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The Irish border as sign and source of British-Irish tensions

Katy Hayward, Peter Leary, and Milena Komarova

Abstract

The Government of Ireland Act, 1920 partitioned Ireland along a line set to ensure a stable Protestant majority in the small northern state. However, neither stability nor security were achieved by this act, in any social, political or economic sense. This chapter gives an overview of the practical and symbolic significance of the border, the impact of the conflict and peace process on the border region, and the anticipated effects of Brexit. Through a detailed case study of a border village, it demonstrates that, after a violent and disruptive conflict, the present-day interconnectedness of the border region is seen as both 'normal' and a precious part of everyday life. An appreciation for the achievements of peace is particularly acute in the border region, which has been so directly affected by the worst effects of conflict. These achievements are seen by local residents to be put under threat by Brexit – not least because it has revived some tensions in the British-Irish relationship. The everyday lives of borderland communities continue to be buffeted by history as well as by national and even international politics.

Introduction

Over a century ago, in December 1919, British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George introduced a series of recommendations concerning the governance of Ireland to the House of Commons. 'Sometimes,' he remarked, 'when both Britain and Ireland seem to be approaching towards friendship, some untoward incident sweeps them apart and the quarrel begins again' (Fanning 2013). Those proposals would lead to the partition of Ireland and the creation of a border that for one hundred years has reflected the history and state of British-Irish relations and profoundly shaped the lives of communities living along the border. A century on from partition, as a consequence of the 2016 United Kingdom referendum vote to leave the European Union ('Brexit'), the border was once again thrust to the centre of events.

A century's legacy of complex British-Irish relations

Ireland before partition

The Irish border was created by the Government of Ireland Act 1920 and confirmed by the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. It delineates the six counties that make up Northern Ireland from the remaining twenty-six counties of what was originally designated 'Southern Ireland,' a

territory that soon became the Irish Free State and, after April 1949, the Republic of Ireland. Partition arose from a centuries-long history of entanglement between the two islands of Ireland and Britain. It followed an extended political dispute and a short but intense period of military conflict over the extent of constitutional ties between them. That connection dates from the distant twelfth century, but the seeds of partition were sown in the seventeenth, when all of Ireland was brought under British control.

Long before partition, large parts of the future borderlands were a site of cultural encounter and a contested frontier zone. In 1607, following the defeat of Gaelic resistance to English rule and the flight of its leaders to continental Europe, James I of England (who was also James VI of Scotland) embarked upon a 'plantation' of Ulster – Ireland's most northerly and hitherto recalcitrant province. This settlement project augmented earlier plantation schemes and sought to secure the paramountcy of the recently united British Crown through the largescale importation of loyal and dependant Protestants from Britain (Ó Ciardha et al. 2012). The venture was only partially successful. In many parts of Ulster, Protestants did not become a majority and, where they did, Catholic minorities endured. Nevertheless, the existence of a large, successful and comparatively pan-class colony in that province would continue to distinguish it from most other parts of Ireland. To the south and west, despite the establishment of a British or pro-British and Protestant elite, Catholic preponderance among the lower classes remained substantial (Heslinga [1962] 1979).

The last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth were characterised by growing demands for self-government in Ireland. Under leaders including Charles Stewart Parnell and John Redmond – and riding the wave of expanding male suffrage – Irish Nationalists secured election to the British parliament at Westminster and pressed the case for a limited form of Home Rule. But despite substantial changes in the intervening time – not least the emergence of Belfast as Ireland's preeminent industrial city – the religious differences that had once marked incomer from native remained the motive force in Ulster politics. There, the mobilisation of the Protestant population along confessional lines made Unionism – support for an unaltered link with Britain – into a formidable regional force.

