community
dialogue

THE IMPACT OF BREXIT ON NORTHERN IRELAND: CIVIC SOCIETY PERSPECTIVES

October 2017 to March 2018
David Holloway
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"These are scary and uncertain times but there is always light at the end of the tunnel."

"Yes; but in this case the light at the end of the tunnel is a train rushing towards us and it's going to crash into us all on 29th of March 2019. Is called Brexit!"

PROCESS

The following report summarizes the findings of 35 facilitated dialogues across NI with 213 participants reflective of the diversity of that society.

Individuals are quoted but not identified in this report.

Participants were drawn primarily from the NI Catholic, Nationalist and Republican (CNR) community and the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist (PUL) community. They were drawn from urban and rural, working and middleclass communities, and were primarily adult men and women over 24. Some young adults (18-24) participated, but this target group was not well represented. We engaged with the LGBT community, communities of faith, politically motivated former prisoners, women's groups and the business community, political and faith leaders, community workers and community relations workers. Other participants included EU citizens, non-EU Nationals and ethnic minorities. Most of our dialogues were cross community, some were single identity.

The dialogues were conducted between October 2017 and March 2018.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

These civic society dialogues strongly suggest that Brexit has had a significant and a divisive impact on NI society. It is perceived by participants to have:

1. Generated a climate of uncertainty and concern for the social, political and economic future of NI.
2. Damaged relationships between the CNR and PUL communities.
3. Undermined the Belfast Agreement and the peace process generally.
4. Created an unwelcome climate both for resident EU and non-EU Nationals.

- A recurring theme throughout all our dialogues was that most participants, irrespective of their position, acknowledged that they were unaware of the implications of what they were voting for.

- There was a tendency towards voting based on the hope that *'far away fields are greener',* rather than on a rational assessment of impacts and consequences. This could suggest a lack of capacity among voters to make informed decisions on complex issues.

- However, another recurring theme across all of our dialogues suggests that people felt they had to vote without adequate information to help them decide and therefore had to fall back on their *'gut feelings'*.

- Another prominent perception was that people were deliberately misinformed and misled by media and political leaders; *"We were led by the nose."*

"We want to be led by the nose. It's simpler. Reality is too nuanced and complex for us to manage."

- As people generally instinctively respond to the prospect of change in a negative way; *'better the devil you know'*, the Brexit vote for significant change is suggestive of high levels of discontent with the pre-Brexit context. This unhappiness was expressed in our engagements in terms of:

1. Marginalization and alienation.
2. Erosion of cultural identity.
3. A threatened sense of belonging.
4. Socio-economic deprivation.

- The most common cause cited was the socio-economic impact of EU freedom of movement policies experienced by marginalized communities. Marginalized communities in general viewed freedom of movement of EU citizens as contributing to lack of employment and housing opportunities and increased pressure on social services.

- Marginalized Loyalist communities also cited the perceived negative impact of the EU freedom of movement policy on their cultural identity.

- They perceived it as reinforcing a negative impact of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement on their communities.

- Those communities tended to perceive themselves as continuing to *'pay a price for peace'*, a peace that everyone else was believed to be benefiting from.

"Brexit is an opportunity, a challenge, a fresh start, it is freedom and freedom brings risk, but we'll make something of this".

- The price they were paying was seen primarily in terms of cultural erosion and this was felt to have been reinforced by EU membership.

- Leaving the EU was seen as helping to secure their threatened cultural identity.

- In many cases, voting Leave was a *'vote against'*; a rejection of *'the way things are'*. There still existed a *'blind faith'* among Brexiteers that leaving the EU, regardless of consequences, would still be better than remaining within the EU.

- Discussion of Brexit almost invariably includes discussion of the on-going collapse of power
sharing at Stormont. Most participants view Brexit and the power sharing collapse as impacting upon each other and, in combination, producing a more serious challenge to our collective future well-being than either would otherwise have done on their own.

- The combination of the two factors represents a *'perfect storm'* of failed democratic process at a time when the interests of NI require active political representation at the Brexit negotiating table.

- Most participants view the combination of Brexit and the collapse of power sharing as having a real felt negative impact on the peace process leading to growing sectarian tension, retrenchment of communities into 'orange' and 'green', growing tensions over a border poll and growing concerns about a return to political and sectarian violence.

- Many, particularly Unionist participants, however, did not consider the peace process as an issue at the time of the referendum.

- With respect to both Brexit and the collapse of power sharing; the overall feeling was one of frustration and powerlessness.

- The absence of information and misinformation related to both Brexit and the collapse of power sharing has fuelled a growing disconnect between politicians, political process and the people, in particular amongst the Unionist community.

- It has also fuelled increasing intercommunity tension, suspicion, resentment and a resurgence of traditional sectarian attitudes.
- There is significant unease and uncertainty regarding the future and a palpable sense of the inevitability with which we are somehow slipping backwards among almost all participants.
- A recurring comment was that *'Brexit has generated a climate of fear'.* For Remainers; the causes for this lie in:

1. The decision to leave the EU combined with the impact of on-going power-sharing collapse.
2. The belief that the UK negotiators will fail to secure a deal in our interests.
3. The lack of a NI voice in the negotiations.
4. The perceived lack of concern for NI shown by the UK government.
5. The perceived lack of understanding of NI's needs by the UK government.
6. Perceptions of a growing climate of general intolerance blamed on Brexit.

