



PSA-PSAI Roundtable

Brexit and the Political Sciences

Queen's University Belfast, 28th May 2018

Feargal Cochrane (PSA) and Muiris MacCarthaigh (PSAI)

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List of Participants

Roger Awan-Scully	– Cardiff University
Feargal Cochrane	– Vice-Chair, Political Studies Association & University of Kent
Yvonne Galligan	– Queen’s University Belfast
Paul Gillespie	– University College Dublin
Muiris MacCarthaigh	– President, Political Studies Association of Ireland & Queen’s University Belfast
Nicola McEwen	– University of Edinburgh
Anand Menon	– King’s College London
John O’Brennan	– Maynooth University
David Phinnemore	– Queen’s University Belfast
Kathryn Simpson	– Manchester Metropolitan University
Etain Tannam	– Trinity College Dublin
Simon Usherwood	– University of Surrey

List of Abbreviations:

CRN	– Collaborative Research Network
DUP	– Democratic Unionist Party
ESRC	– Economic Social Research Council
EU	– European Union
E-W	– East-West
GB	– Great Britain
IACES	- Irish Association of Contemporary European Studies
LGA	– Local Government Association
LS	– Learned Societies
NI	– Northern Ireland
N-S	– North-South
QUB	– Queen’s University Belfast
ROI	– Republic of Ireland
TUC	– Trade Unions Congress
UACES	– Academic Association for Contemporary European Studies
UCC	– University College Cork
UK	– United Kingdom
UKCE	– UK in a Changing Europe
UKRI	– United Kingdom Research and Innovation

PSA-PSAI Roundtable on Brexit and the Political Sciences

Introduction

On 28th May 2018, the Political Studies Association (PSA) and Political Studies Association of Ireland (PSAI) held their first ever joint meeting. In recognising the significance of the UK's decision to leave the European Union, the two organisations met to discuss some of the likely challenges and potential opportunities the Brexit process has presented. The Roundtable that took place at Queen's University Belfast¹ sought to highlight some of the key issues impacting on research and teaching for the political sciences across 'these islands'² and has represented a first step to map out some ideas for potential co-operation between the two learned societies.³ The Vice Chair of the PSA, Feargal Cochrane, and President of the PSAI, Muiris MacCarthaigh, invited a participants from a range of universities with specific interests in teaching and/or researching at the intersection of Brexit and the EU across these islands. The discussion took place under the Chatham House Rule and this Briefing Note provides a summary of the main themes and ideas that were raised.⁴

Professor Richard English, Pro Vice Chancellor for Internationalisation at Queen's University Belfast, opened the roundtable, emphasising his support for the two learned societies meeting to have a discussion about Brexit and its possible impacts on teaching and research for higher education. The provision of evidence-based expertise in this area that could be provided by members of both learned societies (and those beyond them) was seen as a vital source of public goods and exemplified the purpose of universities as repositories of information and innovation for broad societal benefit. In welcoming participants to the Roundtable, it was suggested that opening a discussion between learned societies about potential collaborations could only benefit academics, students and universities themselves. Events and initiatives that developed stronger links between learned societies could help researchers adapt to the changing landscape that would be created by Brexit and position them to respond to or take advantage of this new environment in the years ahead. In their welcoming remarks, the President of the PSAI and Vice Chair of the PSA reiterated the importance of the two organisations opening a conversation about the potential impact of Brexit on teaching and research in the political sciences across the UK/Irish context. A key point made here related to the need for learned societies to push evidence-based research concerning Brexit into the policy process, to provide expertise for understanding the various policy options and to assist those responsible for making decisions and implementing those policies.

The Roundtable sought to connect the expertise of the PSA and PSAI to achieve two objectives: 1) to reflect on the challenges, issues and opportunities raised by Brexit for study of politics across these

¹ The PSA and PSAI would like to thank Queen's University for hosting this event and for the scholarly hospitality extended to members of both associations.

² This phrase derives from the early 1990s when the 'totality of relations across these islands' became an inclusive way of articulating the various sets of relationships across Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain that evolved into the three-stranded geometry of the multi-party negotiations and eventually the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

³ Both the PSA and PSAI recognise that a range of viewpoints exist on Brexit and how learned societies should respond. None of the views expressed necessarily reflect the positions of either the PSA or the PSAI. This Briefing Note does, however, provide an accurate reflection of the discussion that took place and hopefully provides both organisations with some ideas for potential co-operation in the future.

⁴ Both the PSAI and the PSA would like to thank PhD candidate Lisa Whitten for taking notes during the Roundtable and from which this Briefing Note has been compiled.

islands and, 2) to develop some ideas for future collaboration, either between learned societies or their members, which could then be brought back to both organisations for further discussion.

