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It's a great privilege to be here on this special occasion.

But the very focus on the history of Ireland emphasises why I view the present situation between our two countries with a great deal of trepidation.

England and Ireland have endured a turbulent relationship for nearly 1,000 years. It has been studded with unrest, repression, rebellion, reprisals, mistrust, betrayal and violence. In times past, there is much to repent.

Now, today – we are again at a moment when decisions made might once more unsettle our relationship.

During the 1990s, the Peace Process prospered as the construct of many hands: governments, politicians, the Church, peace movements, whilst war weariness – and the recognition by the men of violence that armed conflict would never achieve their aims – also helped forge the search for agreement.

The whole Peace Process was spurred on and cemented by the obvious wish of Irish men and women – North and South – to work together to end violence.

No-one wished to see the lives of yet another generation damaged by “The Troubles”.

When commonsense, and common humanity triumphed, the Good Friday Agreement ushered in two decades in which the British/Irish relationship moved to a higher and more co-operative level than at *any* time in our joint history.

And this is how it *should* be: the UK and the Republic of Ireland are one another's nearest neighbours, and the relationship should be one of *mutual* consideration and harmony.

And – as one of millions of Britons with Irish antecedents – I was delighted to see our relationship mature and grow closer.

Brexit – depending on the final deal – may now put this in reverse. When Tony Blair and I went to Ireland together to warn of the implications of the UK leaving the EU – for the *whole* island of Ireland – we expected opposition from Brexit supporters.

What we *didn't* expect was a *complete* failure of understanding about its impact by leading Brexiteers.

There are serious issues to address:

- How the UK can minimise the damage to Ireland of Britain leaving the European Union.
- Whether a new Customs border between Northern Ireland and the Republic will divide communities that are now united, and complicate bilateral trade with the UK, which totals over one billion pounds a week.
- Whether such a border *could* – I emphasise *could* – yet be a focus for both Unionists and Nationalist fringes to recreate violent friction.

If one of the British ambitions after leaving the European Union is to “go global” to increase our trade and influence, distancing ourselves from our nearest neighbours and largest trading partners is a curious way to begin.

I, myself, deeply regret that Ireland will feel the impact of the UK’s departure more negatively than *any* other European State.

A former Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, put it more bluntly noting that: “Brexit is the greatest economic and social challenge to [Ireland] in 50 years”. Sectors like agri-foods and fishing, tourism and energy, are among those that face particular challenges. The UK Government neither *can* nor *should* ignore that.

I don’t believe for a moment that the British Government wishes to hurt Ireland: far from it. I simply observe that preventing collateral damage to Irish interests doesn’t appear to feature prominently in the concerns of those who press for Brexit. I believe that the obligations of history – and sheer good neighbourliness – suggest that they *should*.

It is not only the Border question – or the need to avoid impediments to the trade flow. Many other issues must be considered. Some can, at least in part, be solved.

I have in mind the Common Travel area, where I’m sure an agreement *will* be reached. There is also the scale of co-operation set up under EU frameworks where both Governments are committed, in principle, to maintain co-operation –although there must be doubt whether it will be fully replicated post-Brexit.

The problem of the North/South border is more intransigent. Once a hated symbol of division, it was abandoned without regret under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. It may yet return as the border between the *UK* and the *European Union*.

At the very least, a new Customs border will harm trade: East-West as well as North-South. Ten thousand commercial vehicles travel back and forth across the North-South border each day, carrying a vast range of goods.

Were there to be a Customs Border, this weight of commerce is bound to face delays, queues, and administrative obligations that will lead to higher costs for companies *and* consumers, North *and* South.

No doubt many goods can be cleared in some invisible, frictionless way – as yet unidentified – but not all. Some, such as animals and animal feed, which cross the border every hour of every day, will probably have to be examined for health and safety reasons, in order to avoid infections and diseases such as BSE.

If so, a physical border seems unavoidable. And, since the border winds through over 300 miles of countryside, this may require a number of border posts to be erected.

