

# EU's 'hard border' threats expose its cynical approach to Ireland

*Michel Barnier is again threatening a hard border in Ireland as tensions rise on the implementation of the backstop. But as **Professor Anthony Coughlan**, Emeritus Professor of Trinity College Dublin explains, Barnier's idle threats merely demonstrate the EU's cynical approach to the border issue and Ireland as a whole.*

Michel Barnier seems hell bent on imposing an internal border in Ireland if he does not get his way on the precise implementation of the 'backstop'. It's the same old EU song: using the Irish border to try to disrupt Brexit, with hints of a return to Irish Border terrorism unless Brussels gets its own way.

In reality, North-South trade in manufactured goods can be easily managed by means of trusted trader status and is a non-event in terms of difficulty. All that is required is a UK system of export licences to control what is actually carried across the land border into the Republic, as suggested last August by former senior EU Commission official Sir Jonathan Faull:

*'Under this proposal it will be a violation of UK law backed up by severe penalties knowingly to export, through the frontier between the North and the Republic, goods which do not comply with the regulatory standards of the EU.'*

Sales to the Irish Republic account for only 6% of all sales by businesses in Northern Ireland. In contrast, NI sales to

the rest of the UK account for 15% of sales – i.e. 2.5 times more. Goods exported across the land border comprise only 7 percent of Northern Irish GDP. So much for the ‘all-island economy’. The Northern Ireland economy is much more closely integrated with the British economy, which is why the EU’s spiteful attempt to force a wedge between the two can only harm the people of the North.

So why has the UK government decided that numerous other businesses, not just in Northern Ireland but also in the rest of the UK, must be dragged into an ill-designed, cumbersome and expensive system supposedly to protect the EU Single Market, when the obvious solution is to apply any necessary restrictions just to that tiny minority of businesses that actually export across the border?

‘Brussels playing games with Irish sea border’ was the title of an important article by Northern Ireland journalist Newton Emerson published in the *Irish Times* on 4 June. Emerson pointed out that four-fifths of all grocery spending in Northern Ireland takes place in just three supermarket chains: Tesco, Sainsbury’s and Asda. Tesco and Asda have one distribution centre each in the region: Tesco in the Belfast Harbour Estate, and Asda by the Port of Larne. Sainsbury’s model is even simpler, with one huge distribution centre in East Kilbride serving Scotland and Northern Ireland. So most imported goods roll off ferries to be sorted in one place, right by the quayside, before being dispatched to shops.

Where is the risk to the Single Market? Are we really supposed to believe that these supermarkets will be involved in mass smuggling schemes? It is hard to imagine a more ideal situation for a trusted trader scheme to be a perfect solution. So any opposition to such a solution on the part of the EU or the Irish government cannot be about risk, and can only be about politics.

As Emerson rightly says, the EU is continuing to use the Irish

border as a bargaining chip. It is significant that Barnier felt obliged to respond to Emerson's article as follows:

*'Regarding Mr Emerson's concerns... I would say that we can take into account those concerns within the framework as it's currently written because it's written in a very precise way... Simplified declarations can be used for large economic operators, supermarkets being one of them.'*

Barnier seems to be trying to face both ways at once: threatening the British with a 'hard border' in Ireland and the possible resumption of terrorism, while reassuring the Irish that there are lots of practical solutions. So perhaps the lesson for the British is that they should not take his threats seriously.

Perhaps the most important point in Newton Emerson's article is in his final two sentences, where he observes that there can no longer be any excuse for not seeing that 'the EU's approach to Northern Ireland has been dangerously cynical from the outset.' There can certainly be no excuse for the new Government in Dublin not seeing that Barnier is bullying not only the British government, but more importantly the people of the island of Ireland too.

If Dublin politicians want to let that happen, so be it. The world will not cave in if border posts go up. There is no reason to think that violence would resume, and the technical solutions that Dublin has been saying were impossible will quickly be found to be possible. It will just mean that the South's uncritically europhile politicians will be setting themselves up to be all the more discredited in the eyes of the public as things finally play out.