The challenges of Brexit and how learned societies might help meet them

One of the key themes that arose in the first session of the Roundtable was the view that the challenge for academics, and social scientists generally, was to get evidence-based research ‘out there’ to those who do not normally hear it. This challenge requires academics, universities and learned societies to think more carefully about how we communicate to non-academic audiences. It was suggested that significant work has been done in this area already, in part due to the impact agenda of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK as well as the focus of many national and EU funding agencies on the need for research with impact pathways to non-academic partners or dissemination to a wide range of audiences. It was pointed out that over recent years much progress has been made in this area and that ‘academic’ is now rarely used by journalists or policy stakeholders as a ‘pejorative term’.



One of the challenges facing academics and learned societies in terms of promoting evidence-based expertise on Brexit and its effects on teaching or research in the political sciences across these islands has related in part to the caution in policy circles (and in Whitehall especially) towards talking to ‘outsiders’ given the politicised nature of Brexit as a policy issue. Successful penetration of dominant narratives at the policy level requires both persistence and resources, and these are areas where learned societies might make a valuable contribution. A further challenge highlighted related to the observation that the EU referendum result in the UK had divided society along the lines of those who tended to listen to academic expertise produced by universities on

the one hand, and those who were less likely to be convinced by it on the other. It was emphasised that it was beholden on universities and learned societies to connect with those who would not normally be their natural audiences –and specifically with those on the ‘leave’ side of the Brexit argument. This became a key motif during the discussion –how could/ought universities and learned societies connect more effectively with audiences that would not normally form their natural constituency?

From an Irish perspective, it was suggested that Brexit had produced a catalytic effect on connections between academic and policy stakeholders and that the potential impact of Brexit had galvanised joint initiatives in Ireland between academics and civic society groups such as the British-Irish Chamber of Commerce and others. One contributor made the point that Irish civil servants were keen to avail of the information, knowledge and expertise that academics could supply, but that it was incumbent on academics to do this in a way that could be digested by the policy community.

It was emphasised that maintaining or expanding such initiatives would require resources if the potential was to be realised. This became a regular theme in the discussion and it was underlined repeatedly that significant resources from a (specialised and professional communications team) would be needed to help communicate and interpret evidence-based research to policy stakeholders and wider public audiences. This was an area where learned societies were believed to have some capacity to add value.

It was pointed out by a number of speakers that the mode of research itself, as well as its dissemination, was challenged by Brexit in that the traditional way of conducting social science research did not easily map on to the Brexit context. The politically charged nature of the Brexit debate in the UK has made it very difficult for political scientists to conduct typical policy-facing research in the normal way, for example, via audio-recorded interviews, the use of consent forms and writing up the evidence. A more productive mechanism was found to be the creation of 'safe spaces' for open conversations, where mutual learning could take place –but this has had consequences for what was produced in traditional academic terms. In this sense, Brexit challenges how we think about how research outputs should be valued or measured within the discipline –and there may be a role for learned societies in helping to shape future benchmarks over the balance between traditional published outputs and less traditional public engagement or knowledge transfer activities within higher education.

Within the Irish context, a further challenge identified that there are relatively few researchers with relevant experience who have been called on to inform the issues associated with Brexit and an even smaller pool of people who are willing to speak publicly about these issues. One of the themes that emerged here was that the impact of Brexit was highly contextual and had different implications across these islands –so the challenges and the opportunities as perceived in Scotland were quite different to those in Wales, England, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In the context of Northern Ireland, where the two main parties across the unionist/nationalist divide, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein (SF) took opposite positions, Brexit was portrayed as having similarities with the political mobilisations within civic society that occurred in the 1970/80s due to the dearth of progress in Northern Ireland at the formal political level. Learned societies could perhaps play a role in connecting into some of the sectoral expertise of civil society work on Brexit, which went beyond the formal policy sphere.

It was also pointed out that within the already fractious nature of politics in Northern Ireland, academic engagement on Brexit carried a particular risk of exposure, particularly for early career academics, and there was a role for learned societies here to support members and champion evidence-based research as a key aspect of academic independence.

In terms of the whole UK/Irish context, the suggestion was made that there was a general Brexit-weariness within the wider public and a frustration on both sides of the Brexit argument over the extent to which the issue was dominating public discourse. It was also suggested that one of the ongoing challenges for academics, or for learned societies seeking to make a contribution on the issue, concerned the high level of staff turnover within the civil service and the practical difficulty of investing the necessary time to develop and maintain working relationships when people regularly move position.

