

COMMENTARY / WORLD

## How the Irish question affects us all

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Today Northern Ireland, comprising most of the ancient province of Ulster, sits simultaneously inside the European Union Single Market (largely under EU trading rules and standards) and also within the United Kingdom, which has left the European Union and its single market.

How can that possibly be? The answer lies partly in the terms reached before the recent U.K. departure from the EU and partly deep in the Irish question, which has bedeviled British politics for generations, and indeed for centuries. The nature of the Irish question may change in form over time, but the issue in all its tortuous complexity is always there — and is now back once again with a vengeance. Partition of Ireland was the solution in the last century, but now it persists as the impossible problem in this one.

It might be thought that this was a specific and unique British (and Irish) headache and not of much interest to the wider world. But it is amazing how much interest the continuing dilemmas of the Irish situation generates internationally.

This is especially so in Japan. Maybe this is just the proverbial Japanese politeness inquiring about the current British condition similar to how one would ask about a friend's health. But beyond polite inquiry, it is also an undoubted feature of today's increasingly connected world. What may seem like difficult local issues within one state or neighborhood have a habit of causing frequent and instantaneous shock waves that reach all members in the global network, raising questions and implications far outside the originating zone.

The current Irish question is very much of this kind. It is a source of misunderstandings and bad feelings — disturbing U.K.-EU relations, as well as those on the other side of the Atlantic given the enormous legacy of immigration to the United States from Ireland, a country of which President Biden himself has strong ancestral ties. It challenges the future structure of the EU and its single market, obstructs future trade flows, threatens the unity (and potentially the peace) of the United Kingdom and raises questions about the future status of the Irish Republic itself.

Under a protocol agreed to when the U.K. left the EU at the end of last year, Northern Ireland acquired this confusing double status — as if it were in two places at once.

Why was this? Because all sides were determined not to have a policed frontier or border between the North and the South. This was agreed to by all parties to the so-called Good Friday Agreement of 1997, which secured a halt, or at least a breathing space, to the dreadful violence between the two communities in Ulster.

The open border in Ireland was and remains the condition for compromise, instead of all-out violence between the factions, and the basis for a power-sharing agreement on governance in Northern Ireland itself.

No one wants to see the violence all start up again. But of course an open, unpoliced border leaves the EU with a gaping open flank through which goods and services could pour in unchecked from Great Britain and Northern Ireland right into the carefully protected EU system.

This just cannot be allowed, say EU officials, and therefore there must be a proper border check somewhere else, if not within Ireland itself then between the mainland of Britain and the province of Northern Ireland across the Irish Sea.

That, say Brussels officials, is what the U.K. signed up to in the EU Withdrawal Agreement Protocol, and that is what must be strictly implemented. Oh no, say the British, that was a general aim, to be implemented very lightly, if at all, since most goods from Britain to Northern Ireland stop there and are never going to be exported to the South. This is just internal trade.

Oh yes, say EU Commission officials, we must have tight controls, especially of foodstuffs such as chilled meats and sausages.

Well, if you take that attitude, say the British, the loyal Unionists in the North will rise up in anger — and are already showing signs of doing so, as they see their free internal trade with other parts of their own sovereign country and kingdom interfered with. It will soon be about far more than sausages. And politics in Northern Ireland will descend again into violent chaos as anger flows back into Unionist politics and splits the ruling pro-Union coalition — a scenario that is already happening, too. That could leave the Republican Sinn Fein party in control in Belfast, with untold consequences.

Who said the Irish issue was simple or soluble? It is neither. The arguments will continue and get increasingly dangerous. They can only fade away if the basic building blocks of modern Europe shift.

For example, the European Union Single Market may turn out to be not as vital and sacred as the EU leaders maintain — and certainly in many parts of Central and Eastern Europe it may be breaking up already.

Additionally, a new and less doggedly anti-British generation in the Republic of Ireland may come to see its future best interests differently — as much closer to the U.K., its biggest trading neighbor and its partner in an already long-standing common travel area.

Miracles can happen over time — and do in this age of miraculous information technology, with its basic changes in the patterns of governance and world power structures now taking place before our eyes.

The grim path of history can be altered, if slowly. The whole British Isles could eventually find the peace and harmony which has eluded it for centuries past and a new kind of cooperative unity could emerge. The running sore of the unanswerable Irish question could become a shining example of how diverse communities can live and prosper together.

Unlikely? Well, we are all entitled to a bit of optimism — and time is a great healer.

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