The visit of Queen Elizabeth to Ireland in 2011, the first by a British monarch in 100 years, marked a high point in the British-Irish relationship and cooperation seemed embedded. However, the result of the Brexit referendum on 23 June 2016 precipitated a sharp deterioration in British-Irish intergovernmental relations that continues to date. Sinn Féin called for a referendum on unification, highlighting the issue of EU membership, and the DUP sought a hard Brexit and opposed any referendum. The British-Irish relationship did little to de-escalate rhetoric in Northern Ireland. In fact, the opposite occurred: in the ensuing four and half years the British-Irish relationship deteriorated to levels not seen since the early 1980s.

My research aims to explain why cooperation has waned and emphasises that Brexit is not simply a cause of tensions, but that its deep impact reflects underlying weaknesses that preceded the Brexit period. In particular, the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts was not implemented robustly. Strand Three of the Good Friday Agreement provides institutions to foster intergovernmental cooperation, but their potential has not been maximised.

The Three Strands approach, developed by the late John Hume, former leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), emphasised that conflict resolution in Northern Ireland rested on the ‘totality of relations’ – meaning relations on the island of Ireland, relations in Northern Ireland and relations between the two islands. The EU was admired by Hume as a model of post-war reconciliation and he believed strongly that its dense institutional network was central to its success. Many features of the Good Friday Agreement emulate the EU’s institutional framework. However, unlike with the EU institutions, these features have been lacklustre. The key institutions of Strand Three, the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (Strand Three) have been under-utilised. The key problem however in using these institutions robustly is that the UK government has not always shared the political will to formalise relations and the current UK government led by Boris Johnson is particularly slow to engage with the Irish government systematically.

My research shows that Brexit is not the sole or fundamental cause of a weak British-Irish relationship, but that it has exposed that relationship’s fragility. My recent work for UCL’s Working Group on Referendums on the Island of Ireland, with Trinity Law School colleagues, Professor Oran Doyle and Dr David Kenny, (who examine legal aspects of a referendum), examines the Irish government’s role if there was a referendum on unification and how best to manage British-Irish relations in that context. My article for the ARINS project, led by the Royal Irish Academy and Notre Dame University, examines from an international relations perspective but also from an analysis of the peace process, why institutional cooperation is so important and also examines why the BIIGC met less frequently from 2007. My forthcoming book with Oxford University Press examines all economic and political aspects of British-Irish and Irish/Northern Irish cross-border relations since 1998.

All my research shows that whether there is a referendum on unification or not, an enhanced and rigorous role for the Good Friday Agreement is necessary to help facilitate stability. I have submitted evidence about this topic to the House of Commons Select Committee for Northern Ireland and to the European Parliament. With the UCL team, I also recently presented to the Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

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