For Brexiteers; the causes for this lie in:

1. The belief that the UK negotiators will fail to secure a deal in our interests.
2. The lack of a NI voice in the negotiations.
3. The felt lack of concern for NI shown by the UK government.
4. The perceived lack of understanding of NI's needs shown by the UK government.

- Many Brexiteers also feared that they had voted the wrong way as a consequence of insufficient information and the prevalence of misinformation.
- Most participants, Remainers and Brexiteers, articulated one or more of the following feelings in response to both Brexit and power sharing: powerlessness, disillusionment, apathy, cynicism, disengagement, anger, fear, frustration.
- Hope was expressed by a small minority.

Recommendations
1. The majority of participants favoured a second referendum on a final deal.
2. The majority of participants supported the idea of alternative mechanisms to articulate the fear, needs and concerns, that they felt were not being heard or taken account of by political parties or the negotiations. Prominent among these was the creation of a nonparty-political civic voice, reflected through a Civic Forum or similar model.

THE DIALOGUES

THE BREXIT CAMPAIGN AND VOTE

Analysis

- There is a clear general sense that citizens of NI were ill-prepared to make an informed decision in the Brexit vote and that politicians were ignorant of the implications of leaving the EU.

"This vote on our future was a gamble without adequate information. If I made a business decision on that basis I'd be sacked."

"We shouldn't have had a Brexit vote. It was madness."

"When we voted in the referendum did we really know what we were voting for? There was a clear lack of informed opinion in the media. Many people just voted with their hearts and not their heads."

"Community Dialogue's Brexit Document is useful. If ordinary people had read it before the referendum I think it would have made an impact on their thinking. It puts things in a context that was absent when we were voting. It asks us to consider implications."

"NI voted to stay within the EU yet our voices are not being heard even though the implications of Brexit are far greater for NI and the island as a whole than for the rest of the UK."

- The Brexit vote is generally viewed as having been a leap into the dark without any reliable information about the consequences.
- With the benefit of hindsight many participants considered that a referendum should not have been called because of the uncertainty and tension it has caused.
- Many Brexiteers and Remainers also feel that had we been better informed prior to the referendum the vote would have been different.
- Many participants were of the view that the referendum was called by David Cameron because of political expediency, i.e. to maintain internal party unity and that he assumed he would secure a yes vote.

- The Brexit referendum has called into question the nature of our representative democracy and encouraged many participants to question whether or not our representative system is fit for purpose.

- People generally voted in response to media coverage supporting and reinforcing their preexisting perceptions, positions, fears and hopes.

- People did not generally vote having considered the pros and cons based on reliable impartial information because it was unavailable.

- There is a strong sense among all participants that *"we were lied to and misinformed by both sides in the campaign"*.

- The general turnout was perceived to be low because people were confused and / or politically disengaged.

- While it was common not to vote in both communities; PUL voter apathy was viewed as higher.

- The turnout in CNR areas was perceived to be low because of complacency; an assumption that we would remain within in the EU.

- The turnout in PUL areas was perceived to be low because of political disillusionment and disengagement.

- In areas of deprivation the vote tended to be low.

"It was a vote based in ignorance, misplaced fear and deliberate manipulation."

"In the communities we come from most of our neighbours didn't bother to vote."

"We didn't vote, we don't understand Brexit. We got no real information about it and don't see the relevance of it to our lives."

THE BREXIT NEGOTIATIONS

Analysis

- Overall there is frustration with *'the complete incompetence of the* process' and popular disconnection from it.

- Participants believe that we are being drip fed information, and only now are people and politicians beginning to understand the implications of the vote. For most Remainers these implications are dire. For most Brexiteers these implications are increasingly worrying.

- Participants generally believe that the incompetence of the UK negotiators will leave the UK worse off.

- There is a general lack of trust in the UK government to protect the best interests of citizens in NI.

- The on-going uncertainty is leading to fear and tension recognised by most participants.

"Does NI matter to GB? We're not really considered as a priority. There's a lot of ignorance about NI."

"The British Government's handling of Brexit to date leaves a lot to be desired."

General Perspectives

"The Government is not looking after its own people. "

"The implications of Brexit are starting to scare the government, not just us!"

"There is a strong sense of helplessness; that there is nothing we can do beca use the people in power have all the control."

"There is increasing frustration, tension, uncertainty and mutual recrimination across our community as the process continues."

"The ongoing lack of information, misrepresentation and keeping people in the dark is fuelling fear and intercommunity tensions and needs to be challenged."

REMAINER PERCEPTION OF BREXITEERS

Analysis

- Overall; Remainers exhibited significantly stronger feelings of hurt, betrayal, injustice and disapproval towards Brexiteers.

- Remainers showed significantly less respect for the right of Brexiteers to hold their opinions.

- They were generally disinclined to accept the Brexiteer vote as a legitimate expression of democracy because it was based on misinformation, ignorance and ill-founded fears.

