



Preliminary Findings Report – Brexit and North-South Relations

What is the theme?

Brexit has intensified discussion of the border on the island of Ireland. One thing that both the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and membership of the EU did was to take the hard edges off this issue by normalising movement as well as promoting the idea of transnational institutions and mechanisms and multiple identities. Brexit, however, has re-opened in a new way the debate on partition, the existence of two jurisdictions on the island and the nature of that relationship. Harmonious North-South relations are a necessity for continuing peace and developing prosperity and the practical implementation of the peace Agreement. Brexit presents a series of threats and dangers to productive practical relations between the jurisdictions in the years ahead. It also carries with it a threat to the relative ‘constitutional flexibility’ that was developing on the island.

What are the main issues?

Brexit poses hard questions and challenges for those aiming to ‘thaw’ relationships on the island of Ireland. Extensive effort has been invested in promoting better relations between the two jurisdictions, including North-South governmental dialogue and cooperation in the form of the North-South Ministerial Council. There is a genuine question mark over aspects of the continuing operation of cross-border bodies, as both jurisdictions move further apart in a post-Brexit landscape.

The radical disruption of the equality of British and Irish citizenship by the former losing EU citizenship is a threat to the equality of the two main communities, as enshrined in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. There is a danger that either a ‘hard border’ or enhanced immigration controls (insisted on by the UK Government) will create racial profiling and a repressive immigration structure in the North, with the South being complicit in this policy ahead. Included here is the associated danger that Ireland becomes a ‘proxy’ for a racist and restrictive UK immigration policy.

What problems have been identified and what solutions have been proposed?

There must be agreement that Northern Ireland already enjoys a special constitutional status and that this is a reasonable reading of everything that has happened since 1998. It is simply not credible to suggest that the Northern Ireland arrangements are a simplistic example of devolved government within a UK framework. If this is accepted then it becomes easier to acknowledge the need for recognition of ‘unique circumstances’. Within this in mind, and with the objective of securing the future of North-South relationships an agreement should be made between the UK and Ireland, supported by EU, that Northern Ireland should be a ‘special zone’ where EU citizens enjoy the same rights of entry, work, residence, and access to services as a present. The EU should also allow all those UK or Irish citizens resident in Northern Ireland the rights of EU citizenship.

It is imperative that the existing North-South bodies should be protected and their role re-affirmed by both governments. One way to improve North-South relations in the future will be to widen and deepen the scope for all island discussions to ensure effective cooperation and coordination in the practical interests of everyone on the island. As in our other Reports we are persuaded that the best way to do this is to underpin it all with a robust framework of human rights and equality guarantees.