

Northern Ireland – Handle with Care!

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We've heard a lot about the importance of borders in recent weeks. Hardly surprising given the ongoing threat from Covid-19. Equally, we are hearing of the problems caused because of firms struggling with additional bureaucracy associated with the UK having assumed 'third nation' status.

[Guardian columnist](#), Simon Jenkins, relates problems affecting a range of sectors including farming, distribution and manufacturing which have all experienced problems in the last few weeks.

As well as delays in supply chains and reports of taxes being levied on goods delivered to individuals, there is a sense among some of the magnitude of the decision to leave the EU taken back in June 2016. Some newspapers are carrying reports referring specifically to those who voted to leave but now think differently.

Typical was [DevonLive](#) which Brixham fisherman, Ian Perkes, who, having spoken to [Byline TV](#) claiming that he and many others from what was perceived to be a citadel of leavers would, if offered the opportunity, change their mind and vote to remain. As Devonlive described, following his interview, Perkes "has received the sympathy of thousands of Twitter users".

The [Financial Times](#) article, 'Brexit one month on: what has changed?' analyses what we've experienced so far and what the future may hold.

Leaving the EU was always going to throw up challenges. Ceasing to be bound by arrangements that've evolved over the last 28 years since the formation of the Single European Market in January 1993, with the key objective freedom of movement of goods, capital, services and people, was never going to be straightforward.

In effect, by voting to leave, the UK collectively decided that it wished to impose barriers between itself and the other 27 existing members of the EU. Because the majority of the UK is surrounded by sea, controls would be exercised at by officials monitoring movements by air and sea. However, any part of the UK with a land border with an EU country was a different matter.

Northern Ireland was a particular case in point.

As explained in a number of blogs and articles and in various chapters included in [*Bordering on Confusion*](#), like many others I stressed the immense difficulties that would surface by the UK's departure from the EU on Northern Ireland. The border Northern Ireland shares with the Republic of Ireland, created because of its formation in 1921 by the Government of Ireland Act 1920, makes it the only part of the UK in which it's possible to travel by land to the EU.

The 'Troubles' which resulted in the deaths of over 3.500 people and tens of thousands terribly injured was only ended by the 1998 Good Friday agreement. This was based on facilitating trade through easing of security arrangements on the Irish border which became much less conspicuous. No-one ever envisaged a situation in which the border between the two parts of Ireland would become an international frontier.

Since June 2016, when the UK may have voted to leave the EU but, significantly, Northern Ireland didn't, phenomenal effort has gone into finding a solution enacting the collective will of the people but without jeopardy to the peace by the need for a 'hard' border required to monitor goods or people.

One way of dealing with the challenge was the 'Backstop' (see the chapter I wrote in *Bordering on Confusion*). This proposed that Northern Ireland be treated differently by being allowed to stay in the single market. The UK would be part of a common customs territory with the EU to enable a workable way to ensure the integrity of the single market, but without the imposition of border checks, could be developed.

Unionists and Loyalists in Northern Ireland were apoplectic at this suggestion and, because of their support being crucial to the keeping

the government in power, the backstop, and Theresa May's premiership, were fatally undermined.

Boris Johnson dumped the backstop and though proclaiming Northern Ireland would leave the EU in the same way as all other parts of the UK, for the sake of gaining agreement engaged in a volte which would have been inconceivable under his predecessor May. The fact that there would be customs checks between Great Britain and Northern Ireland was, unsurprisingly, not welcomed by [Unionists or Loyalists](#) but, in the midst of a pandemic and with parliamentary arithmetic now against them, not an issue that was going to attract support.

There have been reports of [food shortages in Northern Ireland](#). These have been caused by food producers and hauliers' adherence to EU food standards, problems due to Northern Ireland remaining in the Single European Market and said by Prime Brexit Minister, Boris Johnson, to be "[teething problems](#)". Nonetheless, in the febrile and highly charged atmosphere anything creating even minor disturbance will be used as justification for all sorts of threats and bellicose language.

And so, despite having been intimately involved in negotiations concerning Northern Ireland and being aware of the incredibly delicate sensitivities among the communities, the actions of the EU last Friday in, apparently, threatening to using [Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol](#), seems incomprehensible. Irish state broadcaster RTE's Europe Correspondent, the always excellent Tony Connelly, provides detailed analysis of what happened and, as he explains, "what went wrong".

