

# **BREXIT & IREXIT**

## *A Discussion Article*

In the near future, our country is going to experience momentous change and upheaval arising from circumstances not of our making, but which nonetheless will force us to make difficult political choices and take calculated political risks

There are three looming political crises that Ireland is going to have to address. [1] The non-functioning of the political institutions in the six counties and, in the longer term, the end of the entity of Northern Ireland, at least in its present form. [2] Dealing with the outcome and consequences of the Brexit decision in the United Kingdom. [3] Our future relationship with the European Union and how we as a small nation deal with the growing democratic deficit, the mass impoverishment being caused by imposed economic policies, and the threat to the remnants of national sovereignty posed by the proposals to create a superstate - in effect, an empire.

We shall now deal with each of these issues in turn and, as will be seen, the common theme that runs through all three subjects is the National Question in its widest sense, national sovereignty and the will of the people.

The decision by a small majority of the UK electorate to leave the EU sent shock waves through the Irish political establishment and, indeed, created some degree of panic. In the twenty months or so since the Brexit vote, the Irish establishment has calmed down somewhat and is attempting to offer constructive proposals aimed at alleviating the more negative outcomes from Brexit. Dublin's relative sense of calm and reassurance stems no doubt from the fact that Britain is essentially out on its own and that, for the time being at least, the 26 continental EU states are supportive of the Irish position.

However, it remains to be seen whether the Irish equanimity can be maintained once the second, and more important, round of negotiations begins. Ireland's needs could be rendered secondary in the intricate dealings between the UK and the EU. The major Irish concerns in this whole process are: the potential losses of export earnings, particularly as regards food and indigenous manufacturing; the imposition of a so-called hard border on the island of Ireland; and, finally, the potential for the unravelling of the Good Friday Agreement.

Inside the UK state itself, the Brexit electoral result has produced major divisions amongst the electorate, with some organized groupings vainly seeking to reverse the Brexit vote.

Scotland and the six counties of course voted by majority to remain and that now has the potential to re-open the debate concerning Scottish independence and the possible break-up of the 311 year-old Union. In the north of Ireland, we saw how it was that many unionists, even in rural and border districts, voted for Brexit, i.e. voted in an ideological way seemingly against their own economic interests. The nature of this particular stance was attributed to an attempt to stop the process of so-called soft Irish reunification that they saw as arising from the open borders policy of the EU.

Outwardly, it would appear that the current British government is floundering and clueless, and many are of the view that the country is being led to a disastrous outcome. However, there are others claiming that the ground was being prepared for Brexit long before the plebiscite. These sources are claiming that, at the very highest levels of the British ruling class and the 'deep state', there has been for some time a view that the EU is fundamentally a failed project, destined to collapse. This view it seems is also shared by the German military intelligence service which has been drawing up contingency plans to deal with this possible outcome. The preferred option of Britain's rulers is to create a new Atlanticist trading block between the UK, the US, and British Commonwealth states initially. When we talk about the British ruling class here, we should also include the highest levels of finance capital in the City of London, at least those parts of it that are not dependent on Frankfurt or Brussels for business.

There are indications that US so-called 'dark money' and 'vulture funds' played a significant role in financing the Brexit campaign, hoping to capitalize on potential windfall profits arising from the future status of the United Kingdom. British strategists are aiming at turning post-EU Britain into a global financial and trading hub, attempting to restore its past status as it were. It would be difficult to see how this could come about, given the hollowing out of British industry, caused by years of deliberate de-industrialization and outsourcing. However, as a financial centre, London would retain its dominant global role and the over-inflated London property market would continue to attract so-called hot money from global oligarchs and criminals.

There will be an enormous social price extracted from UK citizens as a result of Brexit. Not only will UK taxpayers be saddled with a large exit bill by an angry and vengeful EU, they will also of course end up losing many of the benefits and protections that went with EU membership. This is the stark underlying agenda behind Brexit that ordinary citizens are not being told about. For the simple reality is, and the elites pushing the Brexit agenda know only too well, that their vision of a new post-EU Britain can only come about through the

tearing up of the social contract in the UK. In particular, the future of the National Health Service looks bleak, given that US interests are seeking to cannibalize it and mine it for profits.

