



How do you solve a problem like Ireland?

The UK has just one land border with the EU, a 500km stretch dividing Ireland that was the source of much contention and bloodshed as recently as the 1990s. For the past 20 years, the Good Friday Agreement has allowed many to temporarily forget about the tragedy and suffering the border contributed to, largely because the pact was devoid of border issues. A beauty of both the UK and Republic of Ireland being members of the EU was that it helped facilitate a peace agreement that stopped the killings and effectively eliminated the border. Only relics of former checkpoints remain and sectarian tensions have retreated with them.

Brexit has brought back to prominence an issue that most hoped would never need to be confronted again; it is telling that in Northern Ireland 56% of voters voted to remain, including all six counties along the border. Worryingly, language more akin to the 1970s is reappearing; DUP leader Arlene Foster recently stated that their 'red line is blood red' and politicians as well as police on both sides of the border are warning of a return to violence if the issue is not resolved.

Theresa May now finds herself in the unenviable position of trying to extract the UK from both the customs union and single market, as her party demands, without putting an already fragile peace process at risk by at least partially closing the border. Currently she can't; Northern Ireland must have special status if the UK leaves the customs union and single market or a truly open border is impossible.

The problem, as usual, is down to factions with competing interests.

The Republic of Ireland is insistent that the status quo is maintained as far as possible. In December 2017 Leo Varadkar, the Irish premier, demanded a 'backstop' guaranteeing an open border in the event of no agreement being reached. As recently as last week Simon Coveney, Ireland's deputy premier, said 'there will be no withdrawal agreement without the backstop. End of story'.

The 'backstop' would effectively keep Northern Ireland in the customs union and single market, drawing a border of sorts down the Irish Sea and giving Northern Ireland special status with the EU relative to the rest of the UK. The UK and EU initially agreed on this proposal, and this drew a crucial line in the sand which has since been difficult to move away from. The Government have indeed attempted to move away from it as the DUP, on whom they now rely for their slim majority, are steadfast that there will be nothing that separates Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK; this is their 'blood red' line.

David Davis, the former Brexit Secretary, has previously said that the 'backstop plan' is 'not a legally enforceable thing' and the UK claims that any special status for Northern Ireland threatens the country's 'constitutional integrity'. However, the Government are yet to come up with a viable alternative.

Theresa May would prefer the UK, in its entirety, to remain in some form of customs union post 2020. This might sound sensible. However, Brexiteers in parliament would demand a fixed end date to this arrangement, whereas the Irish Government (and consequently the EU) insist it must have no time limit. Add into the mix that the DUP are willing to sink the Government in order to prevent any form of border checks within the UK and one quickly understands the difficulty of overcoming the impasse we currently find ourselves at.

A possible neat solution would be for a trade deal to be agreed between the UK and the EU which facilitates the free movement of goods, while removing the UK from both the customs union and single market. However, the EU refuses to allow the UK to use Northern Ireland as a bargaining chip to force through a trade deal and, having adopted the 'Ireland First' stance, will not entertain negotiating one until the border issue is resolved.

It is fair to say that neither the UK nor the EU want a hard border in Ireland, but how to prevent one is proving nearly impossible to agree upon: Brexiteers in Parliament will not allow, under any circumstance, the UK to remain part of the customs union or single market indefinitely; the Republic of Ireland insists that Northern Ireland be kept in the customs union in the event of no deal being reached indefinitely; the DUP will not entertain Northern Ireland being treated any differently to any other part of the UK; the EU will not allow the UK to negotiate a trade deal until the issue is resolved.

The long shadow that the Troubles, which claimed more than 3,600 lives, still casts over the Irish border makes this particular issue more visceral than any other relating to Brexit. The phrase 'life and death' is overused; here it is more than warranted.

Over to you, Theresa.

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