

The reality of Brexit is finally hitting home in Ireland

Professor Anthony Coughlan, Emeritus Professor of Trinity College Dublin, explains how Boris Johnson's election victory in December 2019 shocked the Irish Establishment and media into stunned silence. For three and a half years they blithely assumed that Brexit could be reversed. Only now is the reality of the UK leaving the EU sinking in.

Until the Boris Johnson Government's election victory in December, most people in the Republic of Ireland assumed that Brexit would be frustrated by means of a second referendum to undo the result of the first.

After all, a second referendum was what happened in Ireland itself in 2002, when Irish voters had the temerity to reject the EU's Nice Treaty that the year before. And the same happened when Dublin re-ran the referendum on the Lisbon Constitutional Treaty in 2009, following that treaty's rejection by Irish voters in 2008.

Even if a so-called 'People's Vote' to undo the result of the real people's vote of 2016 did not happen, the Irish Establishment assumed that the UK/EU negotiations would at most lead to a Brexit-in-name-only. That was where things seemed clearly to be heading under Theresa May.

For the three years of Prime Minister May's tenure of 10 Downing Street the Irish media were obsessive in their coverage of every twist and turn of the UK/EU negotiations and the accompanying shenanigans at Westminster. Over that time, with scarcely a dissenting word from anyone, Irish

policymakers and pundits painted Brexit as a disastrous mistake crying out to be undone. Brexit was represented as a catastrophe for the UK, with attempts to implement it bringing continual humiliation for its government and parliament.

Our Irish politicians, by contrast, remained staunchly europhile, bolstered by the solidarity of the other EU States, conventionally and semi-affectionately referred to as 'Team EU'. This was the message the Irish public received and meekly absorbed.

Then came the thunderbolt of that exit poll on UK election night, 12 December last. Suddenly, for the first time since the 2016 referendum vote, a real Brexit hove into view. The confidence in Ireland that Brexit would not happen was shown to be just wishful thinking.

A kind of stunned passivity has since immobilised the Irish Establishment and media. They are still in a state of semi-shock. Mention of Brexit has virtually vanished from press, radio and TV. There is scarcely a word about it among campaigners in the Republic's current general election, with polling day scheduled for 8 February.

One can take it that few people in the Republic have yet thought through the long-term implications of a real Brexit. Yet the Republic will be more affected by that than any other EU country.

For example, the main political reason why the Republic of Ireland applied to join the then EEC along with the UK in 1961, and eventually did join in 1973, was because Northern Ireland was joining along with Britain. All of the Republic's political parties aspire to a united Ireland; if the UK joined 'Europe' and the Republic did not, the North-South border on the island would be strengthened.

The reverse position now applies. Now that Northern Ireland is leaving along with the rest of the UK, if the Republic seeks

to remain in the EU, this must inevitably add new dimensions to the Irish border. Does the current generation of Irish politicians really want to be responsible for a new Partition of Ireland?

The fact is that Brexit puts 'Irexit', Ireland's withdrawal from the EU, on the historical agenda. The Irish Establishment is so stunned by the fact of a real Brexit happening that there is as yet no public discussion about this. But that will change.