The xenophobes who made one of their campaign issues immigration restriction will soon be made to realize the extent of their folly. The brave new post-EU Britain will need more rather than less immigrants. In order to restore international competitiveness and profit margins, labour costs will have to be driven down and the social safety net shredded. Inevitably, a new brutal social Darwinism will come into being. Police forces in Britain will come to resemble the old Royal Ulster Constabulary, and any attempt to organize serious mass-dissent against the neoliberal onslaught will be brutally suppressed. In the Britain of the not too distant future, everyday social reality will come to resemble some of the worst aspects of today's America.

It would be incorrect to term the Brexit slight majority vote in England and Wales as 'populist', given that much of the current leadership of that movement is made up of xenophobes, social reactionaries and financial predators. It is at this point that we need to ask ourselves what is the best position for Ireland to take now that it is clear that the United Kingdom will leave the European Union in 2019. Should we remain or should we Irexit, as some would advocate?

Given that the UK is quitting a wealthy continental trading block of some 430 million people, for what could be at best an uncertain future, the only logical and sensible position for the Irish State to adopt at this time is the remain one. We will argue this for the following reasons.

Firstly, notwithstanding the increasingly undemocratic nature of the EU and its growing embrace of neoliberal and destructive austerity economics, there are, at least for the time being, important supports, benefits and safeguards of a socially benign nature still in place. Agricultural supports, food safety standards, infrastructure grants, training subsidies, protection for workers' rights and, very importantly for us in Ireland, human rights safeguards and oversight. Britain, on the other hand, seems destined for a period of escalating social regression under a very brutal form of Anglo-US capitalism which up to now British people have never experienced, even under Thatcher! Disturbingly, the UK government has also indicated that it wishes to withdraw its support from existing EU human rights legislation. Imagine the future effect that particular change could create in the north of Ireland.!

Secondly. If the Irish State were to Irexit alongside the UK, there is little doubt that we would find ourselves gravitating, economically, politically and culturally, back towards Britain and what is termed, the Anglosphere. This

would have a negative effect on national morale and lead many to question our very existence as a distinct State. The cultural link with continental Europe is vital for our self-image and survival.

So, in terms of our overall approach, we should support the remain position. We should therefore assist communities, particularly those living in the border areas, which are seeking a special status for the six counties when the UK finally does leave the EU. And we should give our support to any positive initiatives taken by the Irish government, provided that there is no weakening of resolve or pandering to British mischief.

In conclusion, we need to be aware that as actual Brexit comes closer, Irish society will find itself being pulled in both directions. Certainly, Anglocentric commentators will start issuing stark warnings as to what will happen to us for not following the British lead. Expect to hear arguments along the lines of: "We have nothing in common with the continentals,..Britain is our extended family". Also, do not rule out the possibility, given past form, that the British could try to create problems on various levels and may try to use an anxious and easily rattled Irish Government as their cat's paw in dealings with the EU bureaucracy. And no doubt, we will hear renewed calls for us to rejoin the British Commonwealth.

There will be those who will call for Irexit, coming from an Irish republican, nationalist or socialist perspective. They will argue that we should leave the EU in order to restore our sovereignty, regain control over our currency, and over resources such as fisheries. Many of the arguments they put forward against us staying in the EU are interesting, and valid in their own terms and worth taking into account. However, they are perhaps a little too sanguine concerning the prospects for a post-EU Ireland. They are failing to take into account what centuries of brutal colonialism and actual genocide have done to the Irish psyche. We simply do not have the self-confidence of the Swiss, Norwegians or even the Finns. In a post-EU Ireland, our easily frightened comprador elites would, more likely than not, put us straight back under British tutelage. Our anti-EU friends should be debated with in a fraternal and amicable way. But, for the present at least, their advice should be disregarded.

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(Considered comments about this article will also be published.)