

Brexit, Politics and Northern Ireland

by Larry Plachno



Brexit, the story behind the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union, has been evolving into an ongoing saga. Putting a customs border in the middle of a country is a unique concept that has not been accepted by some people. The result has been turmoil and unrest in Northern Ireland. TUMISU.

The February, 2021 issue of NATIONAL BUS TRADER contained an article titled “Brexit and the Bus Industry” that explained the basics of Brexit and how it might affect the bus industry. Brexit is a short form of British Exit, which is the departure of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU). Since then, there has been some strife and violence in Northern Ireland. Readers are asking about this and how it will impact Brexit and the bus industry.

As a general comment, your editor would suggest that many if not most of the problems with Brexit stem from decisions going political instead of practical. One of the more obvious is that Brexit passed by less than two percent of the vote. The outcome would have been different had the elected officials taken the time and put in the energy to address the concerns of the

people who voted “leave” instead of “remain.”

Many in the UK fishing industry were unhappy about EU fishing boats in British waters. Could elected officials have gotten some concessions from the EU to improve this situation? There were complaints about more attention being paid to London rather than smaller cities and rural areas, but I would have to question whether this was really an EU problem. There were also concerns about EU immigrants and a struggling National Health Service. Had these problems been addressed practically rather than politically, there conceivably would have been more people voting “remain” with fewer voting “leave” and Brexit would not have happened.

The story behind what is going on in Northern Ireland goes back a century and

may be difficult to understand for those who do not know the background. I will try my best to go through the history and the current situation. Please forgive me if I simplify things for the sake of brevity.

A good place to start is with geography. All of this is taking place on two large islands to the west of Continental Europe. The larger of the two islands, located closer to Continental Europe, is called Great Britain and includes England, Wales and Scotland. Located slightly to the west is the Island of Ireland that includes the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Today, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland constitute the United Kingdom.

At one point both islands were part of the United Kingdom. In 1922, the southern and central portions of the island of Ireland broke

away and formed what is today the Republic of Ireland. Six remaining counties in the northeastern part of the island became Northern Ireland.

The basic problem is that the residents of Northern Ireland are a mixed group. Some relate to Ireland and are primarily Catholic. Some relate to the United Kingdom and are primarily Protestant. The two groups do not mix well. With both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in the European Union the border between them was essentially open, but there still were major problems and confrontations with paramilitary groups. One source says that about 3,600 died in conflicts that came to be called "The Troubles."

This was finally resolved in 1998 with what became known as the Good Friday agreement that created an uneasy peace by balancing the two sides. The agreement covered the north-south border to Ireland, the east-west sea crossing to the UK and a partnership government for Northern Ireland. This seemed to work reasonably well until Brexit came along.

In 2016, the United Kingdom voted on whether to "remain" or "leave" the European Union. Approximately 1.9 percent more voters wanted to leave rather than remain. Both England and Wales had more people voting leave by a few percentage points, Scotland voted rather strongly to remain while Northern Ireland also voted to remain. A subsequent poll showed that Northern Ireland wanted no borders.

Movement towards Brexit languished for a few years. However, what could be considered a landslide election in December of 2019 served as a mandate for Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his conservative Tory party to get Brexit done. This was easier said than done



Brexit activity is primarily located on two islands west of Continental Europe. The first island of Great Britain includes England, Wales and Scotland. Further west is the island of Ireland that includes the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The only land border between the United Kingdom and the European Union is the 310-mile border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. NBT.

because the EU was not about to give the UK a good deal and negotiations on a post-Brexit trade agreement went right down to the wire.

If the EU gave the UK a good exit deal, other EU members might decide to follow.

The obvious question was where to put the border between the EU and the UK. The EU wanted a defined border to protect their single market. The logical location would be the 310-mile border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. However, Ireland – remaining an EU member – was opposed to this as were the pro-Ireland people in Northern Ireland. As a result, it was decided to put the border in the Irish Sea between Northern Ireland and the remainder of the UK. Northern Ireland would be partially in the UK and partially in the EU – a somewhat awkward position.

