CHURCH TIMES ON BREXIT

Three or four times a year, we make the journey back to Edinburgh from our holiday home in Donegal in the Irish Republic. We cross the Irish Border, leaving the part of Ireland where we were both born and where our passports come from. We drive across Northern Ireland where I grew up and where we lived for 29 years, working and bringing up our children during the years of the Troubles. We then take the ferry across the Irish Sea to Scotland which has been our home for the last 13 years.

I’m going to offer a personal view on how Brexit looks to people in both parts of Ireland and in Scotland and what are the particular implications for the Union in respect of Northern Ireland and Scotland. Brexit raises strong emotions. Many wonder whether the promoters of Brexit either didn’t think about the implications for Ireland and the devolved nations - or didn’t care.

Let’s begin with the Irish Border which is now a major issue in the Brexit negotiations between the British government and the EU. On a dark night, you would miss it if you didn’t know where to look. It’s little more than a change of texture in the road surface and the confusion of Irish petrol prices expressed in sterling on the southern side.

I’m old enough to remember a ‘hard border’ in Ireland – the queues at the customs post, the book to be stamped, my parents ‘filtering’ their wedding presents northwards across the Border during the 1950’s. During the Troubles, it became an uneasy place with a strong military and police presence – crossing involved roadblocks and searches. Nobody is advocating a return to all of that – but the issues involved in avoiding it are very complex. What changed it was the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement of 1998. With a great deal of studied ambiguity, it affirmed the place of Northern Ireland within the UK while allowing many aspects of the border simply to melt away as people travelled, traded and built relationships across it.

Ireland has been an enthusiastic member of the EU and of the Eurozone. Brexit raises two issues of particular concern to the Irish Government. First the Irish Border will no longer be a border with another EU member – they will feel somewhat cut off from their EU partners. Second Brexit puts at risk the delicate architecture of the Belfast Agreement – of which the British and Irish governments are the guarantors. All kinds of cross-border co-operation have grown up – in tourism and healthcare to name but two. This week the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council in Ireland said that the ‘size and nature of potential impacts’ from various Brexit scenarios were ‘highly uncertain and may not fully capture the extent of the Republic’s and the UK’s closely integrated supply chain’. Those concerns are present on both sides of the Border – particularly in the agricultural sector. 25% of the milk and 40% of the lamb produced in Northern Ireland are processed in the Irish Republic. Regulatory issues raised by Brexit put that trade at risk.

Leaving the Border behind us, we drive across Northern Ireland. It’s a place which has largely left behind the violence of the past but has yet to find a contented peace. In the Brexit Referendum, 56 % voted Remain – but the major Unionist party, the DUP, supported Leave. Indeed the Referendum result largely mapped onto the traditional sectarian divisions of Northern Ireland. So Northern Ireland, still without a Assembly and Executive after eighteen months, faces a confused post-Brexit situation without functioning democratic structures. Brexit brings many concerns, particularly about cross-border trade and the common regulatory regimes which facilitate it. Exports to Northern Ireland from the Republic were worth €1.9bn euro last year while trade in the other direction was worth €1.3bn. Of greater concern is the risk to the stability of the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement - the various options for the Irish Border are viewed with particular concern. Neither the option of seeing the land border become a ‘hard border’ nor of what would in effect be a border in the Irish Sea will find broad acceptance.

We cross from Larne to Cairnryan in Scotland, sharing the expensive ferry crossing with large numbers of trucks. The EU ‘fallback’ position for maintaining a frictionless Irish Border would see customs checks between Northern Ireland and Scotland. Common customs and regulatory arrangements could then apply in both the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. The British Government is deeply opposed. It is unlikely but not impossible that these trucks will be lining up for customs checks at Larne and Cairnryan.

Scotland voted 66% Remain. That strong anti-Brexit vote raises the obvious question: Is a second Independence Referendum leading to Scottish Independence now more likely?

There are a number of reasons why the answer to that question is ‘probably not for now.’ The polls do not show any ‘Brexit bounce’ and Scotland’s fiscal situation remains unsatisfactory – with a deficit of £11.4bn. It may also be because, as one commentator suggested, a large part of the electorate has been ‘scunnered’ by two high pressure referenda in rapid succession and will be unlikely to vote for further major change in a third.

My personal feeling is that the strength of the pro-Brexit vote means that some change will come. Relations between Holyrood and Westminster are at an all-time low. Shortly after the Referendum, The Scottish Government published a helpful document called ‘Scotland’s Place in Europe’. This looked at different ways in which the Brexit vote might be carried into political reality. In particular it explored the possibility of differentiation – that Scotland, for example, might have a different future relationship with the EU from the rest of the UK, perhaps to the extent of remaining in the Single Market. This of course went absolutely nowhere. But it remains a helpful contribution to the wider debate.

As our journey ends back at our home in Edinburgh, it’s time to reflect on the way in which Brexit impacts on the two parts of Ireland and on Scotland. Brexit is probably one of the most significant changes which will take place in any of our lifetimes. Yet in each of the places through which our journey took us, there is a feeling that the passions which have driven this issue are not experienced in the way in which they seem to be south of the Scottish Border.

Clearly there will be short to medium term impacts on trading relationships, on regulation, on the ease of travel which we have been enjoying in Europe. But beyond that lies the possibility that in the longer term it will bring shifts in relationship. Some wonder about Irish reunification. I think that is inconceivable – but it is possible to see changes both in the demographic balance between the two communities and changing attitudes which might make some kind of pragmatic realignment in Ireland logical or desirable. Scotland too may seek change – possibly some form of independence or some movement which would allow Scotland to have a closer link with Europe. It’s possible also to see circumstances in which something akin to a Celtic Federation might begin to emerge.

But these are dreams for a new political generation