- Brexit was seen to reflect the anger of a marginalised poverty-driven underclass striking back against the system and was equated with a perceived underclass backlash in the last USA presidential elections which returned Donald Trump.

- Brexiteers were perceived to have voted because they were ill-educated and *'don't want foreigners about the place'.*

"A vote based in fear and ignorance."

- Their vote was viewed as one of intolerance based on negative stereotypes of the other.

- Remainers generally articulate their own reasons for voting as being to maintain the social and economic freedoms achieved through EU membership.

"This is a democracy. I have the right to vote according to my conscience but people who voted to leave are not respected."

BREXITEER PERCEPTION OF REMAINERS

Analysis

- Brexiteers were more likely to accept the right of Remainers to hold their position but generally felt that the legitimacy of their own position was not respected and they strongly resented this.

- Remainers were perceived to have voted because they were middle class and / or CNR and doing well economically through the EU.

- Most Brexiteers generally articulate that the reasons for their own vote were to return control of the national destiny to the nation and bring democracy closer to home.

- A significant minority of Brexiteers articulated one or both of the following reasons for voting to leave the EU:

  1. The EU freedom of movement policy and the resulting increased presence of foreigners in NI was a threat to traditional culture and identity.
  2. The EU freedom of movement policy and the resulting increased presence of foreigners in NI had increased difficulties accessing employment, housing and social services.

- Brexiteers remain generally unapologetic for their position but are also generally less hopeful now of a positive outcome than they were when they voted.

"Remainers should accept the democratic result of the referendum and get on with it."

"We are our own country; we don't need Europe telling us what to do".

THE ROLE OF NORTHERN IRELAND POLITICAL PARTIES

Analysis

- Distrust of politicians and disillusionment with the political system and process in general was high among all participants.
- We noted that this distrust and disillusionment had increased noticeably in our dialogues in response to the on-going power sharing collapse and Brexit.
- This perception was higher among PUL participants, almost all of whom were of this view.

General Perspectives

Most CNR, PUL, Remainer and Brexiteers participants:

- Believe that the DUP and SF concentration on internal power sharing issues was having a negative impact by depriving us of a negotiating voice in the Brexit process.
- Primarily blame the other side's political representatives for the failure to agree powersharing.
- Believe that their political representatives should compromise in order to agree power sharing, in particular to ensure a NI voice at the Brexit negotiating table.
- The DUP pro Brexit position was regarded by most CNR and many PUL participants as weakening the Union.

Perceptions of DUP

The DUP pro Brexit position was regarded by most CNR and many PUL participants as weakening the Union.

"The DUP has fatally undermined the Union with its pro Brexit stance. It is appalling to think that it did not consider how Brexit would reignite the border poll issue."

"Maybe the DUP hope this would happen because it increases sectarian tension which will be reflected in a stronger DUP vote. This is not about Brexit, it is about securing power."

"The DUP Brexit stance shows that they are not a fit political party for a leadership role."

Perceptions of SF

The perceived silence of SF on the Brexit issue was a recurring theme that concerned participants across all dialogues.

"SF received disastrous predictions for the economic impact of Brexit on NI from a range of impartial experts recently and they are worried. But why are they silent?"

"Their silence on Brexit is viewed as cynical and politically expedient."

"Brexit reflects a disturbing shift to the right across the western world, one supported by SF ironically, though they won't explicitly say anything about it. Why are they so quiet?"

"There was complacency in SF. They assumed that people would vote to remain."

"There is considerable support for the view that SF should take up their Westminster seats to give NI people a say in the Brexit negotiations."

"If SF used their 7 House of Commons votes it would make a difference."

THE GENERAL IMPACT OF BREXIT

Analysis

- Only a handful of participants were hopeful about the future, that *'common sense will rule'*.

- Brexiteers are equally divided between those who are uneasily hopeful and those who are increasingly worried since the referendum and as the March 2019 deadline approaches. Remainers are almost all increasingly worried since the referendum and as the March 2019 deadline approaches.

- A recurring statement or acknowledgement throughout our dialogues from both Brexiteers and Remainers was that Brexit had produced a *'climate of fear'* in NI.

"There has been a lot of apathy and disillusionment around the political situation here for a long time now. Brexit may be an opportunity to galvanise people into exploring the issues more and reaching agreement on the future they really want."

"With luck Brexit will be like the Millennium Bug, a prediction of doom which turned out to have no serious implications."

"Our membership of the EU is completely interwoven into all aspects of our lives, and Brexit will affect trade, cross border commuters, education, agriculture, health, standards across the board."

"The level of uncertainty about the future is having a huge impact on societal wellbeing. This is compounded by the political breakdown in regional politics on top of fears over Brexit."

BREXIT'S IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY

General Analysis

- There was a palpable fear of a No Deal Brexit and a hard border across most of our engagements, expressed by Remainer and Brexiteer alike.

- Remainers cite examples of unfolding negative consequences including; sterling weakening against the dollar and euro, the removal of the UK from the EU 'City of Culture' awards, Dunn's closing stores in the mainland UK, Jamie Oliver closing UK restaurants due to foreign staff returning home, and EU student applications to UK universities dropping.

