

Brexit puts spotlight on Irish peace process and complicates potential UK/US trade deal

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The United Kingdom left the EU on 31 January 2020 after 47 years of membership. As Brexit becomes a reality, it may not only be a sore awakening for Boris Johnson and his government but also for the United Kingdom as a whole. This chapter will examine UK scepticism over Europe as a long-established phenomenon as well as the failure of the withdrawal agreement and the problems with the poorly executed UK strategy for Brexit negotiations. I will then look at how the final Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) between the EU and the United Kingdom¹ mirrors a milder form of a No Deal Brexit scenario. The TCA is provisionally applicable since 1 January 2021, after having been agreed on by EU and UK negotiators on 24 December 2020. It is set to complicate the economic and political consequences for Ireland and the associated repercussions for trade negotiations for the United Kingdom with the United States. The historic commitment by the US government to the peace process in Northern Ireland is a factor, but in addition, the Irish American vote matters in US national politics (Laird, 2020). This chapter concludes with an examination of how an Irish American congressional lobby that is worried about the integrity of the Good Friday Agreement would block a UK-US trade deal (Ryan, 2019; Lynch 2019a; Kennedy, 2019).

There is still a possibility at the time of writing (early April 2021) that we could have no deal because the Johnson government does not want to implement what it has signed up to and trust in the EU has been shattered. The deal is “not working” for the United Kingdom because Johnson and his government see it as a humiliation despite having celebrated it as their negotiating success not too long ago and seek a pretext for it to fall. This would cause further damage to the reputation of the United Kingdom and would cause serious political, economic and trade problems with the EU and the United States (Menon and Portes, 2021).

The phenomenon of British exceptionalism towards the European Union has taken a dramatic turn (Tilford, 2017, pp. 1–4). With the right-wing populist Boris Johnson taking the country's premiership, Britain's Trumpian moment had arrived (Ryan, 2019, p. 7; Rubin, 2019; Stewart, 2020). The TCA deal is extremely near to the dreaded No Deal scenario. With the global economy in recession and the COVID-19 crisis still not resolved, this is bad economic news for both the United Kingdom and EU.

Brexit – endgame of the reluctant European – the phase of scepticism 1945–2016

The EU referendum vote on 23 June 2016 represented the biggest political decision many British voters have made in their lifetime. The British public in turn delivered a result that can easily be classified as one of the biggest recent political shocks (Armstrong, 2017).

The referendum revealed deep popular disaffection with the European Union, in particular on the part of working-class communities that felt that they had been left behind (Shipman, 2016). Some of the roots of this disaffection may lie elsewhere – in national government austerity policies or in the effects of globalisation more generally (Goodwin and Heath, 2016). The disaffection was exploited by opportunistic politicians, such as Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage (Gifford, 2017).

The potential implications of Brexit were even more significant, as the United Kingdom was far from being ‘any’ EU Member State. It was the third-most populous of the 28 members, accounting in 2016 for around 13 per cent of its population. It was, with a share of 16 per cent in the EU’s collective GDP in 2016, the second-biggest economy. Accounting for 27 per cent of all military spending of EU members in 2015, it was, by this definition, the biggest EU military power. With France, the only other EU Member State with a comparable military power projection capacity, it was one of only two EU members with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and with nuclear weapons.

The implications of Brexit were doubtless bigger for the United Kingdom itself than for the 27 remaining Member States (Keating, 2019, pp. 167–176). But Brexit also threatened to diminish the EU’s (arguably already declining) international weight and influence (Webber, 2018). History shows that three spheres of interest originally governed the British official attitude: the UK’s relationship to the United States, the Commonwealth and then Europe (Young, 1985). Europe became more important to the United Kingdom as it became more successful economically and to a lesser extent politically (Ryan, 2016; Bevir et al., 2015; Vail, 2015).

Most prime ministers of the United Kingdom defended and enhanced British exceptionalism and carved out a permanent niche, within the Single Market and Customs Union but outside the European Monetary Union and further European integration with various opt outs. There was a strong belief up until the referendum in 2016 that this setup was in the UK’s best interest (see Table 25.1).

Britain became the Reluctant European under Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990), who was known for her confrontational style, and she negotiated a budget rebate for Britain. Thatcher was in favour of enlargement but resisted closer European integration as well as the exchange rate mechanism (ERM). Thatcher wanted floating exchange rates instead. Britain became a member of the ERM in 1990, against Margaret Thatcher’s wishes. A month after Britain had joined the ERM, Margaret Thatcher had to resign as prime minister. Successor John Major (1990–1997) represented the British view of widening rather than deepening European integration (Ryan, 2016; Thatcher, 2003).

Under Major, in December 1991, the Maastricht Treaty was signed. On 16 September 1992, so-called ‘Black Wednesday’ happened, which saw the United Kingdom exit from the ERM. This event is not only deeply engrained in the memory of older politicians like then-Finance Minister Norman Lamont but also among the younger ones like Prime Minister David Cameron, who was then a special adviser to the finance minister. The ongoing recession and a split within the Conservative Party concerning the EU dominated UK politics before the 1997 general election, which the Conservatives lost (Ryan, 2016; Kiratli, 2015). Following the

Table 25.1 Key dates

Year	Event
1957	The EEC (The Treaty of Rome) is set up
1961 & 1967	British applications for EEC membership
1963 & 1967	French veto against British membership
1971	Third British application for EEC membership
1973	Britain becomes a member of the EEC under Prime Minister Edward
1974	Harold Wilson's Labour party defeated Edward Heath's Conservatives in February 1974 and formed a minority government and then won an overall majority in October 1974. Labour promised that it would give the British people the final say on EEC membership, which would be binding on the government – through the ballot box – on whether the United Kingdom accept the terms and stay in or reject the terms and come out
1975	In the referendum, Britain votes in favour of continued membership (66 per cent voter turnout, 2/3 said yes) (Butler and Kitzinger, 1976)

Maastricht Treaty in 1993, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) adopted the UK's exit from the EU as the distinctive party goal (Lynch and Whitaker, 2013). Growing Euroscepticism within the wider UK population and a surge of support for UKIP also had implications for the UK's stance on Europe.