The 'reasoning' behind partition

The decade of crisis that led to the establishment of a border on the island of Ireland had begun in earnest in 1912 with the passing of the third Home Rule Bill by the British House of Commons. Encouraged by elite interests including within the British Conservative Party, more than two hundred thousand Ulstermen responded to the Bill by signing a 'Solemn League and

Covenant' pledging to resist a Dublin-based parliament by 'all means' with many thousands joining the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). A similar number of women put their names to an equivalent 'Declaration.' The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 saw Home Rule placed in legal storage until it was concluded but, by the time it ended four years later, the fallout from the 1916 Easter Rising had profoundly altered Irish politics, while internationally, boundary-making had very much come into vogue.

Outside the north east of Ireland, the post-War election delivered a landslide victory for the separatist Sinn Féin and was followed by the conflict now known as the War of Independence as well as large-scale sectarian violence in the north (particularly in Belfast). The Government of Ireland Act 1920 was Britain's response. Underpinned by high level of tension, intense politicking and compromise, Home Rule would finally come to Ireland; but, instead of one, two parliaments were now provided for. Consenting to the demands of Ulster Unionists, Northern Ireland was comprised of six of the nine Ulster counties including the cities of Derry/Londonderry and Belfast. Its putative counterpart, Southern Ireland, would include three of the five Ulster counties that had Catholic majorities – Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan – but not Fermanagh or Tyrone, both of which were in 'the North' (see Figure 1 below for a map).



Figure 1. A map of the Irish border and the counties of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (source: The Irish borderlands project).²

The hardening border

Unionists immediately accepted the new dispensation, establishing a Home Rule parliament in Belfast by June 1921, and thereafter imposing the new border through armed force. A Protestant militia, the Ulster Special Constabulary, was established and within a year roughly one in six adult male Protestants in Northern Ireland had enlisted in its part-time ‘B Specials’ element alone (Wilson 2010). Meanwhile, republicans rejected the arrangements and continued their own armed campaign to completely sever the entire island from any element of British rule. Eventually, the Anglo-Irish Treaty, struck in negotiations held in London, replaced what was known as Southern Ireland with an Irish Free State. Territorially identical, it would possess a greater degree of sovereignty but the provisions of the Treaty allowed for partition to remain. A short but bloody civil war between pro- and anti-Treaty factions was won, with British help, by the former and, by 1923, the Irish border was firmly in place.

Speaking of the transformation he had witnessed over recent years, in 1925 one borderland clergyman remarked, 'We never thought about the difference between one county and another before that change was made.'³ Based on the old district boundaries, the new border cut through some 1,400 landholdings (Harvey et al. 2005) and even individual buildings including a spade factory and more than one house (Leary 2018). It divided villages, parishes and communities, and separated market towns from their traditional hinterlands. Approximately 200 roads ran across the border, as did many more informal crossings (Johnson 1979).

Eric Hobsbawm attributed the post- First World War remapping of Europe to a principle of national self-determination 'more easily held by those far from the ethnic and linguistic realities of the regions which were to be divided' (Hobsbawm 1995). What went for Central and Eastern Europe was true of Ireland too. In both territories, partition left substantial minorities on the 'wrong' side of the border. At the time of partition, Catholics constituted over a third of the total population and more than half in the four counties adjacent to the boundary (Heslinga [1962] 1979).

Influenced both by imperial cartography and by the ideals of the Paris Peace Conference (Rankin 2007), the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty contained a clause for the establishment of a Boundary Commission to redraw the border, in line 'with the wishes of the inhabitants, so far as may be compatible with economic and geographic conditions'. Rejecting the option of plebiscite in contrast to several European counterparts, and despite the presence of large majority-Catholic areas inside Northern Ireland, the Irish Boundary Commission under British chairman, Richard Feetham, chose to preserve the basic outline of partition focusing only on the possible rectification of small anomalies (O'Callaghan 1999). Following the infamous leaking of its proposals, the Irish Boundary Commission collapsed in December 1925 without any changes being made to the erratic 300 mile (475 km) border line.

