

Grassroots for Europe Round Table Webinar #48

10 September 2024



Brexit and after, views from Ireland

On 10 September 2024, [Grassroots for Europe](#) (GfE) hosted an open webinar forming part of a series seeking perspectives [from different countries in the EU](#) on what is happening in the UK and in the EU, and where we are heading.

This session brought together representatives of organisations from both sides of the border on the island of Ireland that advocate for young people's views on their countries' future in Europe. It was chaired by **Jane Morrice**, Honorary President of the European Movement Northern Ireland, former Deputy Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and former Head of the European Commission Office in Northern Ireland. It was attended by representatives from a range of organisations that campaign for the UK to rejoin the European Union, and for democratic and human rights, including European Movement UK and GfE branches and affiliates from around the UK.

The panel discussed how Brexit has affected Ireland, the UK, the EU and relations between them, and its impact on the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process. Young Irish pro-Europeans shared their insights on the current situation and their hopes and priorities for the future, and what they and their organisations are doing to drive progressive change.

Introducing the session, Jane Morrice spoke of the hugely important role played by the EU in the peace process. "I was head of the EC office in Belfast when Jacques Delors came for his first visit, which led to the initiation of the first EU PEACE Programme, the only EU programme in Northern Ireland lasting beyond Brexit, which has poured billions into cross-community and cross-border peace-building work – and which continues, I must gratefully acknowledge, mainly thanks to the Irish. Thank you to everyone out there for keeping that on board and fighting for it to continue. As a member of the Women's Coalition, which had a seat at the Good Friday negotiations, I was able to see at first hand the value of compromise through consensus and the importance of peace building, modeled on the example set by the EU itself. As John Hume often said, if the French and Germans can do it, why can't the Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland? And in the first Northern Ireland Assembly, as Deputy Speaker, I presided over what was then a war of words, and pretty ugly at times, but never as ugly as what I'd witnessed on the streets of Belfast, growing up from a teenager during the 30 years of the Troubles. The peace we achieved after Good

Friday was dropping slow, to quote Yeats' famous poem, but we were moving in the right direction. The Single Market had all but erased our border. The coming together of British and Irish leaders and politicians and grassroots groups on a cross-border and cross-community basis, started new trust between former enemies, and it was a time of so much hope and expectation. Then came Brexit, and everything changed. But after a long struggle we got the Protocol, and now we've got a healthy and viable Rejoin movement, and with the ever-growing engagement of young people, I truly believe that the UK will rejoin the EU."

Robert O'Donnell is the [President of Young European Federalists Ireland](#) (JEF Ireland), part of a pan-European network that campaigns for a closer and more democratic EU and the eventual creation of a federal union. He feels that the Irish are fortunate in that, unlike other European citizens, they can still live and work in the UK, thanks to the Common Travel Area and the Good Friday Agreement. But, significantly, Ireland has lost its natural ally on the European Council and other European institutions. The impact of Brexit on importing and exporting has also had major implications for the agriculture sector, one of the largest in Europe.

Robert commented on what pro-EU campaigners can do better to convince people that the UK should rejoin the EU, noting the rise of the far right across Europe, including in Ireland. He believes that many involved in progressive politics tend to be idealistic, but, ultimately, people vote with their wallets, and we need to talk less about rejoining the EU, and more about rejoining trade deals, until eventually the conversation changes to "well, if we're already taking these rules, why can't we be there to make them?".

Tommy Monahan is the [Head of Finance and Administration for Young European Movement UK](#) (YEM UK) and the International Officer for Alliance Youth (Northern Ireland). For him, one of the main aftermaths of Brexit in Northern Ireland is the issue of the customs border. As there can be no hard border under the Good Friday Agreement, it had to be drawn in the Irish Sea, thereby threatening the integrity of the United Kingdom, a major issue for Unionists. The [Windsor Framework](#) has brought significant progress on this recently, but we still need to pay close attention to issues like this that can cause real cultural divides, as we saw in the collapse of Stormont in recent years.

Brexit also raises concerns around human rights and the Common Travel Area, affecting the movement of tourists, asylum seekers and even people who commute every day across the border. This movement is an integral part of social cohesion and prosperity in Northern Ireland, and it is threatened by legislation such as the 2022 Nationality and Borders Act. Meanwhile, Tommy notes that Northern Ireland has lost [millions in EU funding](#), including Northern Ireland's share of the annual 3.5 billion the UK received from the [Common Agricultural Policy](#).

Sorcha Ni Chonghaile is a Policy Officer in [European Liberal Youth \(LYMEC\)](#) and is Language Officer and Vice President of JEF Ireland. She believes the European Union offered a unique space for a shared community outside the binaries of being Irish,

British, both or none, and that shared identity has been lost. As a dual British and Irish citizen, she is deeply saddened that one of her passports is no longer a European passport: “half of me has been diminished a little bit”.