> *"I fear the negative impact of Brexit on the economy and on freedom of movement of people. We need foreigners to grow our economy."*

- They also raised numerous practical concerns about Brexit including; where will children's heart operations, now happening in Dublin, take place? What is the future of the Derry cancer unit? What about emergency service cooperation in border areas?

- Brexiteers, however, tended to be more bullish, saying *'give it time'* or *'it will be worth it to secure our borders'*.

- While Remainers tended to cite specific examples of negative impacts; Brexiteers tended to make more general statements about the positive impacts of greater economic freedom.

Remainer Perspectives

"Brexit is like buying a car, I ordered a shiny new one but ended up with an old banger and can't give it back."

"Brexit will damage the economy."

"A recent government report showed that NI will be negatively affected by Brexit in the long term which confirmed suspicions already in place."

"Whilst cheaper food may be available there will not be the same EU safeguards as before. Will food standards fall if for e.g. we get a trade deal with the US- a race to the bottom?"

"The on-going climate of uncertainty is forcing businesses, especially in border areas, to make worst case scenario decisions in preparation for a hard border that are costing them additional money."

"Businesses may be affected as a result of more paperwork which may result in consumers having to pay more."

Remainer Perspectives

"It's bad for business: my husband drives from Belfast to the South every day. Is he now going to be held up?"

"The drop in the pound since the referendum has impacted everyone. While good for exporters; it is bad for consumers for whom prices have risen. It's going to be more expensive and difficult to go on holidays too."

"The voluntary and community sector, and in particular, community workers and good relations workers fear for their jobs post Brexit."

"What about the loss of peace funding from the EU? That built roads, community centres, paid for jobs. Who will replace that?"

"Farmers will lose their EU subsidies."

"There are consequences for cross border structures. My fear is that cross-border institutions and practical cooperation will not survive."

Brexiteer Perspectives

"Brexit frees us to make economic decisions that are in our own national interests."

"It's about the removal of restrictions, opening the world to us."

"Brexit will enhance the economy, freeing us from bureaucratic restrictions."

"There will be more employment and housing for local people. Better opportunities for our kids."

"Where we have skill gaps or labor shortages we can still welcome other workers in."

"Brexit will reduce pressure on social services by reducing the numbers of foreign users."

"Huge amounts were paid into the EU from Britain which could have been better spent here. Brexit will save us of money."

BREXIT, IMMIGRATION AND DIVERSITY

Analysis of Remainer Perspectives

- Remainers are unhappy at the prospect of losing freedom of movement, both for themselves and for EU nationals.

- They believe diversity is good for our economy and for our culture.

- They believe that views to the contrary are based in ignorance and xenophobia.

- An increasing sense of Us, Them and Others was frequently noted by Remainers.

- Growing race hate crime reportage was also frequently cited.

- Remainers are very concerned that we will be viewed as an insular and intolerant country because of Brexit.

- Many Remainers do believe that we need more control of our borders, but this issue is not important enough to leave the EU over.

Remainer Perspectives

"Brexiteers seem to think that without foreigners there we will be no criminality. Don't they realise they're not just competing in an underworld market with our own head bangers?"

"The Prod working class voted out on the issue of foreigners. They need someone to blame for their marginalisation. Foreigners are the new obvious easy target. Their leaders reinforce this because fear consolidates their electoral base. The media exploits this because it sells papers."

"Foreigners are a scapegoat for the real problem. An east Belfast flag protester Facebooked that he couldn't get a Doctor's appointment because the waiting list was full of foreigners. The reality is that he couldn't get an appointment because the waiting list is full of aging local people. We have an ageing population that the system can't cope with."

"Foreign nationals from the EU have a massive fear of being sent home after Brexit and their children do not even know their parent's homeland. "

"Children of foreign nationals living here may be affected in terms of their eligibility to continue living here."

Remainer Perspectives

"There are growing reports of foreign nationals moving home or elsewhere."

"Foreign nationals are reporting to us that they are increasingly ill at ease."

"Migrant workers from Europe are experiencing very high levels of anxiety about what the future holds for them. Those who are considering adopting British Citizenship as a means to remain face extremely high costs."

"EU citizens here are now living in fear."

"I don't want to live in a place where it's just us, local Protestant and Catholic. Diversity is healthy."

"I fear the rise in nationalism and right-wing groups as a consequence of Brexit."

Analysis of Brexiteer Perspectives

- Brexiteers viewed greater control of immigration as a mechanism that would increase access to housing, employment and social services for local people, reduce criminality and reduce the erosion of local culture and identity.

- Most Brexiteers articulating this position used examples from their own communities, defined as working class with high deprivation indices.

- They shared a sense of ambivalence over articulating their views about foreigners because they feared that they would be accused of being racist, which wasn't how they viewed themselves.

"The perception that the Brexit vote is because we don't want any foreigners about the place is a misconception and must be challenged."

"It is alleged that intolerance has increased since Brexit, I disagree, we were always like this, it's just that Brexit has removed the need for political correctness and now we can say these things."

Brexiteer Perspectives

"I don't agree with free movement of people, there needs to be more checks."

"A hard border will secure NI from unwanted immigration and from terrorism."

"People shouldn't be able to just go wherever they want and claim what they want without putting something back."

"People come here and even if they work they send it all back home."