The economic border

As a result of partition, a number of borderland communities were separated from their historical economic hinterlands (McCall 2011, Hayward 2018). Protestant and Catholic borderland communities alike were affected deeply by this separation. For example, a town like Clones (on the southern side of the border) which had enjoyed relative affluence before partition went into a decline that saw it hold an official status of 'disadvantaged' in the 1950s (Dooley 1994). Within these border areas and small towns, the severing of 'ties of economic relationships and kinship [that] had run freely' across the county boundary before its status changed demonstrated the consequences of poor planning and implementation (Harris 1986:

19-20). In the period from the border's first creation as a temporary measure, the region along the border suffered from the multiple disadvantages of peripherality, rurality, low population, and poor infrastructure. Research shows that unemployment rates in the border region have traditionally been higher than the state averages (on both sides) and this remains the case today, while 'GVA and GDP per capita within the border region is already significantly below the averages for both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland' (Magennis et al. 2017: 43).

The general rise of economic protectionism following the 1929 financial crisis provided the backdrop to the first major wave of cross-border smuggling. During the so-called Anglo-Irish 'Economic War' beginning in 1932 this context, combined with the Irish government's decision to withhold 'land annuities' claimed by Britain under the provisions of the Treaty, saw the latter impose punitive tariffs on imports of livestock from the Irish Free State (Johnson 1979). Global conflict too, produced a second great smuggling outbreak, during World War Two, characterised this time by butter and bacon, white flour and tea, concealed about the persons of the women who then dominated the trade. Efforts to tackle smuggling centred on the strengthening of customs controls. This in turn had a knock-on effect on pushing communities either side of the border further apart.

By the time that its location was confirmed, the customs barrier that defined the lived experience of the border for many local residents had already been in place for more than two years. Reflecting Dublin's desire to utilise the autonomy afforded by the Treaty and fiscally diverge from London, customs posts appeared along the border in April 1923. Just sixteen border crossings were equipped with customs facilities and 'approved' for bringing dutiable goods – including motor vehicles – across. The remainder were restricted to those not carrying taxable items and travelling 'by foot, cycle or horse drawn vehicle.'⁴ As a consequence, those not using 'approved' roads were immediately subject to some suspicion – making the very act of crossing the border potentially disruptive and rebellious.

Border violence

Most Irish nationalists, north and south, and official Dublin government thinking, remained unreconciled to partition. Customs posts were targeted by republicans from the early 1920s, and many were burnt down in 1937. Also targeted were British soldiers and other members of the security services, in a series of armed raids in the later 1950s. This 'border campaign' included high profile attacks on military and police targets in Northern Ireland conducted by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) (Leary 2016; Hayward 2017). With the onset of 'the Troubles' after 1969, however, violence erupted on a wider basis. Although most of the literature relating

to the conflict has focused on the 'urban epicentres of violence' (Patterson 2013), the Troubles profoundly impacted on the border. In both symbolic and, indeed, practical terms, much of the conflict centred on the border region. In exploring the geography of conflict related deaths during 'the troubles', for instance, Gregory et al (2013) suggest that while Belfast was perhaps the largest single theatre of violence during the period, the border areas of south Armagh and Londonderry/Derry, plus rural areas such as East Tyrone and north Armagh also became epicentres of violence. A reading of statistics from Sutton's *Index of Deaths from the Conflict in Ireland* (2001) similarly suggests that nearly 44% of these occurred in Belfast, followed by the second largest concentration of nearly 36% in the border counties of Armagh, Derry, Fermanagh and Tyrone (including Londonderry/Derry city).

Much research has documented the extent to which the creation of an international border and the violence that ensued in the intervening years affected border communities socially, as well as economically. The border region had long been woven by thick familial, social and economic networks. There was religious segregation in some villages on both sides of the border, but in other cases communities of different political and religious persuasion were deeply interconnected. The Irish Borderlands project showed how these connections were 'dramatically distorted or destroyed' by the re-emergence of conflict in the late 1960s. Old connections, friendships, 'patterns of sociability' and cross-community contact were seriously affected, not only as the security situation and political climate became extremely tense but as roads and physical connections in the border region were blocked and interrupted.⁵ In some border towns extensive segregation of schools, sports and social infrastructure developed (Adams 1995), with Protestants and Catholics finding ways to systemically avoid interaction with each other (Larsen 1982).