Under the Good Friday Agreement [nobody should be forced to choose an identity](#), but Northern Irish citizens who need to work in the EU must apply for an Irish passport, even if they identify as British. Northern Ireland is in an awkward position with one foot in the UK and one in the EU. If its citizens are to have representation and offices based in the EU, then she argues they should be able to work there without being forced to take on [an identity they don't necessarily agree with](#).

While the economic impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland is huge, the biggest issue is cultural. Sorcha says she will never take for granted again the harmony and sense of peace she felt growing up. She is a teacher in a European School, and has seen for herself the huge impact on education with the loss of the British voice. Brexit has opened up space for the Irish, but it has put a lot of pressure on the Irish Government, which currently funds Northern Irish students' participation in Erasmus+, although there is no guarantee this funding will continue.

Sorcha emphasised the breakdown of trust following Brexit, exacerbated by last year's [Legacy Act](#). The election of the new Government is definitely helping, but the Act is still in existence and problematic (since the webinar, a Northern Irish court has [ruled on an appeal](#) against the Act and the Labour Government is considering its response).

Leah Rea is [Head of Policy and Political Engagement for YEM UK](#), and was formerly vice president of the Young European Socialists and international secretary for the SDLP in Northern Ireland. Her first experience of grassroots activism was with the 2016 campaign to keep Northern Ireland and the UK in the European Union. She was dismayed then by UK politicians' and campaigners' total failure to consider Northern Ireland or the impact of Brexit on its citizens.

Her main interests are human rights and equality, key pillars in the Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent peace process. The GFA states that there must be no diminution of rights and equality standards in Northern Ireland, but the Brexit negotiations failed to take this into account. This disregard continues today, with the last UK government's [legislation on immigration](#), for example, clearly demonstrating what happens when Northern Ireland's [unique legislative provisions and frameworks](#) and the peace process are not considered. [Courts in Northern Ireland recently ruled](#) that certain provisions of the Illegal Migration Act violated both the European Convention on Human Rights and the Windsor Agreement.

Leah concluded by noting that we now have a Labour Government that says it really wants a reset of UK relations with the EU, though it will not go back and revisit Brexit. Everyone who cares about the UK's relationship with Europe needs to think about all parts of the UK, including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and to understand and appreciate their different historic ties and arrangements, and how they shape any

future reset.

Barry Colfer is [Director of Research at Dublin Institute of International and European Affairs](#) and teaches at the University of Cambridge. He believes that, apart from the UK itself, no country has felt the departure of the UK from the EU more keenly than Ireland. The ties of kinship, economics and politics between the peoples of these islands are enduring, but UK-Irish relations have been tested and undermined since 2016.

The ongoing reset following the change of government in the UK is grounds for some optimism, and the bonhomie on display at [Keir Starmer's recent encounter with Taoiseach Simon Harris](#) is to be welcomed. But three clear risks and challenges will continue to shape Irish-UK relations, and thus UK-European relations.

The first is the Northern Ireland Assembly, which is working again after its latest hiatus. However, a vote on the operation of the post-Brexit trade arrangements under the Windsor Framework consent mechanism is due before the end of 2024 and there is real scope for instability when that vote takes place.

Secondly, the end of shared EU membership has led to the loss of connections built by people working side-by-side in Brussels and elsewhere, links that allowed a shared vocabulary, shared interests, friendships and trust to develop. There is still no robust replacement for these relationships between civil servants, state agencies and politicians.

The third risk lies in the shifting political sands in the Republic, with a general election due by March, most probably in November. The key issues will be housing, childcare, the cost of living, and rural interests, while immigration has also entered the political discourse for the first time. All this has rendered the political situation in Ireland more plural, but also less predictable.

To conclude, he argued that if the UK is ever to rejoin the EU, there must be genuinely close cooperation between the UK and the EU and its member states, most especially Ireland, given Northern Ireland's special place in the EU single market. It is strategically wise for the UK Government to be focusing on questions of security and defence, as this is of increasing interest in the EU, and it is an area where the UK has some leverage. The good news is that there is now great scope for goodwill after the Brexit psychodrama, now much of the white heat has died down around issues such as phytosanitary rules, judicial cooperation, Erasmus and Horizon. This should not be squandered.

In the open Q&A, the panellists discussed who or what is to blame for Brexit, and the implications of Macron naming Michel Barnier, the EU's former Brexit negotiator, as France's new prime minister.