"We'll still have foreigners. They're welcome. It's just that we will have more control over who stays and goes."

"Our national identity takes precedence over integrating foreigners. Who we are is changing because of them and we need to combat that."

"I value diversity. No problem with it. But I don't need to compete with people from other countries for school places and doctors, no way."

"I voted to secure our border. I welcome a hard border. There are too many foreigners and not enough jobs."

"I've no problem with foreigners but you must draw a line somewhere, enough is enough. We need to take back control of our borders."

"I don't have a problem with foreigners as such but I want to control their numbers because they are taking jobs and houses needed by local people."

"I am supportive of Brexit from the perspective of the need to secure UK borders against immigrants who take our houses and live off our benefits. They contribute nothing and deal in drugs."

Brexiteer Perspectives

"We have to have a hard border, we can't   not check who is coming through. We have to control immigration and terrorism."

"East Europeans have flooded this place and brought trafficking, prostitution and hard drugs with them. Look at xxx (Belfast community), it's full of xxx (east European nationality named); they recruit kids as heroin mules. They deal in   hard drugs in broad daylight. We asked the Peelers to do something about it and they said they hadn't the resources, so we asked the paramilitaries and they moved them on. But they're probably in another area now."

"Multi culturalism doesn't work, foreigners need to integrate. We've lost the balance."

"No local power to control and cap immigration undermines local identity and generates a sense of not belonging anymore."

"I don't have a problem if people come here legally and work legally but not if they just come here to claim benefits. There needs to be more checks."

"Most of the Brexiteers I talk to welcome foreigners but want to regain control of our borders."

BREXIT'S IMPACT ON RIGHTS, FREEDOMS AND DEMOCRACY

Remainer Perspectives

"EU Membership gave us human rights, women's rights, employment rights, LGBT rights, funding, environmental protection, membership of one of the world's largest trade networks"

"NI is 30 years behind the rest of Europe because of the troubles. We nee d the EU but we've lost the EU."

"There was a sense of safety from being an EU citizen. Without our own Bill of Rights; there is a feeling now of being unprotected, people are fearful."

"The UK, and NI in particular, has no Bill of Rights, but I felt protected when we were in Europe. Women, workers and gays have been positively affected by EU laws. This may change through Brexit."

"Brexit diminishes our freedoms."

"A hard border means queues, intrusive checks, travel delays, diminished freedom and the Republic will go mad."

"I have no trust in the UK government to protect my rights post Brexit."

"There are negative implications from Brexit on the sex trade and the treatment of migrant workers in NI when we are outside of EU security regulations and cooperation."

Brexiteer Perspectives

"More decision making is needed at a local level. The EU eroded our autonomy. We won't be dictated to by foreigners."

"The EU has become more of a superpower, an empire. We want our freedom from that."

"The EU is about neo -liberalist economics and market capitalism. It works for the educated and the middle class but it oppresses the workers. This is not about xenophobia, this is about freedom and democracy."

"We would rather be the master of our own destiny tha n slave to Europe. We don't want to be dictated to by other countries."

"People bemoan the loss of access to Europe but most people who emigrate from here go to Anglophone countries- Canada, USA and Australia, so what are we losing?"

"A hard border will protect our democracy and make drugs and trafficking harder."

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BREXIT AND YOUNG PEOPLE

General Analysis

- These perspectives in the main, are about young adults, not from young adults. Of 213 participants only 12 were young adults.

- The most frequently recurring comments were that we gave no consideration to our children's futures when we voted and that we had damaged their futures.

- This was heatedly disputed by Brexiteers and some Remainers.

"We need to hear the voices of young people more. They will be affected by Brexit even more than the rest of society. It is their future that is at stake."

Remainer Perspectives

"Most young people voted to remain, and they think we have damaged their future."

"We are in an uncertain and fragile place. I work with young people and I hear their fears and concerns. They don't want to be part of a place that is not welcoming to others and they see Brexit as being all about that."

"They see Brexit as imposed upon them and upon their future by others and they don't like it."

"Brexit represents the selling out of the dreams and aspirations of the next generation, by the previous generation, because of their ignorance, misunderstanding and fear."

"We voted out of selfish fear when we should have voted with thought to our children's futures."

"I voted in for my kids, I wanted them to have free access to the rest of Europe, university, travel, the right to live and work in Europe."

"It restricts access to 3rd level education in the EU which is not good for our children."

"We're teaching the young to fear difference and resent foreigners."

THE IMPACT OF BREXIT ON THE PEACE PROCESS

General Analysis

- There was a clear tendency for both PUL / CNR participants and for Remainer / Brexiteer participants to show a lack of understanding of and concern for the positions and the needs of the other community.

- This reinforces our understanding that despite the progress made in peacebuilding since the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement; NI people continue to view themselves, not as a united community, but as two separate communities with conflicting aspirations.

- In addition, our dialogues strongly suggest that what progress had been made towards building a genuinely united community since the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement is being undermined by Brexit and the collapse of power sharing.

Analysis: The Peace Process

- Most participants believe that the implications of Brexit on the NI peace process were not considered during the referendum campaign.

"The Stormont collapse and Brexit are combining to form a perfect storm."

