

## ***BASSETTING FOR BRITAIN***

**A lengthy tome has just been published entitled *The Idea of the Union* and edited by John Wilson Foster and William Beattie Smith. Foster is a retired Canadian university professor and an Ulster-born unionist. Fellow Ulster unionist Smith was Private Secretary to First Minister David Trimble. A lot of the usual suspects are contributors to this volume, including Trimble, former UUP leader Nesbitt, Belfast *Newsletter* editor Lowry and Kate Hoey MP.**

Of particular note is a chapter by the former Irish diplomat and I Brexit advocate, Ray Bassett. His other incarnation is as a senior fellow of the right-wing Policy Exchange think-tank based in London.

### **Anglo-Centricity**

His by now well-established anglo-centric perspective is evident from the beginning of his contribution. He is concerned with the post-Brexit poor relationship between Ireland and Britain and declares that "the onus is on Dublin to improve it." He is worried about the potential of the situation "to damage economic, political and cultural ties that have lasted centuries", as he anodynely puts the colonialist experience. Annoyed by this "country's Europhilia", he also reiterates the unionist hypocritical distortion that the Good Friday Agreement is being put under threat by the Protocol.

In case you didn't know it, Britain is our "most important economic, ethnic [sic] and cultural partner." In place of the "special relationship" that we have with Britain, we are simply becoming "the EU's leading cat's paw." He does concede that "the relationship between Ireland and Britain has often been [wait for it] fractious." In case you missed the point, he goes on to say: "We had been joined in some form of political association for over 700 years."

One can almost hear him singing in the bath "An Association Once Again".

### **Trade and Energy**

Under the heading Mutual Interest, he stresses the trade dependency on Britain that has existed over the years and has still endures to an extent There are also the "ethnic links between the two islands" whereby hundreds of thousands of Irish people were forced to emigrate and settle on the neighbouring island. While a patriot would be focused on generating employment in Ireland, he just has in mind that: "It is vital for Ireland that this intimate relationship is maintained and that Irish people are able to travel and work freely in Britain."

Under Energy Dependence, he quotes the reliance for various sources of this on Britain and says that: "It would be better to keep as much of the present arrangements in place as possible." Most Irish people would think here, not of dependence but of independence, as in the case of renewed contemplation currently being given to a safe nuclear power supply within the State.

### **Emigration to Linger**

Dealing particularly with the Common Travel Area, Bassett characterises this as a "safety valve", thinking again of the emigration which was necessitated in the past and, he clearly believes, may arise once more in the future. He advises that: "Mainland Europe is unlikely to be a viable alternative. This is not just because of the lack of linguistic skills but also because of historical cultural connections."

In the first instance, his attachment to the allegedly immutable is evident yet again insofar as it seems that the Irish people are congenitally unable, even in the situation of necessity, to learn any language other than English. In the second instance, his advertence to our lack of "cultural connections" with the Continent displays a remarkable deficiency of historical knowledge. Of course, the implication is that we do have "cultural connections" with England, and that is true in the degree that

the English sought to extirpate our national language and culture. Not for Mr Bassett an attempt to reverse this, But rather to accept and apparently reinforce it. No reconquest of Ireland for him.

### **Spectre of Immigration**

He then goes on to invoke the bogey of immigration to Ireland. We are warned that we "will probably see a major increase in immigrants from Eastern Europe ... " and, horror of horrors, "with immigration becoming a major focus of discontent, especially where there is pressure on public services and housing." The echoes of some of his fellow, quasi-racist Brexiteers are thunderous. Yet, that is not all. Believe it or believe it not, we may further expect "the positioning of UK immigration officials at Irish air and seaports." This will follow on pressure from Britain and its fears of Ireland being used as a backdoor for illegal entry into its jurisdiction.



### **Further Challenges**

Under Further Challenges, we are first of all informed that "Ireland will suffer from a physical dislocation from the main centre of power in the EU." Does Mr Bassett not know that there are now numerous direct flights and greatly enhanced ferry crossings from Ireland to the continent? Our anxiety should apparently be generated by the fact that "English will longer have a strong case to be the dominant language of the European institutions." Is he aware that Irish is now an official and working language of the European Union and does he expect us otherwise to be the standard-bearer for English linguistic arrogance?

He reflects on the difficulties which could now arise from using Britain as a land bridge in trading with the Continent. As just touched upon, he does not seem to realise that it is now simply being bypassed. Regarding port facilities in Ireland, and his

allegation of their inadequacy for dealing with imports that previously came through Britain, he repeats his attitude of seeing Ireland as a static phenomenon and incapable of development.

On the question of increased investment and employment in Ireland following Brexit, he claims either that this has not happened or that there is no prospect of it. However, these are assertions made without any reference to facts or statistics and accompanied by a lofty prophetic air.

His desire is that we should not damage the rapprochement with Britain that he saw taking place prior to Brexit. In particular, he mentions the British Conservatives and states that "it does not make sense to make them our enemy." While we are in the EU, however, "Ireland should consider itself a close ally and friend of the UK inside the Council of Ministers." If you are unwilling to be an adjunct, you might at least be a lackey.

### **Recommendations**

He concludes with a number of interesting recommendations. One can almost perceive, looking over his shoulder, shadowy unionist figures standing behind him as he urges a "refurbished GFA", an "energised... British-Irish Council", and (surprise, surprise) that what "needs to be looked at seriously is Ireland's possible association with the Commonwealth."

### **Euroexit and Eurocritical**

Mr Bassett proves himself yet again to be one of the most articulate and published Irexiteers. There are of course others in Ireland who similarly raise their voices from time to time: the quasi-fascist National Party, the ultra-right Irish Freedom Party, the post-soviet nostalgists in the CP and various ultra-leftists and dissident 'republicans' as well as the simplistically dogmatic National Platform lobby group. They are all what might also be termed

euroexit. At the other end of the spectrum, there are the europhiles in the traditionally established political parties.

In between, there is the position of eurocritical, mainly characterised by Sinn Féin. This harbours no delusions about the European Union and its transnational capitalist character, but aims to steer a course between return to anglo-american hegemony and absorption into a franco-german dominated federation. That is through immediate defence of the national interest along with other left-wing forces,

while nonetheless being in the EU by popular wish. At the same time, the longer-term objective should not be reformation of the EU on the basis of the existing neoliberal treaties, which is a chimera. Rather should it be scrapping them and putting in their place a transformation brought about by, hopefully, an increasing number of national leftist governments and through their coming together to create a European Association of Sovereign Nations

***Daltún Ó Ceallaigh, Samhain 2021.***

---