

The Crux of the Matter: Northern Ireland and Brexit

About: Mary C. Murphy, *Europe and Northern Ireland's
Future: Negotiating Brexit's Unique Case, Agenda*

By Thibaud Harrois

How will the different regions in the UK be impacted by Brexit? Mary C. Murphy's book explores the unique case of Northern Ireland—a region isolated both geographically and politically from the rest of the country— in the run-up to the referendum as well as in its aftermath.

The UK's decision to leave the European Union (EU) following the June 2016 referendum will have consequences on the country's future relationship with the EU, with other parts of the world, but also with its constituent regions. However difficult it is to predict the impact Brexit will have on the UK, it is already clear that not all regions will be impacted in the same way. Northern Ireland is the smallest of the UK's devolved regions¹ and is geographically isolated from the rest of the country. Politically, it also seems to be at odds with the rest of the country as the Northern Ireland electorate voted by 55.8 percent to remain in the EU. But since the 2016 referendum, discussions about the future relationship of the region with both the EU

¹ In the UK, "devolution" refers to the transfer of power from the Westminster Parliament (the Parliament of the UK) to the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly that were created following the 1997 and 1998 referenda. However, Parliament remains sovereign and has the power to amend the devolution Acts or to pass legislation on devolved matters (even if it normally only does so with the consent of the devolved legislature). The UK remains a unitary state and devolution must not be confused with federalism.

and the UK have become one of the central and most complex issues in the Brexit negotiations.

Mary C. Murphy, a lecturer in politics with the Department of Government at University College Cork, in the Republic of Ireland, and a specialist of the study of the EU, Irish and Northern Irish politics, studies the specific situation of Northern Ireland in the Brexit debate. Her book is a very useful addition to recent publications on the study of Brexit from an Irish/Northern Irish perspective, like the report published by Katy Hayward, *Bordering on Brexit: Views from Local Communities in the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland*², or the one co-authored by David Phinnemore and Katy Hayward for the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) of the European Parliament in 2017.³ The independent research initiative The UK in a Changing Europe has also published various analyses on post-Brexit Ireland and Northern Ireland, including *Brexit and the island of Ireland*, published in May 2018.⁴ Other noteworthy contributions on the Irish response to Brexit include journalist Tony Connelly's book: *Brexit and Ireland: The Dangers, the Opportunities, and the Inside Story of the Irish Response*.⁵

In her book, Mary C. Murphy explores the reasons that made the Northern Ireland case unique in the run-up to the referendum as well as in its aftermath, and analyses the potential consequences of Brexit for the region and the UK as a whole. Twenty years after the Belfast Agreement⁶ was signed, the relationship between communities in Northern Ireland, but also between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland as well as with the rest of the United Kingdom has improved. The history of Northern Ireland since 1998 is one of economic growth and prosperity, and political cooperation between communities has replaced the violence of the

² Katy Hayward, *Bordering on Brexit: Views from Local Communities in the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Centre for International Borders Research, Queen's University Belfast, 2017. This report is available online: <https://www.qub.ac.uk/brexit/Brexitfilestore/Filetoupload,780606,en.pdf>

³ David Phinnemore and Katy Hayward, *UK Withdrawal ('Brexit') and the Good Friday Agreement*, 2017. Report written for the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) of the European Parliament. This report is also available online: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/596826/IPOL_STU\(2017\)596826_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/596826/IPOL_STU(2017)596826_EN.pdf)

⁴ This research paper is available online: <http://ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Brexit-and-Island-of-Ireland.pdf>

⁵ Tony Connelly, *Brexit and Ireland: The Dangers, the Opportunities, and the Inside Story of the Irish Response*, London, Penguin, 2017.

⁶ The Belfast Agreement, or Good Friday Agreement, was signed in 1998. It was a major landmark in the peace process that put an end to thirty years of conflict (known as 'The Troubles') between communities. It allowed a new Nationalist and Unionist power-sharing government to be formed in Northern Ireland.

Troubles.⁷ However, Mary C. Murphy also points out that progress in the reconciliation between Nationalists and Unionists has been slow and fragile. The collapse of the Stormont Assembly—in 2017⁸ is one of the latest examples of the ongoing tensions and lack of trust between the two blocs that characterise the “negative peace” that has been achieved in the region. This study of the way the referendum campaign was run and of the developments in Northern Ireland and UK politics since June 2016 shows that Brexit is reviving communitarian tensions and could therefore have the potential to unsettle the peace process.