"The combination of Brexit and the antics at Stormont are causing increasing suspicion and intolerance on the ground".

- Most participants acknowledged that Brexit, in combination with the on-going collapse of power sharing, was having a negative impact on the peace process and on community relations within NI.

- There is growing concern at political tension over Brexit within NI, between NI and the Republic and between the Republic and the UK.

- Remainers and most Brexiteers believe that a hard border will weaken the union, lead to increased calls for a border poll, increase tensions within NI and between NI and the Republic and make a return to political and sectarian violence more likely.

- We were struck by how few Brexiteer participants had initially given thought to the impact of Brexit on the peace process when they voted.

- But many were subsequently concerned about the implications for the peace process and community relations within NI.

- The CNR community generally feel that PUL Brexiteers are using Brexit to roll back on the Agreement and reinforce the border; they see it as part of an Orange agenda.

- However, PUL participants in our dialogues heatedly refuted this and claimed that CNR participants were in denial about their own sectarianism.

- Growing sectarian tension since Brexit was uniformly noted with concern but some CNR participants claimed that there was *"widespread avoidance among Protestants of the reality that Brexit has increased sectarian tension"*.

- However; PUL participants in our dialogues were uniformly concerned about increased sectarian tension.

- A significant minority of PUL participants approved of the potential negative impact of Brexit on the peace process.

- While they did not want to see deteriorating community relationships; they did want to see the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement removed and viewed Brexit as supporting this objective.

- They did not support the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement because it lacked justice, it led to the on-going erosion of PUL, particularly Loyalist, cultural identity and undermined the position of NI within the Union by giving the Republic a say in NI affairs, giving SF a role in government and introducing the possibility of a border poll.

"This reinforces our view that Protestants tend to be more sectarian and racist than Catholics and that they are more conservative and backward looking."

"Widespread avoidance among Protestants of the reality that Brexit has increased sectarian tension."

- They were, therefore, happy with the prospect of Brexit challenging the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement.
- From this perspective; Brexit could reinforce the position of NI within the Union and reduce unwarranted interference from a neighbouring state that was still perceived to favour incorporation of NI within the Republic.
- This in turn could raise the moral and strengthen the cultural identity of a demoralised and marginalised PUL community.

"The feeling that there is an all-Ireland community matters, especially in the north, there is a need to feel part of the Irish nation."

"There is a feeling that a hard border somehow cuts us off from our brothers and sisters."

"We must build a place here where people who are different feel they belong, that requires give and take, compromise to make it work. Brexit is a step away from that."

Analysis: Identity and Belonging

- Brexit is having a profound impact on the sense of identity and belonging of NI people.

- For the majority; it represents a potential diminishment of sense of identity and belonging, for a significant PUL minority; it represents a securing and enhancement of sense of identity and belonging.

- Remainers generally express a sense of identity loss and diminishment with the prospect of exclusion from the EU.

- CNR Remainers in particular, but not exclusively, articulated a sense of being trapped within NI and cut off from a broader Irish family.

- A common Remainer theme was one of concern for the sense of equality of belonging within NI of both PUL and CNR communities.

- A significant PUL minority, however, expressed a lack of concern for the CNR sense of being trapped or cut-off.
- There was also a feeling among many PUL participants, particularly those identifying as Loyalist, that they had given enough to the CNR community since the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement and that this was a oneway process.

"I guess they may feel trapped by Brexit, but I'm secured."

"If they live in NI, then they just have to get on with it. If they don't want to stay no one is making them. Move south if that's what they want. This wee place is part of Britain. That's the way it is."

"It takes two to compromise but Unionists have been giving since the ceasefires, what are nationalists giving?"

"Protestants feel Nationalists are using Brexit as part of Green agenda and a jump pad for a border poll."

- A significant PUL minority also look forward to an increasing sense of security of identity and sense of place and belonging as a consequence of Brexit.
- They believe Brexit will achieve this by securing the Union.
- Exclusion from the EU is not perceived to have any negative implications in terms of their sense of identity and belonging because *"I don't feel European".*
- But the PUL community generally are becoming less certain that Brexit will secure the Union as they consider the impact of it on the CNR community and that communities growing interest in a border poll.

Pro Belfast / Good Friday Agreement Perspectives

"It's hard to envision the Good Friday Agreement outside of an EU context. The spirit the agreement supported, was reflective of the wider spirit of the EU and its principles."

"It is unbelievable that no one cared about the Good Friday agreement when they voted for Brexit."

"That our peace process wasn't considered tells us how important we are to the UK."

"The trick of the Agreement is that Unionists can feel that they are British and the superstructure is there to support that and Nationalists can feel Irish and there are crossborder institutions and mechanisms for constitutional change to support that. Brexit threatens this."

"Suggestions by some Tories and some Labour that the Agreement has passed its sell buy date put a chill of fear down me. The peace we have is based on that Agreement."

"The peace process and cross border relationships are coming under additional pressure as successes won over the years are undermined by Brexit."

"NI is coming up on 100 years of age and the issues debated then are the issues coming to the fore now, issues of partition and borders. How far have we really come?"

"A generation grew up since the Agreement that don't see a border. To make it operational, even militarised, does great damage to the freedom of movement we have come to expect and undermines progress made since the Agreement. We are going backwards."

