

Will Ireland really bring the end of the Union for the ...

Published: January 14, 2026, 10:49 am

You can't be even a bit Irish and be unaware of the significance of the Easter 1916 rising for the history of the country. In the middle of WW1 more than 1,000 Irishmen rallied to a call that Ireland be a Republic, independent of the United Kingdom. The Rising failed, of course. Most of those who led it paid with their lives. But in 1922 the Free State was born.

That did not mean the stresses between the UK and Ireland went away, of course. If you were brought up in the 60s and 70s, as I was, and happened to have Murphy as a name, the Troubles were an issue that was hard to avoid. And the peace since since the Good Friday Agreement has, in that context, been something to celebrate. It's hard to recall when in the border regions of the Republic and the North now just how dangerous this region was to be in when I was in my twenties and thirties. No one should want to go back to the situation of that time.

Amongst too many politicians that recall is, however, either not there (maybe they've never been, and maybe they never knew) or it has seemingly been forgotten now. What else can explain the casual indifference of so many UK politicians to what might still, quite fairly, be called the Irish question? The fact that this now comes up in the context of Brexit in one sense changes nothing, and in another makes everything so much more urgent, precisely because that process has such absurdly tight timetables attached to it.

There is, of course, nothing 'natural' about Northern Ireland. It is not the Irish province of Ulster: that was of nine counties and three (Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan) are in the Republic. It was simply the expedient territory deemed to retain Unionist affiliation in 1922. Ireland fought a civil war at the time as a consequence. Many lives have been lost since as a result. And the fact that the border very largely disappeared from view post 1997 has been an enormous cause for relief for all those with concern for Ireland.

In that case to say that the issue of how that border might function in future is secondary to any decision on an overall trade deal with the EU that may, or may not, be agreed during 2018 is to scandalously miss the significance of this issue, which is quite

rightly seen as absolutely fundamental by the Irish government, and will I suspect remain so even if that government does change in the near future. This is not just about ensuring that trade can flow freely across the border - important though that is to the Republic - but about ensuring that peace is maintained in the whole island of Ireland in the manner that has been very largely enjoyed for two decades now. The EU recognises this. It is apparent that [Liam Fox does not](#). His dogmatic fervour that is devoted to ignoring this issue is as ill-placed as any that have ever fuelled the crisis in Ireland over the years, and is as likely to be as dangerous as a result.

I am unsurprised as a consequence that the EU backs the Republic. What else was to be expected? Of course it was going to side with a member state who feels threatened by Brexit, just as it has also sided with Spain on Gibraltar, and may well side against the UK on blacklisting British tax havens in due course. That's not picking fights as such; it is about doing what alliances of states exist to do, which is offer mutual support to those who feel their interests are at risk from an outside source, which for these purposes the UK now is.

The result is, though, that at present it is very hard to see what progress there can now be on any talks with the EU. Liam Fox says we will leave the customs union and single market, as a matter of fact. And as a matter of fact that requires a hard border between the Republic and Northern Ireland.

But as a matter of fact the DUP says it will not have that border.

And in reality it is perfectly obvious that such a border is not deliverable. Three hundred road crossings and the lack of any physical sign of where the border might be along most of its length makes that obvious.

Just as it is obvious that the DUP demand that Northern Ireland have no special status different from the rest of the UK is in any way consistent with the demand for no border with the Republic.

These are, to be blunt, issues that cannot be resolved by any amount of negotiation. There is no such thing as a non-border when the whole point of Brexit was that there should be one. And yet there is no way there can be a hard border. And there is no way there can be the arrangement the DUP demands.

And nor is there any way that border controls on flights and ferry crossings between the North and the rest of the UK cannot happen in future if there is no border between the Republic and the North, as the DUP demand. Like it or not that's because without controls between the North and the rest of the UK in that situation there would be no border for migration between the EU and the UK. In other words the DUP simply cannot say borders are unacceptable anywhere and leave Brexit in any sense meaningful in the eyes of all those who voted for it because they thought migration the issue it was meant to control.

What this means is that, like it or not, the Irish question is now at the core of the Brexit debate. And nor can it be deferred. No trade deal overcomes it, most especially if the UK is adamant about leaving the customs union and single market. Any such departure leaves both the Republic and the DUP in impossible situations. And that leaves not just the UK government in an impossible situation, but also without a majority since it is dependent upon the DUP for that. It leaves us, then, without a government at all.

As a result the fact is that the 2016 Brexit vote may have been as significant an issue for Ireland and the rest of the UK as the 1916 rising, one hundred years earlier. And in both cases, and just a few years later, a solution to a border issue has to be found or the consequences will, I fear, be very long lasting indeed.

Right now I have only one. That, of course, is the whole of the UK staying in the customs union and single market. That works. Peace in Ireland is maintained. Borders are not required within the UK, which as the DUP rightly notes would shatter the idea that there is a UK asunder, come what may. And we could agree a deal with the EU in the proposed timescales. Try anything else and I can see not only no favourable outcomes, whilst there will be some deeply divided and profoundly hostile borders within both Ireland and Great Britain in the very near future.

The fact is that what this means is that the UK has met its match. And it is Ireland. And this time it has to give ground. Not for Ireland's sake, but for its own.

But with Liam Fox in the equation, will it? I cannot answer that.