

The Irish question

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Issues relating to Ireland have been troublesome for British politics for centuries. Since 1802, when the Irish parliament was subsumed into that in Westminster, the parliament in London has had to almost continually address an issue to which it has never had any adequate answers, largely because barring total independence there are none. Today the problem of the Irish border continues.

The question that we now have is simple. Given that England, and somewhat surprisingly Wales, chose to leave the EU the question is where is that border with Ireland to be now? Johnson always ducked the question, but when pushed to deliver a supposedly oven-ready Brexit accepted the compromise that he always said he would never agree to, which was to put the Irish border in the Irish Sea.

Let's be candid. Johnson had no choice but to do that. The alternative was to make it a land border in Ireland and that would have breached the Good Friday Agreement that has delivered a period of lasting peace and relative prosperity in Northern Ireland. Not that I suspect the people of Northern Ireland weighed heavy on Johnson's considerations: I think the risk of sanctions from the EU and most especially the USA as a guarantor of that agreement was what forced his hand.

But the issue has not gone away. Johnson created the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill in the Westminster parliament. This remains on the floor of the House, providing an ever-loomng threat to the EU that the UK might pull out of agreed arrangements. Its presence acts as a constant reminder that UK talks on this issue with the EU and others are never being undertaken in good faith.

That is the problem. The Protocol was always meant to be temporary. The deal was meant to be finalised. The EU is rightly demanding that it is. The threat of sanctions from the EU and USA has not gone away. And the mood in Ireland is changing. Sinn Fein is the largest party in the North. There is a real chance that it could lead the next government in Dublin. The Union has never looked weaker.

Despite all this, the Unionists maintain their demands, backed by the European

Research Group far-right fringe of the Conservative Party. Their demand is that there be no border within the UK and that the EU have no jurisdiction over Northern Ireland, which it must if Northern Ireland is to be in the single market as is necessary to avoid a border in Ireland.

There is only one eventual solution to this problem. The people of Ireland are eventually going to vote for it. The legal mechanism to permit that vote already exists, although as yet no one wants to use it. But until then there is only one viable interim step that can work, which is to keep the border in the Irish Sea. There is really no room to negotiate around that. In this case there is also no way that the EU cannot have influence and some sanction over Northern Ireland. Wittingly or not, that is what the people of England and Wales chose. The Unionists in Northern Ireland may not like it, but the country to which they claim allegiance voted for this for them, with the backing of the very same people who now claim to be their allies in Westminster, which fact you could not make up.

What are Sunak's options? He has few. The best is to agree a deal. Starmer, who wants the issue resolved before he gets to office, will provide support. Then Sunak has to increase security in Northern Ireland because there will be backlash. And after that he has to be prepared to suspend the whip from any MP who votes against this agreement if it goes to the Commons, which it need not do but likely will. He has, in other words, to use Johnson's methods to rid the Tories of the ERG as Johnson once used it to rid the party of its moderates.

Will that leave a Tory rump? Of course, it will. But Sunak can't govern anyway, so that will make no difference. But it will at least permit Sunak to be seen to do the right thing on one issue before his ignominious reign as prime minister ends. And that is one more than Truss managed.

What chance is there that Sunak will do the right thing? I am not optimistic. But, as ever, I live in hope.