

No Brexit deal will tick all the boxes

This week, the British Home Office announced that it is to issue one million texts to UK passport holders.

This is to remind anyone travelling to Europe that after Brexit they will need valid passports. Not just that, the passports must have at least six months to go before their expiry date.

This shouldn't trouble any residents of Ireland moving from north to south or from south to north. The longstanding Common Travel Area arrangements should suffice.

But the North remains pivotal within the increasingly desperate attempts to come to an arrangement that will shield British citizens from the worst disruptions of a no-deal Brexit.

The projections in the British government's Operation Yellowhammer dossier, which outlines what could happen, are so extreme as to be almost unbelievable, and therein lies its weakness.

Food and medicine restrictions, business collapse due to unpreparedness, travel chaos: it couldn't really get that bad, surely?

At this late stage and perhaps prompted by such fears, proper attention is now being given to the role that the North can play in ensuring a land border arrangement acceptable to the EU and to all communities of interest within the UK.

The North was at an enormous disadvantage during the Brexit negotiations in not having a functioning Stormont assembly and a working Northern Ireland Executive.

The only clear indication of what the concerns of the Northern Ireland Executive would have been is set out in a letter of August 14, 2016.

The letter was from the then first minister, Arlene Foster, and then deputy first minister, the late Martin McGuinness, to then UK prime minister, Theresa

May. In recent weeks, this letter has become a political touchstone.

Almost a year on from when it was last discussed in this column, its contents are worth revisiting. The border was the first issue highlighted, noting the "difficult issues relating to the border throughout our history and the peace process."

The first and deputy first ministers said that the border should not become an impediment to the movement of people, goods, and services, or become a catalyst for illegal activity. That aspiration is not possible in a Brexit no-deal scenario.

The second area identified was ease of trade with EU member states and access to labour. That cannot be achieved unless the UK remains within the Single Market and Customs Union, which is not really on any British agenda other than that of the Liberal Democrats.

The third priority was energy supply, perhaps achievable with the maintenance of the Single Electricity Market on the island of Ireland.

The fourth area was funding.

Both McGuinness and Foster identified that EU funds coming into the North would dry up post-Brexit. Replacement of those funds would become a matter of brokerage between Belfast and Westminster.

Lastly, agri-food, including fisheries, was seen as being uniquely vulnerable both to the loss of EU funding and to potential tariff

and non-tariff barriers to trade. Again, in a no-deal scenario, this concern cannot be addressed.

The doomed Brexit withdrawal agreement, which failed to get through the House of Commons, would have satisfied many of the priorities of the then first and deputy first ministers.

A new form of withdrawal agreement — which could emerge in the next few days or weeks — might not tick as many boxes for anyone.

It may, however, meet some of the original Brexit priorities of the North's leadership.

For all concerned, that ought to be enough.

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Martin McGuinness and Arlene Foster in 2016: Their letter to then PM Theresa May has become a touchstone. Picture: Jonathan Brady