Under Prime Minister Tony Blair (1997–2007), Labour had a more pro-European stance (Daniels, 1998). Blair was keen to play a leading, constructive role in Europe, and New Labour were less sceptical towards the EU (Daddow, 2013; Fella, 2006). But declining popularity due to the Iraq war weakened his premiership. Finance Minister Gordon Brown, who later succeeded Blair as prime minister (2007–2010), was rather lukewarm regarding the EU (Gannon, 2015). Cameron (2010–15) was first elected in a coalition government with the pro-European Liberal Democrats until the Conservative Party won a majority in May 2015 (Glencross, 2016).

In the 2009 European Parliament elections, UKIP came in second, while it won the 2014 European Parliament elections with a vote share of 26.6 per cent. As UKIP became a significant political force, it started to pose a threat to the Conservative Party. Indeed, Cameron decided to hold an 'in-out' referendum on the UK membership of the EU, though it was labelled as an "advisory referendum" which was not constitutionally binding (Ryan, 2016; Glencross, 2016). This decision was a tactical move to try to win over UKIP voters in the run-up to the 2015 general elections. The surge of support for Nigel Farage and UKIP and the victory for the Leave campaign in the EU referendum emboldened and strengthened the Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative Party, providing it with substantial political clout within the Party (Cotton and Fontana, 2019).

Prime Minister Cameron was primarily to blame for the referendum outcome. He initially endorsed the idea in 2013 of an 'in-out' referendum after a planned attempt to renegotiate the UK's relationship with the EU. Cameron in his Bloomberg speech in January 2013 pledged to stage an 'in-out' referendum on the UK's EU membership if the Conservatives won the 2015 elections. Cameron explained his proposal by arguing that the EU that would emerge from the Eurozone crisis was going to be a 'quite different body' to the one that the British had voted to join in 1975. Before staging a referendum, the government would negotiate a 'new settlement' of the UK's membership terms with 'our European partners' (The Guardian, 2013). Cameron duly submitted his requests for renegotiation to his European partners in November 2015, and

Table 25.2 Requests for renegotiation

Position of non-Eurozone Member States	Discrimination between Euro and non-Euro economic actors prohibited.
Competitiveness	Better regulation, lowering of administrative burdens.
Social benefits and free movement of workers	Safeguard mechanism, restricting non-contributory in-work benefits for four years. Member State control over benefits for non-active EU migrants.
Sovereignty	Ever-closer union of peoples not a legal basis for extending EU competencies. All Member States do not have to aim at a common destination, with recognition that the United Kingdom does not want further political integration.

by February 2016 an agreement was reached at the European Council under the four headings of Cameron's requests (BBC News, 2016) (see Table 25.2).

The agreement did not resonate with the British public and, combined with a complacent Remain campaign, led to the pro-Brexit result in the referendum (Scott, 2017). On the morning after the referendum (Clarke et al., 2017), Cameron announced he would be standing down to allow a new prime minister to prepare the negotiation with the EU. "Above all," he said, "this will require strong, determined and committed leadership" (Martin, 2016). Theresa May, the only Remainer with any profile to fight the post-Cameron leadership battle, won it by default after the last Leaver standing, Andrea Leadsom, imploded in a disastrous interview and withdrew. Absent a full leadership campaign, May's skills of persuasion were never put to the test (they might have given the party pause in that contest – and given May pause before her general election dash). More significantly, she also avoided being forced to define, defend and win party backing for her vision of Brexit. Instead, she could simply take refuge in clichés. On 11 July 2016, the Conservative Party chose Theresa May to replace Cameron. Prime Minister May's record on Brexit revealed a high degree of opportunism, a certain skill in calculating domestic political odds and a willingness to risk the economic well-being of the British people for short-term political self-interest and for the interest of her party (Shipman, 2016).

May began her premiership with a simple – if enigmatic – definition of leaving the EU: "Brexit means Brexit" (Mardell, 2016). By the time of her first Tory Party conference as prime minister in October 2016, she had clarified her position. Brexit meant controlling immigration from the EU, shrugging off the jurisdiction of EU courts and regaining the ability to strike independent trade deals.

"We are not leaving the European Union only to give up control of immigration all over again," she said to the ovation of Tory members. "And we are not leaving only to return to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. That is not going to happen. We are leaving to become, once more, a fully sovereign and independent country" (BBC News, 2018). She made that speech without having thought through the consequences; no official could read it in advance (later she added No Customs Union to her list of red lines). In her speech, Theresa May also promised to trigger Article 50 no later than the end of March 2017.

The stage looked set for the United Kingdom leaving the EU Customs Union and Single Market and negotiating a deal that would result in an arms-length relationship with the rest of the EU, based on a free trade agreement. May's government made strategic and tactical errors in the conduct of the negotiations. In that speech, the prime minister was trying to curry favour with Tory Eurosceptics, especially when she said that "if you believe you are a

citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere – you don't understand what citizenship means" (Mason, 2016).

In a second speech at Lancaster House in London on 17 January 2017, May announced that the United Kingdom would indeed be leaving the Single Market and the EU Customs Union, which regulates the EU's trade in goods. This left her with little room for manoeuvre. In what would become a familiar refrain, she said: "No deal for Britain is better than a bad deal for Britain" (May, 2017).

In the February 2017 white paper and in the letter triggering Article 50, the United Kingdom started to grapple with the question of the border with Northern Ireland, which became a central sticking point in the later negotiations. The white paper recognised the need to "find a practical solution that keeps the border as seamless and frictionless as possible, recognising the unique economic, social, and political context" (the Article 50 letter stated that the United Kingdom wanted to 'avoid a return to a hard border' [HM Government, 2017]). Yet this objective was hard to reconcile with the UK's stated ambition of leaving the Single Market and Customs Union, both of which implied the introduction of physical checks at the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Jones and Miller, 2019).

