

Lest we Forget

By David Hearne, Researcher, Centre for Brexit Studies

I always enjoy reading blog posts from my colleagues here at the Centre. Aside from being a refreshing change of pace from the day job, they often bring a different perspective or a new point of view that I had not previously considered. Jacob Salder's recent post on why he now backs 'no deal' is no exception, being well thought out and argued. I am sure that he speaks for a great many people, particularly amongst the EU27 (many of whom understandably just want Brexit to be over so that the rest of the EU can go back to dealing with actual issues). I suspect that there are also many in the UK who feel a good deal of sympathy with his notion that we must somehow 'learn our lesson'.

Nevertheless, as understandable as this is, I must beg to differ. Whilst I have several reasons to do so, one stands above all others: Ireland. My country – and I do mean all of it, for the rapaciousness of Scottish landlords in Ireland easily matched the behaviour of their English counterparts – has a long and ignominious history on the island of Ireland. From the tragic loss of life in the potato famine to the events of the Easter Rising and Bloody Sunday, the British have all-too-often failed to hold our governments to account for their actions in Ireland.

We cannot undo that history. Bobby Sands died 5 years before I was born and the horrendous policy of internment was abandoned before a majority of people in the UK were alive. No amount of self-flagellation on my part will atone for Britain's sins in Ireland nor am I any more responsible for them than a modern-day Spaniard is responsible for the sins of the *conquistadors*[\[1\]](#). However, the fact that the events of history cannot be undone does not give us license to forget them.

What does this mean for today? Put simply, it means that if we can avoid a 'no deal' outcome then we should. The people of Ireland did not vote for Brexit. Nor did they vote to leave the EU. . For us to harm their interests through leaving the EU would be objectionable. For us to leave the EU in a disorderly fashion, thus precipitating a hard border in Northern Ireland would be unconscionable. Never again

should Ireland be considered 'collateral damage', as it sometimes has in the past.

The EU, too, must be sensitive to this history. If the UK asks for an extension to the Article 50 period then that should be granted. Whether the UK chooses to use this period to come to an agreement on what it would like its future relationship with the EU27 to look like or to reconsider Brexit or to deal with its own political division does not matter. To fail to do so would be to fail the people of both these islands.

I understand and appreciate the argument that the UK voted to leave the EU and therefore that for that to fail to happen would be undemocratic. Don't get me wrong: if the people of Great Britain genuinely want to leave the EU (and there is a case for asking what kind of relationship they wish to have in future) then a way should be found to allow that to happen. It must not happen at Ireland's expense. Democracy is not just about voting: if a majority of people voted to kill anyone with ginger hair then, in that instance, the rights of ginger-haired people trump the rights of said majority.

A way needs to be found to avoid a hard border in Ireland. The people of that island deserve it. The people of Northern Ireland also deserve to be given a say in their future. They should be asked whether (limited) regulatory divergence from Great Britain is an acceptable price to be paid for maintaining an open border. The people of the Republic should also be asked: their views count, particularly when they themselves live near the border. How that result is interpreted and used is open for discussion, but it would be grotesque for Great Britain to act in a way that precipitated a hard border without consulting the people of the island of Ireland.

Finally, the EU is morally obliged, in my opinion, to be creative in seeking to find a way of avoiding this impasse. The Withdrawal Agreement cannot be considered sacrosanct in this regard. It is a draft international treaty, not some Holy Text inscribed in stone. Michel Barnier and Olly Robbins might be inspired individuals (or not) but they cannot claim divinity. Likewise, we need an adult conversation about the reasons for Brexit and the challenges the EU faces.

We must stop at nothing to maintain peace. Even if that means revisiting some of our most cherished principles. That goes for all of us. Great Britain owes it to the island of Ireland to do everything in our power to find a way forward. The EU, too, should remember that above all other values – including those it most cherishes – lies the maintenance of peace. Today is the 21st anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. Lest we forget.

[\[1\]](#) In any event, as a general rule one should not hold individuals accountable for actions of a state, unless they were directly involved.