Northern Ireland and the EU before the referendum

In the first part of her book, Mary C. Murphy recalls the history of Northern Ireland’s relationship with the EU from 1973 to the 2016 referendum. Political instability and sectarian violence at the time of UK’s accession to the EEC have led the European issue to be ignored by most parties. Indeed, political discourse and debates were dominated by the Troubles and other issues were not given as much attention. Besides, direct rule from London did not encourage Northern Ireland political parties to engage in debating other political and social issues. In this context the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) was the only party to openly support membership. Other parties’ lack of enthusiasm stemmed from various factors: Republicans feared EEC membership might be a diversion from their

⁷ The Troubles is the name commonly given to the conflict in Northern Ireland that lasted from the end of the 1960s to 1998. The conflict was mainly political and nationalistic but also had a sectarian dimension. Unionists and Loyalists, who were mostly Protestants, wanted Northern Ireland to remain in the UK. They fought against Irish Nationalists and Republicans, who were mostly Catholics, and wanted Northern Ireland to leave the UK. Republican paramilitary groups, such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) fought against loyalist paramilitary groups such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) or the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). The British Army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary were also involved. More than 3,500 people were killed in the conflict that took place mainly in Northern Ireland even if violence also occasionally spread to other parts of the UK, the Republic of Ireland and continental Europe.

⁸ The devolved legislature of Northern Ireland (also called the Stormont Assembly) was suspended in 2017 after Martin McGuinness, the then deputy (Republican) First Minister of Northern Ireland, resigned to protest against (Unionist) First Minister Arlene Foster’s refusal to step aside to allow an inquiry into accusations of fraud in connection with a renewable energy incentive scheme (the Renewable Heat Incentive scandal, or Cash for Ash scandal). McGuinness’ resignation caused the collapse of the Executive Office of Northern Ireland and a snap election was triggered in March 2017. However, subsequent talks to form a power-sharing government have failed and Northern Ireland is still, as of January 2019, without a government.

efforts to reach all-Ireland sovereignty and Unionists feared the EEC might jeopardise the UK's national sovereignty.

Attitudes to the EU changed in the 1990s following the implementation of the Single European Market (SEM), mainly because Northern Ireland benefited from increased structural funding. But the completion of the SEM also led to the dismantling of the physical infrastructure on the border, which had economic and political consequences. Security checkpoints were soon removed and the 1994 paramilitary ceasefire was followed by the creation of the EU Peace programme. Following the signing of the 1998 Belfast Agreement, the EU coupled economic support to the region and peace-building initiatives that had a direct impact on citizens' lives in Northern Ireland. The public's interest in the Union was further reinforced by the introduction of devolution in 1999. The newly created cross-community Assembly and Executive were given responsibility over social and economic matters previously run by London. Devolution thus required political parties and the administration to engage with other issues than the constitutional and security matters that had been the focus of their attention until then, which allowed a renewed and pragmatic engagement with the EU. But where other issues regularly exposed diverging views between parties and the two communities, EU-related issues were not politicised and remained quite consensual.

Brexit and the Growing Polarisation of Northern Ireland

The 2016 referendum campaign considerably altered the way the EU was perceived and addressed in Northern Irish politics. While the rather positive attitude towards the EU in the region meant that the referendum campaign was generally less divisive than in other parts of the UK, the distinctive political and social environment also meant that the debate rose a certain number of issues that were specific to Northern Ireland. The second part of the book explains how the "negative peace" environment actually intensified the tensions created by the Brexit debate. Mary C. Murphy insists on the manner in which the referendum was politicised and became a source of contestation that fuelled opposition between two polarised communities. Nationalists and Unionists had differing preferences on Brexit that stemmed from their understanding of what leaving the EU may entail, especially for Northern Ireland. Contrary to what happened in other devolved UK regions, the Northern Ireland Executive did not publish a position paper on the EU referendum, mainly

because there was no unity on the issue among its members. This lack of unity was also apparent in the Northern Ireland Assembly where the Brexit referendum was hardly discussed. However, Nationalists and Unionists alike were concerned about the economic consequences of Brexit for the region.