In the run-up to formal negotiations with the European Union, Theresa May decided to call a snap general election in June 2017 in a bid to strengthen her negotiating hand. Her government was operating with a wafer-thin majority of only 12 MPs in Parliament, and the prime minister was concerned that such a slim majority would enable opposition parties to frustrate the Brexit negotiations. Opinion polls showed the Conservative Party had a 20-point lead over Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party, and May saw an opportunity to win a much larger majority and greater control over Parliament (Payne, 2017).

This move backfired spectacularly as Theresa May lost her parliamentary majority altogether. The prime minister campaigned badly, on a manifesto that failed to win public support. Meanwhile, Jeremy Corbyn ran an effective grassroots campaign. The Conservative Party suffered a net loss of 13 seats, producing a hung Parliament. To secure a working majority in Parliament, Theresa May entered an alliance with the ten MPs from the socially conservative Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland who supported a 'hard' Brexit. Formal negotiations between the United Kingdom and EU27 began in July 2017, a year after the UK's EU referendum.

Brexit consequences for Ireland

The political dynamics unleashed by Brexit may make a border poll in Northern Ireland inevitable (Burke, 2016;; Gormley-Heenan and Aughey, 2017; Brakman et al., 2018). Complications with the TCA, the threat of a No Deal Brexit if the TCA fails (Chang, 2018; Walker and Elgot, 2019) and the inherent threats to the Good Friday agreement (McDonald, 2019) could force the people of Northern Ireland to consider a border poll and the possibility of a United Ireland (Whysall, 2019). One possibility might be a border poll in Northern Ireland concurrent with a constitutional referendum in the Republic of Ireland. The interim constitutional arrangements would preserve the *status quo* within Northern Ireland as much as possible, continuing both devolution and compulsory power-sharing but swapping the roles played by Dublin and London. The Republic of Ireland referendum would redefine the national territory to include Northern Ireland but would then also prescribe interim constitutional arrangements and a set of more extensive constitutional changes that would apply five years later by default with a new constitution being enacted by plebiscite on an all-island basis. Planning for a possible vote for a United Ireland in both jurisdictions would be needed (Doyle, 2019).

There is little doubt that this would cause problems back in Britain, too. Although, as the Irish economist David McWilliams has noted, trade between Ireland and the United Kingdom has fallen from 91 per cent of Irish exports in 1953 to 11 per cent in 2019, the Irish-British partnership remains of central importance to Britain. Ireland is the UK's fifth-largest export market, and the United Kingdom exports more to Ireland than it does to China. Furthermore, the United Kingdom runs a large trade surplus with Ireland – in fact, it is the UK's second-largest trade surplus after the United States (McWilliams, 2019).

In addition to facing economic distress and enduring political instability, Ireland may also have to fight to ensure its standing in the EU. In the delicate post-Brexit setup, there are concerns that commercial interests in the United Kingdom might be able to smuggle goods into the EU's single market through the Northern Ireland land border that do not meet EU standards and that evade EU tariffs. In such a case, Ireland may be forced to harden its border with the rest of the EU (Ryan, 2019; Parker et al., 2020).

The UK government had repeatedly stated that it would not ask for or agree to an extension of the transition period – referring to the Conservative manifesto commitment (Conservative Party, 2019, p. 3). Indeed, the government had gone so far as to legislate to prohibit itself from agreeing to an extension with the EU. The transition period subsequently expired, and the United Kingdom exited the EU single market and customs union on 31 December 2020.

The United Kingdom on 12 June 2020 formally rejected the option to extend its post-Brexit transition period beyond 31 December 2020, leaving companies with a matter of months to prepare for more restrictive trading conditions with the EU. UK Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove said he had “formally confirmed” the decision during talks with Brussels, stating on Twitter: “On 1 January 2021 we will take back control and regain our political and economic independence” (Brunsden and Payne, 2020).

A U-turn from the United Kingdom therefore was a remote possibility despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and the UK's ambitious timetable ruling out an extension to the transition period remained a key driver of the UK's negotiation strategy. Several observations on the UK stance – as viewed from outside the negotiating team – were described as the UK government “running down the clock” on reaching a deal with the EU (Jerzewska, 2020).

It became clear under Boris Johnson since his election victory in December 2019 that the interpretation of the Withdrawal Agreement's Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland differed significantly between the United Kingdom and the EU. The Command Paper published by the United Kingdom seemed to cement these differences (HM Government, 2020b), but did not fully address the challenges which came from the special situation around the Irish border. It attempted to determine how the UK government envisaged the Protocol might be implemented and suggested some solutions, but these would need to be agreed on with the EU, and that would not be straightforward (Gasiorek and Jerzewska, 2020).

The substantive differences concerned which goods would be subject to checks, on which flows and how the checks would be carried out to the satisfaction of both the United Kingdom and the EU and, relatedly, what infrastructure and institutions were needed. With talks between the United Kingdom and the EU seemingly at an impasse, the outlook was bleak for businesses and consumers alike in Northern Ireland, and it is ordinary people who would be hit the hardest by price increases for daily essentials (Gasiorek and Jerzewska, 2020).

The agreement of the revised Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland in October 2019 paved the way for the United Kingdom to leave the EU on 31 January 2020. Yet the months after that were characterised by uncertainty. On the one hand, the UK government was unable to explain precisely or consistently what it had agreed with the EU. The House of Lords European Union Committee report warned that time was running out for the government to provide certainty

to Northern Ireland business and stakeholders before the Protocol became operational on 1 January 2021. Without clear and prompt guidance from the government, and a proportionate approach to the application of the Protocol by the EU, there remained a real and present danger of Northern Ireland becoming collateral damage of Brexit (European Union Committee, 2020).

The big difference between leaving the EU without a trade deal in December 2020, as opposed to in March or October 2019, was in principle that there was agreement between the United Kingdom and the EU in the legally binding Withdrawal Agreement on the regime for the trade in goods between Northern Ireland and the EU (European Union Committee, 2020).

