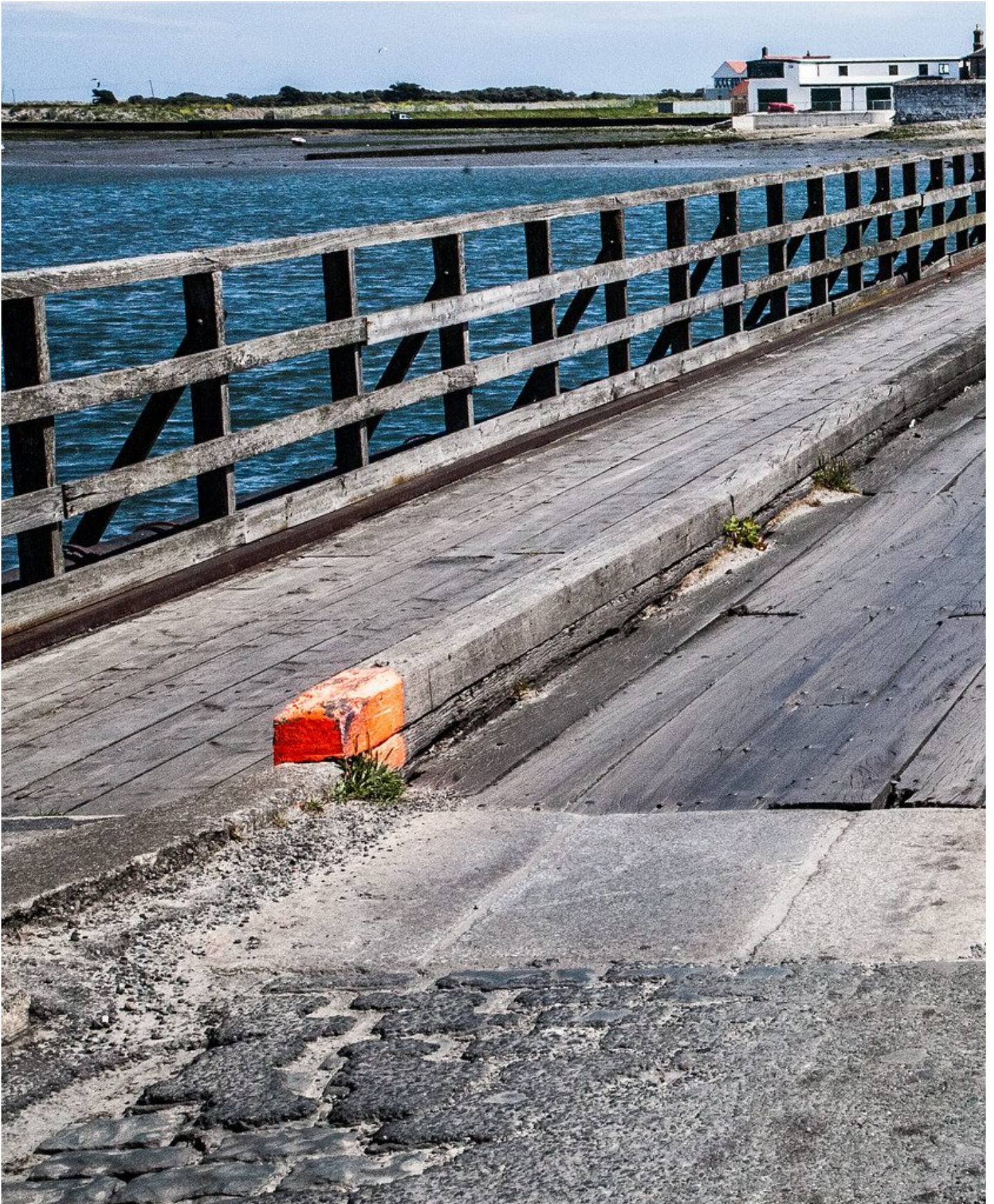

Shared Island? There's hope for British-Irish intergovernmental relations

Brexit revealed the [weaknesses in British-Irish intergovernmental relations](#) and also created a need for the Irish government to provide a clearer policy to Northern Ireland, given the economic implications of Brexit and calls for unification, argues Etain Tannam (Trinity College Dublin). Time will tell whether the Shared Island document marks a new beginning or a false dawn, but it is most certainly a landmark and heralds an optimistic start.

The Irish government's successful lobbying for the inclusion of the Northern Ireland protocol in the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement led to tensions between the DUP and the Irish government, whereby it was blamed for its emphasis on protecting a soft border. However, the new Taoiseach, Micheál Martin appears to have got off to a good start with [unionists](#) in Northern Ireland, unlike his predecessor Leo Varadkar, who was regarded by unionists as favouring nationalists. Martin's [stark condemnation](#) of Sinn Féin in February 2020 contributed to the unionist welcome (though Leo Vardakar had also made stark statements).



