Borders, Brexit and Beyond:

Fragments on Northern Ireland

Frauke Hofmeister

Frauke Hofmeister (Leipzig) takes a closer look at a peripheral region that suddenly took centre stage in Brexit negotiations: Northern Ireland. In revisiting political decision making within and/ or concerning Northern Ireland over the past four years (also, but not only, regarding Brexit), she explores the ongoing significance of geographical, political and social boundaries in the region.

On 31 January 2020, the Irish border closed its Twitter account: "it feels like I won the battle but the war was lost." (cited in McClements 2020). For almost two years, an anonymous author had published satirical comments on the implications of the UK withdrawal from the European Union on the Irish land border. Brexit and Northern Ireland – whoever followed the news over the past years (and you couldn't escape it) grasped that the border question had indeed been *the* major obstacle in the negotiations. If it hadn't been for Northern Ireland, it seems, Brexit would have been "done" much earlier (and May might still be Prime Minister…). However, the spotlight was mostly on Westminster, Brussels, or possibly Dublin. Reason enough to spend a few pages having a closer look at Northern Ireland itself and at what happened there over the past four years, both regarding Brexit and beyond. Of course, I can't offer a holistic picture, but at least a few fragments highlighting that the geographical border between Ulster and the Republic of Ireland is not the only relevant boundary in Northern Ireland.

Before the referendum…

What would be the impact of a UK withdrawal from the European Union on Northern Ireland – that smallest 'nation' ('region'? 'country'?) of the United Kingdom, which had been created in 1921 with the partition of Ireland, because a majority of the mostly Protestant population wished to remain part of the UK instead of becoming part of the new Irish Free State (later to become the Republic of Ireland)? What would Brexit mean for this peculiar place, which had seen a violent

civil war between a Protestant majority and a Catholic minority in the latter half of the twentieth century until the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 had achieved more or less peaceful stability, with an open border with the Republic of Ireland, a growing number of cross-border institutions, and an (albeit regularly suspended) power-sharing regional government in Belfast.

Although hard to believe from a hindsight perspective, the future of the Irish border and Northern Ireland's somewhat complicated constitutional situation featured only very late in the referendum debate and its media coverage – on both sides of the North Channel. Neither Vote Leave nor Britain Stronger in Europe campaign materials even alluded to these issues, and also other players neglected Northern Ireland (partly completely, as shown by leaflets like Better Off Out's "Are you British… or European?", where "British" obviously really means British and not "Ukanian" (in Tom Nairn's terms)).

Yes, there had been warnings, of course. Edward Stourton had explored "The Irish Question" in a half-an-hour BBC podcast as early as February 2016. The House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee had heard witnesses on issues they "believe[d] should be amongst the most relevant to the electors in Northern Ireland" (House of Commons 2016: 3) over February and March 2016 but only published their report on 26 May. Tellingly, "The Border and Cross-Border Issues" was only the last of three chapters, preceded (and pagewise clearly outnumbered) by chapters on "Trade and Commerce" and "Agriculture". And

Better Off Out (2016) - Has anyone seen Northern Ireland?

even though the campaign in Northern Ireland differed from the referendum campaigns in the other parts of the UK (cf. Doyle/Connolly 2017: 2), it seems that the majority of the media and the electorate did not take the imminent constitutional impact very serious. As Stephen Baker (2018: 94) put it in his analysis of Northern Ireland newspaper coverage:

There was a time when a visit by a senior British official to Northern Ireland, especially in the midst of political turmoil and constitutional crisis, would have excited a great deal of public comment. Not so during the EU referendum campaign of 2016, when no less that [sic] one British Prime Minister, two ex-Prime Ministers, a Chancellor of the Exchequer; the Mayor of London and Nigel Farage visited the region to little acclaim and less fuss.

Well, why should there have been more "fuss" considering that the Northern Ireland Secretary Theresa Villiers had insisted in April 2016 that "the land border with Ireland can remain as free-flowing after a Brexit vote as it is today" (ctd. in Cunningham 2016)? Think of Tony Blair and John Major what you like, but at least they took the border (or "no-border") issue seriously, when they appeared together at Ulster University in Derry to stress constitutional impacts of a Leave-Vote in June 2016.