"The demilitarisation of the border is considered one of the biggest successes; this should be built upon not reneged on."

"A hard border and Brexit more generally are barriers to progress. They block continuing improving Irish-British relationships."

"Even with a restoration of power sharing, Brexit has placed the border back at the top of the list politically and in terms of popular awareness.

Pro Belfast / Good Friday Agreement Perspectives

"SF will capitalise on increased pressure for a border poll as soon as possible and call one".

"They (SF) are under pressure from their electorate to push for a border poll, even if, as some feel, they would rather this issue was not prominent at this time."

"Brexit's impact means that for the foreseeable future orange and green politics are copper fastened and increasingly emphasised and voters will increasingly vote to keep the other out."

"This have focused attention on the constitutional issue more than since the 1998 Agreement."

"We are reverting to our old politico-sectarian camps and this will squeeze out alternative non-sectarian parties, independents and the middle ground and reduce the likelihood of developing an opposition coalition. To my mind this is an awful result. Its deeply depressing. We are going backwards. Have we learned nothing after all this time?"

"Brexit is bad for Unionists; it weakens the union by increasing tensions with Scotland and reintroduces the constitutional issue which is increasing tensions with Nationalists."

"A hard border will increase tension within NI and between it and the Republic of Ireland."

"Brexit will undermine the union as there will be a concerted push for a border poll which will further increase entrenchment between Catholics and Protestants."

"It will increase divisions in NI. Nationalists will feel less secure and that will make Unionists less secure."

"A return to a meaningful border means nationalists feel trapped again."

"I'm heartbroken and frightened over Brexit. As a nationalist, the Agreement and Europe made me feel I belonged to something bigger, now I feel I'm back trapped in NI and it doesn't' feel good."

"Brexit is undermining the Nationalist sense of belonging in NI."

Pro Belfast / Good Friday Agreement Perspectives

"This isn't about reality; it's about perception, about people's diminishing sense of belonging. That needs to be taken seriously. It ramps up the intercommunity tension."

"I'm a unionist but I value that wider sense of being European, I don't like the feeling of losing that."

"The Brexit vote was on sectarian lines and as a consequence of that vote our society is more divided now than ever."

"A lot of people thought that Brexit would secure the Union. Increased border control will have a significant positive impact on the Unionst communities sense of belonging, security and well-being, but at the expense of the Catholic community's sense of place."

Anti Belfast / Good Friday Agreement Perspectives

"Brexit will increase the sense of belonging of Unionists and secure our identity."

"I voted out for my kids. I want their country and culture and identity secured."

"It'll secure the union and it'll secure the future of this wee place for the Protestant people."

"Brexit secures NI as part of the Union and will help to reduce the role of the Republic in our affairs. I've no problem with maintaining neighborly relations but they've no right to a say in our affairs. We're a separate country up here."

"We will copper fasten the Union while maintaining neighborly relations with the south. I see no problem with that."

"I know some Brexit voters are rushing to get Irish passports, including so-called Loyalists, but I don't care if I can't travel or ever leave this country again, I would never have an Irish passport."

"The idea that Nationalists feel trapped in NI by Brexit is ridiculous. They all have Irish passports. They can go where they want."

"If Brexit means the Agreement is obsolete, then so be it. I didn't vote for it. If SF signed up to it then it wasn't in our interests."

"There is so much uncertainty and lack of clarity. We could be sleepwalking into the re-emergence of the conflict."

"Neither community has the stomach for a return to that. We have all had enough. If we learnt anything it was that nobody won when playing that game."

A RETURN TO POLITICAL VIOLENCE?

Analysis

- Brexit has increased concerns over a return to political and sectarian violence.

- Most participants felt that a hard border increased the likelihood of a dissident Republican campaign and a loyalist backlash to that campaign. • Based on past experience, this would be expected to spiral out of control.

- Most participants considered that a border poll would produce a violent loyalist response.

- Most participants, however, viewed a return to violence as unlikely in the short term because of the expected overwhelming cross community condemnation in response and because of the lack of appetite for a *'return to the bad old days'*.

- Nevertheless, the possibility of a return to political and sectarian violence became an increasingly prominent theme as this dialogue programme progressed.

General Perspectives

"I'm a unionist and the prospect of a hard border fills me with fear. Bad things will happen as a consequence, not just economic damage but conflict."

"We can slip back into conflict easily. I remember the 1950s IRA border campaign. When it ended everyone said that its but two decades later and bang!"

"The symbolism of the border is critical, and so will checkpoints on it be. They will be seen as easy targets for paramilitary attacks."

"A physical border will reinvigorate a sense of being wronged, of discontent; provides a sense of something to fight for."

"If border roads close this may be a spur for radical Republicans to carry out attacks on border posts."

"Brexit will lead to calls for a border poll. A border poll will increase tension and increase the Us and Them gap. The result could lead to violence."

"A border poll cannot be ignored by Loyalists. We are there to protect the position of Ulster within the Union. Anything threatening that will be resisted."

"There is growing fear over the implications of a hard border and rising tensions around this issue both within Republican and Loyalist communities."

"There are some very worrying stories circulating about preparati   ons being made to pursue or resist moves for a border poll."

