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Brexit tears up the Good Friday Agreement. The DUP were against the Good Friday Agreement and this is their revenge. ... They want to destroy the Good Friday Agreement and have waited twenty-one years and this is their opportunity to do that. If Brexit goes ahead in the way envisaged by the DUP and the Brexiteers, then you have effectively binned the Good Friday Agreement.

Máirtín Ó Muilleoir MLA, Sinn Féin¹

The damage to the Belfast Agreement and the devolved institutions has not been done by Brexit but by the absence of the Assembly sitting. It is ironic that those who are most keen on cross-border institutions are ensuring that the cross-border institutions do not meet because there is no Assembly and no Ministers to go to cross-border meetings. However, what the current situation has done is to highlight one of the very weak points of the Belfast Agreement, namely that one Party can have a veto as to whether or not the institutions of the Belfast Agreement are allowed to operate.

Sammy Wilson MP, Democratic Unionist Party²

[Brexit] has fundamentally changed the constitutional settlement of the United Kingdom. We need to have a new future of how we look at the United Kingdom.

Steve Aiken MLA, Ulster Unionist Party³

I think that [during] Brexit, Northern Ireland is the most polarised it has been since the Hunger Strikes in 1981. However, clearly there

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is nothing like the risk of violence or the appetite for violence that there was in 1981.

Ben Lowry, deputy editor, *Belfast News Letter*⁴

Brexit hit Northern Ireland like a meteor from space. No one really saw it coming – or really understood its implications. It represents the biggest political and economic challenge for Northern Ireland since its foundation in 1921. In 2021 we will be commemorating the centenary of the creation of Northern Ireland, but the implications of Brexit will likely shape Ireland's future (North and South) for the next hundred years. In the context of Northern Ireland's troubled history, Brexit sits as a counterpoint to partition, separated by nearly a century but bookending generations of political strife, cultural division and economic instability. Thus for a political scientist who has spent the last twenty-five years writing and teaching about the political conflict and troubled institutions in the region, it raises a fascinating and urgent set of questions for the future of Northern Ireland, relationships within the whole island and between Ireland and Great Britain (GB).

In this sense the book is about history as well as politics – as in Ireland, these two disciplines are notoriously difficult to disentangle. We wear our history like a comfort blanket in Ireland; it shrouds us in nostalgia, belonging and an overriding sense of victimhood. Some have wallowed in this to an unhealthy degree – even though the victim status has been hard earned. But for some the past has invaded the present and shackled them to it in a way that has been limiting rather than liberating. This point was made by Maya Angelou, one of the great voices of post-war American literature, who said that 'history, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be un-lived, however, if faced with courage, need not be lived again'.⁵ When Queen Elizabeth II visited Ireland in June 2011, she spoke about the importance of 'being able to bow to the past, but not be bound by it'.⁶ However, in Northern Ireland history is not simply history, it is also woven into politics, culture and religion

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and decanted into a heady brew of ethnonational identity. The problem is that these identities are contested, and are reflected in mainly binary British and Irish terms. History is remembered (or misremembered) along divided lines, where the past is deployed in pursuit of contemporary disputes about political power and cultural belonging. Brexit encapsulates this multilayered conflict, where micro and macro issues are inextricably linked to the point where they form an amalgam. Thus the Irish border is simultaneously about a territorial demarcation and also about an existential identity crisis. Border roads that might appear sleepy backwaters are actually emotionally charged frontiers – places that for some Brexit supporters have been ‘weaponised’ by those on the ‘Remain’ side of the argument seeking to use the Irish peace process as a shield to hide behind to guilt-trip the United Kingdom (UK) government into changing its policy. Once Brexit ‘happened’ (and in Ireland Brexit happened on 24 June 2016 once the referendum outcome was known), border roads became more than roads. They became political and cultural totems of Irish freedom, peace, stability and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

Brexit as an issue therefore connects the present and future of Ireland to the past in a number of ways – many of them not appreciated by the government that is responsible for running the Northern part of it. The border – to take one of the most immediate issues in the UK’s departure from the European Union (EU) – is not just a territorial demarcator, or even just a political one. It is of course both, but it is also an historical, cultural and psychological phenomenon with a resonance in the Irish context that has just not been appreciated when viewed through a British lens. So to close a border road in Ireland would have a significance beyond traffic management for either the Irish or UK governments. Such an act would be seen as an historical throwback to malign English control, to what is popularly referred to as the ‘Troubles’ of the 1970s and 1980s and beyond that to the Irish Famine of the mid-nineteenth century, the Land War that followed and the rise of

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militant republicanism in the early twentieth century that led to the partition of Ireland in 1921 and to the very border that is once again on the front burner of contemporary Irish politics. None of this historical baggage was on the radar of those driving the Brexit project in 2016, or of those who continue to do so.