In any case, for much of the campaign period, other matters had preoccupied Northern Irish media (and the public) – first and foremost the assembly elections on 5 May. But when it comes to party stances on the referendum, it is worth noting that support for either side was not aligned to the usual nationalist-unionist divide: the only major party campaigning for Leave was the DUP under Arlene Foster, while the second most important unionist party, the UUP, supported Remain alongside Sinn Fein, the SDLP, the Alliance Party and the Greens (for more information on party stances see McCann/Hainsworth 2017). And indeed, the *Belfast Telegraph*, the major regional newspaper with a unionist tradition (although read by parts of the Catholic population as well) also argued clearly for Remain on 22 June 2016: "Europe is deeply flawed, but we'd be lost without it", they wrote, and then drew up a long list of projects supported by EU funding and other economic benefits. Yet by suggesting that economic (dis) advantages were all that was at stake, the problem of the land border specific to the Northern Irish context was neglected once more.

The referendum results

It was also in the *Belfast Telegraph* that Fionola Meredith summed up the referendum results in the following terms: "It's not all about us" (Meredith 2016). Indeed, while 55.6 % of voters in Northern Ireland had cast their vote for Remain, the 'Northern Ireland issue' seems to have hardly played a role for voters across mainland Britain. However, having a closer look at the results suggests that the clear Remain majority was mainly due to the – unsurprisingly
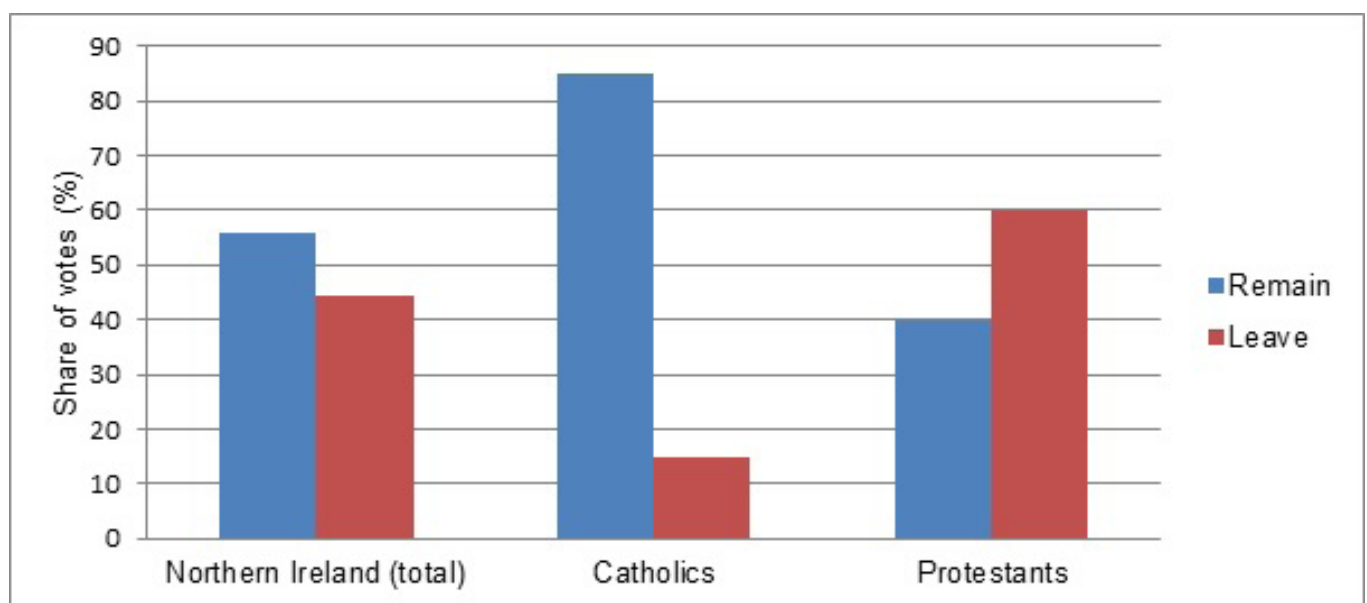
EU referendum results in Northern Ireland (based on Garry 2018)