The United Kingdom was legally obliged to be ready for the new system by the end of the year, which meant introducing a customs and regulatory border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland to ensure that goods entering Northern Ireland could circulate freely in the island of Ireland (with no customs or regulatory border) without compromising the EU's Single Market or Customs Union. The implementation of the Protocol was being discussed in the Joint Committee, where the UK co-chair was Michael Gove, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. The Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee oversees UK and EU implementation, application and interpretation of the Withdrawal Agreement. The Joint Committee seeks to resolve any issues that may arise during implementation. The Joint Committee further supervises the work of six Specialised Committees and takes decisions on their recommendations. The six Specialised Committees cover: citizens' rights, other separation provisions, Ireland/Northern Ireland, Gibraltar, sovereign base areas in Cyprus and financial provisions (HM Government, 2020a).

This implementation of the Protocol requires goodwill and flexibility on both sides, even in the event of the failure of the wider UK-EU negotiations on the future relationship, and the inevitable tension and acrimony that this is likely to generate. The overriding imperatives are conservation and preservation, in terms of finding solutions that will as much as possible secure a reasonable measure of stability in Northern Ireland (European Union Committee, 2020).

Meanwhile, the British government abandoned its plan to introduce full border checks with the EU on 1 January 2021 as ministers came under mounting pressure from business not to compound the chaos caused by COVID-19. In a significant policy U-turn, Gove accepted that businesses could not be expected to cope with COVID-19 and simultaneously face the prospect of disruption at the border at the end of the post-Brexit transition period. Instead of full checks, the government introduced a temporary light-touch regime at UK ports such as Dover for incoming EU goods. However, goods flowing to the EU from the United Kingdom must undergo full checks as they enter France (Foster and Parker, 2020).

The EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement for Brexit means there is no hard border or customs border on the island of Ireland between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The Withdrawal Agreement included provisions to maintain a seamless border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. This seamless border was originally negotiated between the United Kingdom and Ireland as part of the Northern Ireland peace process culminating in the Good Friday Agreement/Belfast Agreement (1998) – an agreement or treaty that essentially underpins the peace process in Northern Ireland (HM Government, 2019).

The fact that both United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland were in the EU when this Agreement was negotiated made everything a lot easier. Now that the United Kingdom is out of the EU, and because of the Good Friday Agreement and the Withdrawal Agreement, there will have to be a customs border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom rather than between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, which would be the

logical situation given that the Republic of Ireland is in the EU and Northern Ireland is in the United Kingdom.

Boris Johnson won the general election on 12 December 2019 and came into office, determined to "get Brexit done". His government negotiated the Withdrawal Agreement, which Johnson then also persuaded Parliament to approve. All 330 votes in favour of the (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 were Conservative. The UK government became concerned that having a customs border between one part of the United Kingdom and another part of the United Kingdom undermines the unity and integrity of the United Kingdom and subjects its internal trade to a degree of control by the EU that undermines the whole idea of Brexit.

The publication by the UK government of the draft "United Kingdom Internal Market Bill" on 9 September 2020 (House of Commons, 2020) aimed to remove the legal force of the Northern Ireland protocol, which observers had long argued was vital to preserving peace and stability in Ireland after Brexit. The principle of *Pacta Sunt Servenda* ("agreements must be kept") in international law is axiomatic for the EU, ruling out any potential "mini deals" that do not address this larger issue first.

The European Commission asked the UK government to submit by the end of October 2020 its observations to the letter of formal notice it had issued on 1 October 2020. After examining these observations, or if no observations had been submitted, the Commission would, if appropriate, decide to issue a Reasoned Opinion. (European Commission, 2020a). The Withdrawal Agreement had been ratified by both the EU and the United Kingdom. It entered into force on 1 February 2020 and took legal effects under international law.

The European Commission triggered legal action, while the United Kingdom refused to remove the clauses in the Bill which overrode the Northern Ireland Protocol. Meanwhile, trade talks continued, and talks continued within the EU-UK Joint Committee, which is where issues of concern on the Protocol were supposed to be settled.

The European Commission, after the third meeting of the Specialist Committee on Ireland and Northern Ireland on 9 October 2020, called once again on the United Kingdom to urgently intensify its preparations for the full application of the Protocol. The EU requested the United Kingdom to swiftly provide a detailed timeframe for the full implementation of all these measures (European Commission, 2020b). The Republic of Ireland's new budget of €17.75 billion had included a No Deal Brexit scenario by the end of the transition period. The budget included a €3.4-billion recovery fund aimed at stimulating the economy and employment in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit (Carswell, 2020).

French President Emmanuel Macron insisted on tough enforcement rules for any UK trade deal, warning that British prime minister Boris Johnson's move to override the Brexit treaty showed that Britain's word cannot be trusted. Germany had been unnerved by the UK's internal market bill, which would break international law in a "specific and limited way" by overriding part of the Brexit treaty relating to Northern Ireland. The German government found it difficult to conceive why the United Kingdom would breach an international treaty (Brunsden et al., 2020).

From the moment of the UK referendum result to leave the EU, the complications of the EU/UK border on the island of Ireland have been a focal point for EU negotiators. The TCA, which offers little more than a No Deal, has led to a complex sea border arrangement between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This means that negotiations between London and Brussels will continue for years to come, and the impact on Ireland will be politically and economically complex.

John Ryan

The 2020 Irish Republic election result has recast Ireland's political dynamics

Following the 2020 elections, Ireland's political landscape has been redrawn in an unprecedented way. Sinn Féin won the popular vote in the Irish election, securing 24.5 per cent of first preferences in the country's electoral system of single transferable votes. Opposition party Fianna Fáil came second with 22.2 per cent, and Leo Varadkar's ruling Fine Gael a dismal third on 20.9 per cent. As far as seat distribution is concerned, Fianna Fáil received 38 seats, down 6 seats in 2016. Sinn Féin won 37 seats, up 14 on 2016, and Fine Gael dropped 16 seats to end up with 35 seats. This means that Fine Gael had the third-worst vote result in its history (after 1944 and 1948), while, for Fianna Fáil, it was the second-worst ever (after its post-crash humiliation in 2011).