This mechanism was, like all safeguards, only to be used in an emergency and to be applied if there are concerns of serious risk of 'economic, societal or environmental difficulties' due to the protocol. That it was going to be invoked as a result of 'vaccine wars' and with the intention of stopping the European-produced Pfizer inoculation from crossing the Irish border into Northern Ireland as a 'backdoor' to the UK seemed, at the very least, poorly considered.

[For those Brexit supporters](#), particularly those who argued that a complete break with the EU was required, the EU acting in a way that

might potentially cut off supply of a vaccine that could lead to increased likelihood of infection and death provided evidence of the overweening organisation they claimed it to be. Even supporters of remain were left exasperated with the EU's inability to think through the consequences of what might happen.

The fact that Johnson had posed using a pretty similar mechanism in the proposed Internal Market Bill did little to assuage the anger many felt against the EU for acting in what seemed to some, a spiteful manner borne of annoyance at, we're informed, the inability of AstraZeneca to supply sufficient quantities of its vaccine from the European plants. Compared to the success in vaccination achieved by the UK, the EU's progress has been poor may create [drag on its economic recovery](#).

That the dispute is between the EU, which placed its order for the vaccine with AstraZeneca three months later than the UK, became political suggested a degree of gameplaying that does not become an institution that has, hitherto, prided itself on integrity and, during negotiations concerned with the UK's departure, willing to be pragmatic.

That the decision to invoke Article 16 by the EU was, given the intense annoyance created, almost immediately rescinded means that there will be little practical effect. It can only be hoped that valuable lessons concerning the need to communicate may have been learned. However, what's intensely worrying is that the EU's now withdrawn action is providing cover for those with malign intent on both sides of the Irish Sea.

Reports of staff employed to make checks on goods entering Northern Ireland's ports being threatened demonstrates delicately balanced peace [can easily be undermined](#). Irish *Taoiseach* Micheál Martin believes [the situation at Belfast and Larne ports](#) to be a "sinister and ugly development".

Not for the first time Northern Ireland is dominating the news. Call for checks and restrictions on goods crossing the Irish Sea from Great Britain to Northern Ireland are understandable but unlikely to be agreed to by the EU who may fear an unpicking of the [Free Trade Agreement](#).

Predictably, using the [Northern Ireland Protocol](#) as leverage, Brexiteers believe there is political capital in arguing for completion of ‘unfinished business’; complete disengagement with the EU and a move to trading with it under World Trade Organisation rules.

It’s virtually certain that the next general election, due in 2024, will be, once again, dominated by the issue of Europe. Any hope that this country’s relationships with the EU could assume less significance have been dashed.

Borrowing from the title of Travelling Wilburys’ 1988 song, when dealing with Northern Ireland all sides must, in future, ensure announcements made with regards to this part of the UK are handled with care.

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13:978-1694447807) and *English Regions After Brexit: Examining Potential Change through Devolved Power* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8666953099). He has contributed chapters to a number of texts in the last year (in 2020 unless otherwise stated): *Brexit Negotiations after Article 50: Assessing Process, Progress and Impact* (published in 2019 by Emerald Publishing, ISBN: 978-1787697683); *The Wolves in the Forest: Tackling Inequality in the 21st Century* edited by Hindley and Hishman (published in 2019 by Social Liberal Forum); *Boris, Brexit and the Media* edited by Mair, Clark, Fowler, Snoddy and Tait (published by Abramis Academic Publishing, ISBN-13: 978-1845497644); *The Virus and the Media: How British Journalists Covered the Pandemic*, edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8643725824); *The Pandemic, Where Did We Go Wrong?* edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8665858326); *BBC, A Winter of Discontent?* edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books ISBN-13: 979-8694863117) and *The Pandemic, Where are We Still Going Wrong?* edited by Mair, (published by Bite-Sized Books ISBN-13: 979-8563726338). His latest chapter, ‘Does Vaccination offer Johnson a Way out of the Pandemic?’ is published in *Pandemic, A Year of*

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