
The totality of UK-Irish relations is at risk because of Brexit

*The European Union was a crucial element of the totality of UK-Irish relationships that would allow for the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, writes **Darren Litter** (Queen's University Belfast).*

The UK and Ireland's historic achievement of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) is most synonymous with the inter-prime ministerial partnership of Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern. More than any of their predecessors, Blair and Ahern [got on together](#), shared a common understanding of the 'Northern Ireland problem', and were determined to approach this issue in the fully intergovernmental spirit envisaged originally by the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA). However – while indispensable to the efficiency and effectiveness with which the GFA was achieved – this emphasis on the Blair-Ahern partnership serves to take away from the importance of the wider totality of UK-Irish relationships – principally in the EU context – that was no longer a matter of rhetoric by the mid-1990s. This, as we shall see, contrasts with the post-Brexit state of play, where the totality of UK-Irish relations has again taken on the much less resonant meaning from when it was first introduced into the Anglo-Irish discourse at the height of the Northern Ireland conflict.



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The Thatcher Years: A ‘totality of relationships’ largely confined, in practice, to the British and Irish Isles

The phrase ‘totality of relationships’ was first deployed in the [context of the joint UK-Irish communique](#) which proceeded the December 1980 intergovernmental summit in Dublin between Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Taoiseach Charles Haughey. Although immediately objected to by the Iron Lady – who later framed its inclusion in terms of bad advice by her civil servants – the phrase had obvious merit. Whether they liked it or not, the islands of Ireland and Great Britain *were* inextricably intertwined, and so there was a duty on political leaders to try to resolve the legacy of partition; or at the very least move past it.

The phrase totality of relationships was also somewhat of a misnomer, however, in that the Thatcher-Haughey relationship was a fraught one. It had begun promisingly with Haughey’s [gifting of a silver teapot](#) in London in May 1980 but deteriorated thereafter due to differences over security cooperation, the 1981 Hunger Strike, and the 1982 Falklands War. A sense of [“utter contempt”](#) came to define Thatcher’s view of the Prince of Power, which she [herself became subject](#) to from elements of Irish officialdom (in unfortunately misogynistic terms, it should be said) during Haughey’s third run as Taoiseach (1987-92).

The phrase totality of relationships, then, was only given deeper political meaning following Dr Garrett FitzGerald’s re-ascension to the Office of Taoiseach in 1982. Through effectively co-opting her closest advisers into their way of thinking (though some were perhaps already this way inclined) – in addition to drawing extensively upon the [diplomatic umbrella of European summitry](#) – FitzGerald and his team succeeded in persuading Thatcher to sign the AIA. This gave Ireland a formal input into UK policy toward Northern Ireland, and framed this game-changing development in terms of the UK and Ireland’s obligations toward one and other as [“partners in the European Community \(EC\)”](#).

As Lord David Hannay (UK Permanent Representative to EC – 1985-90) has expressed to me, however, despite the commonality of EC membership, the totality of relationships remained constrained by the fact that the UK and Ireland were “at odds over the main issues of EU business – over trade policy, over CAP reform, and over Britain’s budget contribution”. The Irish were perceived by their British counterparts as “always siding” with the Commission on these matters – decried by Thatcher [as a “politburo”](#) – and “above all”, France.

The Community fiscal crisis of 1984 for instance saw the UK deliver a [stinging rebuke of the Irish Presidency’s](#) proposal for handling the budget overrun. Ireland advocated that “money be found” – as was the preference of the other member states – but the British instead called for the more austere approach of “a combination of savings and deferrals”. The British said pointedly of the Irish that they were “suggesting that we should write out a cheque, outside the treaty arrangements, to finance other people’s agricultural overspending”.

