

An Irish Border at Hadrian's Wall? You Know it Makes Sense! (Richard Forsyth, January 2019)

What is the most terrifying threat to the survival of the British nation today, according to our elected representatives and the commentators who surround them? Is it the fear of nuclear miscalculation by Putin and Trump, or perhaps Kim Jong-Un? Could it be plastic pollution or runaway climate change? It couldn't be vassal-like dependence on giant unaccountable corporations like Amazon or Huawei, could it? No, it is a condition described by a couple of earthy four-letter words stuck together.

I refer to the so-called backstop, that unexamined buzzword which is bandied about by the chattering classes like a threat to keep naughty children in order. Yes, I do mean the proposed Irish border arrangement, regarded by most right-thinking folk as a state almost too terrible to contemplate.

Yet consider this: the UK gets free trade with the single market without free movement, and we don't have to pay! That includes benefiting from the EU's deals with other countries. Moreover, the ECJ's role is reduced and we leave the sclerotic common agricultural and common fisheries policies; on top of which it gives our politicians a handy excuse -- to our ally across the Atlantic -- for politely declining to allow US corporations to take over the NHS. (After all, Labour may get into power one day.) What's not to like? It's better than Brexit and better than staying in the EU. Theresa May and her dwindling band of supporters have somehow stumbled upon a socio-economic sweet spot which must rank as one of the greatest examples of serendipity since Columbus found the Americas when looking for China.

If Yanis Varoufakis and Alexis Tsipras had negotiated anything comparably advantageous for Greece they would have been hailed as masters of the deal-maker's art. More to the point: the Greek population would be in a much happier condition. Yet May and her team of civil servants are derided as a bunch of incompetents. Curiously enough, this almost universally reviled backstop bears an uncanny resemblance to what the UK voters thought they were endorsing in the 1975 referendum (by a convincing majority, unlike last time). It could be called Common-Market-plus. It would benefit the whole of the UK, and for Northern Ireland in particular it could usher in a period of unprecedented prosperity. We might as well admit that Northern Ireland is a special case and has been for at least a century. This half-in half-out position would suit most people there rather well, giving them some welcome economic advantages. But the DUP seems intent on exemplifying the phrase "lions led by donkeys".

The problem that exercises our governing classes, however, is that it could imply a border in the Irish sea. Strange, really, since the sea is a much more natural dividing line than the bizarrely artificial border that snakes haphazardly across the island of Ireland. A major reason underlying their disquiet is that it would make starkly explicit a division within the United Kingdom. And behind that lurks another consideration. The fact that many people and local businesses in Northern Ireland would be quite happy to work within the backstop arrangement is not viewed positively by many in Westminster. The trouble in their eyes is that the Scots might want it too. In other words it might lead to a border between England and Scotland.

And why not? Wouldn't that be well described as "respecting the result of the referendum"? Both Northern Ireland and Scotland voted to remain in the EU, and the SNP is eager to use Brexit as an excuse to agitate for yet another once-in-a-generation referendum, in order to break away from the UK. It may well be that the farsighted way to preserve the unity of the UK is to have both Northern Ireland and Scotland remain in the backstop arrangement until something they like better is offered.

One might object that the customs infrastructure along Hadrian's wall is a little out of date. But let's not be defeatist: we live in an information age. Both sides would have a strong incentive to keep trade freely flowing, and it would not involve a three-way dialogue between the UK, the Irish Republic and the EU (three and a half if Stormont ever wakes up from its persistent vegetative state). We could start with the whole UK inside the backstop. Then England and Wales, which actually do want Brexit, would be incentivized to find solutions for the Scottish border that allow them to leave that arrangement. Note that this step wouldn't threaten the Good Friday agreement. It would be under the control of two nations within the same state, both with strong incentives to reach a practical solution. Then if the Scots saw Brexit working in England & Wales, they could decide to quit the backstop. Finally, if Northern Ireland liked the look of real Brexit, they could join in too, with the great advantage that the technical solutions for ultra-light-touch customs processing had been tested and debugged. So neither the EU nor the Irish Republic would have reason to object.

If you think that is fantasy, just wait until you see what the magical thinking of our politicians in Westminster leads them to concoct.