Road sign close to the border. Photo © Eric Jones (cc-by-sa/2.0)

– overwhelming support of the Catholic and/or nationalist population: 85% of those who identify as Catholic (compared to only 40 % of Protestants) and 88% describing themselves as (Irish) nationalist (compared to 37% identifying as unionists) voted to stay in the EU (cf. Garry 2018). Although the more diverse voting behaviour of Protestants/unionists has also been explained by 'left behind'-factors (ibid.), the results made clear that Northern Ireland is far from being a united society, about 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement. And this was to become even more obvious in the following years.

… after…

Of course, the referendum result sparked a number of instantaneous reactions both from politicians (Brexiteer Arlene Foster's suitability as a representative for EU-favouring Northern Ireland was questioned by several people from the Remain camp, and Sinn Féin quickly called for a border poll under the arrangements of the Good Friday Agreement) and from the general public. The signs close to the border protesting against an "EU frontier in Ireland" were surely among the most visible symbols of the significance of the result for pro-Remain Northern Ireland.

However, for quite some time, nothing much happened, apart from a general run on Irish passports by Northern Irish citizens (a move which had been advised even by Ian Paisley!).

Indeed, as politicians in Westminster tried to figure out what Brexit actually meant, life went on in Belfast almost as usual. The power-

sharing Executive collapsed in early 2017 – something which had happened several times before and was thus not really uncommon. This time, it was caused by the so-called Cash for Ash scandal – a totally failed renewable energies incentive scheme overseen by Arlene Foster, who had by then become First Minister. Various disputes over language policies, abortion and civil rights loomed in the background of this breakdown. I find it remarkable that, at least on the surface, the failure of government had nothing to do with pending constitutional issues. However, the clear pro-Brexit stance of Arlene Foster and her DUP certainly did not encourage Sinn Féin to find a different way out of the situation. The results of the March 2017 snap election triggered by Martin McGuinness's resignation were certainly noteworthy: the size of the assembly had been reduced, but the losses were almost exclusively experienced by the DUP and the UUP, which resulted in a near par between unionist (40) and nationalist (39) assembly members (cf. Russell 2017). Dramatic as they were, the changes could still not pave the way for a new power-sharing Executive, as the DUP and Sinn Féin would still have had to co-operate. Therefore, direct rule from Westminster was to remain re-installed for close to three years.

These were the years that saw Northern Ireland move to the centre of political attention in Europe. Prime Minister Theresa May's profound miscalculation of the political climate prior to the snap General Election in June 2017 resulted in unprecedented power at Westminster for the DUP and party leader Arlene Foster. As the Conservative minority government now suddenly depended on the 10 DUP MPs, it became truly impossible to integrate the wide range of stakeholders' priorities in Brexit negotiations. Leaving the Single Market and customs union while adhering to the Good Friday Agreement *and* keeping Northern Ireland wholeheartedly within the Union? Very tricky indeed!

The sudden centrality of the 'national issue' has never been visualised better than on @BorderIrish's Twitter account on 8 February 2018: "There's me at the Brexit negotiations," says the border – and we see a photo of a very real elephant in the room with the negotiators. The DUP would hear nothing of a Northern-Ireland-only 'backstop' – and who could really blame them, given their and their voters' stance on the constitutional issue? And we all know what happened to Theresa May's 'divorce deal' agreed in November 2018, which included a UK-wide backstop, possibly preventing the whole of the UK from ever leaving the customs union – an obvious no-go for Brexit hardliners. It took repeated objections in Parliament, several Brexit postponements, a new Prime Minister, even more objections in Parliament and finally a General Election to untie that knot – whether you like the result or not.

