

Northern Ireland for English Cabinet Ministers and other beginners

Brexit has exposed much confusion about the history and processes of Northern Ireland, both among the public and government ministers. In an effort to provide some clarity, [Sean Swan](#) offers an overview.

Given the importance of the Irish border in the Brexit negotiations, the lack of knowledge about Northern Ireland displayed by senior English politicians is depressing. Perhaps the ultimate example of this was when Northern Ireland secretary, Karen Bradley, [admitted](#) that she:

didn't understand things like when elections are fought, for example, in Northern Ireland – people who are Nationalists don't vote for Unionist parties and vice versa. So, the parties fight for election within their own community.

The 2018 Annual [Future of England Survey](#) was conducted in each nation of the UK. It contained a question on national independence. 41% of Scots [agreed](#) with the statement "Scotland should become an independent country"; 19% of the Welsh [agreed](#) that Wales should be independent, and a similar 19% of the English [thought](#) that England should be independent. The response in Northern Ireland to the question should it be independent [showed](#) that only 4% agreed that it should – but 44% thought it should form part of a united Ireland and 43% thought it should remain part of the UK. This is unsurprising. Northern Ireland, unlike England, Scotland or Wales, is not a nation. It is home to two competing national identities. This is Northern Ireland's first dirty little secret; its second flows from this – the real border runs not so much between Northern Ireland and the Republic as along the 20 foot high walls – euphemistically named '[peace lines](#)' – separating Nationalist and Unionist areas in Belfast and other parts of Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland has its origins in Unionist resistance to Irish Home Rule in the 1880s. That resistance quickly crystallised around the northern province of Ulster, where there was a Unionist majority. 'Unionists' were mainly Protestant descendants of those English and lowland Scots with whom James VI & I had planted Ulster in the early 17th century. The Catholic/Protestant division in Northern Ireland is thus not religious *per se*, rather religion serves as a cultural marker distinguishing 'natives' from 'settlers' (who speak the same language and are the same colour).

The aim of Ulster opposition to Home Rule was to either prevent it, or at worse, to prevent it being applied to Ulster. Following a series of failed Home Rule bills in 1886 and 1893, the Home Rule crisis of 1912-4 and the 1916 Rising, the 1920 Government of Ireland Act (also known as the fourth Home Rule Bill), was designed to bring Home Rule to Ireland, but with two separate parliaments: one for the 26 southern counties and one for six of the nine counties of Ulster. It became a dead-letter as regards the south as it was overtaken by the Irish War of Independence, the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the creation of the Irish Free State – a self-governing dominion within the Empire.

Ironically, the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, designed to deal with Irish Home Rule thus came to apply only to the Unionist area. Northern Ireland was created to be the largest area of the province of Ulster in which Unionists would have a secure majority, which turned out to be six of Ulster's nine counties. This yielded a Unionist majority of roughly two to one, though many border areas and NI's second city actually contained Nationalist majorities – who did not want to be part of NI. Part of NI's tragedy is that it originated from Unionist opposition to Home Rule but, as a 'Unionist state', was 'territorially over bounded'. It controlled six counties but only had a majority in four and a half of them.

For fifty years Northern Ireland existed as a semi-detached region of the UK. Ulster Unionists had not asked for a separate parliament, but a parliament they got. The British political parties did not organise there and Northern Ireland was kept at arms' length from the politics of the British state. The only form of politics possible within the devolved parliament was the constitutional question and Unionist policing of a large dissident Nationalist minority. Elections were regularly held but elections in Northern Ireland were never anything more than sectarian headcounts. Despite elections, the government of Northern Ireland never changed. It was always Unionist.

Gerrymandering, particularly in Derry city which had a Nationalist majority, was almost a structural imperative. It was the only way in which Unionists could politically control areas in which they were a minority. Because the local election franchise was restricted to householders, giving somebody a house also meant giving them the vote. This provided a powerful incentive for discrimination in the allocation of local authority housing.

