

## The Finchley Question

**An Irish bishop whose diocese of Raphoe covers most of Donegal and borders Northern Ireland argues that the “Irish backstop” issue is being wrongly used as stick in the Brexit fight. By ALAN McGUCKIAN**

There was a time, not long ago, when the inevitability of violence in Northern Ireland was accepted as a tragic given. The opposed national loyalties, British and Irish, unionist and nationalist, and the conflicting constitutional claims that backed them up formed a square that could never be circled. For decades – centuries – we were condemned by this binary analysis to a hopeless standoff and cyclical outbreaks of violent unrest; a policy of containment was the least worst solution it was possible to imagine.

Then along came the European Union. The EU offered a bigger context, in which the binary analysis could be looked at again. The United Kingdom and Ireland’s common membership of the EU was certainly not the only factor that ultimately led to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the peace that it has brought to Ireland. But it provided a shared framework within which Unionist and Nationalist identities could be seen as complementary, as equal partners, within the contested space that is Northern Ireland.

In recent weeks, the United Kingdom has suffered further convulsions, with the deepening standoff between those who want to be part of the big context that is the EU and those who want to be free of its constraints. And in the middle of it all, the relationship between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom sticks out like a sore thumb. But can this really be so? Could the so-called “stumbling block” of the Irish backstop actually be a proxy for something else? The special – and different - status of Northern Ireland has been agreed and settled for nearly twenty years. Remember, there was once a time when a Prime Minister made the claim that, “Northern Ireland is as British as Finchley.” The claim drew smiles even then, because when it is put into words and spoken out loud everybody realises that it simply is not so, or at least, not entirely so. It is true that, as Arlene Foster has put it, for Unionists Britishness is fundamental to their identity and “Fermanagh is every bit as integral a part of the Union as our nation’s capital”, but Fermanagh is not British in the same way as Finchley is British. In due course Margaret Thatcher signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 and her successors signed the Downing Street Declaration in 1993 and then the Good Friday Agreement five years later. They have, in a cumulative way, recognised the other half of the Northern Ireland equation: for nationalists Fermanagh is every bit as Irish as Connemara, though it is not Irish in quite the same way as Connemara is.

Northern Ireland should not be used as stick in the current fight. The United Kingdom government and parliament must recognise – as Thatcher did – that in its Britishness and its Irishness Northern Ireland is a special case. It was common membership of the European Union that gave Britain and Ireland the context within which Northern Ireland could be held at peace. The noble compromise ultimately expressed in the Good Friday Agreement and later confirmed by the people of Ireland, north and south of the border, allows Northern Ireland to be at peace in its Britishness *and* its Irishness. The current Prime Minister spoke some months back about the “integrity” of the United Kingdom. Theresa May and her government should remember that when Mrs May’s predecessors made their peace with the truth about Northern Ireland, simultaneously British and Irish, unionist and nationalist, they did it in the face of fierce opposition from the Democratic Unionist Party under the leadership of Ian Paisley. Its opposition to the Good Friday Agreement was rooted in a rigid reading of the claim that “Northern Ireland is as British as Finchley”. That claim had to be faced down. The DUP had to be helped to come to live in a world that is “both and” rather than “either or”.

In order to make the Agreement that has given us twenty precious years of peace a British and an Irish constitutional reality, the Irish nation collectively accepted a big constitutional compromise. In May 1998, a referendum was held in Northern Ireland in which the result was a majority of 71% in support for the Good Friday Agreement; on the same day, the electorate in the Republic of Ireland voted by 94% to drop the constitutional claim, articles two and three, that asserted Irish sovereignty over the entire island of Ireland. That was a big ask for the Irish people, unionist and nationalist, north and south of the border. They voted in overwhelming support of the Agreement on the understanding that both governments would always guarantee Northern Ireland’s position as a unique meeting point of our two national identities, with “parity of esteem” for both the unionist and the nationalist identity, recognising the right of every citizen to be considered as Irish or British or, indeed, both.

The Irish Backstop proposal, that whatever outcome is agreed by the UK and EU, there *must* be a common regulatory area on the island of Ireland in order to safeguard an open border between North and South, is essential if the gains from the Good Friday Agreement are not to be thrown aside. The border should not be allowed to be a “sore thumb” frustrating the efforts of both the UK and the EU to find a way out of the current impasse. The Irish question should not be allowed to stand in the way of the freedom of the people of the United Kingdom to choose their own future. Northern Ireland is different: it is as British as Finchley and it is *not* as British as Finchley. The future relationship

between the United Kingdom and the European Union must reflect that reality. Therefore, it is appropriate, and in the interests of the common good, that Northern Ireland remains an integral part of the United Kingdom and at the same time that there is a free movement of people, goods and services across the two sides of the border. The European Union will find ways to accommodate this necessary anomaly. So should the government of the United Kingdom. Indeed the integrity of the United Kingdom demands it.

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