During the 2019 UK election, Unionists suffered notable losses in Northern Ireland. The DUP, whose ten members at the Westminster parliament (MPs) had propped up May's government, lost its leverage at Westminster. This includes the loss of two seats to nationalists, including its parliamentary leader's seat to Sinn Féin. Support increased for the cross-community Alliance Party, which won one seat. The nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) won two seats, one from the DUP and one from Sinn Féin. Notably, there are now more nationalist MPs from Northern Ireland (9) than unionists (8) – a reverse from the 11-to-7 split in 2017. Catholics in Northern Ireland usually categorised themselves as nationalist, and Protestants usually classified themselves as unionist (Ryan, 2020; Hayward, 2020).

The Ulster Unionists, the SDLP and Alliance parties joined Sinn Féin and the DUP after signing up to the deal brokered by the British and Irish governments² which overcame the stalemate in the Northern Ireland Assembly dating from January 2017 when Sinn Féin withdrew from power-sharing, accusing the DUP of arrogance, bad faith and sleaze (Beesley, 2020b). The almost unanimous view in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is that Boris Johnson's attitude to Northern Ireland is at best indifference. This view was only strengthened by the dismissal of Julian Smith as Northern Ireland secretary just over a month after he oversaw the resumption of the Northern Ireland assembly (Carroll, 2020).

The Republic of Ireland's general election took place on 8 February. Sinn Féin's vote share increased by 10.7 percentage points, making it the most popular party. This was the first time it achieved that distinction; but it did not become the largest party in the Irish Parliament (Dáil Éireann) only because it did not run enough candidates to capitalise on its surge in popularity. In 2019, it had poor local and European Parliament elections, losing half of its local councillors, which made its success in the general election even more surprising.

The result is part of a story that began more than a decade ago, with the economic crisis, spending cuts and tax increases, and the intervention of the IMF and EU with a multi-lateral 'bailout' loan in late 2010. Fianna Fáil and the Green Party, which were in government at the time, were severely punished by the electorate at the general election in 2011. Fine Gael and Labour also lost swathes of voters in 2016, notwithstanding Ireland's rapid economic recovery, because they continued with a programme of spending cuts and tax increases from 2011 onwards (Ryan, 2020; Leahy, 2016).

From 2016, Fine Gael governed with the support of a confidence-and-supply agreement with Fianna Fáil, which effectively supported the minority Fine Gael government in parliament. This arrangement lasted almost four years – long beyond its expected lifetime – partly due to the need for political stability to deal with the impact of Brexit (Kelly, 2016).

Under the mechanics of Ireland's electoral system, 39 constituencies elect between three and five lawmakers each, through a single transferable vote. Sinn Féin's election success materialised

under the leadership of Mary Lou McDonald, a Dubliner who replaced veteran Belfast leader Gerry Adams in 2018 (Ryan, 2020; Beesley and Hall, 2020).

Sinn Féin rode a wave of anger over homelessness, soaring rents, hospital waiting lists and fraying public services. McDonald offered left-wing solutions, such as an ambitious public housing building programme, that enthused voters, especially those under the age of 50. Meanwhile, Varadkar's attempt to frame the election around his Brexit diplomacy and the strong economy fell flat. Fianna Fáil was contaminated by its confidence-and-supply deal that had propped up Varadkar's minority administration, leaving Sinn Féin to cast itself as the agent of real change.

Sinn Féin at its core is the party that wants to call a border poll in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland on Irish unity. At the same time, it embraces multiculturalism and supported both gay marriage and abortion rights. Relations with the United Kingdom were, until Brexit, as close as they have ever been. Brexit itself may in fact have become Sinn Féin's perfect storm: Not only has it locked the two larger parties into an extended problematic marriage, but it has also left the prospect of a United Ireland looking far less remote. Northern Irish voters chose Remain in the 2016 referendum but are now outside the EU anyway. Faced with the choice between two unions – the United Kingdom or the EU – many in Northern Ireland may choose unity with the Republic of Ireland in the next five years (Garry et al., 2020).

After positive internal party votes on Ireland's proposed coalition between Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party, a new government was formed on 27 June 2020, with Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin serving as taoiseach and Leo Varadkar as tánaiste (deputy prime minister) until December 2022. The position of taoiseach (prime minister) will revert to Leo Varadkar, and Micheál Martin will become tánaiste until the next election in 2024. Sinn Féin has become the main opposition party in Dail Eireann (Irish Parliament) (Beesley, 2020a).

Sinn Féin has recast Ireland's political dynamic and installed itself as a third large party in what has historically been a two-party system. One of the main takeaways of the 2020 election result is Sinn Féin fundamentally breaking through the historical tight grip of the two traditional parties Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael on Irish politics (Ryan, 2020; Beesley and Hall, 2020).

Some influential Irish Americans are looking on in astonishment at the demonisation of Sinn Féin by the two leaders of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and what seems like most of the Dublin establishment in the Republic of Ireland. After decades of Irish leaders encouraging Americans to get Sinn Féin to do the right thing and become full participants in the peace process, the political establishment in Ireland is now sending out mixed messages. It is fine for the unionist DUP to form a coalition with Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland but not for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in the Republic to consider Sinn Féin a coalition partner (O'Dowd, 2020).

Former congressman Bruce Morrison, a key figure in the American role in the Irish peace process, summed up Irish American sentiment best in an interview with IrishCentral.com: "The continuing attempts to quarantine Sinn Féin is a direct attack on their democratic mandate and the wishes of their voters," he said. "When we urged them forward to ceasefire and disarmament . . . we said peaceful politics was the way forward. Now that they have done that, the previously dominant parties are trying to change the subject to the past – It makes no sense" (O'Dowd, 2020).

A Joe Biden presidency and congress may block a US-UK post-Brexit trade deal

In June 2017, then-UK Prime Minister Theresa May called an election that lost the Conservatives their parliamentary majority and made her party dependent on the DUP to form a government. The DUP, a fiercely pro-union party that had opposed the 1998 Good Friday Agreement

that brought peace to the island of Ireland, used its new leverage in Parliament to block any differentiated status for Northern Ireland after Brexit lest it weaken the union. Bowing to the DUP's demands, the prime minister tried to appease her coalition partners by widening the alignment to encompass the United Kingdom, not just Northern Ireland. This in turn infuriated the other Brexiteers.

