

Brexit's Broken Britain and the Northern Ireland Protocol

By Scott Lucas

British newspapers tried to proclaim an improbable victory snatched from the jaws of doom.

“Brexit Breakthrough” [shouted The Times](#). In The Daily Express, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak had reclaimed Brexit’s slogan: “PM: My Brexit Deal ‘Now Takes Back Control’”.

Even those who had supported Boris Johnson’s scheming to reclaim the Prime Minister’s chair from Sunak joined it. The Daily Telegraph featured his statement, “Sunak: My Deal is a New Way Forward”. The Daily Mail exulted, “Has Rishi Done the Impossible?”

As so often with the tragic festival of Brexit Britain, reality is more sobering.

Facing the corrosive political and economic damage of the UK exit from the European Union, Rishi Sunak ended the UK Government’s three-year sabotage of the Northern Ireland Protocol. He stood alongside European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, hailing agreement over the Protocol’s trade and custom agreements as well as its legal process.

The truth is that Sunak had only returned to the provisions that could have been confirmed before the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement took effect in January 31, 2020. These include the “green channel”/“red channel” for movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland with — finally — the supporting infrastructure.

The one addition is the headline of the “Stormont brake”, which in theory allows the Northern Ireland Assembly — if it is ever reconvened — to object to any new EU provision. But that is largely a cover, trying to isolate the objection of Northern Ireland’s Democratic Unionist Party to any EU involvement in economic arrangements. The European Court of Justice, the *bête noire* of the DUP and ultra-Brexiters alike, is still here even if any initial disputes have to go through the Northern Irish system.

Of course, Sunak could not say this in his celebration, lifting an unwelcome curtain for those who still might block the agreement.

So, like Boris Johnson in December 2019, [he lied](#), “We have removed any sense of a border in the Irish Sea”.

[See also EA on China Radio International: Will Brexit Britain Avoid a Northern Ireland Meltdown?](#)

Bowing to Reality...

As Chancellor the Exchequer throughout most of Johnson’s Premiership, Sunak was complicit in the attempts to sabotage the Protocol.

[See also Get Brexit Undone: The Johnson Government \(Again\) Threatens Northern Ireland](#)

But then came Johnson’s departure in July 2022, spurred in part by Sunak’s resignation over the Prime Minister’s personal and political behavior. The former Chancellor watched as Liz Truss, who defeated him in the battle for the succession, lasted only 49 days in her rush to economic mayhem.

When Sunak finally entered 10 Downing Street on October 25, inflation was 11.1% — a 41-year high — and possibly heading higher amid a trebling of energy costs. Trade with both Europe and Northern Ireland was down, and the Biden Administration had ruled out any trade agreement with

London. The UK was on the brink of recession, the worst-performing economy among the G20 nations except for Russia. The Northern Ireland Assembly had not met since February.

So the Prime Minister lifted the roadblock on talks with the EU over the Protocol, with almost four months of discussions leading to Monday's announcement.

The Immediate Chatter...

The heated chatter will now be about whether Sunak can quell any insurgency from the hard Brexiteers as well as isolating the DUP if it remains intransigent.

He may be able to do so. The former hardliner Steve Baker is now inside the Cabinet. Others like former Brexit Secretary David Davies have given approval. The DUP appears to be divided, with its leader Jeffrey Donaldson reserving judgement even as Ian Paisley Jr. said the agreement "does not cut the mustard". The opposition Labour Party has pledged its support in any Parliamentary vote.

This could change if Boris Johnson — who blinked over Brexit in 2016 but then launched his coup in 2019 against Prime Minister Theresa May — decides that this is his opportunity to supplant Sunak. So far the Blond One has stirred up uncertainty with statements by subordinates like former "Brexit Opportunities" Minister Jacob Rees-Mogg and former Culture Secretary and reality TV star Nadine Dorries and by his boycott of Sunak's Monday statement in the House of Commons. But he has not come into the open with an objection.

...And the Decline Beyond

This has an immediate importance. If Sunak has to rely on Labour votes for confirmation of the Protocol, he could be a lame-duck Prime Minister in a lame-duck Conservative Party with almost two years to go before the next General Election. Political turmoil in Great Britain could resurge while the Irish island deals with the effect on its security, 25 years after the Good Friday Agreement.

But it is even more important to realize that the confirmation of the Protocol is only a tourniquet on a gushing British wound. The International Monetary Fund projected at the end of January that the UK would cement its position as worst-performing major country, contracting 0.6% in 2023 while the global economy grew 2.9%. The latest evidence of disrupted supply chains and labor markets is in the shortage of vegetables in British supermarkets, but manufacturing and other sectors have long felt the effects. The Government has a \$40 billion hole in its annual revenues because of lost trade.

On February 9-10 in Oxfordshire, Conservative and Labour representatives, and analysts from the corporate, financial, and military sectors gathered to assess the situation.

The seriousness of the crisis was borne out by the senior level of the participants: former Conservative ministers Michael Gove, David Lidington, Michael Howard, and Norman Lamont; Labour shadow ministers David Lammy, and John Healey and former ministers Peter Mandelson and Gisela Stuart; former Treasury permanent secretary Tom Scholar; and Angus Lapsley, NATO's assistant secretary general for defence policy and planning.

A source summarized:

The main thrust of it was that Britain is losing out, that Brexit it not delivering, our economy is in a weak position.

It was about moving on from Leave and Remain. What are the issues we now have to face. How can we get into the best position in order to have a conversation with the EU about changes to the UK-EU trade and cooperation agreement when that happens?

But if the meeting expressed “little interest in further wrangling over Brexit” and “clear European as well as British strategic interest in a productive and closer relationship”, it did not appear to grasp the fundamental of a solution as it emphasized “rejoining the EU will not be on the agenda”.

Instead, it was Rishi Sunak who — inadvertently — pointed to the necessary step.

Promoting the Protocol agreement in Northern Ireland on Tuesday, [Sunak said](#)

Northern Ireland has this very special position where it has access to the UK market, has access to the EU market, which makes it an incredibly attractive place to invest for businesses.

In other words, Northern Ireland’s economic prosperity is bound up with a future in the European Union’s single market.

Sunak did not answer the logical question: wouldn’t the economic recovery of Great Britain best be pursued by getting back into single market?