

# “One Country, Two Systems”? Britain and Northern Ireland on Brexit

By [Tom Clifford](#)

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Theme: [History](#)

*One country, two systems. Britain is leaving the European Union. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is not leaving on the same terms.*

In the UK election, more Irish nationalists than Unionists were elected in Northern Ireland for the first time since Ireland was partitioned in 1921. Not surprisingly, it led to Sinn Fein renewing its calls for a vote to leave the UK and unite with the Irish Republic. This is not going to happen for reasons steeped in history. But also crucially there is not a groundswell of opinion, on either side of the border, for it. But Northern Ireland feels a lesser part of the UK today than at any time since Lloyd George was prime minister.

Hold the front page, as they used to say in pre-internet and website days. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson is talking nonsense. There was, he said adamantly, no question of checks being needed on trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom under his European Union withdrawal agreement.

“There will not be checks on goods going from Northern Ireland to Great Britain,” Johnson said in November.

Not so fast. His own Brexit secretary, Steve Barclay, had to contradict him. Goods going from Northern Ireland will have to be accompanied by exit declarations and “targeted interventions” from customs officers, he said.

Johnson, according to his own allies, is a non-starter regarding trust. Let us not forget, he is actually the leader of the Conservative and Unionist Party. The Democratic Unionist Party feel they have been abandoned by him. On this, they are right. The DUP were convenient bedfellows when it suited him and when their usefulness was up, they were ruthlessly pushed out. This is no reason for non-Unionists to gloat. If the prime minister can dispatch his allies, then for those of a different political persuasion the occupant of No 10 Downing Street poses, at the very least, a troubling dilemma. Can he be taken at his word or trusted? The evidence suggests not.

Johnson is renegeing on his absolute commitment to his allies in the DUP that a “border in the Irish Sea” is something “no British government could or should” ever accept.

DUP leader Arlene Foster was in no doubt. She said the British prime minister betrayed Unionist voters in Northern Ireland when he sealed a deal with the European Union that would introduce a trade barrier down the Irish Sea, jettisoning Northern Ireland from British customs procedures. He renegeed on a promise he made when he spoke at their annual

conference.

Foster said the party could no longer take Johnson at his word and would have to check if what he said “was actually factually correct”.

“Once bitten, twice shy, we will certainly be looking for the detail of what this [Brexit] is going to look like,” Foster said.

In his victory speech on Friday morning, Johnson said the UK is “leaving the EU as one United Kingdom”. Even if we ignore the Scottish question, this is utterly fraudulent. It is a matter of fact that Northern Ireland is not about to leave the EU on the same terms as Britain.

Crown subjects in Northern Ireland have a right to be told by their prime minister the truth about their status. Johnson displays a reluctance to tell the obvious truth that on the border, borders, literally, on the schizophrenic.

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