After first suggesting the United Kingdom would agree to some alignment between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, and subsequently suggesting regulatory alignment more broadly between the United Kingdom and the EU, it was clear that May would fail to provide a solution to the Irish border issue. For this reason, the European Commission unveiled its own 'backstop', which would guarantee that the border remain open no matter what happened in the future. The backstop would ensure that Northern Ireland would remain integrated within the EU's customs union and single market for goods, supplemented by an EU-UK customs union, until it was rendered unnecessary either by the future relationship itself or other means. In layman's terms, it was designed as an insurance policy enabling the United Kingdom and EU to fulfil their shared commitment to respect the Northern Ireland peace agreement by keeping the border as open after Brexit as it was before.

Throughout the protracted Brexit saga, the central problem has been the Irish border issue, which Brexiteers have long avoided acknowledging. Indeed, at every step, they have shown a simple lack of concern about the communities who rely on the border's openness for their peace and prosperity (Luce, 2019). Even worse, Michael Gove, tasked in May's government with No Deal planning, previously authored a pamphlet attacking the Good Friday Agreement, comparing it to Munich appeasement (Gove, 2000, p. 2).

In addition, Brexiteers have claimed confidently that any inconveniences in the trade relationship with the EU resulting from Brexit would prove insignificant for a scenario in which post-Brexit Britain was able to secure a better and more prosperous trade deal with the United States. Indeed, from the beginning, Prime Minister Boris Johnson had made a US-UK free trade agreement a guiding ambition of his government, and he claimed that the United Kingdom would be "first in line to do a great free trade deal" with the Trump administration. Across the pond, this fantasy was inflated by President Donald Trump, too, who said in late July 2019 that he had spoken to Boris Johnson by phone and supported an "ambitious trade agreement" with Britain after Brexit. Trump's message was also echoed by Senator Tom Cotton, a Republican from Arkansas, and 44 of his Senate colleagues, who sent a letter to Johnson pledging unwavering support for the United Kingdom as it exits the European Union (Cotton, 2019).

However, as Boris Johnson and Donald Trump were making their triumphant claims, the Irish government was building up support among its own allies in the US Congress. So far, the Irish are in the stronger position in Washington, DC (Donnan, 2019). This has primarily been achieved with the help of the Friends of Ireland Caucus in the US Congress, which has been an effective advocate for Irish interests in the United States and which claims to represent the interests of America's large and politically diverse Irish American constituency (Kennedy, 2019).

Many of US Congress' most important officials have sided with the Irish Republic on backstop concerns and against the British government on a potential trade deal. Richard Neal, for example, the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, which has authority over trade deals, has said, "Any negotiation of a bilateral trade agreement with the UK . . . needs a firm commitment on no hard border" (Lynch, 2019b). This has been reiterated by Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, who declared in a speech at the London School of Economics: "If there's any harm to the Good Friday accords – no trade treaty" (RTE News, 2019). There is also Chuck Schumer, the Democrats' leader in the Senate, who has declared his

"inveterate opposition to any prospective trade deal with the UK that either undermines the landmark Good Friday Agreement or facilitates a return to a hard border" (Ryan, 2019).

On 3 November 2019, the US House of Representatives voted in favour of a resolution which called for strict adherence to the Good Friday Agreement during Brexit negotiations and was passed by unanimous voice vote following a debate. The legislation urged the United Kingdom and the EU to ensure that Brexit did not threaten peace on the island of Ireland and strongly opposed the reintroduction of a hard border. The bill emphasised that any trade agreement between the United States and the United Kingdom is contingent on meeting the Good Friday Agreement's obligations (The Irish News, 2019).

The economic consequences of Brexit under the TCA, an agreement close to No Deal Brexit, are being tested in an environment made infinitely more hostile by the consequences of COVID-19. The painfully won relative stability of Northern Ireland, founded on the Good Friday Agreement, has inevitably been put at risk, a development that is arousing concern in the United States. This opposition from Congress and other American sources will serve to preclude any possibility of a favourable trade agreement between the United States and United Kingdom. The widespread perception of the present British government as a "rogue" administration will be reinforced by its cavalier attitude to the implementation of such international treaties.

Brussels put the border on the island of Ireland, the only land border between the EU and United Kingdom, at the very heart of the exit negotiations with the UK government. Across the Atlantic, key political leaders were quick to raise their concerns over the potential negative impact of Brexit on the Good Friday Agreement. As Joe Biden rose in prominence through the US election campaign, ultimately winning the race to the White House, the impact of Brexit on the US-UK relationship became ever more apparent and forced the hand of the UK government, which looked determined to drive towards a No Deal in its negotiations with the EU.

Speaking at a campaign event in South Carolina on 21 November 2019, Biden voiced his support for protecting the Good Friday Agreement and avoiding a return to a hard border after Brexit. Trade negotiations with the US post-Brexit under any administration would be far more complex than the Johnson government had outlined to date. The added complexity over the border issue on the island of Ireland was something that the UK government might have chosen to downplay but would be propelled into the limelight if a No Deal Brexit scenario came true (Stephens, 2020).

After the Johnson government introduced the Internal Market Bill, which put the UK's commitment to the Withdrawal Agreement in question, the EU was asking how they could continue to negotiate with a government whose signature could not be trusted (Foster, 2020). Goodwill among the EU-27 towards the British government had moved to an all-time low. The bill did not seek to eliminate the customs border in the Irish Sea that Johnson agreed to just a few months ago – merely to weaken aspects of it. Nevertheless, the bill led to fears in Dublin and elsewhere that Johnson might ultimately seek to scrap that entire border. Boris Johnson's dislike of the Withdrawal Agreement is genuine. That treaty contradicted the pledge that he had earlier given to the DUP that he would never allow a border in the Irish Sea (Grant, 2020, p. 2; Ryan, 2019).