Part of the British state's response to what they characterised as paramilitary incursions from a republican base across the southern side of the border was heavy securitization that included the setting up of army checkpoints, the positioning of multiple military bases and watchtowers along the border itself, and the physical blocking, 'cratering' or 'spiking' of many of the 270+ border crossings and roads, carried out by the Army (Mulroe 2017). This form of border management caused great inconvenience to daily life in the region, provoking anger at the demonstration of British state power. In response, Nationalist border communities themselves would refill road craters or remove the spikes. A process of repetitive closing and reopening of roads ensued until the British army moved to close roads on a more permanent basis (Buttazzoni 2016; Bardon 2011).

Far from removing the security threat, such road closures led to an increase in violent incidences at the border (Mulroe 2017), to further ratcheting up of political tensions between

the two governments, and to a deepening alienation between communities within Northern Ireland and across the border. Whilst unionists often saw the border as a vital means of preserving British culture in Northern Ireland and a form of protection against republican violence, Irish nationalists detested it as a lingering manifestation of British colonialism, and a reminder of their role in the 'northern state' as 'second class citizens'. Much harm was also caused to local businesses by violence, disinvestment, and 'back to back development' (as businesses avoided cross-border trade even with their close neighbours). Altogether, the entire border region suffered some of the worst social and economic consequences of violent conflict.

The slow transformation of the border

Despite what was to follow, the decade up to the late 1960s had generally been one of reform and tentative reconciliation. Although unsuccessful on the first attempt, both Britain and Ireland applied to join the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1961 and hoped to smooth the path to entry through bilateral tariff reductions and improved intergovernmental relations. Under Irish Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, and Northern Ireland Prime Minister, Captain Terence O'Neill, a new tone was struck in cross-border affairs. To boost tourism and trade, in 1964 and 1965, several new crossings were approved for customs purposes while subsequent changes to the regulations made it easier for vehicles to go across. By 1967 the border was more porous than at any time since 1923 (Leary 2016). Much happened over the subsequent half century. And today, just a decade and a half after the last remnants of the military watchtowers were removed, the Irish border is one of the most open borders in the world. This is a result of two key processes that fundamentally changed the relationship between the UK and Ireland, just as similar processes were taking place elsewhere in Europe (Sahlins 1991).

First, both countries joined the then EEC in 1973. This common membership opened both states to the processes and practices of European integration, particularly in terms of economic integration and of cross-border cooperation. The introduction of EEC regulations on customs declarations in 1987 had immediate effect on the ease with which goods could be transported between north and south. Later, the creation of the Single Market (with its official entry into operation on 1 January 1993) erased many obstacles to cross-border trade and economic development, and customs posts on the border were immediately made redundant (Kowalsky 2010). In such a very practical way, the EU context successfully enabled change in cross-border economic relationships in Ireland, structurally impacting on the significance of the border as an economic and customs divide. As such, the border region became a site of growing

economic cooperation, with plans for its further expansion through the Belfast-Dublin ‘border corridor’ and north-west city region (Hayward and Murphy 2018).

Cross-border trade, furthermore, is disproportionately significant to the smaller economy in the north, with a third of all goods exported from Northern Ireland going across the border to the Republic of Ireland (Phinnemore and Hayward 2017). The majority of cross-border transactions are made by micro and small businesses, although the value of such trade is concentrated in larger companies, especially in the agri-food sector. Much North-to-South trade is comprised of trade in ‘intermediate’ goods and, including market-ready agri-food products, two-thirds of it are part of supply chain activity. The 177,000 trucks that cross the Irish border per month carry mixed loads for destination across the UK and the wider EU (Leheny 2018). Because it is frequently time-sensitive, the benefits of the practical disappearance of the border as an economic divide and as an international customs and trade outpost are most felt precisely in the movement of such products.

