

Theresa May's Florence speech and Northern Ireland: subtle change?



*Northern Ireland was barely mentioned in Theresa May's Florence speech. For many commentators, it was an opportunity for the UK government to provide more detail about its plans for the Irish border. Media and academic reactions to the Florence speech were negative. However, as regards Northern Ireland, there were subtle differences in the language used writes **Etain Tannam** (Trinity College Dublin).*

Disappointment was expressed by many after Theresa May's speech in Florence, that Northern Ireland was barely mentioned and that there was no detail about how to preserve a soft border. Doubtless, the UK government's management of the border issue, like its management of Brexit generally, has been chaotic and uncommunicative. Since Brexit, there is evidence of new [tensions](#) in British-Irish intergovernmental relations. So, the much-hyped Florence speech had a lot of ground to make up if it was to reassure worried citizens and politicians in the UK and Ireland. Seen in that light, it was a damp squib. However, there is one large difference and also some subtle differences between the Florence speech and previous UK government statements on Brexit and Northern Ireland. Although a small consolation, the speech appears to be related to improved relations between British and Irish governments, compared to in previous months.



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The most obvious difference between the Florence speech and previous keynote statements from the UK government is that despite the internal divide in the Tory party, Theresa May committed to a transition period of 'roughly' two years, during which the status quo would continue, so the Irish border would be unaffected. If a week is a long time in politics, a two-year period is definitely a significant period. It gives more time to negotiate and it also provides a possibility that various factors may have changed by the time the transition has ended. Not surprisingly, the British-Irish Chamber of Commerce responded with an unequivocally positive response.

Secondly, Theresa May used identical language in her speech in Florence to the language used by the Irish government in its May 2017 [position paper on Brexit](#): in referring to Northern Ireland, the phrase 'unique issues to consider' is used. The term 'issues unique to Ireland' is also used in the Irish government in May 2017. [In previous statements, the UK government referred to 'unique relationship' with slightly different connotations.](#)

Thirdly, the terms 'frictionless', or 'soft', are not used at all in the Florence speech. Instead, there is a commitment to prevent any physical infrastructure along the border and there is no reference to technical solutions, mentioned in the UK government's position paper on Northern Ireland and opposed by both the EU and the Irish government.

It is noteworthy that the section on Northern Ireland is brief and that there was no mention of Northern Ireland in the run-up to the speech. However, rather than brevity causing concern, after the speech in Florence, it was reported that Irish officials had not expected any mention of Northern Ireland and although eventually, (following various EU statements), the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar said that not enough progress had been made on Northern Ireland to move to the next phase of negotiations, there were no hard-hitting criticisms from him, or from Simon Coveney, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs. In contrast the Irish government's reaction in August to the UK government's position paper on Northern Ireland was unusually blunt.

It is also noteworthy that the two prime ministers spoke by phone the night before the Florence speech and met three days later in London. The Taoiseach's statement after the London meeting was also relatively positive compared to previous statements and welcomed the UK government's explicit opposition to physical infrastructure along the border.

Overall, the Irish government's response to Theresa May's speech in Florence was more positive than Irish governmental responses over the previous six months. The simmering tensions in British-Irish relations appear to have eased, at least temporarily. Consultation between both prime ministers could imply that there has been more coordination and/or communication between the Irish government and the UK government than in recent months and/or that the tougher language used by the Irish government was a deliberately short-term strategy to achieve certain aims and that now there is sense those aims are achievable and a different bargaining strategy is being adopted.

The importance of the British-Irish relationship to the peace process and to restoring the Executive in Northern Ireland necessitate that strong intergovernmental cooperation continues. The Florence speech offers some hope that this will be the case. It may be clutching at straws, but in this Brexit era, it is tempting to find hope wherever one can.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Brexit blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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