

Troubles redux: Brexit would put the Good Friday Agreement in jeopardy

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A Brexit – which is very unlikely to reflect majority opinion in Northern Ireland – could profoundly destabilise the the Good Friday Agreement, argues Brendan Donnelly. It would necessarily re-establish the political border with Ireland, cut off EU funds and stoke sectarian tensions kept relatively dormant since the peace accord.



Concern has already been expressed by some British commentators about the possible implications for Scotland of a Leave vote on 23 June. Less comment has until now been directed, at least on the British mainland, to the implications of such a vote for Northern Ireland. Commentators and politicians in both halves of Ireland have been less reticent. The former Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, recently warned that a British decision to leave the Union would be “negative in every way” for Anglo-Irish relations, and more particularly for relations between the Republic and Northern Ireland.

In the same way as Scotland is widely expected to return a majority in favour of remaining in the EU, it seems highly likely that a clear majority of the voters in Northern Ireland will wish to remain in the European Union. The overwhelming majority of the nationalist community will vote to do so, and probably a significant minority of the unionist community. Opposition to the EU will be led at a political level by the Democratic Unionist Party, traditionally seen as the more intransigent wing of Ulster Unionism. A success for the DUP and its English allies in forcing Northern Ireland out of the EU against the wishes of the majority in Northern Ireland can hardly be seen as a contribution to the lessening of historic sectarian tensions in Ireland.



DUP leader Arlene Foster (left) and secretary of state for Northern Ireland Theresa Villiers are both campaigning for a Leave vote.
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It is not by chance that in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which has done much to reduce these tensions in recent years, so much emphasis is laid on the membership of both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland in the European Union. Nationalist sentiment in Ireland since 1973 has seen the sharing of British and Irish national sovereignty within the Union as an important softening of the bipolar choice between British and Irish dominion in

Northern Ireland. A DUP-inspired option for the UK to leave the Union will be seen by many nationalists as a reconstruction of political and even physical barriers between the north and south of Ireland, which the Good Friday agreement was designed to reduce.

If the UK leaves the EU, the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland will be both an external border of the European Union and the only external land border of the UK itself. It is difficult to believe that this can have no restraining implications for the passage of goods and people between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Northern Ireland is currently a major beneficiary of European funds, for the continuation of which there is no guarantee from purely British sources. The UK's continuing membership of the European Convention of Human Rights, which plays such an important part in the Good Friday agreement, is moreover guaranteed and reinforced by its membership of the EU. There are many in today's Conservative party who would wish to use British exit from the European Union as an opportunity to terminate British membership of the Convention. This would be an existential threat to the Good Friday agreement.

Taking all the above considerations into account, it is clear that much potential exists for the destabilisation of Northern Ireland through a vote to leave the EU on 23 June. The Good Friday agreement is under more strain from a currently low level of sectarian violence than is sometimes appreciated on the mainland. The risks to the integrity of the United Kingdom arising from a Brexit are at least as great in Northern Ireland as they are in Scotland.

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

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