It was suggested that learned societies could play a useful role in building on expertise and sharing best practice about public engagement activities, perhaps even running training activities, and that some learned societies already do run training for ECRs, for example, teaching how to write blogs or briefing papers that summarised research for wider public audiences. Learned societies might play a useful role in introducing training for different types of stakeholders (policy, practitioner, media etc) across the separate jurisdictions and devolved areas –and/or training and guidance for presenting evidence to parliamentary select committees, for which there is currently very limited institutional support. A '*Handbook of Public Engagement*' was mooted as one idea that could be produced by learned societies, with examples of best practice and what has worked or not worked and the reasons why.

In the specific context of Ireland, there was general concern at the implications for British-Irish relations post-Brexit and what learned societies might be able to do to help cultivate and protect those linkages. The *British Irish Association* model was mentioned here in terms of providing a facilitative mechanism or 'back-channel' that could provide a forum to bring people together.

A specific proposal emerged concerning this issue, which was that there be a *PSA-PSAI annual meeting*, ideally sponsored by the two governments, to which civil servants from both jurisdictions would be invited, to maintain and augment the diplomatic contacts at an informal level, given the reduction in opportunities to meet within an EU context.

Implications of Brexit for Research and Teaching– and potential options for co-operation

In the next session, a prominent issue related to the task of identifying some of the systemic issues facing the political and social sciences teaching and research landscape on the one hand, while at the same time identifying a more targeted set of issues and opportunities that could be addressed at a practical level by learned societies such as the PSA, PSAI, UACES and others. The discussion ranged across both, but tried where possible to highlight the latter and points for action that might form a collaborative agenda where learned societies might make the largest contribution. These latter ideas are summarised in the last section of this paper.

One of the central themes to emerge with respect to the first of these challenges concerned the difficulties of teaching about both the EU and Ireland within the GB context. The point was made that there was a striking lack of knowledge and understanding in GB of Irish politics (North and South) and also of the EU and its structures and operations. Brexit was thought to have amplified and exposed this lack of understanding, making teaching in these areas challenging. Given the lack of depth of basic knowledge, especially in the GB context, some 'back to basics' input within the curriculum was required in relation to Ireland's political history and the process of European integration. It was pointed out that social media and the interconnections between academic colleagues and Associations across these islands was a mitigating factor in helping to connect colleagues, reduce feelings of geographic isolation, and assist the task of providing more granular understandings of EU structures and some of the nuances of Ireland's specific political circumstances. There was some discussion about the potential for collaborative funding applications in the context of Brexit as an avenue that PSA/PSAI and other learned societies such as UACES and IACES could further explore. It was suggested that Brexit will become all pervasive in teaching but "as a small part of everything" rather than as a distinctive programme in its own right, for examples on such issues as political economy, international relations, constitutional futures; devolution and federalism, party politics and elections amongst other sub-fields in political science.

Other contributions in this part of the discussion highlighted some of the ongoing concerns about the shape of the HE sector after Brexit and the funding for teaching that would be available. This raised a number of questions for learned societies and for universities themselves: What could be done on a British-Irish level for higher education funding post-Brexit? How could learned societies best mobilise to shape the teaching and research agendas of respective funding bodies across the UK and Ireland? The example was given of the 20th Anniversary of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement which currently has a very high public profile – how could learned societies best use this (and other Brexit-related issues) to stimulate and harness the broader public interest that exists?



There was discussion that learned societies, such as the PSA, have the capacity to connect across the full 'educational pipeline' and that some thinking was needed about how/what we teach as a result of Brexit from the A Level curriculum through UG and PGT provision. One idea that emerged here was for collaboration between PSAI, PSA and perhaps others to create teaching spaces across the UK and the island of Ireland. At the formal level there could be collaboration between PSA and PSAI colleagues via online delivery platforms or MOOCs or 'Master classes' on European integration and British and Irish politics –but at another level this could exist and be developed outside of the formal educational sector, i.e. created and delivered to wide public audiences as a form of public goods and as a collaborative project between the PSA and PSAI.

Interventions were also made over the impact of Brexit on research funding. Suggestions were made relating to the evolution of the UK funding environment and the trend away from the traditional individual research grant towards larger collaborative schemes clustered in certain areas of excellence. It was suggested that there needs to be some strategic and systematic thinking within the social sciences in relation to this and as a means of optimising the capacity of researchers to tap into such resources. While the challenges of this were recognised, there was also a feeling that this direction of travel, together with the arrival of Brexit as a dominant force within UK and Irish politics, presented an ideal opportunity for learned societies to help facilitate such connections and collaborations. With regard to the Brexit issue specifically, concerns were raised about the diminishing attractiveness of UK researchers and institutions as part of European H2020 consortia and whether some collaborative mechanisms might be mapped between the PSA and PSAI to allow UK based researchers to 'buddy up' with Irish partners for mutual benefit. There was some feedback here to the effect that the chill factor towards UK based researchers was already being clearly felt –and was likely to accelerate up to and beyond the UKs proposed departure from the EU in March 2019.

