



# Brexit, Ireland and the Future of Europe

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# Brexit and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Relationship

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# The Significance of the British-Irish Relationship

- **Joint decision-making and problem-solving typified British and Irish governments' policy-making to Northern Ireland in the 1990s and evolved from the 1980s**
- **Policy was based on long-term strategy. It was not ad hoc, or reactive**
- **The central tenet was that in a crisis, government leaders should be obliged to meet more, not less often**



# British-Irish Strategy, 1985-1998

- A joint ‘carrot and stick’ policy emerged incentivising the DUP, UUP and Sinn Féin to cooperate
- Lessons were learned from Sunningdale Agreement that both governments needed to hold firm



# **British-Irish Strategy, 2000-2016**

- **Flourishing relationship. 2011: the decision was announced to hold annual bilateral PM meetings and a civil service Permanent Secretaries and Secretary General Group meeting was also to occur once a year**
- **Reflecting the success of the peace process, there was less emphasis on British-Irish institutions set up under the Good Friday Agreement, such as the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference**
- **Of the UK PMs, only Tony Blair attended British-Irish Council meetings. Irish PMs always attended**



# Implications of Brexit

- **Ireland and the UK governments are not on the same 'team' in the negotiations for the first time since 1974: implications for sharing of information and trust**
- **Fears that Northern Ireland could be used as a pawn by the UK government to achieve a more favourable final deal for the UK highlight the limits of trust in a Brexit bargaining situation**
- **Ireland and the UK shared many common interests in the EU and were in the same camp on many issues, but now could have conflicts of interests, especially if there is a hard Brexit**



# Implications of Brexit

- **UK government's disarray and mismanagement of Brexit have led to increased tensions and a return to more hard-line rhetoric than in the recent past**
- **Although since November, PM communication has increased, there have been remarkably few one-to-one PM meetings since summer 2016**
- **The British-Irish Intergovernmental Council, established under the Good Friday Agreement to represent the Irish government in non-devolved policy matters, has not met either**



# Implications of Brexit

- **In July 2017, the UK government announced it was leaving the 1964 Fisheries' Convention and communicated it to the Irish government via its Embassy in Dublin - The Minister for Agriculture said he first heard the news from the media**
- **UK government is overburdened and stretched: paying less than necessary attention to Northern Ireland and to the British-Irish relationship**



# British-Irish Relations, July 2017-December 2017

- In response to the UK government's lack of clarity about its plans for the border, the Irish government's language became more blunt (from August 2017)



# Conclusion

- **Even in the 1990s, there were periodic divisions of opinion, e.g. on decommissioning**
- **However, divisions of opinion from summer 2017 to Christmas were far more more public**



# Conclusion

- **Blunt rhetoric may well be a short-term strategy to make the UK government aware that it could not continue to ignore the issue**
- **But it also reflects a fundamentally different context for the British-Irish relationship**
- **It may also incite nationalist emotions in Northern Ireland, England and Ireland**



# Conclusion: prescriptions?

- **Brexit with respect to Northern Ireland must not be used as a political football to gain votes by any party in the UK, or Ireland**
- **Yet, nationalists in Northern Ireland who voted 'Remain' must not feel they are 'abandoned'**
- **Intensive management of the British-Irish relationship and calming of public opinion are required: greater use of existing institutions to serve the relationship, or the creation of a new one**

