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Brexit: The ‘Bread and Butter’ Implications

A RESPONSE TO ‘COMPARING SOCIAL SECURITY
PROVISION IN THE NORTH AND SOUTH OF IRELAND’,
BY CIARA FITZPATRICK AND CHARLES O’SULLIVAN

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Brexit can be considered a ‘critical juncture’ that has already set in motion enduring legacies for Ireland, including facilitating the call for a referendum on a united Ireland within a 5–10-year period, something that the architects of the Good Friday Agreement would not have felt possible within their lifetimes.¹ It is widely acknowledged that Brexit will have severe economic consequences for the UK in general and for Northern Ireland

¹ Katie Hayward and David Phinnemore, ‘This Brexit juncture is a critical moment for the Good Friday Agreement’, *LSE Blog*, 28 November 2017, available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2017/11/28/this-brexit-juncture-is-a-critical-moment-for-the-good-friday-agreement/>.

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in particular.² The overall reliance of the north on financial subvention from London leaves the region particularly weak in the wake of Brexit but the scale of the subvention also begs the question, can the Irish republic afford the north in a unified Ireland?³ It is against this background that Fitzpatrick and O’Sullivan turn attention away from the constitutional consequences of Brexit to the ‘bread and butter’ implications of the post-Brexit world by focusing on how both welfare systems could operate within a united Ireland framework. The authors are to be commended for pointing to the lack of attention to social security issues in debates around the potential for a united Ireland. The authors warn that, since the welfare state is one of the main policy manifestations of social and economic rights, the ongoing failure to pursue these issues in any great depth could lead to a united welfare state that offers lower standards of protection than what is currently on offer.

Their analysis highlights similarities and differences between both regions of Ireland. Both parts of Ireland face similar problems in relation to rising unemployment, ageing populations, changes to family composition, dependency on welfare benefits, ongoing high levels of poverty (particularly child poverty) and social exclusion, coupled with the increasing cost of funding welfare systems. Particularly problematic is the high rate of disability in Northern Ireland, which some commentators attribute directly to the consequences of the ‘Troubles’.⁴

One of the core responses to these problems is to promote ‘activation’, defined as reforming the behaviour of welfare recipients to stimulate entry into the labour market. However, while the conditionality associated with ‘activation’ was embraced wholeheartedly and harshly within the UK welfare system, a softer approach was evident in Ireland, where conditionality was less vigorously applied. Nonetheless, the authors argue that a fundamental chasm is evident between policymakers at Westminster and those in the Stormont Executive in relation to various aspects of social welfare policy. Fitzpatrick and O’Sullivan point out that the Northern Ireland Executive, as part of the ‘Fresh Start Agreement’, negotiated a welfare reform mitigation

² Katie Hayward and M.C. Murphy, ‘The EU’s influence on the peace process and Agreement in Northern Ireland in the light of Brexit’, *Ethnopolitics* 17 (3) (2018), 276–91.

³ John Bradley, ‘The Irish-Northern Irish economic relationship: the Belfast Agreement, UK devolution and the EU’, *Ethnopolitics* 17 (3) (2018), 263–75.

⁴ Mike Tomlinson, ‘Risking peace in the “war against the poor”? Social exclusion and the legacies of the Northern Ireland conflict’, *Critical Social Policy* 36 (1) (2016), 104–23.

package to lessen the impact of the social welfare changes being pursued in other parts of the UK. Various provisions were also negotiated to cushion the draconian impact of UK welfare reforms. However, these mitigations are time limited and there will come a period when Northern Ireland is subject to the full force of UK welfare reforms. A unified welfare system on the island of Ireland could facilitate greater future manoeuvrability and autonomy for Sinn Féin as an all-island ‘socialist’ party to spearhead a more humane approach to welfare policy, although it must be remembered that the party ceded power to the British parliament in order to ensure that earlier reforms were implemented in Northern Ireland.

However, it must also be acknowledged that the inadequacy in the level of benefits paid to claimants in both parts of Ireland was evident in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fitzpatrick and O’Sullivan indicated that both jurisdictions had to raise the level of mainstream benefits to enable claimants to make ends meet, yet a direct comparison of Unemployment Benefit provided in Table 1 by the authors clearly shows significantly higher levels of unemployment assistance paid to claimants in Ireland, compared to their counterparts in the north. While the authors caution against making simplistic direct comparisons without taking into account variations in the cost of living in both regions, nonetheless, these differences have significant capacity to capture the hearts and minds of future referendum voters.

As an academic director of the all-Ireland Social Welfare Summer School, which brings together policymakers and frontline workers to debate similarities and differences in both welfare systems, I have observed how these two issues (the different rates of benefits and attitudes to conditionality) dominate discussions. The summer school is funded by the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland and the Department of Social Protection in Ireland and could set the stage for some preparatory work or at least debate on how a unified welfare system could function and operate in a united Ireland scenario. Thus far, this issue has not been part of the school’s deliberations but Fitzpatrick and O’Sullivan’s paper, with its focus on the major similarities and differences in the architecture between Northern Ireland and Ireland, could help pave the way for a more concerted focus on the administrative challenges that Irish unity presents for welfare.

To conclude with the words of Beveridge in his ground-breaking report in 1942, which as Fitzpatrick and O’Sullivan point out fundamentally shaped welfare in both parts of Ireland, ‘a revolutionary moment in the world’s history

is a time for revolutions, not for patching'.⁵ Brexit and COVID-19 provide the seeds for the revolution but it is 'street level bureaucrats'⁶ who implement policy. Maybe it's time they started at least talking about the administrative challenges that possibly lie ahead.

⁵ William Beveridge, 'Social insurance and allied services' (1942), CM6404, HMSO, p. 9, para 17.

⁶ Michael Lipsky, *Street-level bureaucracy: dilemmas of the individual in public services* (New York, 1980).