

Political Turmoil over Ireland's Post-Brexit Status Escalates

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Bitter negotiations over post-Brexit arrangements with the European Union threaten to destabilise governments in the UK, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Britain is due to exit the European Union in March 2019, raising the possibility that the border between the north and south and the Irish Sea will become an external customs and tariff barrier to “Fortress Europe.” The issue has therefore pitched a divided British government against the EU’s 27 member states, including the Republic.

The EU has made a resolution of the border issue one of the three preconditions for moving forward onto talks with the British government on Brexit trade terms. Brussels is placing maximum pressure on the Conservative government of Prime Minister Theresa May to agree to pay a £40-50 billion “divorce settlement” that is meant to be agreed in one week’s time. The Irish government has made clear it will veto any border solution—and therefore any Brexit deal—of which it does not approve.

This has potentially catastrophic consequences for cross-border trade and for the economies of both parts of the island. Politically, it threatens the survival of May’s government but, more fundamentally, calls into question both future Anglo-Irish relations along with the power-sharing arrangements between the nationalist Sinn Fein and the pro-British Unionist parties. Inaugurated by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the arrangements ended the 30-year armed conflict known as The Troubles.

Britain’s Tory government depends on the vote of ten Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) MPs in a “confidence and supply” arrangement made necessary by the disastrous election result in June. This means that the DUP can veto any Westminster policy it doesn’t agree with.

Northern Ireland has not had a functioning government since early this year—when the Northern Ireland Executive was collapsed by Sinn Fein seizing on a long running scandal over the misallocation of British government funds. Two subsequent elections, one in Northern Ireland and one in Westminster and months of desultory talks failed to revive the power-sharing government between Sinn Fein and the DUP.

Despite the collapse of the Stormont Assembly, the DUP’s stranglehold on May’s weak and divided government has been strengthened—along with her reliance on the hard-Brexit wing of her own party. In the 2016 Brexit referendum, Northern Ireland voted by a clear majority, 56 to 44 percent, to remain in the EU. However, the DUP are fervent Brexiteers with intimate connections to the Tory right.

Earlier this month the British government, egged on by the DUP, took the first steps towards

re-imposing direct rule over Northern Ireland from Westminster. A budget to allow public services to continue to function in the absence of regional government was pushed through by Northern Ireland Secretary of State James Brokenshire.

Last week, the situation became yet more fraught when the Republic of Ireland was also pitched into an electoral crisis.

A long running scandal around the state framing of whistle blower, Maurice McCabe, who exposed fraudulent and corrupt police practices and was falsely accused of being a paedophile, has led to successive police and government resignations.

The main opposition party, Fianna Fail, and Sinn Fein, which operates on both sides of the Irish border, are calling for the resignation of *Tánaiste* (deputy prime minister) Frances Fitzgerald of Fine Gael over her role in the affair. Recently appointed *Taoiseach* (prime minister) Leo Varadkar has refused.

Fianna Fail, which props up the minority Fine Gael government, responded by threatening to pull out of a “confidence and supply” deal. That would precipitate a snap general election just days after the crucial December 14 summit between the EU and the British government.

Both sides are in talks seeking to avoid such an outcome. Fianna Fail are also under pressure from Sinn Fein who recently dropped opposition to entering a coalition agreement as a minority party.

Gerry Adams’ retirement announcement last weekend would facilitate such a governmental role by removing the leader most associated politically with the Irish Republican Army’s campaign against British rule in the North. Adams’ departure brings nearer the prospect of Sinn Fein simultaneously being in government in Northern Ireland and acting as king makers in the Republic.

Brexit has proved to be an unmitigated economic and political disaster for Irish capitalism, north and south. Until Brexit, the Irish Republic, for all the nationalist posturing of its leading parties, broadly shadowed the trajectory of its former imperial master and leading market. Ireland even joined the EU’s forerunner, the European Economic Community, on the same day as Britain, in 1973, at a time when Northern Ireland was occupied by tens of thousands of British troops.

As a member of the European trade bloc, the once impoverished republic attracted vast amounts of US and EU investment aimed at exploiting cheap English-speaking labour with access to European markets. Indeed the “peace process” in the North was underpinned by the fact that both Britain and Ireland were in the EU. The US, Britain and the EU worked to create the conditions for the island to be economically integrated, and investment to be directed towards the increasingly isolated north.

As a result, over the past 19 years, the economically irrational 300-mile border that was once scarred by hundreds of checkpoints, fortresses and patrolled by the British Army effectively ceased to exist. Tens of thousands of goods vehicles, commuters and bargain seekers cross it every day. A recent EU paper reported 142 areas, including the environment, health, agriculture, transport, education, tourism, energy, telecommunications, broadcasting, inland fisheries, justice and security, and sport in which current cross border activity was underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement and EU law.

Brexit poses other problems for the republic. Statistics vary, but 2014 figures suggest that Irish trade with the EU, at €109 billion, is more than double its €52 billion trade with Britain. However, external trade, even if ultimately destined for Europe, still passes through Britain. A recent *Financial Times* article quoted the Irish Exporters Association stating that two thirds of Irish goods directed towards European and even global markets currently cross the Irish Sea to use the British motorway infrastructure and access to the Channel Tunnel.

All parties and governments, including the DUP, therefore agree that there should be no return to a “hard” border. But there is no unity on how this can be done, or where the line marking the EU’s boundary should fall.

The DUP and the British government have ruled out any “special status”, or “bespoke” solution for Northern Ireland that would allow the rules of the EU single market and customs union to continue to be mirrored in the North. They have also ruled out checks at British and Northern Irish ports, claiming this would undermine Northern Ireland’s status as part of the UK.

The Irish government’s European Commissioner, Philip Hogan, warned that Ireland would “continue to play tough to the end.” He did so knowing that he has EU backing, with chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier recently Tweeting,

“Strong solidarity with Ireland...Irish issues are EU issues.”

There is a strong element of political brinksmanship, but all sides are behaving with extraordinary recklessness over the future of an island whose most recent civil war only ended two decades ago.

For the working class, the situation is fraught with the danger of heightened sectarian conflict amid a continued descent into austerity. Only through a united struggle for the abolition of all national borders and the founding of a United Socialist States of Europe can workers advance their interests.

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