The structural peculiarities of Northern Ireland make the region extremely exposed to the changes that the UK's withdrawal from the EU will bring. The region's over-reliance on public sector employment and public spending, its underdeveloped private sector, and the importance of cross-border economic activities all mean that it will be hit more than any other parts of the UK by the potentially negative consequences of the withdrawal for the country's economy. In the third part of her book, Mary C. Murphy insists on the fact that Brexit is likely to hit deprived communities more than affluent ones and that those who are likely to suffer most from the impact of Brexit are those who are already economically marginalised in the Northern Irish society. Both in the Protestant and Catholic communities, those who had already suffered most from violence are still today those who suffer more acutely from inequality and have the feeling of being left behind. Yet, there is no cross-community working-class party to carry this shared frustration and discontent remains channelled through existing sectarian channels. Even if widespread violence is avoided, Brexit is likely to reinforce polarisation and challenge the already fragile trust in the institutions created after the 1998 Belfast Agreement.

A Voiceless Region

Northern Ireland has rarely been so central in UK politics as in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. However, the book's fourth chapter underlines the absence of a strong and clear Northern Ireland voice in this crucial period. The Brexit debate and the negotiations have essentially taken place between the British government and the European Commission, and involvement from the constituent regions has been limited. This, as Murphy points out, did not allow the specific interests of Northern Ireland to be effectively considered. The suspension of the Northern Irish Executive and Assembly in early 2017 further aggravated the situation as it *de facto* excluded these institutions from talks with the EU Commission or from consultations

by parliamentary committees. Following the 2017 UK General Election, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) signed a confidence-and-supply agreement with the Conservatives which has allowed the most radical Unionists to set out their conditions for the Brexit deal to pass while Nationalists are not even represented in Westminster. The terms of the withdrawal agreement are thus likely to be perceived as being imposed on Northern Ireland and as favouring the interests of one community over the other, and opposition to its terms might reignite sectarian tensions.

What Future for Northern Ireland after Brexit?

The last part of Mary C. Murphy's book explores the various options available for the future relationship between the EU and the UK as a whole, and Northern Ireland in particular. The debate has been dominated by discussions on the status of the Irish border and the future of free movement of goods, persons, capital and services on the island of Ireland. If Britain were to prioritise border controls over access to the single market, as Theresa May suggested, this would lead to the reintroduction of a visible border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Given the political and economic impact this would have for the region and the island as a whole, some ideas have been put forward in order to avoid disruption to trade and free movement thanks to new border arrangements. The idea of moving border controls away from the border between Northern Ireland and Eire and allowing them to take place between the island of Ireland and Great Britain has been suggested. The possibility for Northern Ireland to remain part of the single market in case no deal is found before the end of the transition period on the future relationship between the UK and the EU has been included in the November 2018 withdrawal agreement. However, Unionists have vigorously opposed such propositions on the ground that it would be a step towards the reunification of Ireland and hostility to the "backstop" has fuelled wider parliamentary opposition to the withdrawal agreement. The involvement of the Irish government through the publication of reports as well as public declarations by Irish politicians suggesting Irish unification could be debated in the near future may have further scared Unionists and led them to believe the Republic of Ireland supports Nationalists. Yet the UK does not negotiate directly with Eire and negotiations with the EU have

revealed both sides agree on the necessity of finding a compromise in order to avoid dire political and economic consequences for Northern Ireland.

Mary C. Murphy provides a very helpful and clear account of the situation in Northern Ireland both before and after the 2016 referendum. Thanks to her historical contextualisation of current debates, Murphy provides a useful analysis of the specificities of Northern Irish politics and the risks that Brexit may entail for the peace process. Explanations about the process of politicisation of the Brexit issue is key to understanding changes in attitude towards the EU since the referendum was announced. *Europe and Northern Ireland's Future: Negotiating Brexit's Unique Case* provides a highly readable account of discussions and tensions on the Northern Irish issue in UK and EU politics and the book will undoubtedly remain essential reading whatever the outcome of current negotiations.

Reviewed: Mary C. Murphy, *Europe and Northern Ireland's Future: Negotiating Brexit's Unique Case*, Newcastle, Agenda Publishing, 2018.