

How the Irish political class badly misjudged the Brexit referendum

*Former Irish ambassador **Dr Ray Bassett** gives an insider's account of how the Irish political establishment badly misjudged the 2016 Brexit referendum. How did they get it so wrong?*

There has been a huge loss of institutional memory in Irish Government circles since the days of the Good Friday Agreement and its implementation. By the time of the UK's 2016 Brexit referendum, virtually none of the politicians or officials who had been directly involved in the GFA Talks in Castle Buildings were still serving in Dublin. Casual remarks among my colleagues on Brexit about the relative unimportance of our bilateral relations with Britain, and a complete blank when it came to the potential fragility of peace on the island of Ireland, only compounded my concern.

At the time of the 2016 referendum, the political leadership in Dublin was personified in the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, a well-meaning and genial individual. But his only answer to the issues raised by Brexit seemed to be to follow the EU line on everything. His constant changing of position on the Irish border—first there would be no border, then a frictionless border, as frictionless as possible, a technological border, etc.—seemed to encapsulate a mental confusion at the time about the way forward.

Kenny and his advisors set Ireland on the wrong course right from the beginning of the Brexit process. It was a knee-jerk reaction to commit the country completely to the EU. Kenny did not emphasise enough that Ireland's connections with the UK

were of a different magnitude to those with other EU countries. What we needed was a special new arrangement with both the EU and Britain, should Brexit occur. We needed some new, imaginative solutions, not to be hogtied into the rigid EU framework.

The Irish political class never really came to terms with Brexit at any point in the process. It never countenanced that the Brexit referendum would be carried in the first place. In fact, there was widespread disbelief that the British were actually going to give their citizens a choice on future membership.

There was a general assumption that the referendum might produce a close result but that the Remainers would carry the day. When the then UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, went to Brussels seeking renegotiation and new terms for continued British membership of the EU, Ireland was not even slightly sympathetic. There was a determination to show our European credentials. It was even mused that we the Irish should be among the hardest against any meaningful concessions to Cameron, lest we be accused of being soft on the British.

We were the country with the most to lose should the referendum go wrong. Hence, logic demanded that Ireland would do its best to ensure that Cameron would be provided with enough substance to justify the UK's continued membership of the EU. This led to the suspicion in Brussels that we might actually act in our own national interest.

But the EU elite need not have worried. Under Enda Kenny, there was no possibility of any show of independence from Brussels. Anyway our experts in the Taoiseach and Foreign Affairs Departments had assured the Government that there was little or no chance of a majority in favour of Brexit. Better to take the opportunity to keep in with Brussels. It was a bad error of judgement.

Hence, there was initial confusion in Dublin after the vote, as the Irish Government apparatus scrambled to come to terms with the unexpected outcome. There was hope that the result could somehow be ignored or even rapidly reversed.

In 2005, Jean-Claude Juncker, then the prime minister of Luxembourg, stated the EU position on the forthcoming French referendum on the EU Constitution. Juncker said, 'If it's a Yes we will say on we go, and if it's a No we will say we continue'. Juncker was now President of the EU Commission, the premier position in Brussels. Surely he would now follow the same course? Dublin did not need to worry unduly; they had such confidence in the EU and Juncker.

In the circumstances, it was difficult for me to maintain silence when our [Ireland's] interests were being blatantly disregarded by the powers that be.

This article is taken from Dr Bassett's recent book Ireland and the EU Post Brexit, which can be purchased direct from the distributor here.