Oh yes, the General Election of 2019. In the light of Labour's crushing defeat and the Tory landslide elsewhere in the UK, the results in Northern Ireland seem all the more unusual: for the first time, nationalist parties won more seats than unionist ones. Although it still received the most votes, the DUP lost

Party	Seats	+/-	Share of Votes (%)	+/- (%) (vs. 2017)
DUP	8	-2	30.6	- 5.4
Sinn Féin	7	0	22.8	- 6.7
Alliance Party	1	+ 1	16.8	+ 8.8
SDLP	2	+ 2	14.9	+ 3.1
UUP	0	0	11.7	+ 1.4
Others	0	- 1	3.3	- 1,3

Table 1: Results of the General Election 2019 in Northern Ireland (based on UK Parliament 2020)

two seats in Westminster. Independent unionist MP Sylvia Hernon had retired, the SDLP won two seats and the Alliance Party one. What is more, the changes in vote share were much more drastic: both Sinn Féin and the DUP lost significant numbers (- 6.7% and - 5.4% respectively), while the Alliance Party gained + 8.8% (doubling their result from the previous elections), and the SDLP received 3.1% more than in 2017.

Explanations for these results range from "changed times and changing attitudes" and Alliance's "clear Remain message" (McClements 2019) to a mere punishment of the DUP and Sinn Féin for their failure to restore the workings of the Northern Irish Assembly for almost three years. Indeed – as in most elections before – Northern Irish issues seem to have played a major role in voting decisions. Reason enough to have a look at what had been going on there beyond Brexit.

… and beyond.

When the DUP signed the Confidence and Supply Agreement with the Conservatives after the 2017 General Election, they thereby not only halted the changes to the pensions envisaged in the Tory manifesto, which would have introduced UK-wide means-testing for receiving winter fuel allowance. The agreement also brought an extra £1 billion of funding to Northern Ireland. This money was indeed badly needed within the region. (Of course, such increased funding for health, infrastructure and education was also urgently required elsewhere in the UK, but, needless to say, budgets in Scotland or Wales were not augmented.) As one of the UK's most disadvantaged regions, Northern Ireland had previously suffered even more under austerity measures than many other parts of the country (cf. BBC 2014). The largest share of the extra funding was to be invested in infrastructure, but money was also to go into the health and education systems, mostly to "address immediate pressures", and these immediate pressures certainly abounded.

Regarding the health system, various actors have long warned that the Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland (HSC) service is on the brink of collapse (even in pre-Corona times). For instance, waiting times both for emergency care and for planned hospital services significantly exceed those in other

Unison campaign poster

parts of the UK (and I doubt those count as a satisfactory point of reference…). The HSC's underperformance has been attributed to a number of factors: not only lack of funding, but also the absence of a stable government or the extremely centralised structure of the HSC have been made responsible (see for instance Dayan/Heenan 2019). And indeed, the nurses' strike last winter certainly played a role in putting pressure on the two main parties to eventually re-establish the devolved government: it was the first time in British history that the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) voted to go on strike. Workers organised in the RCN and other health worker unions took industrial action in late 2019 and early 2020 to finally achieve a significant pay rise and better staffing in Northern Ireland.

Since 2014, Northern Irish health workers had been paid even less than their colleagues in other parts of the UK, due to the devolved government's spending decisions under austerity pressures (cf. BBC 2019). Although severe protests had driven Westminster to guarantee increased funding for Northern Irish health workers in 2017, this agreement had not been put into practice, due to the lack of a devolved executive. Now, strike days in December and early January (and possibly the results in the GE – see above) had put enough pressure on the main parties to get the power-sharing government restored on 11 January 2020, after almost three years. The new Health Secretary Robin Swann immediately took up talks with the unions, and in February, an agreement was finally reached – just in time before the Corona crisis, you might think. It is clear, however, that even the provisions now taken – pay parity and "safe staffing levels" – will not remedy all problems of the Northern Irish health system.

