiteers for a relatively 'moderate' approach, compared to his successor (from the same party) Leo Varadkar. This distinction is misplaced. For example, [Kenny's speech](#) in the aftermath of May's Lancaster House speech of January 2017 (which made a border the default outcome) was as strong as any of Varadkar's. The speech invokes tumult, crisis and alludes to Irish historical struggle with reference to Brexit, making it very clear that Ireland will be on the European side in the tough negotiations to come with 'our British friends' (a gentle form of othering). In fact, an elementary content analysis of emotional language on Brexit does not reveal any differences between the Kenny and Varadkar governments. The language is permeated with regret and insecurity. But looking at individual speeches, there is a difference in style between the two men, if not in their fundamental position. Kenny's recriminations were usually oblique whereas Varadkar was much clearer in attributing agency, and blame, to the Brexiteers. Varadkar was also more explicit in highlighting the power Ireland had, and the relative marginalisation of the UK, while also openly questioning the logic of the Brexiteers. This may be responsible for the unique anger he evoked on the right wing of British politics, with many commentators taking evident pleasure in Varadkar's election loss to Sinn Féin (the traditional enemy of the British state).

The Irish framing of Brexit dovetailed with the wider EU approach. The Irish position (only logical, as a remaining EU member) was to accept the EU decision that the existing laws and space were an immutable reality which would not be changed to make a special economic arrangement with a parting member. There are some distinctions, however: the Irish could never claim that Brexit was a peripheral irritant, as the former president of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker sometimes did. Neither did the Irish engage in the relatively trivial metaphors about divorce, leaving 'the club' etc. that both the UK and the rest of EU deployed. Ireland's vulnerability was too acute.

One area where the general EU and Irish discourse strongly aligned was in stressing physical geographical reality. Just as Barnier pushed back against [abstract British notions of frictionless trade](#), emphasising the reality of checks outside the European regulatory space, the Irish government emphasised the physical reality of the Irish border, dismissing high tech solutions and other futuristic tropes. Although the pan-EU unity was remarkable, Ireland and the wider EU naturally had different interests, and these threatened to emerge as the prospect of no deal increased in 2019. Here, the position of the Irish government was not exactly coherent. If the stance was that a backstop was necessary to keep the border invisible (even with a standard free trade agreement), a crash-out no deal would surely require border controls – but the government denied this. As the situation did not arise, the Irish and EU institutions managed to keep on message.

The essential policy position of the Irish government was to gain a legal commitment from the UK to keep Northern Ireland wedded to EU regulation and customs procedures, come what may. This was a very radical proposal in the context of the delicate situation in Northern Ireland. Indeed, back in 2015 it would have been unthinkable. As such, the Irish government took great pains to emphasise that this was not some sort of territorial claim. It emphasised the protective nature of the move (defending the peace process, the all-Ireland economy and the status quo on the island. Protection is the dominant motif in Irish leaders' speeches. As such the Irish position could be considered a 'transnational territorial claim' (if that is not an oxymoron) 'claiming' Northern Ireland for the European socio-economic space rather than for the Irish state. However, the implications of this were clearly understood in nationalist and unionist terms. Furthermore, an element of moderate nationalism did enter the discourse: mainstream Irish pro-European nationalists have often viewed European integration as a means of consolidating independence *vis-à-vis* the UK.

The backstop agreed in December 2017 was implemented in the initial deal with Theresa May. The later deal, cooked up by Varadkar and Johnson under extreme pressure, covered the essential Irish/EU demands but in an extremely obtuse and technical way. This allowed the PM to claim that he was keeping the province in the UK customs union (perhaps technically true, but misleading) and later to claim that there would be no 'checks' at all on goods travelling between the rest of the UK and NI (categorically untrue). This highly complex and innovative agreement contains the seeds of future tension not just within Northern Ireland but between the EU and the UK.

More tough trade talks await and issues such as fishing offer real flashpoints. It is entirely possible that the next government will include a role for Sinn Féin. Irish policy on Brexit has been based on a [broad consensus](#) so we should not expect dramatic changes in rhetoric and policy, but the election result does add a combustible element to already fraught Anglo-Irish relations. [Ben Tonra is correct](#) that the Sinn Féin vote should not be read as a rise in nationalism, but it may be perceived as such and stimulate reactions and counter-reactions.

Despite the nuances of their approach, much of the British media convinced themselves that Varadkar and the Fine Gael deputy leader Simon Coveney were anti-British fanatics (while a senior political figure spoke openly of war with Spain in regard to Gibraltar). How would they react to a Sinn Féin minister, who supported the Provisional IRA campaign, scolding the UK when the negotiations heat up again? Brexit has already taken Anglo-Irish relations to a place undreamt of five years ago. There may be more twists to come.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor LSE.