Until the peace process itself bore fruit however, the above-described benefits of economic cooperation in the Irish border region could not be properly felt. It was the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement that would form the foundations for the Northern Ireland peace process, remaining to this day the lynchpin to good relationships between Britain and Ireland and on the island of Ireland. It was concluded by the British and Irish governments and negotiated through multi-party talks, in which each major party in Northern Ireland (bar the Democratic Unionist Party, who opted out) participated. The 1998 Agreement not only brought about the removal of the border security installations, it also created institutions and mechanisms for cross-border cooperation in a wide range of policy areas such as health, environment and transport. Such cross-border integration and cooperation has brought direct and tangible benefits. A ‘mapping exercise’ of north-south connections conducted to inform the Brexit negotiations revealed around 150 areas of solid cross-border cooperation – covering such spheres as health, education, transport and environment – that both governments acknowledged to be in need of preservation given their real benefit to residents on both sides of the border (HM Government 2018a).

Brexit and Northern Ireland’s borders

The United Kingdom’s decision to leave the European Union centred on a campaign to ‘take back control’ of its borders (HM Government 2018b). This objective was largely assumed to mean controls on the movement of people through British sea and airports. The movement of goods and services across the UK’s land border with the EU in Ireland, as well as the

significance of any necessary controls over such movement that would arise from the border becoming an EU external frontier, was given scant consideration prior to the 2016 Referendum. The potential for social, political, economic and symbolic damage arising from the likely hardening of this border after Brexit was underplayed and misunderstood in main political discourse in Britain. Indeed, the Irish border proved to be the most complicated challenge and a long-time stumbling block for the Brexit process.

First, this was a border whose existence was still contested, and whose openness was seen as a litmus test for the health of a peace process. Low level paramilitary activity has continued, fuelled by organised criminality (including by smuggling across the Irish border to avoid excise duties); and there have been organised groups on both sides who see the 1998 Agreement as a sell-out and who would gladly exploit circumstances to justify a return to 'war'. For this reason, policing in the border region continues to be far from normal. Experience of military surveillance and paramilitary intimidation, plus suspicion of state activity (both British and Irish), has meant that there is great sensitivity among local communities in the region to any form of surveillance, tracking or monitoring as well as more generally - to any change in the status of the border, both in symbolic and real terms.

In recognition of the unique complexity of movement across the Irish border, the UK and EU promised to avoid a 'hard' border on the island of Ireland after Brexit and in particular, putting 'physical infrastructure' at the border itself fearing that, as in the past, it could alienate local people and become a target for violence. However, neither have either wanted to turn a blind eye to this border, knowing that a porous boundary could rapidly become gateway for illegal activity that may pose a risk to the integrity of their respective internal markets. Moreover, a clear tension has lain in the fact that for the UK to pursue its main ambitions from Brexit (e.g. an independent commercial and trade policy), it must seek to become increasingly distant from the EU, and thus more checks and controls would be needed at UK/EU borders. Whether these restrictions should be placed at the land border between the two states or the sea border between the two islands has been a matter that touches on the very core of the political conflict in Northern Ireland. A 2018 representative survey among 1000 people in Northern Ireland recorded 'substantial and intense opposition to possible North-South border checks between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and to East-West border checks between Northern Ireland and Great Britain', with 61% of respondents preferring for the UK as a whole to remain in the customs union and single market (Garry et al. 2018: 9). Another research of over 500 people living and working in the central border region of Ireland north and south (Hayward and Komarova 2019), showed an overwhelming sense of uncertainty, fear and concern with the impact of Brexit and of potential border checks. The tension, as well as

frustration with uncertainty generated by the negotiation of the UK's withdrawal, has of course been stoked by the lack of clear popular support for the UK (and thus Northern Ireland) leaving the EU, as demonstrated by the result of the 2016 Brexit Referendum where 56% of Northern Ireland's population voted to remain and 44% to leave (The Electoral Commission 2016).

