

Some EU-critical Irish are starting to put their heads above the parapets

Ireland joined the EU, along with the UK and Denmark, in 1973. With its important agricultural sector very dependent on exporting to the UK, the Irish really had very little choice.

Many Irish men and women developed an enthusiasm for the European project which has been conspicuously absent from this side of the Irish Sea. The generous EU subsidies which Ireland received undoubtedly contributed to their Euro-enthusiasm, but EU membership helped Ireland publicise its separate identity as an independent nation after breaking with the UK in 1922.

The leadership of the main Irish political parties, along with the Irish media, have been staunch supporters of EU membership. Their position has not changed in spite of the severe hit taken by the Irish economy in the recent Great Recession – a downturn exacerbated by Ireland's membership of the Single Currency. Neither has the change in Ireland's status from net recipient of to net contributor to EU funds made any difference in their stance. Brexit has made them downright hysterical in their depiction of the Brexit vote as an unmitigated disaster for both the UK and Ireland.

But what of the Irish people? The most recent Eurobarometer survey still pointed to a nation happy to be part of the EU. 55% of those surveyed had a positive image of the EU, the highest score across the entire EU28. Ireland was also the most positive country regarding the future of the EU. At face value, there seem to be few echoes of the hostility towards the EU which has always been such a feature of the UK.

Regular visitors to this website will be aware of the work of

the veteran Irish Eurosceptic Anthony Coughlan, but has he been a voice crying in the wilderness?

If a recent letters page in the staunchly pro-EU *Irish Times* is at all typical, the answer seems to be no.

A Mr Ronan Scanlon, from Leopardstown, Dublin, had written a few days earlier, *"Ireland is a maritime country in the North Atlantic, an open economy with a flexible, literate, highly educated and – above all – English-speaking workforce. To what kind of future can she look forward walled into an anti-democratic, over-regulated, protectionist little customs union with its job-destroying currency and within which hardly anyone else speaks English as their mother tongue?"* and he returned to the fray on 4th April to hit out at EU regulation:- *"EU membership imposes far too many regulations on small businesses that don't export anywhere...Why are such standards decided at supra-national level? It ought to remain a competence for domestic legislation in national parliaments."*

Ken Andrew from Cobh, Co. Cork debunks claims in the paper that we in the UK are regretting voting for Brexit:- *"Your columnist also mentions a long-time London-Irish businessman admitting to feeling 'a little scalded' as proof that many British people are suffering regret over their choice to vote Leave. The truth is there is little evidence of buyer's remorse among voters, and Theresa May is enjoying remarkably good approval ratings, even amongst Remainers, for her handling of the Brexit process thus far. The British economy is booming, inward investment is at record levels, unemployment is at its lowest rate in a decade and the predicted exodus of jobs from the City of London simply hasn't happened."*

The offending columnist, Kathy Sheridan, also gets short shrift from Dave Slater of Kilkea, Co. Kildare, for her condescending attitude towards supporters both of Brexit and

President Trump:- *"Why don't your columnists actually come out and directly say what they are obviously thinking? They oppose universal suffrage, clearly consider it a disastrous failure and would, in light of events, 'reluctantly' prefer a return to limited suffrage. Those with third-level degrees, business owners and those who own a house valued above a certain threshold. That should put a stop to a Trump or Brexit ever again being forced through, against all logic and decency, by the great unwashed."*

Of course, such sentiment does not imply that Ireland is going to follow us out of the exit door, although the very fact that a group of Irish economists and lawyers have recently produced a report making a credible case for "Irexit" indicates that Brexit has given a new spring in the step of a much larger number of EU-critical movements than the more widely-reported groups such as the *Front National* in France or Geert Wilders' PVV in the Netherlands.

Sinn Féin has predictably ditched its sham euroscepticism after realising that Brexit provides an opportunity to press for a vote on an United Ireland, with Northern Ireland being incorporated into the Irish republic (and thus the EU) rather than bringing back a hard border with the UK. However, not only is a hard border unthinkable on either side, but if the UK government plays its cards right, Brexit may further open the eyes of our Irish cousins and encourage them at least to consider whether they might be better off joining us in seeking freedom from the failing, disunited and moribund EU. We can but hope.

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