They agreed that Brexit cannot be pinned down to a single moment or person. While it is easy to point the finger at David Cameron and the Tories, the UK never really

bought into the EU as other European countries, including Ireland, did. Factors such as poverty, alienation, dishonest media, a poor Remain campaign, and most importantly, a major failure of political leadership also contributed. Austerity left many regions, particularly in England, feeling neglected or abandoned. People in those areas voted for Brexit fundamentally because they wanted their voices to be heard: it could have been a referendum on any issue. It just happened to be on the EU.

Robert O'Donnell worries that Barnier's appointment could push the EU further to the right, placating anti-migration forces, with the risk of pushing the left towards the anti-EU cause. Sorcha is less concerned, because instability in France means another election is likely, probably in less than a year. It is worth noting, however, that the Tories really did not like Barnier: Liz Truss said he was on a mission to give the UK the worst possible deal, so it will be interesting to see how relations pan out between him, Starmer and Simon Harris.

Colin Gordon, vice chair of Grassroots for Europe, asked the panellists about their visions and experiences of collaborative relationships between young European activist groups north and south of the border in Ireland.

The panellists admitted that sometimes groups in the North and the South are not always good at talking to each other, but agreed on the need to get out of their own bubbles. JEF Ireland and YEM UK have recently signed a twinning agreement, and they have organised events with speakers from the nationalist and Unionist communities. Last year the two groups also met with Young Liberals in the UK and will shortly be meeting with other European youth parties based in Brussels to talk about Northern Ireland.

Robert O'Donnell of JEF Ireland is also international secretary of the Labour Party in the Republic, and he has been involved in joint activities with the British Labour Party and with the SDLP in the North. He stresses the need for organisations both in mainland UK and the Republic to learn more about the North and engage more actively with groups there.

Leah Rae urges young people to get involved in their communities. Some of the best organisational groups are those which are active at the grassroots level, and in working-class communities that make representations to European organisations, as well as the EU. There is a [Shared Ireland Forum](#) which operates very successfully north and south. Run by the Taoiseach's office, it has worked extensively with young people on both sides of the border to gather their views and experiences on a number of issues. Leah would like to see that extended to include the rest of the UK. Barry Colfer also made the case for seeking new opportunities for engagement between civil servants and decision-makers, suggesting a congress or festival for politics between Ireland and the UK, bringing together people from government and civil society.

Cecilia Jastrzemska, president of YEM UK, asked the panellists what they would most like to see from Starmer's "reset". Most agreed that the repeal of the Legacy Bill would be the quickest way to regain trust between Northern Ireland and the rest of the

UK. The implementation by a Labour government of the long-promised Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, with the Irish government as co-guarantor, would also represent a real demonstration of engagement across the Irish Sea.

In response to a question from **David Blackwellman**, the panellists considered the role of Sinn Fein and the other political parties in Ireland. Robert O'Donnell pointed out that Sinn Fein has different policies in the South and the North. In the Republic the party has traditionally been Eurosceptical, but since Brexit its stance has, according to Barry Colfer, been more "Euro-realist", as there are few votes in Ireland for anti-EU parties. In the North, Tommy Monahan observes that nationalist parties tend to be pro-EU, and Unionist parties tend to be anti-EU, especially the DUP, taking its direction from the Tories. The centrist Alliance Party, meanwhile, are pragmatic pro-Europeans, reflecting an understanding of the costs of leaving the EU and the subsequent instability. Lea Rea argues that Sinn Fein in the North has been using Brexit to push their own agenda regarding Irish unity, but, for many reasons, the constitutional future of the island of Ireland and its relationship with Europe should not be conflated.

Finally, **Peter Burke** of Oxford for Europe asked the panel for their views on the resurrection of the Northern Ireland Assembly and its future under the new Labour government in the UK. Although they all welcomed the fact that Stormont has now reconvened, the constant, repeated suspensions of the Assembly suggest that there is an urgent need for reform. The Assembly has a poor record of producing legislation or passing budgets, and one party can hold it to ransom by refusing to engage. Public services in Northern Ireland are gravely suffering as a result. Sorcha hopes that the new Labour government will push this reform, but is doubtful that it will be at the forefront of Keir Starmer's priorities right now.

In her closing remarks, Jane Morrice emphasised the importance of continued North-South and East-West dialogue. It was refreshing and valuable to hear from young people from both Northern Ireland and the Republic, and from a range of political backgrounds, with shared European values and a shared desire towards a better future for Ireland, Northern Ireland and the EU.

"I've said it many times. I'm going to say it again. Brexit is not a divorce. It's a trial separation, allowing the UK and the EU to settle our differences, long-standing differences, and get back together for the sake of the children."

Jane Morrice