While there were people who liked this idea, others would question it. Some people pointed out that there was no study done on whether putting a customs border in the middle of a country was a good idea. Had this been done before? Had it been successful? How did this relate to the Good Friday agreement as well as the past problems and violence? It was pointed out that not only was there no study of these important issues, but there were little or no newspaper articles covering the pros and cons of this arrangement.

Prior to becoming the prime minister of the UK, Boris Johnson was elected as London's mayor in 2008. He was responsible for modernizing and retaining double-deck Routemaster buses for London. Shown here is one of the newer double-decks with hybrid power that was built by Wright-Bus in Ballymena, Northern Ireland. WRIGHTBUS.



In addition, Northern Ireland would be subject to EU market rules but had no representation in the EU. Strangely, there appeared to be a clause in the trade agreement that allowed Northern Ireland to reject this arrangement four years in the future, but no option for rejecting it today.

Hence, it was not unexpected that there was unrest in Northern Ireland, particularly with the pro-British people who did not want to be cut off from the UK by a customs border. There had been problems getting food to stores, problems with customs paperwork and even an inability to move pets, trees or soil across the Irish Sea between two parts of the UK. It did not help that the pro-Irish group escaped prosecution for COVID-19 restrictions thus upsetting the balance and calling for the resignation of the Northern Ireland Chief Constable.

While elected officials and the police in Northern Ireland are urging a reduction in violence, everyone seems to be ignoring the real problem which is the unwanted customs border in the Irish Sea. Pro-British loyalist militants in Northern Ireland said there had been a "spectacular collective failure" to understand their fears and anger over Brexit. It has been suggested that this is a classic example of three foxes and a chicken voting on what is for lunch. The foxes are the EU, Ireland and the UK while the chicken is the British people of Northern Ireland. In this case the chicken is being ignored for the convenience of the foxes.

As of early April, the situation has become complex and multi-faceted. The EU is emerging as somewhat of a bully by insisting that the Irish Sea customs border move ahead while ignoring the negativity and violence in Northern Ireland. Some of the Northern Ireland elected officials are calling for an alternative to the customs



Much public transport in the UK is operated by private companies under contract. Shown here is a bus with a Wright body on a Volvo chassis operating in Bath, Northern Ireland by First Group. It was a former airport bus for Belfast International Airport. CHARLIE UK.

border in the Irish Sea. There has been a legal move to eliminate the customs border that may do something as early as May. Several people point out that the Irish Sea customs border violates the Good Friday agreement by upsetting the critical balance between the groups in Northern Ireland. If peaceful means to remove the border do not work out, we may see a return to the violence of the past. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has effectively kicked the can down the road by suspending some of the customs arrangements until later in the year.

Where does this leave things? There are several different possible outcomes. One is

that the European Union could refuse to approve the post-Brexit trade agreement with the UK because of these problems. This could lead to a hard exit with no agreement and with trade on World Trade Organization rules. This would also keep EU fishing boats out of UK waters and the EU would also lose other things in the trade agreement. One EU official said that the Irish Sea customs border was the price that the UK had to pay for Brexit. However, it would be difficult for the EU to reverse the UK public vote for Brexit. Some British elected officials have talked about another Brexit referendum, but that would put the UK in the unenviable position of begging for readmission to the EU.

Some people have talked about a united Ireland by joining Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland. However, it is questionable whether the voters of the Republic of Ireland want to take on a million pro-British residents who side with the UK and would be more opposed to this than to the Irish Sea customs border. The results might be worse than the past troubles.

The basic bottom line is where do you put the customs border? Based on past experience and past violence, it is obvious that putting a customs border anywhere in Northern Ireland is not a good idea. You upset a very delicate balance if you draw a line between Ireland and Northern Ireland or if you draw a line between the UK and Northern Ireland.

Hence, it is premature to talk about how this will impact the bus industry until the various groups agree to get together to see if they can work things out. We will try to keep watching the situation. □

Translink is the provider of public transport in Northern Ireland. Metro and Glider Services operate in the Belfast area while Ulsterbus and Goldline bus services connect the rest of Northern Ireland. This Translink Goldline bus incorporates an Irizar i6 body with a Scania chassis. TRANSLINK.





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