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The new coalition government's 'Shared Island' section in the [Programme for Government](#) proposes a plan for policy to Northern Ireland that has not been criticised by unionists and that is noteworthy in 3 main ways: i. It provides a more explicit and long-term approach to Northern Ireland and to the British-Irish relationship, ii. It alters policy emphasis in some ways that shows increased sensitivity to unionist perspectives. iii. The final version in June differed quite significantly from the [draft version](#) in April.

As regards an explicit plan, the UK and Irish governments' approach has tended to be one of ad hoc crisis management since 2007. The former Secretary of State, Julian Smith and the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney were commended for their involvement in the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive, but the success of the peace process, the burden of dealing with austerity in Ireland from 2008 to 2013, the Brexit negotiations and lacklustre engagement from UK governments made a clear plan difficult to formulate. The [2020 Programme for Government](#) provides a detailed long-term plan and creates a new unit in the Department of the Taoiseach to '[work towards a consensus on a shared island](#)'. It seeks to energise the North-South Ministerial Council (strand 2 of the Good Friday Agreement), as well as the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC) and the British-Irish Council (BIC) (Strand 3 of the Good Friday Agreement). It also seeks to '[expand and develop](#)' mechanisms for engagement between the Irish parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the UK parliament and the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales. It pledges to prioritise regular bilateral engagements between both governments across all sectors and to deepen relations with devolved governments in Wales and Scotland. In short, the new programme for government provides a detailed plan that guides policy in the context of UK's departure from the EU for the next 4 years, if not longer.

The second reason the programme is noteworthy is its sensitivity to unionist concerns. Unionists have tended to perceive that Irish governments facilitate nationalist aims and that the BIIGC increases Irish interference in Northern Ireland. UK governments also have tended to downplay the BIIGC and have posited bilateral frameworks outside the Good Friday Agreement to deal with the post-Brexit period. Therefore, it is noteworthy that the Shared Island document and the new unit in the Department of the Taoiseach do not refer to a united Ireland. The document frequently refers to the aim of building consensus for a shared island. In addition, the document, although it mentions the BIIGC and envisages a fuller use of that institution, does so towards the end and it does so alongside new bilateral frameworks outside the Good Friday Agreement. It also frequently refers to working with the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK government, presumably to reassure unionists that it will not go over the heads of the Executive. It is also striking that the above features were emphasised more strongly in the final draft than in the April draft.

The draft document stated that the new unit in the Department of the Taoiseach seeks to build a 'united' island. The final document states that it seeks to build a 'shared' island. Thus, the document deliberately separates reconciliation and pragmatic cooperation from a united Ireland. By so doing, contrary to some [nationalist criticism](#) of the 1st draft that it aimed to achieve unification by parallel consent of both communities, it does not undermine the Good Friday Agreement's stipulation that unification must occur if a majority of the Northern Ireland electorate (51%) support it. It deals with reconciliation and cooperation, not unification and echoes the spirit and letter of the Good Friday Agreement. Another difference is that there is a stronger emphasis on the BIIGC and the BIC in the draft document, whereby they are mentioned earlier on and where there is no mention of other bilateral frameworks, or relations with Wales and Scotland. Also, in the draft document, the aim of 'expanding' the BIIGC and the BIC was stated, but in the final document, the aim is to 'enhance' their role – a less threatening term to unionists. Finally, there is no mention of working with the Executive in the draft document, whereas there are many references in the final document, implying that the Irish government will not go over the heads of the DUP or other parties.

Overall, the Shared Island mission marks a not insignificant landmark in Irish policy in recent times. It sets out clearly the aim of building reconciliation on the island through consensual politics. By providing a clear policy it seeks to create more security for unionists. By including bilateral frameworks outside the BIIGC, though seeking to enhance the BIIGC too, it should also satisfy the UK government's preferences. [The key question](#) is whether the UK government will engage in plans for stronger and more regular bilateral meetings and to what extent it was informally consulted about the plans. It is likely that after UK-EU trade negotiations are concluded, UK engagement will develop, particularly when there is a new government in Westminster and given the existence of intense lobbying by Irish officials.

It is still uncertain whether unionist expectations of Micheál Martin and the new government will be met. There will undoubtedly be conflicts and sensitivities and the period from 2008 to 2011 when Martin was Minister for Foreign Affairs lacked any of the tensions unleashed by Brexit. Simon Coveney, praised by many for his dedication, was another thorn in the side for some unionists (mainly because of the Protocol) and is still Minister for Foreign Affairs, though it is likely that Micheál Martin will play a more central role than his predecessor. As the UK's departure from the EU embeds, time will tell whether the Shared Island document marks a new beginning or a false dawn, but it is most certainly a landmark and heralds an optimistic start for British-Irish and cross-border relations.

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