As for education in Northern Ireland, the picture is not much brighter. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) announced in 2019 that NI had experienced the highest cut in public spending on education within the UK: "Northern Ireland has seen an 11% cut in real-terms school spending per pupil since 2009", compared to 8% in England, 6% in Wales 2% in Scotland (cf. Meredith 2019). The money secured in the Conservative-DUP agreement in 2017 could thus only ease some cuts, but did not lead to any substantial improvement. Again, the absence of an Assembly and Executive did not help. The issue was even deemed so urgent

by central government that the Westminster Northern Ireland Affairs Committee conducted an enquiry themselves in 2018. The results included the unsurprising discovery that Northern Irish schools required more funding, not least since the rise in pupils, and especially the increasing number of SEND pupils, had not been met by a rise in school budgets. Also, as with health workers, teachers' wages had not kept up with those in other parts of the UK. Many schools are understaffed, class sizes are growing. Unsurprisingly, classroom assistants had been the first ones to be sacked (cf. House of Commons 2019).

The Committee's report also highlighted the "complicated structure of education" (ibid: 3) in Northern Ireland, that is, the many different types of schools that exist alongside each other. There are (mainly Protestant) Controlled schools, Catholic Maintained schools, a small number of Integrated schools, Irish medium schools, Grammar schools, Special Schools, and a small number of fee-paying independent schools. In many parts of the region, parallel structures exist. This concerns both selective and non-selective schools (grammar schools are much more common in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK), but also, or even principally, schools reflecting the continuing denominational segregation of Northern Irish society. Within this frame, Philipp Hammond's announcement of significant investment in shared and integrated education in Northern Ireland of November 2018 can (and must) surely be read as an attempt to save money once again. Nevertheless, the promotion of integrated

education indeed seems a reasonable decision for other reasons. The first integrated schools had been started by parents' initiatives in the 1980s in order to break community barriers, at first privately funded. Today, there are still only 60-70 integrated schools, now state-funded, most of them offering primary education. Only 7% of pupils attend such a school, but numbers are growing slowly. However, research has shown that "integrated education in Northern Ireland impacts positively on identity, outgroup attitudes, forgiveness and reconciliation" (McGlynn et al. 2004: 147). In 2019, the Integrated School movement even received a Nobel peace prize nomination (cf. Ward 2019). A systematic promotion of these educational institutions might indeed help to build the *Alternative Ulster* the Stiff Little Fingers called for way back in 1981 – but it seems a long way to go.

Nevertheless, some borders *are* being removed – if not necessarily by the Northern Irish themselves. Two of the by-products of direct rule were the legalisation of same-sex marriages and the decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland. This goes back to two amendments to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill put forward by two – praised and criticised – Labour MPs and passed by Westminster in July 2019. The Northern Ireland Assembly could have barred the regulations taking effect by passing different legislation in Belfast, but the attempt of unionist parties to call the Assembly back into session on 21 October 2019 was prevented by the other parties. Therefore,

the deadline passed, and the regulations came into effect on 13 January 2020.

What next?

More than 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement, visible and invisible boundaries still permeate Northern Ireland. The electoral results (both in the EU referendum and in regional and general elections since then), the still mostly segregated education system, or the continuing existence of 'peace walls' (at least until 2023) do not suggest a cohesive society. The circumstances surrounding the tragic killing of journalist Lyra McKee in 2019 were a miserable reminder of this. The sociocultural segregation is criss-crossed with socioeconomic differences; especially many rural areas of Northern Ireland are extremely deprived. Many of these issues are of course specific to Northern Ireland, but the people's options will depend to a large degree on decisions which will once again be taken elsewhere in the months to come. Will the invisible border become visible once again? What would happen if the North Channel became such a border (as could be the result of Johnson's renegotiated agreement)? No bridge, tunnel, or – in Tom Peck's (2020) words – "strawberry blancmange" between Scotland and Northern Ireland would fix it all. Most likely, it would not solve the problem, but just cost a huge amount of money – money which is badly needed elsewhere, in Northern Ireland and beyond. @BorderIrish's twitter account may be out of use now. The various borders within and around Northern Ireland are not.

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