This book examines the impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland, and it is primarily concerned with the story of the negotiations and how these affected Northern Ireland and the wider set of political relationships between London and Dublin and with the European Union itself. One of the key threads that runs through the book relates to the way in which the Brexit negotiations have affected political stability in Northern Ireland and further complicated the operation of the devolved institutions, and the progress of the peace process more broadly. As the title suggests, it poses the question: Is Brexit ‘breaking peace’ in Northern Ireland?

It is certainly putting huge strain on what is popularly referred to as ‘peace’ in Northern Ireland but might more accurately be defined as political stability in the region. Ironically, this was not foreseen at any point during the peace process or the three years of multiparty negotiations that resulted in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA).⁷ Everyone back then was looking inwards at each other – rather than outwards at how changes in the external political environment might destabilise the political settlement. There was an underlying assumption within the text of the GFA that external factors would remain constant. To this extent the book presents an example for other conflict contexts about the capacity for political events to evolve and the need for negotiated agreements to build flex into their language to accommodate such unforeseen changes. As Brexit demonstrates (like the end of the Cold War before it), meteors do land on occasion and it is wise to have some shock absorbers available for fragile post-conflict political institutions when they do.

Another theme that sits at the centre of the book relates to Northern Ireland’s political and cultural position within the United

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Kingdom and the manner in which Brexit once again thrust the region into the forefront of British politics. While Northern Ireland quickly became an issue in the Brexit negotiations, this was not the case during the UK referendum campaign in 2016. How Brexit would impact on Northern Ireland was simply not on the political radar – or that of the media that was covering the campaign. This oversight became obvious after the referendum result, but the fact that it was largely overlooked beforehand raises a fundamental set of issues pertaining to Northern Ireland's role within the UK and how that is understood in both Ireland and in Great Britain.

Northern Ireland, of course, quickly became *the* key focus of the Brexit negotiations and has proven to be the most difficult issue to reconcile. This book focuses on the efforts to square the Irish circle, characterised by the question of how the UK government's declared aim of leaving the single market and the customs union can be achieved while also meeting its declared intention to maintain the Common Travel Area (CTA) between the UK and Ireland. The book examines these apparently mutually incompatible aspirations and how political discourse surrounding them evolved over the course of the Brexit negotiations. To reiterate a point made earlier but central to the book – Brexit as a phenomenon has been experienced differently in Britain and Ireland. In Britain the debate has largely centred around the future and what would happen once it left the European Union. However, in Ireland Brexit is spoken of in the present tense, not as a future concept. Brexit is here already, it is happening now and it is having a tangible effect on people's lives.

One of the core themes of this book is how the main political parties developed their positions and arguments during the negotiations, why they did so and the implications of these arguments for the future of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland. The positions of the two largest political parties in Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin, were as divided over Brexit as that of the British and Irish governments. Sinn Féin was fundamentally opposed to Brexit, campaigned for the Remain

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side, and has since demanded ‘special status’ for the region once the UK leaves the EU. The DUP was an advocate of the ‘Leave’ side in the 2016 referendum and has insisted on Northern Ireland exiting the EU on the same terms as the rest of the UK, rather than being seen as a special case.

All of these themes crystallise around one central question: What is going to happen to the Irish border after Brexit? The border issue haunts the negotiations, those involved in them and everyone else who will be affected by any change in the nature of the border once the UK has left the EU. This has been one of the most intractable arguments during the Brexit negotiations and one of the most vivid areas of political debate and public concern. Fear that the border will re-emerge as a point of political friction in Ireland has concentrated the minds of many, within and beyond the policy actors involved in resolving the issue.

As mentioned earlier, the border issue provides a perfect illustration as to why Northern Ireland represents a unique aspect of the Brexit negotiations and the process of leaving the EU, an aspect not faced elsewhere in the UK. While a majority of people within the region voted to remain in the referendum on 23 June 2016, (56% voting to remain, 44% voting to leave), Northern Ireland will be the only part of the UK to share a land border with another EU state after the UK ceases to be a member.⁸ So once the UK has left the EU, Northern Ireland will become the UK land frontier to the EU, a fact that has potentially huge implications for politics in Northern Ireland, where the border was for many years the physical and legal manifestation of partition and a driver of violent political conflict between the late 1960s and late 1990s, until the political institutions were established on the basis of cross-community power-sharing following the GFA in 1998. Thus the nature of the Irish border is crucial for the devolved institutions and the political stability of the whole island.

It has to be remembered that another sovereign country, Ireland,⁹ has significant political, economic and cultural interests in the terms

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of Brexit and how these outcomes may affect political stability in Northern Ireland. This inevitably links the implementation of Brexit into a wider Anglo-Irish context, with unique complications. This reality will be crucially important for the political and economic future of Ireland and the future of the peace process more broadly.

