

Where should the UK's internal land border be? Is it Ca...

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I have very little confidence that the Cabinet will resolve its Brexit differences tomorrow. I, candidly, have very little confidence that it ever will. And, as yet, I have no more confidence therefore that any significant deal will be reached with the EU before March next year. But in that case what we do know is that a backstop deal for Northern Ireland has been agreed. In December 2017 it was agreed that in the event of no other agreement either the UK as a whole, or Northern Ireland on its own, will remain aligned to the single market and the customs union after Brexit takes place so that there is no land border in Northern Ireland. To date, this is just about all that has been agreed on Brexit. In summary, what it says is that if the rest of the UK crashes out of the EU then Northern Ireland does not: it stays.

Like just about everything else on Brexit no one knows what this means. There is no actual agreement on delivery. There is only controversy. The DUP says it will not permit a border in the Irish Sea. Labour says it does not want to be in the Customs Union or Single Market. The Tories are simply fighting each other. But this is an international agreement, and it is meant to be binding.

There is a problem though, and it has been researched by the [Wings over Scotland website](#). I should put it on record that I know just how controversial this website is. It divides opinion, even amongst nationalists. but what Stuart Campbell, who runs it, has done is some opinion polling. As he has argued, both Northern Ireland and Scotland voted to stay in the EU. Scotland did so by a particularly large margin. And in that case, he suggests, any deal which effectively keeps Northern Ireland in Europe would represent a huge benefit that the Scottish people and businesses would likely want too. There is just one downside:

The downside is that if such special status would necessitate customs and immigration checks in the North Channel — as it would have to — then obviously it would mean the same thing on the land border between Scotland and England.

So Stuart did some opinion polling on this and found the following:

As he notes:

According to our recent Panelbase poll, it turns out that a hard border at Berwick and Gretna is a price that Scottish voters are — by a margin of more than two to one — willing to pay to stay in the EU.

He adds:

This is another question where Tories are isolated from the rest of Scotland. While SNP voters (even including the third of them who voted Leave) are absolutely overwhelmingly prepared to tolerate a hard border — presumably since it'd plainly be a further big symbolic and practical step towards independence — Labour and Lib Dem supporters also back the idea by more than 2:1.

Only Tories would be against the idea of Scotland having the same special status as Northern Ireland, and they're only a quarter of Scottish voters and a fifth of MPs.

But it's where he goes next that is really interesting:

And the most intriguing thing about that is this: were it to happen, there'd clearly no longer be any need for a sea border between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. That's because NI would no longer be shut off from the rest of the UK, the situation that's so intolerable to the DUP — instead it would be England and Wales that were effectively quarantined. The need for a hard land border on the island of Ireland could be avoided, replaced with one between Scotland and England which would have no implications for the Good Friday Agreement.

And there is a practical, and even pragmatic, dimension to this:

Also, at just [96 miles](#) the Scotland-England border is a lot shorter than the NI-Ireland one at [310 miles](#), and has many fewer crossings, so it'd be far easier to manage.

As he notes:

Now, to say that such an arrangement would be controversial is like saying relations between Israel and Palestine are “a little tricky”. But remarkably, it appears to be the LEAST problematic of the solutions currently open to the UK government. It would — we've just learned — be acceptable to the people of Scotland. It would, at a minimum, be LESS unacceptable to the DUP than any other option is. We know the English would go along with it, because we already know [they'd happily cut Scotland and NI loose](#) entirely to secure Brexit, never mind give them a half-and-half status. And let's be honest, nobody much cares what the Welsh think.

I readily admit I had not considered this.

I also readily admit I cannot see it happening,

But can I see that now the idea has been sown it may become a new and recurring feature in discussion on this issue given just how unpopular Brexit is amongst many in Scotland? Yes, I can. And I can see it finding support. As Stuart puts it:

[This solves] the most unsolvable problem in British politics. Northern Ireland and Scotland get what they want — to basically stay in the EU as part of a Celtic substate with one foot in both camps. England and Wales also get what they want — to leave the EU. [And] we don't need to have a hard land border in Ireland, destroying the [Good Friday Agreement], because the border between the EU and the UK will now be a much shorter and less bloodsoaked one located just north of Hadrian's Wall.

In a situation where nothing is known I think that this has to be thrown into debate.

Hat tip: Andy Crow