

Brexit lessons forgotten in EU drive to deeper integration

Brussels ignores how economic grievance evolves into political dissent.

Oh Brussels! Only in the land of the EU could 49 objectives containing 325 proposed actions be seen as the answer to Europe's future development. But remarkably, this is exactly what the grandly sounding Conference on the Future of Europe has recently proposed.

Although originally conceived as a great experiment in collaborative, pan-European policymaking, what the EU actually delivered was a two-year vehicle for President Emmanuel Macron to wax lyrical about his centralizing, integrating vision of a French Europe.

Pushed by Paris, the conference was deliberately timed to finish by the summer of 2022. It was neatly sandwiched between the French elections and the French presidency of the European Council, and Paris is now reveling in its role as the de facto EU HQ.

And therein lies the danger for Ireland, and many other small EU member states.

Because from the very beginning, the purpose of the conference was not only to guide the EU's future evolution, but also to demonstrate that Brussels was capable of "moving past Brexit" in a united and coherent fashion.

However, what the conference's draft recommendations show is less a measured consideration of why Europe's second-largest economy would voluntarily choose to leave the EU, and more a bland vindication of all the EU's existing policy dreams.

Its draft actions read like a wish list of every stressed-out Brussels Eurocrat. Increased harmonization, abolition of national vetoes, greater military co-ordination and more common borrowing at EU level are just some of the highlights.

And while nobody doubts that more EU-level action is required in key areas – combating climate change, fighting terrorism, helping Ukraine, finalizing the

structure of the euro zone – this vision of a universally deepening Europe hardly reflects majority thinking in any member state.

Policy failures

It is also a potential political nightmare for referendum- and neutrality-happy Ireland.

In using Brexit (and the pandemic) as “fertile soil for another attempt at deepening integration”, the EU is ignoring how, in countries like Britain, decades of rising insecurity played an important role in allowing economic grievance become political dissent.

The illiberal sentiments and hyper-nationalism witnessed during the Brexit process are not unique to Britain. The recent French presidential election – 52 per cent of first-round voters chose hard-right or extreme-left candidates – shows that the perception of being “left behind” eventually begins to hollow out the centre of the political spectrum.

In Ireland, decades-long housing (and banking) policy failures are fueling voter discontent regardless of underlying economic growth or employment figures. And in refusing to confront (or even acknowledge) these underlying problems, the EU is worsening its ability to form part of the solution.

Because more integration in Brussels will do nothing to sate increased voter dissatisfaction at national level. Indeed, as Britain has already shown, it may have exactly the opposite effect.

Looser vision

Unfortunately, the EU still remains unable to acknowledge how its choices impacted upon Britain’s drift to the periphery and beyond of EU decision-making.

For it was Britain’s loss in attempting to put intergovernmentalism at the heart of the EU that precipitated its European demise. This was a plan to use the single market, Atlanticism and global trade as the drivers of growth. Since the 1980s, this was an alternative model of European integration which favoured concentrating power at the centre of a “European conglomerate”.

Britain was collateral damage to a European integration process which chose a more integrated development path

Ultimately, wider geopolitical events – the collapse of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, Franco-German agreement on monetary union – ensured the failure of Britain’s looser vision for Europe.

In a sense, Britain was collateral damage to a European integration process which chose a deeper, more integrated development path.

For Ireland, the explicit acknowledgment – through the conference – of the EU’s continued commitment to a deeper Europe should give pause for thought.

A more nuanced and deliberative approach to maximizing EU membership is now required given the realities of an Anglo-American Irish economy bound up in a centralizing, harmonizing EU. But to do this requires a fundamental repurposing of official Ireland’s simplistic views of Brussels.

The conceit behind Ireland’s view of the EU (as highlighted by Prof Katy Hayward and others) is that EU membership is of benefit not just to Ireland, but also to Europe. In essence, it’s the old Jack Lynch view from the 1970s that “We can, by becoming better Europeans, become better Irishmen.”

But it’s really time to drop these shenanigans.

What Ireland needs now is the confidence to put forward a vision of Europe that moves beyond the jaded stereotypes of Dublin as the best of Europeans. Picking up Britain’s focus on the single market and Atlanticism would be a good place to start.

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