"I don't see it happening. No appetite for it in the communities. Only a tiny minority of headbangers would be up for that. So; isolated incidents? Certainly. Full blown campaign? No."

RECOMMENDATIONS

A growing awareness of the complexity of the issues that people unwittingly voted on, the sense of exclusion from the on-going process and the lack of trust in political leaders to agree a future that will be good for NI has led to the following two proposals that recurred throughout our dialogues and had majority support from both Brexiteer / Remainer and CNR / PUL participants.

"Democracy doesn't work if the democratic vote leads us to a precipice."

1. A Second Referendum on Brexit

"We didn't know what we were voting for or against. There were too many conflicting views and no substantial information. We need to be given the right to vote on the final Brexit deal, an opportunity to make an informed decision."

"We were sold a pup. We need to vote on the final deal."

"People didn't realise the implications during the referendum. Whether we were pro or anti we need a chance for a final say when we see the details."

"I just don't trust the them (the EU and UK negotiating teams). I need to see what's on offer before we take the plunge."

"The people must insist on the Brexit they want. We didn't know enough back then. But there is no mechanism other than that first referendum in which we can register our voice."

"Yeah, of course I want a second chance but it isn't going to happen. This is democracy. We had our say. We said 'do the deal and get us out of Europe'. The government acts accordingly. If we don't like the result, tough. We just have to live with it, that's democracy."

"We need another referendum but it's not going to happen because the Tories would implode in that eventuality."

2. A Non-Party-Political Civic Society Voice

This proposal is in response to a combination of Brexit, the on-going collapse of power sharing and dissatisfaction with traditional political representation.

"There is powerlessness and frustration in NI, we are not heard, we have no voice, no power sharing government in place, our political leadership lacks the capacity to lead and we elected them! Our democracy is not fit for purpose."

"Multiple initiatives are bubbling across the community and voluntary sector to address Brexit and the political vacuum in the face of a felt absence of engagement between political system, third sector and grass roots people. But they need to coalesce to be heard!"

"Civic society needs to find an alternative voice to that of political representatives."

"We (the PUL community) are not represented by our politicians, we need our voice to be heard."

"We (Loyalists) have to vote DUP to secure the union. That means we end up voting for a party that stands for all sorts of things we don't agree with. Like I wanted to see marriage equality legislation go through for the gays, genuinely. But the DUP opposed that, they blocked it."

"We are locked into sectarian voting. Its either SF or DUP. People who genuinely want politics reflective of left and right still have to vote one way or the other to avoid the other side getting the upper hand."

"The politicians do not reflect the needs of the people. They reflect the lowest common denominator fears of the people. We need something that reflects our actual needs."

"Our democracy is not real democracy. Representative democracy here, thanks to the Agreement, results in a sectarian head count."

"It doesn't matter what the manifesto says or how crap the guy standing for election is. All that matters are whether they're orange or green and we'll vote accordingly."

"We need something to challenge, reform or replace this system. The system has led to us having no voice in the Brexit negotiations. Thank god the Irish government are arguing on our behalf because no one else is."

"We can take small steps from here lobbying our politicians about the issues we are facing but that isn't enough. We need to build popular momentum across traditional sectarian lines. Something like the Women's Coalition did 20 years ago."

Mechanisms cited in order of preference to develop a non-party-political voice were:

1. A Civic Forum

A restoration of the Civic Forum agreed in the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement.

2. A Citizen's Assembly

A Citizen's Assembly model, similar to that employed in the Republic of Ireland, to promote participative democracy in support of the existing system of representative democracy.

"This is where we really need our Civic Forum back".

3. Community / Voluntary Sector Coalition

- The development of a community and voluntary sector coalition as a non-partypolitical voice for civic society.

"We need a Civic Forum or a People's Assembly like in the Republic."

- It would consult with civic society and produce agreed recommendations to government. Existing initiatives, including the Galvanizing the Peace coalition, were cited as examples.

- It was suggested that existing initiatives should unite to form a single movement.

4. Opshal Style Commission

- An Opshal style independent commission of experts visiting every community centre and public meeting space across NI, to give every community and interest group an opportunity to state their experience, concerns, needs and recommendations.

- These would be compiled in a report with recommendations given to government.

A number of other recommendations were also made through the course of our dialogues.

Other Recommendations included:

Impartial Brexit Information Service

- The absence of information, prevalence of misinformation and need for impartial information were raised during every dialogue.
- An information and advice phone service and / or web site together with impartial Brexit information leaflets were frequently cited as needed.

Special Status for NI

- Many participants felt that it was vital to secure special status for NI both for economic reasons and to ensure that the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement remained fully in place.
- Some PUL Brexiteers, however, opposed this on the grounds that it weakened the position of NI within the UK and provided encouragement for Scotland to seek special status as well, which would also weaken the Union.

The Republic of Ireland Leaves the EU

- It was suggested by some that if the Republic of Ireland also left the EU it would enable the maintenance of relations with NI, protect the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement and enhance the relationship between the UK and the Republic.
- A significant majority of Remainer and Brexiteer participants opposed this idea however, primarily because they perceived the Republic as being wholeheartedly pro EU membership.

End