John Major, ‘New Labour’, and the emergence of a real totality of UK-Irish relations

While the nature of the Conservative parliamentary party dictated that he had to partially restrain his pro-European outlook; the beginnings of an authentic UK-Irish EU partnership took place during the premiership of John Major. Major, and his Irish opposite, Taoiseach Albert Reynolds, had become personal friends while working together in [ECOFIN](#); and this bore fruit during the December 1992 European Council summit in Edinburgh. Taoiseach Reynolds delivered for Major by seeking assurances from the German Chancellor Helmut Kohl (1982-98) that he was committed to the fiscal burden of EU enlargement ambitions—the so-called ‘second northern wave’ (1995). This “brought [Major] aboard” in terms of delivering the 1993 Downing Street Declaration which would substantively set up the 1998 peace settlement.

The result of this strengthening of the totality of relationships was that when Ireland presided over the initial Amsterdam Treaty discussions in 1996; it was the member state in which the UK had the “greatest confidence” (Sir Stephen Wall – then the UK Representative). As the former Irish minister, [Alan Dukes outlines](#), this was underpinned by Ireland’s signalling from the outset that the protection of the British-Irish Common Travel Area was “more important” than what was “being attempted on the Schengen side”. Although open to Schengen in an individual capacity, therefore, Ireland opted to protect its “70% of movements” by joining with the UK in securing an opt-out.

Lord Paul Murphy – Minister of State for Northern Ireland during the GFA period – has told me that the UK and Ireland “knew from the start that things had changed” in the totality of their relationships following their respective election of new governments in 1997. The immediate basis for this was that, unlike Eurosceptic-influenced Conservative Party administrations, the New Labour government joined with Ireland in being “very, very committed to Europe”. This strengthening duality in the approach to UK-Irish domestic matters, and UK-Irish EU matters, was denoted by Murphy’s appointment to a role that was designed to be both Northern Irish and European in focus.

The EU “step change” that the election of New Labour represented coincided with the [launch of a “concerted effort](#) to find areas of new substantive cooperation with other member states”. This did not yield a particularly dramatic outcome overall, but did result in a “significant thickening of the relationship in a number of cases”. Sir Stephen Wall informs us that no more was this the case that in the UK-Irish relationship, where the UK’s very gesture of reaching out “served to break the ice and remove suspicion”.

The importance of the emergence of this robust UK-Irish EU partnership – centring initially on their shared pro-business outlook, but extending rapidly, in May 1997, for example, to protect against third country [incursions against UK-Irish farmed fish](#) – was [explicitly recognized in the GFA](#). In his [post-Agreement speech to the Irish Dáil](#) in November, Tony Blair said that: “A new generation is in power in each country. And we now have a real opportunity to put our relations on a completely new footing, not least through working together in Europe”. The use of the phrase “*not least* through” signified the primacy of the EU in the new British-Irish dispensation; which was then reflected in how quickly they came to agree on “[most](#)” of the EU issues of the day (the exact opposite scenario of the Thatcher years).

Brexit and its dramatic impact on the totality of UK-Irish relations

The effectiveness and efficiency with which Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern achieved the GFA undoubtedly benefitted from their extraordinary inter-prime ministerial partnership. This must be placed, however, within the wider context of the fledgeling UK-Irish EU partnership activating a more profound and consequential sense of the totality of their relations. This extended to the Blair-Ahern partnership itself, with both premiers conceiving of one and other not just in terms of the Northern Ireland issue, but the potential for mutually influencing EU affairs, as well as realizing their own [ambitions to become European leaders](#).

The fundamental issue with Brexit is that beyond even the intra-EU rivalry of the Thatcher years, the totality of UK-Irish relations is dramatically diminished by the unprecedented member state-third country dynamic which now characterizes the relationship between both states. Irrespective of the relationship between prime ministers and taoisigh consequently, the scope of their agency is severely limited by what the Irish Foreign Affairs/Defence Minister Simon Coveney has [described as the “different paths”](#) their states are now embarked upon. A clear illustration of this was the almost throwback sight of Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar’s [‘walk and talk’ on the grounds of Thornton Manor](#) in October 2019. The “pathway to a possible [Brexit] deal” which both saw this from indicated an apparently sustainable uptick in UK-Irish relations; yet the [subsequent implementation of that EU-UK deal](#) (or lack thereof) has instead drawn out the entirely different visions for the future that both countries are adherent to.

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