This situation was challenged by the civil rights mobilisation in the late 1960s. The movement challenged structures on which Unionist hegemony in Northern Ireland relied, and led to a Unionist backlash which rapidly degenerated into the Troubles. Truly horrible things happened during the Troubles – Bloody Sunday, the Kingsmill massacre, the Shankill Butchers, the Birmingham and Guildford bombings, the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, and random sectarian assassinations.

The Troubles were ended by a peace process which culminated in and was sealed by, the Good Friday Agreement. A large part of the Agreement consists of mechanisms to prevent discrimination. The Assembly created by the Agreement operates on a power-sharing basis; it is not controlled by a majority party; and seats in the Executive are allocated on the basis of party strength. This creates a form of forced coalition government. Members elected to this Assembly must designate as either 'Nationalist', 'Unionist' or 'other'. Certain key votes require a minimum of support from both those designated as 'Unionists' and those designated as 'Nationalists'. All of this is designed to deal with the issue of potential discrimination at the individual or community level.

Another important part of the Agreement deals with the key constitutional issue. Northern Ireland remains a part of the UK for as long as a majority so desires. Should that seem to have changed, a referendum will be held to give the people the choice between remaining in the UK or joining a united Ireland. Northern Ireland is thus conditionally part of the UK. At the individual level, both Dublin and London guarantee the rights of individuals in Northern Ireland to be, and to be recognised as being, British citizens, Irish citizens, or both. And this would not change even if Northern Ireland became part of united Ireland. This is important because it recognises the fact that there are two separate national allegiances in Northern Ireland.

The Agreement also created North/South institutions connecting Northern Ireland and the Republic (the North/South Ministerial Council) and linking the Republic and the UK (the British-Irish Council). Such institutions obviously blur the distinction between the UK and the Republic as much as they do the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. The core of the Agreement was thus a blurring of all sorts of borders. It represents a form of post-Westphalian sovereignty in which the distinction between being an Irish or British citizen, whether within Northern Ireland or within these islands, was more symbolic than of any practical significance. This was in harmony with the general thrust of developments within the EU. Obviously, the existence of a common EU citizenship further blurred distinctions. Brexit, with its emphasis on borders, was always going to pose problems for Northern Ireland.

In terms of democracy or economic prosperity, there is little to choose between the Republic of Ireland and the UK. The 2017 Economist Intelligence Unit [ranks](#) Ireland as the joint 6th most democratic country in the world and the UK as 14th. In terms of prosperity, the UN Human Development Index [ranks](#) Ireland as 4th most developed and the UK as 14th. Not only can it no longer be argued that 'Home rule is Rome Rule', but Northern Ireland is today much closer to a model of 'Rome Rule' than is the Republic. Abortion and equal marriage remain banned there – though the reason for this currently has more to do with Protestant fundamentalism than Catholicism. Nor can it be maintained that Nationalists today suffer significant discrimination in Northern Ireland.

Whether Northern Ireland is part of the UK or of a united Ireland thus makes little difference in terms of prosperity or rights. What is at issue is symbolism and identity. What makes all this extra problematic is the fact that there is now no majority in Northern Ireland. The [2011 census](#) showed that those of Catholic background comprise 45% of the population and those of a Protestant background 48%. Similarly, latest [opinion polls](#) showed 44% in favour of a united Ireland and 43% in favour of remaining in the UK. The real borders in Northern Ireland may run along the peace lines, but the symbolically significant border remains the one between North and South. The need to keep that border 'soft', ambiguous and invisible should be obvious and not have to be endlessly re-made.

The case for 'special status' for Northern Ireland rests on the reality that Northern Ireland is, and always was, different. Those who argue that giving Northern Ireland special status would strengthen the case of the Scots who want their own special status and a closer relationship with the EU, need to explain why Scotland should not have that right. Scotland, like Northern Ireland, voted to Remain. Brexit is an English obsession. Those who wish to maintain the existence of the UK state would be better advised allowing for and facilitating the real differences that exist between the UK's component parts than in trying to force an Anglo-centric uniformity on everybody else. Of course, it would help if they knew just a little bit more about Scotland and Northern Ireland. Here's a clue: Finchley is in England, not in Northern Ireland or Scotland.

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