The very words “Customs Union” seem to have become toxic in Brexit circles. They do not seem to understand what is at stake for the Irish economy and Anglo-Irish trade flows.

The benefits of a Customs Union are crucial to trade. It abolishes tariffs on goods between Member States. It offers common rules of origin, and common standards for products.

It has ancillary benefits: a common tariff for third country exporters, and no customs checks at borders – all designed to simplify trade between Member States. *No* sensible alternative exists.

Ingenious options – well-meaning options – have been proposed but rejected by Cabinet sub-Committees, with the limp promise that further ideas will be sought.

No doubt the search will intensify – but I doubt it will be successful.

There has been talk of “frictionless” trade to avoid a physical border. But, so far, the delivery of this has proved illusory. There is no “frictionless” trade model anywhere to copy. The only *certain* way to avoid border checks is a Customs Union.

Of course, a Customs Union isn’t perfect. It does have ancillary downsides although, in my view, these are heavily exaggerated. But it *does* soften some of the economic fallout of Brexit, and remove the need for a North-South border in Ireland.

That is a significant gain – but even full membership of the Customs Union will not compensate for leaving the Single Market, or retaining full membership of the EU.

A new Border *may* carry a further risk. There is a complacent belief that, because violence has largely disappeared over the last 20 years, it is unlikely to return. I *hope* that is true but am not *wholly* confident that it is.

I do agree that it may not return on the scale of “The Troubles” – but I do *not* agree that we can be sure it is banished for good.

The introduction of a “hard” border – with all its unpopular symbolism – may provide a focus for protests from fringe groups – either Unionists or Nationalists.

What if demonstrations against a new border are followed by attacks on it? Would it then be protected? If so, how? Would security be brought in? If so, what? What would be the reaction to that? Would it re-activate old disputes and begin a downward spiral towards violence?

Past history warns us how this might play out. I don’t wish to overplay this but, at the very least, it increases the *potential* for conflict.

Some Brexit supporters dismiss this as scare-mongering; an anti-Brexit tactic. It emphatically is *not*. It is simply trivial to suggest so.

Sir Hugh Orde, the former Chief Constable of Northern Ireland, has warned that the political consequences of Brexit may: “play into the hands of those who are still determined to destroy the relative peace we have enjoyed...”

He added that customs posts “could be a target for dissident para-militaries”. And that risk cannot be blithely dismissed.

There are also other risks to long-term stability.

The British Government’s deal with the DUP for Westminster votes must surely be seen by Nationalist opinion to destroy their impartiality as an independent “honest broker”. This will weaken the Government’s hand in dealing with disputes between the two traditions in Northern Ireland, and healing fractures in the Peace Process.

The collapse of the Northern Ireland Power Sharing Executive, if not re-established soon – and it won’t be – may also be a provocation to dissidents – and will lead to campaigns for a border poll. There is *no* Executive. *No* direct rule. And the Civil Service hold the line. Despite all Parties claiming they want an agreement, *none* is making concessions to achieve one. The risks are obvious.

I have never hidden my view that leaving the EU – for all its frustrations, which are many – is an historic mistake.

The negotiations to leave were always going to be hugely complex and expensive – and are ever more proving to be so.

Thus far, progress is modest at best. Every advance seems to involve retreat, and every agreement delivers less than expected.

The costs are mounting. The exit bill is likely to be £50 billion. The costs to industry are incalculable. The staff costs to the Civil Service – and, therefore, the British taxpayer – are huge.

Yet, as the bills mount, and the negotiations falter, the advocates of Brexit become more entrenched.

Some of them – let us be frank – would be quite content to see the talks fail and no agreement reached. That would be the worst *possible* outcome.

That said, there *is* goodwill everywhere to solve the “border question”, and that is a hopeful sign.

But to do so, originality and flexibility are essential – together with *mutual* respect and understanding.

This is much more than a political squabble between Brexiteer and Remainer; it is a battle for the future direction of a policy that will affect *all* the people of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

Its resolution may help us grow closer – or drift apart. There is no doubt in my *own* mind which is the best outcome – for *both* our countries.