

Beyond Backstop: Which Technologies Can Facilitate a Frictionless Border in Ireland?

By Nigel Taylor, Visiting Industry Fellow Centre for Brexit Studies

The impasse over the North/South border in Ireland is well documented. Where the UK is looking to strike out and create new trade deals post-Brexit, the reality of moving goods and people through the Republic of Ireland/Northern Ireland border suggests a metaphorical anchor. The EU has been quick to point this out, after all, how can they protect the integrity of the single market without border controls? The UK in riposte has suggested a combination of regulatory alignment and technology to meet the EU's requirements.

The proposal of a 'frictionless smart border' has been met with doubt and disbelief, with many citing this has never been done before. The truth is, it hasn't, but that does not mean we shouldn't.

Perhaps the disparity in thinking is revealed in the EU's proposal for a backstop. Ignoring the political ramifications of the proposal, the trade facilitation elements reveal the EU's mindset. Perhaps provocatively, the backstop's trade facilitation proposal includes 'third country' checks on goods, but 'conveniently' away from the border; on-premises, in ports and airports, on ships and ferries, or even in the marketplace. It suggests a world of paper and people, of bureaucracy and burden.

As a technologist and futurist, this is not the world I live in. In my paper ['The Republic of Ireland & Northern Ireland: Technology Enablement for a Frictionless Smart Border'](#), I address some of the issues facing post-Brexit trade facilitation between the UK and EU, and where technology can help now and in the future.

The crux of the issue is simple; the situation is unique. No country has yet divested itself from the EU therefore everything we face is new. What is the best way to address this challenge?

Considering the assumed desire for EU companies to retain access to the UK market, the political desire to create a soft border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, the UK's starting position of regulatory equivalence with the EU and the availability of technology solutions to underpin the required bureaucracy, then a frictionless smart border is achievable.

Anyone who has a basic understanding of the internet of things (IoT), business networks and regulation technology, understands that not only is this achievable but it is highly probable – as a lot of it is happening right now. A flat-out refusal to incorporate technology into any modern trade facilitation agreement only reveals government's willingness to stifle trade, not facilitate it. The time has come to stop playing politics, and to start playing trade.