At a thematic level, it was suggested that in the context of Brexit and its impacts on Ireland and the UK, a moment had arrived to pose some fundamental questions and address some gaps in current research agendas.

Are we really asking the questions that matter in relation to EU studies teleology relating to the costs and benefits of EU membership? Are we fully exploring the costs and benefits of EU membership and how those issues are defined through policy, media and popular narratives?

One concrete suggestion for collaboration put forward was for a bi-annual networking conference between the PSA and PSAI, and Irish and British academics generally, focused on making a contribution to keeping contact and communications active between researchers across the UK/Irish context. This was broadened out to suggest that there could be a PSA-PSAI and other learned societies initiative (UACES/BISA/IACES) to offer briefing/conferences on Brexit related issues.

Ideas for Development and Collaborative Engagement

A final session centered on the following issues:

- 1) Given the lack of regional awareness concerning the differential effects of Brexit across the British/Irish context, there was potential for a collaborative initiative to cultivate better

understanding of politics via for example, a mobility fund for PhD students to travel across the two islands and between the various jurisdictions.

- 2) Another idea put forward was for a joint PSAI-PSA 'Best Dissertation' prize on a Brexit related theme –or more ambitiously, a joint PSA/PSAI student internship that focused on a Brexit related area of research.
- 3) There was some support for the idea of a 'mobility funding' scheme by the two learned societies as being beneficial to many more students than one/off prizes or internships.
- 4) An annual PSA-PSAI event to bring policy makers from UK and Ireland together for informal provide discussion and networking (funded by an application to the UK-Irish governments).
- 5) The overlapping nature of the PSA/PSAI was noted and a query raised as to whether there could be membership benefits shared between learned societies such as PSA/PSAI or –more ambitiously, reciprocal membership discounts between the two organisations.
- 6) Many contributors were members of both the PSA and PSAI, and UACES, and it seemed sensible for members of these learned societies to come together in shared spaces more regularly to provide opportunities for more focused collaboration on issues –notably the impact of Brexit on the discipline across these islands.
- 7) Bi-annual networking conference between PSA/PSAI and Irish/British academics, with a view to keeping contact and communications active between researchers across the UK/Irish context.
- 8) For any initiatives that sought to address longer term systemic challenges of Brexit the optimal approach would be to present possible funders –such as the UK and Irish governments - with as wide a coalition of stakeholders as possible.
- 9) Based on this a suggested next step was to bring together other learned societies from within and beyond the social sciences. Contributors considered it important to think though the purpose and objectives of this before starting a collaborative initiative or developing such a network. As this would a) aid coherence and b) provide a clearer rationale for potential funders. Two areas were identified here: 1) a move to recast the meaning of 'research impact' within HE and recruit support from other learned societies for this refinement, and 2) to use the moment of Brexit to begin a wider conversation about teaching within HE.
- 10) The possibility of seeking funding for somebody to undertake development of the relationships between academia, politicians, practitioners on behalf of a wide consortium of learned societies.
- 11) It was suggested that there was a communication gap between academics and practitioners that needed sustained and systematic attention and that one way learned societies could address this would be to invite practitioners to their annual conferences, not as additions, but mainstreamed and centrally within the conference programmes. One suggestion for this was via the use of ring-fenced panels resourced within the funding models of the conferences every year.

Suggested Next Steps and Action Points

The final session considered the following points:



- That a co-badged PSAI/PSA Briefing Paper summarising the discussions would appear on both organisations websites (This document)
- A dedicated 'BREXIT SPECIAL' future issue of the PSA's *Political Insight* with 'think-pieces' around the above issues be developed, commissioned from key stakeholders in the learned societies and circulated as widely as possible beyond the learned societies designed for widespread dissemination and engagement.
- The possible inauguration of Summer or Winter Schools on the theme of 'Governance across these islands after Brexit'
- Possible inauguration of a new *British Politics* or *British/Irish Politics* Specialist Group within the PSAI to partner the PSA Irish Politics Specialist Group with this relationship focusing specifically on forging links between PSAI/PSA.
- Consideration of Reciprocal Membership benefits (PSA-PSAI) by both organisations
- Fringe meeting or reciprocal attendance at next PSAI annual conference in Limerick in October 2018 and PSA annual conference in Nottingham in early 2019.