To claim that this step was taken in the interests of Northern Ireland risked making a mockery of the finely tuned balance and common values the Good Friday Agreement was intended to uphold. Biden warned Boris Johnson's government that a trade agreement with the United States was incompatible with his Brexit negotiation strategy. He sided with the EU by claiming that peace on the island of Ireland was at risk from the UK Internal Market Bill, which was designed to provide powers to override the Withdrawal Agreement to prevent trade barriers

in the Irish Sea. "We can't allow the Good Friday Agreement that brought peace to Northern Ireland to become a casualty of Brexit," Biden tweeted. "Any trade deal between the US and UK must be contingent upon respect for the Agreement and preventing the return of a hard border. Period." He was not just fishing for Irish American votes. That was the firm position of his party and a large portion of America's political class (Chao-Fong, 2020).

Biden is himself part of the Irish American lobby. "The Irish cause is in his veins," a former aide, Shailagh Murray, told the *New York Times* (Landler, 2020). He often cites Yeats, and in his acceptance speech for the Democratic nomination in August, he quoted lines by Irish poet and playwright Seamus Heaney, adding: "This is our moment to make hope and history rhyme." Biden's cultural and political hinterland is suffused with Irish nationalism (Pogatchnik, 2020). In any Anglo-Irish dispute, he will instinctively take the Irish side. However, there was also support shown among the previous administration. US president Donald Trump's special envoy to Northern Ireland, Mick Mulvaney, warned against creating a "hard border by accident" on the island of Ireland (Boffey, 2020). In response to the proposed Internal Market Bill, Mulvaney went a step further, saying in an interview with the *Financial Times*: "The Trump administration, State Department and the US Congress would all be aligned in the desire to see the Good Friday Agreement (Belfast Agreement) preserved to see the lack of a border maintained" (Beesley and Payne, 2020).

The casual ignorance about US congressional politics and Northern Ireland seems widespread in Westminster and the UK media. There have been British critics of Joe Biden's comments regarding the Good Friday agreement, accusing him of not understanding the situation in Northern Ireland and interfering in UK domestic politics (Polley, 2020; Gray 2020). The fact of the matter is that there will be no trade deal between the US-UK unless the Irish dimension is resolved to Dublin's satisfaction. Britain's foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, was accused by Brussels of displaying a "total misunderstanding" of the Brexit deal after claiming the EU was trying to erect a barrier between Northern Ireland and Great Britain (Boffey, 2021).

Ireland's Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Coveney and EU Commissioner Maros Šefčovič briefed the Friends of Ireland caucus on Capitol Hill on 10 March 2021, amid concern in Washington about Britain's decision to delay the implementation of a key part of the Brexit agreement (Lynch, 2021). Sinn Féin supporters ran an advertisement titled "A united Ireland – let the people have their say", in the runup to St Patrick's Day 2021, when the Biden administration and members of the US Congress were celebrating ancestral and political ties to Ireland. There were half-page advertisements in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and other US newspapers calling for a referendum on Irish unification. Full-page versions appeared in the *Irish Voice* and *Irish Echo* (O'Carroll, 2021).

Joe Biden's administration has made it clear that it is taking sides in the dispute over the Irish Sea border – and it is not on the side of the Johnson government and the DUP (McBride, 2021). Joe Biden's administration has tied the defence of Northern Ireland's peace accord to the success of the EU-UK trade protocol for the region. This is bad news for Boris Johnson's critical approach and the DUP, who seem intent on wrecking the protocol (Pogatchnik, 2021). A joint statement issued late on St. Patrick's Day by Biden and Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin said support for the U.S.-brokered 1998 peace deal requires "good faith implementation of international agreements designed to address the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland." Their declaration followed an unexpectedly long 80-minute video chat (The White House, 2021).

The limited influence that Unionism has with President Biden and a lack of trust in Prime Minister Boris Johnson leaves Unionism very exposed politically. Leaked minutes of an internal DUP meeting show alarm at the state of the party; an expectation that it will lose MPs, MLAs

and councillors; and a belief that there must be “drastic change”. “We are losing with no strategy, no vision, media reaction”. There is widespread disquiet at the perilous position in which the DUP and unionism now find themselves.

Boris Johnson only ever signed the Protocol to “get Brexit done”, with no real grasp of its implications or sincere intention of implementing it in good faith. The Protocol was a result of choices made by Johnson and approved by Parliament; there was no credible alternative. When questioned about the grace periods extension row, White House press secretary Jen Psaki reported obliquely that “President Biden has been unequivocal about his support for the Good Friday Agreement”. Translated from diplomatic-speak, this can be read as a strong steer that any damage to the operation of the Protocol would also have implications for potential discussions over a US-UK trade deal (Lynch et al., 2021).

Reality dawns on Brexit Britain's revolution

Johnson has a unique view of sovereignty which does not equate to the reality of 21st-century trade (Sandbu, 2021). He has deceived himself or is a slow learner in accepting the flaws in his understanding which led to English populist nationalism (The Guardian, 2020). Even at this point, Johnson still has plenty of admirers and apologists in the media and elsewhere (Goodwin, 2020).

The British exceptionalism that Boris Johnson believes in is a post-Brexit Britain which is a world-beating power. The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly revealed the weakness of Johnson's government, which seems incapable of running a modern society or fulfilling its most basic responsibility in keeping its citizens safe from harm (Rawnsley, 2020). The comparative success in vaccine rollout is a welcome exception but should not erase from public scrutiny the many failings of the current government in the COVID-19 crisis. There are striking parallels between the way this government has handled COVID-19 and its approach to the Brexit negotiations. In both cases, reality has taken second place to public relations, with the recurrent consequence that unwelcome decisions have been taken too late. The communication of these eventual decisions has seen contradictory and undermining rhetoric from ministers and their press minions.

The resultant unpreparedness will be an entirely fitting symbol of Brexit as a whole. Brexit has been and is, an ill-conceived enterprise, based almost entirely on slogans and delusion. This was further reflected in the lack of preparations by Boris Johnson's government for the wholly predictable disruption to British trade after 1 January 2021.

