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In 1921 the British government employed crude sectarian arithmetic to carve out six counties from the rest of Ireland. Its aim was to create a Protestant-dominated jurisdiction in the north of Ireland that supported remaining part of the United Kingdom.

The centenary events planned for 2021 presented an opportunity for Northern Ireland to show a decidedly different aspect, marking itself out as a place where power is shared and diversity is cherished. Brexit has made that prospect much less likely. The vote to leave the European Union has eroded much of the bedrock of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, hardened the political divide in the province and dealt a significant blow to British-Irish relations.

Both the British and Irish governments stand accused of advancing narrow interests at the expense of the Good Friday Agreement. In May the Irish government angered Unionists by demanding – and winning – a commitment from the EU to quickly integrate Northern Ireland into the European Union in the event of a united Ireland, prompting Unionists to accuse Dublin of trying to use Brexit as a tool to advance Irish unity.

Meanwhile, the British government has negotiated a confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland, calling into question its long-standing role as an even-handed mediator in the province.

Edward Burke on how to chart a smoother transition

Demonstrators dressed as customs officials man a mock checkpoint near Killeen on the Irish border protesting about the possible effects of Brexit

Brexit’s threat to Northern Ireland

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‘Northern Ireland is much more dependent on trade with the South than vice versa’

ment has been underpinned by the principle of consent between the two traditions – Unionist (mostly Protestant) and nationalist (mostly Catholic) – and between the two governments.

Britain enjoys sovereignty over Northern Ireland but it has been careful to consult with and not contradict Dublin on key issues. Brexit was a seismic violation of that principle: voters in Britain imposed a far-reaching constitutional change on Northern Ireland without the consent of its people – 56 per cent of whom voted to remain in the EU – and directly against the expressed wishes and interests of the Irish government.

The Brexit vote was another hole in a Northern Irish power-sharing executive that was already listing badly following disagreements over budget cuts, dealing with the legacy of the Troubles and the status of the Irish language.

The executive limped on until January before collapsing over the scandal of a mismanaged, possibly corrupt renewable energy scheme that appeared to implicate former First Minister and DUP leader Arlene Foster.

DUP support for Brexit angered the nationalist community, which has increasingly thrown its support behind Sinn Féin. Nationalist parties won more seats than Unionists in Assembly elections in March – the first time in Northern Ireland’s history that nationalist representatives outnumbered Unionists in a Belfast parliament. This in turn alarmed moderate Unionists and saw a commensurate rise in support for the DUP in June’s general election.

The announcement in January 2017 by Prime Minister Theresa May that the UK would leave the EU single market and customs union came as a profound shock to Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland – a customs border will have to be re-established and tariffs on the movement of goods and services appear likely.

The DUP is also concerned at the prospect of a customs border. But Arlene Foster’s party – so used to loudly proclaiming its patriotism – is unable to offer a nuanced view on British sovereignty that favours the handing of some powers back to Brussels after the UK leaves the EU. Ulster’s Unionists will take a back seat on Brexit.

Northern Ireland is much more dependent on trade with the South than vice versa. Around a quarter of the North’s goods exports go to the South, but less than 2 per cent of the Republic of Ireland’s goods exports go to Northern Ireland. Leaving the EU customs union without a tariff-free trade agreement for agri-food products would have a particularly damaging effect on this sector and for the Northern Irish economy – agricultural products make up 35 per cent of Ulster’s exports compared with 10 per cent for the rest of the UK. The EU trade-weighted average tariff for agricultural products is 22.5 per cent which if imposed would lock many Ulster farmers out of their markets in the Republic. And 87 per cent of Northern Irish farm income is derived from EU subsidies – compared with 53 per cent for the UK as a whole.

Border controls will not only impede trade but also serve to remind Irish nationalists that two pillars of the Good Friday Agreement have now collapsed – ever closer economic and cultural integration with the Republic and the allocation of EU structural and peace programme funds that make up approximately 9 per cent of Northern Ireland’s gross domestic product. Between 2014 and 2020 Northern Ireland was expected to draw approximately €3.5 billion in funds from the EU, significantly more than any similarly-sized UK region.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland has observed that dissident Republicans and criminal gangs will also seek to tap into the sizeable smuggling opportunity presented by a customs border. For now, violent dissident Republicans lack a charismatic political leadership to seize the political opportunity of Brexit. But Republican clubs and societies – broadly supportive of armed violence against the British state and not directly controlled by the Sinn Féin leadership – are increasingly active in border communities, drawing energy from the anger that has swelled in these areas since the Brexit vote.

What can be done? First, Theresa May should emphasize that although Northern Ireland’s place within the UK is secure, it should be allowed to develop a differentiated relationship with the EU based on its unique political and economic ties with the rest of the island of Ireland. Second, the EU should continue its peace programmes in Northern Ireland regardless of future UK contributions to the EU budget. The EU has spent close to €1.5 billion on activities that support the peace process in Northern Ireland, including providing counselling services and investing in areas most affected by the Troubles. The British government is unlikely to wish to fund training programmes and social work involving former terrorists. The EU’s positive legacy and contribution to the peace process should be maintained.

Third, London and Brussels should permit Northern Ireland to opt into certain EU structural funds such as the Common Agricultural Policy – it is very difficult to disentangle agriculture and other economic activities on the island of Ireland, where supply chains and markets are heavily intertwined. In doing so London – and possibly Dublin – would have to agree to make a related contribution to the EU budget.

Fourth, a swiftly negotiated joint customs agreement would ease bureaucratic pressures and costs. As with the border between Norway and Sweden, much of the necessary clearance could be done online. UK customs officials could process EU paperwork and collect tariffs, passing them to the EU, so that goods could be cleared and leave both jurisdictions without further checks or form filling.

Fifth, if the UK fails to quickly agree a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU, both parties should create a trade zone between the north and south of Ireland. Northern Irish labelled products and services would be exported to the Republic of Ireland tariff-free – but not to the rest of the EU – as long as they continue to meet EU regulations and standards. Irish products and services could also be exported north of the border without being subject to tariffs – but not to the rest of the UK – as long as these did not deviate from Northern Irish standards.

Should EU-UK negotiations end badly, with few exemptions or considerations for Northern Ireland, then politics will become even more dangerously polarized in the province. Only a pragmatic and engaged Conservative government can avert such a scenario from becoming reality. England must speak for Northern Ireland.

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