Conflict, Peace and Brexit in a border village: A Case Study

The partition of Pettigo

Close to the western seaboard and the northern shores of Lough Erne, the village of Pettigo had fewer than four hundred inhabitants recorded in the 1911 census (the last census to be conducted on an all-Ireland basis). Of the 365 residents listed that year, 140 were Catholics while the majority belonged to various Protestant denominations. Running through the settlement, the Termon River, little more than a stream during the summer, marks the line between Counties Donegal (in the Republic of Ireland) and Fermanagh (in Northern Ireland). Partition transformed the county boundary and the Termon into a border between two states (see Figure 1).

Pettigo's early experience of partition was a bloody and dramatic one. In the spring of 1922 the British Army withdrew from the Irish Free State, with pro- and anti-Treaty IRA units taking over its former positions, including the barracks in the Donegal portion of the village and a fort strategically overlooking nearby Belleek. These two points commanded the gateways to a 'triangle' of County Fermanagh to which, at that time, there was no overland access from the rest of Northern Ireland except through Donegal. An attempt by forces loyal to the Belfast government to establish a presence in the area, travelling by boat across the waters of Lough Erne, was abandoned following a series of violent clashes that included cross-border sniper fire. In June, under orders from Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for the Colonies, a large convoy of regular British troops was dispatched to support the locally recruited Ulster Special Constabulary. Aided by heavy artillery shells, the British forces occupied both sides of the village in violation of the provisions of the Treaty. Three local IRA members were killed in the fighting, with another dying shortly after (Ó Duibhir 2011, Cunningham 1982).⁶

As with other points along the border, these and related events 'left massive bitterness behind', but in many respects local people quickly learned to live with the boundary (Wright 1992). While the British army pulled out of the Southern side of Pettigo by January 1923, April the

same year saw the erection of a hard border in the form of a customs barrier. The larger part of the village itself was in Donegal but most of its agricultural hinterland was in Fermanagh. Obtaining access to goods or services available just a short distance away entailed delays, searches and payment of customs charges, or a longer journey to an alternative town. The imposition of duties as well as price differences on either side soon gave rise to a popular smuggling trade. Mocked by outsiders as a ‘farce’ or a ‘constitutional freak’,⁷ the two parts of the small village of Pettigo each had a police station, a post office, a medical dispensary and, of course, customs station of its own.⁸

The troubled border

The emergence of the Troubles and the growing violence in Northern Ireland in particular had direct effects on the border communities. Alongside customs posts came the infrastructure and paraphernalia and restrictions associated with securitisation. The experience of border life through conflict and peace was examined in The Border Into Brexit project (Hayward and Komarova 2019). As part of the project, we conducted a focus group of eight participants (5 men and 3 women, ranging from early twenties to late sixties in age) in Pettigo village in November 2019. Participants were volunteers from among those who had responded to an earlier online survey involving 475 self-selected respondents living in the central border region of Ireland/Northern Ireland, conducted as a part of the bigger research project. It is interesting to look at what was said in this group as illustrative of border experience of people on both sides of the border in the area. One middle-aged participant described his memories of the Troubles from an early age in the village of Pettigo:

During the Troubles, the helicopters used to fly up and down the [Termon] river at night with the big search lights...we used to be sitting up in the attic window looking out at them. That was the border from four years old, or whatever.

One woman agreed with this description, as an indication of how childhood experiences adapted to an extraordinary and sometimes frightening context:

My husband [who grew up in the village] was told that Santa Claus comes in a helicopter!

The hardening of the border that accompanied the military and security response to the Troubles had physical effects of putting many off crossing the border altogether. For those in the border region whose lives were already very much cross-border, they could not help but also be affected in very practical and also in psychological ways by the rising tensions.