The question of the United Kingdom re-joining the EU will not be on the political agenda for at least a generation. In fact, by now, even many Remainers want to make the best of a bad job and move on. The EU would not want an application from a country that lacked a national consensus in favour of re-joining – which is far away. Meanwhile, Brexit adds to uncertainty about UK unity. It is helping to boost support for the Scottish National Party (SNP) and for Scottish independence. With Northern Ireland staying in the EU single market and the customs union, the situation is highly complex. Nobody can be sure how the border in the Irish Sea will affect politics in Northern Ireland in the next few years economically and politically.

Therefore, it remains to be seen what the long-term EU-UK relations will ultimately look like. While the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement is yet another step in the Brexit process, it is by no means the end of it. The implementation of the agreement – and the transitory periods it has created in some fields – will require continuous adjustments between the parties in the future, potentially opening also new scenarios as Europe increasingly acquires a concentric circles shape (Gauke, 2020).

Every negative consequence of Brexit for the United Kingdom and the clear advantage for the EU is alerting the British public to the realities of Boris Johnson's deal. As investment slows and jobs go elsewhere, there will only be one person to blame – Boris Johnson. Brexit in its basic definition of the United Kingdom having left the European Union is done. The deal is thin, and the UK's path is perilous. This exercise in national self-destruction has ended as a sad sideshow to the COVID-19 crisis, while Britain's annual economic decline has been the worst in the G7 at 9.9 per cent in 2020 (Partington, 2021).

Damage from both COVID-19 and Brexit will ultimately be the epitaph to Boris Johnson, Britain's worst and most incompetent prime minister. His track record of incompetence so far includes 149,168 deaths as of 7 April 2021,³ £2 trillion in debt and £1.5bn channelled to friends of the Conservative party through PPE contracts (Hill, 2020).

As the Irish columnist Fintan O'Toole has written recently:

The EU scapegoat has now been ritually sacrificed to the gods of national identity in the hope that they will in turn bestow the greatness that holds Britain together. When the gods do not respond to the sacrifice, the people often turn their wrath on the high priests. (O'Toole, 2021)

The sight of the United Kingdom being comprehensively out-negotiated by the EU while its political and media elite convince itself that it scored some great triumphs and while misleading the UK electorate about the reality of Brexit is only to feed through to public opinion slowly (Harris, 2020).

The widespread incompetence and cronyism that surrounds Boris Johnson makes it hard to predict where UK politics may go in 2022. It is still four years to the next general election, but amidst the disastrous impact of Johnson's incompetence and constitutional strains, UK politics could rapidly become more unstable. The UK's politics have been splintered, undermined and upended by Brexit, and that looks likely to continue into the coming year and beyond.

The UK exceptionalism mentality keeps speaking of sovereign equals, which is nonsense given the EU is a bigger population and a regulatory and trade superpower. Inevitably, the United Kingdom has succumbed to the reality in the trade deal on EU terms. Former Prime Minister Theresa May's triggering of the Article 50 process before understanding what the country wanted from the trade negotiations was an error. The lack of a developed strategy by May was ill advised, incompetent and arrogant, and Johnson, if anything, has further compounded those errors. The UK economy, trade and business are paying a heavy price for Boris Johnson's hubris.

The Global Britain brand looks like a public relations cliché rather than a coherent strategy that has been exposed by reality. The United Kingdom has difficult to complicated relationships with all three world superpowers: the United States, China and the EU (Hutton, 2021).

Conclusion

The last-minute conclusion of the TCA between the United Kingdom and the EU eliminated some of the unpredictable consequences posed by the prospects of a No Deal Brexit to financial stability of the United Kingdom, EU and beyond. But even with the TCA in place, Brexit-related instability, and uncertainty, further compounded by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, will not end anytime soon.

For large periods of the negotiations, Boris Johnson had chosen to ignore the border issues on the island of Ireland. But in the end, he had to realise that failure to meet the UK government's

obligations under the Good Friday Agreement could seriously spoil its 'Global Britain' vision, including any ambitions of a comprehensive trade agreement with the United States.

Nothing will happen quickly on a UK-US trade deal. Brexiteers who claim that a US-UK trade deal will be the solution or compensation for strained economic relations with the EU are not being realistic. The United Kingdom could find itself isolated from not only one but two of its key allies.

Following his presidential election victory in November 2020, Joe Biden has reached out to the EU, Germany and France. This is in part due to the Biden presidency mending fences with allies that have been ignored by President Trump. In contrast, Boris Johnson's support for Donald Trump has not been forgotten by the Biden team. Therefore, it is unlikely that the United Kingdom would strike a meaningful US-UK trade deal in 2021 or indeed 2022.

Meanwhile in Ireland, there will be a gradual move over the next five years to a border poll. Stormont elections in 2022 will be a signal in that direction. The cost to the Republic of Ireland in integrating Northern Ireland would run into billions. The need for the Irish Republic to show that it can provide the same health care as the NHS will be a factor.

The United Kingdom ceased to be a member of the European Union and the transition arrangements came to an end on 31 December 2020. There is still no clear view of the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union.

All of this marks a fitting finale to Britain's catastrophic mismanagement of the Brexit process, which started with the resignation of prime minister David Cameron, who had called the referendum without any plan for what would happen if he lost it; continued with his successor Theresa May triggering a two-year countdown to Britain's final withdrawal without any plan for what future relationship she wanted to negotiate; and was followed by her successor Boris Johnson signing an international treaty without any guarantee of a future trade deal, only then to rip up this agreement when its consequences began to reveal themselves. Regardless of the merits of Brexit, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Britain's leaders dealt themselves one bad hand after another – and proceeded to play them badly.

The rhetoric from the UK government under Boris Johnson has been uncompromising, ready to put the fragile peace in Northern Ireland at risk, but this approach also reveals its ignorance of the wider implications of this stance. The uncomfortable truth is that the repercussions of this reckless approach would be much wider than UK-Ireland and UK-EU relations. It would put the 'Global Britain' vision and with it its centrepiece of a US-UK free trade agreement at risk before it has even come to life.

Notes

- 1 The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement | European Commission (europa.eu)
- 2 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade__a_new_approach.pdf
- 3 Deaths | Coronavirus in the UK (data.gov.uk)

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