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I'm Northern Irish, European, and I want to keep it that way

Journalist Andrew Lowry explains why Brexit is particularly hard to stomach for young people in the disputed region

Symbolism means more in Northern Ireland than in most places. Not long ago, Christmas shoppers were baffled to encounter riots in sub-zero temperatures over something as mundane as the government's decision to fly the Union flag over its buildings at the same frequency as the rest of the UK. This is a place where politics, identity and the abstractions that fuel them are unusually charged – but over the last two decades we've made tentative, stumbling progress toward finding a more sensible way of doing things.

It's ironic, then, that just as it has become conceivable for Northern Ireland to swap sectarianism for collaboration, the rest of the UK has taken a turn for the chauvinist in its vote to leave the European Union. Brexit's weird cocktail of turbo-Thatcherism, sovereignty fetishes and ugly blood-and-soil nationalism blended with the surrender of both practicality and economic wisdom may baffle the rest of the EU, but in Northern Ireland it all feels oddly familiar. Historically, we've never let good sense get in the way of an empty gesture or needless brinkmanship, and we've certainly fallen back on the rhetoric of deep history when there's no pressing contemporary argument to be made. It's weird, then, for us to hear Boris Johnson and his ilk talking like clueless Unionist politicians of the Seventies.

How poignant, then, that just as we're edging toward modernity, Brexit is set to wrench us from an institution that has done a huge amount to secure stability in Northern Ireland.

Like so much of what the EU does, its impact on Northern Ireland has been at once too diffuse and too tediously wonky to compress into a simple slogan that fits on the side of a bus – but to deny its influence in copper-fastening peace in the statelet would be specious in the extreme. It hasn't had the rockstar sheen of the shuttle diplomacy of the

Blair/Clinton years that led to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, but in its own, quiet way, Northern Ireland is where it is today thanks in part to the European Union. The EU may not have been the driving focus behind the seemingly endless dance of talks and walkouts that marked the years up until peace, but it was invaluable in providing a context where continuing them made sense.

In 1973, Northern Ireland happened to join the EU along with the rest of the UK and Ireland a few years into the Troubles (the name given to the thirty-year conflict between unionists and republicans in the late 20th Century). The EEC, as it was then, provided few institutional venues for much more than vague discussion of the conflict – although the unaffiliated European Court of Human Rights became an occasional tool for the Irish government to embarrass their British counterparts over matters such as the excesses of the 1970s internment policy. These early days where marked by a decided reluctance by Northern Irish Unionists and British governments to 'internationalise' the Troubles, despite the fact it was at its core a border dispute between two European countries.

By the time of the 1980s, when it was becoming increasingly clear that the only outcome for either side of the conflict was a negotiated settlement, EU institutions provided a venue for discussions in a more neutral setting than London, Dublin or Belfast. The picture was often confusing, though, with the EU parliament providing a venue for firebrand preacher/politician Ian Paisley to denounce the Pope as the anti-Christ in 1988 (it seems he took the name of the Treaty of Rome a little literally), but it also provided moderate nationalist MEP and MP John Hume with the institutional basis to drive the creation of the Haagerup report in 1984, a document suggesting a solution remarkably similar to that achieved in 1998. This push was instrumental in nudging Margaret Thatcher's government to sign the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, allowing the first cross-border institutions in Ireland. Unbelievably, a few short years before Thatcher went 15 months without speaking to her Irish counterpart.

If we're honest, this is small fry compared to the intense negotiations of the Nineties, when Bill Clinton would be on one phone line, Tony Blair on the other, and the population outside the smoke-filled rooms was exhausted by violence, death and a noticeably backward economy.

This last idea was where the EU came in.

Northern Ireland was poor even before the Troubles, but from 1969 on the stated goal of several paramilitary groups, the IRA included, was to wreck the local economy, and in this they were hugely successful. It's not

hard to see why an American pharmaceutical company or French energy company would think twice about investing in a place where elected MPs were starving themselves to death in prison, the workforce would regularly struggle to get to work because of security concerns, and the risk to property investments was so great.

Unpicking the economic contribution of the EU is tricky – do we factor in the common agricultural policy, where individual farmers receive everything from £20 to a few hundred thousand pounds a year, or the growth of cross-border trade in the years since the security situation improved? One thing we can quantify is the so-called 'peace fund,' which began in 1989 and will end its fourth round of funding in 2020.

Growing up in Northern Ireland in the Nineties, it was hard to go anywhere in the province without seeing a construction site with an EU billboard. Everything from roads to concert venues to the redevelopment of small towns to community centres to colleges received money, providing valuable impetus to the infrastructure reboot the North's economic recovery has depended on. Up to 2013, €1.3bn was given, with €270m due before 2020. It's hard to see where successive British or Irish governments would have found the money – and that doesn't even figure in subsidies, research grants to technology and engineering companies, or the International Fund for Ireland.

This may sound piddling next to the dramatic signing of agreements or talks where global figures helicopter into provincial conference centres, but economic growth leads to political stability anywhere in the world – even in a place where politics is as eccentric as Northern Ireland. We can't measure counter-factuals, but it's easy to see how countless young men have avoided being radicalised into the arms of the paramilitaries because of new job prospects, or how a newly minted middle class could put implicit pressure on politicians to sort themselves out.

And now, owing it so much, Northern Ireland is set to leave the EU – despite, along with Scotland, voting to remain. We're seeing an early sign of the choppy waters to come in the dispute between Bombardier, a plane and train manufacturer, and Boeing over tariffs being added to jet wings manufactured in Belfast. It may be in its essence a Canadian/American issue, but it's one where 4000 Northern Irish jobs are on the line – and with our impending amputation from the EU, the government is left holding very few cards.

The sadness about leaving is tied to more than economics, too. Since the lifting of border checkpoints, the 499km land frontier between what remains the UK and the Republic of Ireland has been, in practice, non-

existent. Tens of thousands of people cross seamlessly down roads where waits of more than an hour would once have been the norm – communities, medical provision, business supply chains and more all stand to be disrupted by even the most light-touch customs regime.

What's more, the border's move into abstraction was matched with an additional abstraction of identity. People born in Northern Ireland are welcome to choose a British or Irish passport, or both (which I recommend, as it makes you feel a bit like a spy).

This a la carte approach to identity, allowing full commitment to one or the other or a stress on the 'ish' in 'British' or 'Irish,' is part of what the romantic idea of the EU is all about. If you're in an academic mood, it's pleasingly post-modern, the traditions and allegiances of either community in theory floating free of government bodies, military commitments or anything else which ties identity to old-fashioned clumps of turf. The people of Northern Ireland suffered because of a variety of kinds of nationalism, but our reward has been – if we want it – the ability to construct our own identities as we see fit, free of the interference of anyone who'd attempt to nail down what we want to be against our will.

This is what we lose in Brexit, and it's why I will always be a European.



Andrew Lowry
London

Andrew Lowry is a freelance journalist based in London. His work has appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent* and *Wired* magazine, among others. Andrew studied English Literature at Oxford University, and holds a master's degree in filmmaking from the London Film School.