People [nowadays] socialise together in a way that we didn't. [Before peace] it was a psychological iron curtain. We would go up [across the border] to visit family...but there was a psychological dimension to it, that you avoided [crossing the border] otherwise. But that's gone now.

People in the focus group were at pains to try to explain why the border is viewed not simply in terms of practicalities but also as a social and cultural effect:

I don't want to see it come back in any form, even psychologically. I saw the border, as we were growing up doing so much harm. It pushed people into corners and made people take sides.

The discussion also demonstrated that 'the border' itself has a political and psychological effect that affects the behaviour of individuals on a daily basis as well as the broadest, biggest political matters that shape identity and community relations:

There's a line in the sand and ...that line says that first of all it's a different jurisdiction and second it's a different religion and it's different this and different that. It creates division and we got rid of that division over the years.

In an unusual way, the border has seen the creation of a unique identity and experience in the border region. This has gradually, and in the context of EU integration and the peace process, moved from being an experience of division to one of additional diversity, and is something cherished by many living in close proximity to the border. Few take the change for granted or see it as irrevocable:

Kids today, they don't care who their neighbour is – race, creed or religion. They just socialise together, play football together, interact from different towns and different villages. If there is anything going on [in terms of social tensions], it's just rivalry between football teams or whatever it might be. We cannot go back to anything that is more serious than that.

This sense that the 1998 Good Friday Agreement initiated a fundamental, positive change in the ways in which people interact and move across the border is something that has been repeated in the research in the border region over the past twenty years (e.g. Harvey et al. 2005, McCall 2011, Hayward and Komarova 2019).

Cross-border symbiosis

It is important to recognise that, just as British-Irish relations could never be completely rendered asunder, so partition was far from a clean break. In many ways the border always remained permeable. For decades after partition, for example, the whole of Pettigo continued to receive its water supply from a single reservoir in Northern Ireland that was still serviced by Donegal County Council, to whom local people on both sides paid their water rates.⁹ Throughout the summer, between ten and twenty thousand faithful Catholics continued to arrive in Pettigo by train – a journey that for most involved crossing the border twice – to reach Saint Patrick’s Purgatory, the famous site of pilgrimage at Lough Derg less than five miles away.¹⁰ Protestant children from Fermanagh still crossed the river into Donegal to get to school while, according to some accounts at least, thirsty drinkers travelled into Northern Ireland at night, because closing time in public houses was later there.¹¹

The reality for residents of Pettigo, just as much as for those of other border towns and villages, is that of a border which has had enormous symbolic and practical significance. The border’s presence is felt very physically and immediately in everyday life, yet is also one etched in generational memory and shaping a particular ‘order of the mind’.

For us here, the border is there on the other side of the street. It’s part of our culture: it’s who we are, it’s who we always were. You have sterling in one pocket and euro in the other. You have to have a foot each side all the time, it’s just the way life is.

Another participant said:

It’s in our bones that the border is here and what it means. The fact that it disappeared to all intents and purposes was fantastic and now it appears to be creeping back in again which is why we’re so concerned. We spent so long trying to get rid of it.

The fact, thus, that the border is a matter of identity and a way of life makes fears of return to a harder border (albeit in different forms) more live and more deeply felt. Because it will have an effect on what happens between the UK-EU, and thus what happens across borders, Brexit will mean something far more for the Irish border region than for any other part of these islands.

Related to this, another theme in the focus group is an awareness of how exposed life at the border is to any change in the nature of the border:

I cross the border six times on the way to work and six on the way back. So, there’s a complete misunderstanding of the day-to-day commute, use of crossing the border that the political class [outside the border region] have. It’s our day-to-day reality.

