



# Viewpoint from Dublin

Photo: Tommy Martin



## Brexit: It Is Such a Pity

**Tommy Martin**

There are any number of ways to gauge the mood of the ordinary man and woman in the street, and, frequently, the most accurate is the most unsophisticated – listening to them where you meet them, on trains, taxis, and in public places. The talk in Ireland today is about many things, and just one thing – Brexit. Brexit has been a feature of Irish life for the past two years, but like many things unpalatable, Brexit only began to be taken seriously by Seán and Aíne Citizen as the date for the British withdrawal from the European Union came rapidly into view.

What is interesting about the process of Brexit, irrespective of the final outcome, is just how indecisively it has been managed, communicated and played out in a very public way, with social media strongly influencing public opinion. The minority Governments in both countries, Britain and Ireland, are reliant on a "confidence and supply" arrangement with other parties and individuals. What this has done, is make it much harder to agree a consensus, with each new development having the potential to bring down a government, should it not receive the required support. At a time when dynamic and decisive leadership is needed, governing by agreement and assent has conspired to dilute the effectiveness of the mandates of both governments, increasing the uncertainty of a post-Brexit world.

### A Sense of Disbelief

In the immediate aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum in Britain, there was a general sense of disbelief in Ireland that Brexit would actually go ahead; or, if it was to go ahead, it was thought that the format of it would be such that it wouldn't really make that much difference to everyday life in Ireland. While there was initial unease about the future status of the open border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, the detail of the "backstop" reassured everyone, and Brexit was relegated to a matter of lesser importance in the minds of many. This early optimism has since been replaced with uncertainty, trepidation and genuine concern about what the future may hold. Ireland's history has been bound up with Britain for nigh on 800 years. There isn't a family in Ireland that doesn't have relatives in

Britain. Irish people support English soccer teams and watch British soap operas, with both countries having so much more in common than they realise. As with all neighbours, they have disagreed, but in recent years, and certainly post the 1995 Good Friday Agreement, Ireland and Britain have both acknowledged that what unites them is far stronger than what divides them. Much of the inherent historical suspicions and mistrust, on both sides, have been systematically and cogently eroded, and Britain and Ireland have never had a closer, more harmonious relationship. But the dialogue around Brexit, the hardening of attitudes, and the very public, high-stakes Brexit negotiations have damaged mutual respect.

### Thrown under a Bus

Ireland suffered more than most during the worldwide financial crash of 2008, plunging the country into years of recession, austerity, and a loss of confidence of our place in the world. Relations with the European Union were tested, and there was a strong belief amongst ordinary men and women that Ireland was somehow thrown under a bus to protect the European Union dream. That memory has not gone away, and there lingers a nagging doubt in the minds of many, that when push comes to shove on the border and Brexit, Ireland's needs may yet again be sacrificed for the perceived greater good of those with their hands on the levers of power.

Britain's withdrawal from the European Union impacts Ireland most of all – they are our nearest and most important trading partner, we have a shared political and social history, we uniquely share the same language. Britain joined the then European Economic Community in 1973, prompting Ireland to follow suit. Ireland today has matured and developed to such an extent that no serious consideration was given to Ireland following Britain and leaving the European Union. And what do the man and woman on the street say about it all? In Ireland, where free speech and the right to disagree are cherished, the British decision to leave the European Union is respected. But it is such a pity it has come to this – and it could have been handled a whole lot better.