The sense of vulnerability is exacerbated by the significance of border crossing to people in the border region, especially in places such as Pettigo and – at the same time – by the fact that

changes to daily life can come about as a result of the decisions being made by the 'political class' so far away from the border itself, in London or in Brussels. A sense of being so acutely affected by political vagaries has bred a mentality of mistrust and scepticism of politicians and the political establishment at large. This sense of political wariness is exacerbated by the logic of Brexit and – because the 'other' is in such close proximity in the border region – there are fears that the high level UK/EU, British/Irish tensions from Brexit take a micro-level, personal form in the border region:

This whole [Brexit] thing is alienating people. ... now these questions are coming up. It's making people turn around and say 'who are my friends anymore? Who can I rely on?'... It is forcing people into corners that I don't think they should be ...it's got really dangerous for us here.

The serious consequences of this melding of practical and psychological effects of Brexit were spelled out by one focus group participant from the business community. Although there has been overriding emphasis and focus on the needs of business, this participant noted that – much more than tariffs and customs declarations – the risks for peace and stability lie in the re-emergence of distrust and uncooperativeness.

I'm in business and there's a lot of risks in business... The greater danger for me [however] is if the fabric of society gets damaged. Because ... the businesses will eventually solve their own problems, but society is a different animal. When it's damaged, it takes a long, long time to solve.

What has been achieved after a century of conflict and cooperation is something that people in the border region want to preserve. As a woman living in Pettigo described it:

We don't want to look like some sectarian dug-out little hole. We all want to move on for the betterment of our communities and our children. I know before the peace process, your Catholic or your Protestant neighbour mightn't have lent you a shovel, but from the peace process, that all changed. All of that broke down. People weren't afraid of orange and green [political differences] any more.

Local residents cherish the fact that they are no longer afraid of difference among themselves; and this is something that they are particularly keen to reserve given that the border region is one in which political, economic, social and cultural difference has been so damaging and divisive. Partition itself brought about and created obvious forms of division and difference. The peace process since 1998 has helped soothe and defuse the differences. It will be difficult

to maintain these levels of trust and goodwill as the British-Irish relationship that underpins the legal border becomes inevitably more distant after Brexit. The Irish border is now an external frontier of the European Union. We can see from the history of a century of its existence that the impact of this change to the status of the Irish border will be felt most acutely and most personally in the border region.

Conclusion

A revised Withdrawal Agreement was reached between the UK and the EU on 17 October 2019, containing a Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland which had direct implications for the experience of Brexit and for avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland. In summary, the Protocol avoided a hard border by treating Northern Ireland differently to the rest of the UK. This will apply to areas such as technical regulation of goods, agricultural and environmental production and regulation, state aid and other areas of north-south co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, including the Single Electricity Market. Its subsequent ratification by the UK Parliament in January 2020 means that the openness of the Irish land border for the movement of goods will be largely maintained irrespective of the changing nature of the UK-EU relationship. In principle, there should be no need for checks and controls for customs or product standards at the land border, and thus no need for new physical infrastructure, procedures or resources for the movement of goods across the border.

Whilst for Pettigo this means no return to the border of 'the Troubles' or to the accompanying everyday life disruption, more subtle changes will depend on the extent of the potential gradual distancing between laws and regulations (including price differences) on each side of the border. Just like partition or the peace process, Brexit does not constitute a one-off event or a 'clean break' from the past. The consequences of Brexit will be long felt in the border region. In the first instance, for example, this means that those residents of Pettigo who are British and not Irish citizens will lose the rights associated with EU membership – bringing a new layer of difference among citizens in the border region. It remains to be seen what role such divisions will play in stoking the ever-present shadow of 'the border of the mind' in the region.

The new relationship between the UK and the EU will not only affect the practical significance of the Irish land border, it will also change relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and between Britain and Northern Ireland. Borders all around Northern Ireland are going to be under pressure, with the general trend being towards a hardening effect. In light of this, trust-building and cooperation, north-south and east-west, will be more

important than ever. And the models and examples of such relationship-building and communication that have been demonstrated in recent years in the border region should be ones to inspire and to build upon at a time of immense economic uncertainty and political flux.

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