Each of the book's seven chapters focuses on a key aspect of the Brexit negotiations and its impact on Northern Ireland and broader Anglo-Irish relations. The narrative and main arguments within it are built upon a wide evidence base, including previously published academic studies, official reports, speeches and primary documents from the main political parties in Ireland and Britain, as well as a mountainous volume of newspaper and broadcast media reporting of the Brexit negotiations over the 2016–19 period. A number of interviews were also conducted for the book with key individuals who have been close observers of political events during the period. These include politicians from Northern Ireland from the unionist and nationalist communities, journalists with a close understanding of the political temperature in Northern Ireland during the period and voices from civic society with expertise on economic and community relations dimensions of the Brexit crisis in Northern Ireland. The purpose of these interviews is to illuminate the main themes within the book and in that sense they are illustrative and reflective and are used to encapsulate the core issues discussed.

Chapter 1 introduces the key themes that underpin the book and maps the emergence of Northern Ireland as a contested issue within the Brexit referendum debate in the run-up to the vote on 23 June 2016. While the central focus is on the referendum campaign and the emergence of the main party political positions, the chapter also puts into context some of the main issues that feature in subsequent chapters. This locates the central arguments within the key academic debates on the GFA, power-sharing and the centrality of the 'consent principle' as an axis of consensus for political change

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in Northern Ireland within the context of the Brexit negotiation process. This chapter also sets out the debate over the future status of the Irish border and how that issue has impacted on the devolved institutions and relations between the main political parties in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 2 connects the empirical dimension of the book relating to the impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland, to a wider theoretical outlook on the dynamics of peacebuilding. The chapter introduces a new conceptual focus to conflict transformation understanding by focusing on the significance of unexpected exogenous shocks to largely endogenous political agreements. The argument here is that Brexit presents a novel example of the need to provide peacebuilding shock absorbers that can withstand fundamental unforeseen circumstances – meteors – that hit peace processes with the potential to knock them off their conventional axes and change the local context. This theoretical chapter is intended to provide conflict studies with an example of the need for greater flex and adaptability within conflict environments. Brexit was a meteor in the context of the Northern Ireland peace process – no one saw it coming or understood, when they were negotiating in 1998, how normal political gravity would be affected when it hit the political atmosphere in June 2016.

Chapter 3 examines the outcome of the referendum vote on 23 June 2016 and the divisions that it exposed in Northern Ireland, across the political parties and within their respective electorates. The chapter assesses the political fallout from the result and the responses of the main parties to the latest evidence of political division within the region. This period saw the crystallisation of political positions and a shift from campaigning mode, towards arguments relating to the democratic legitimacy of the vote and rival interpretations of what it meant in practice.

One of the key areas this chapter focuses upon concerns the debate that followed the result and in particular the fact that the majority of those who voted in Northern Ireland chose Remain

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(56%) as opposed to Leave (44%). This led to an unusual turn of events where Sinn Féin began to articulate the right of Northern Ireland to self-determination over the Brexit issue, while the DUP focused instead on the UK vote as a whole. This complicated the usual political geometry in Northern Ireland, as the DUP, normally an advocate of an ‘Ulster-first’ form of devolved government, suddenly veered towards a more integrationist position. Sinn Féin meanwhile, having denied the political legitimacy of Northern Ireland for most of the last hundred years, suddenly became a champion of its majoritarian political will and democratically expressed self-determination.

Chapter 4 focuses on the aftermath of the Westminster General Election of 8 June 2017, the hung parliament that resulted and the ‘confidence-and-supply’ deal negotiated between the Conservative Party government and the Democratic Unionist Party on 26 June 2017. This presented yet another unforeseen component of the Brexit challenge for Northern Ireland – and again arrived against expectations. The General Election was called by the newly installed Prime Minister Theresa May to help mandate her leadership and provide the public credibility and parliamentary arithmetic to help steward Brexit through the political and legal system. It was also called because the overwhelming message from the opinion polls was that the Conservative Party would win a landslide victory against the embattled leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn. The result did not go as expected and left Theresa May clinging to office with a minority government. The subsequent confidence-and-supply agreement with the DUP kept her in power but changed the dynamics of Brexit significantly, both in terms of how the negotiations proceeded within GB, but also in terms of Northern Ireland politics as well.

The deal with the DUP needs to be understood in the political context of Northern Ireland – as well as in GB terms. Its significance was compounded by the fact that it came at a time when there was no functioning devolved government and when relations between

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the DUP and Sinn Féin were already tense. The result of the Conservative Party deal with the DUP had a negative impact on that relationship and thus on the appetite of those parties to restore the devolved institutions to Northern Ireland. This is a key aspect of Northern Ireland's Brexit story, as the three-year suspension of functioning institutions and lack of common purpose between the main political representatives of the people who live there made it very difficult for the specific interests of Northern Ireland to be reflected in the UK's Brexit negotiations.

Chapter 5 focuses on the epicentre of Brexit for Northern Ireland – namely the border and how the issue of Irish border arrangements was read differently by the various parties during the Brexit negotiations. At a very basic level, the process of Brexit complicates the issue of political self-determination in Ireland and raises the question of how the Common Travel Area between the UK and Ireland will be implemented outside of the customs union. This chapter explores how the border issue was defined during the Brexit negotiations, how it divided the main political parties and their wider electorates, and the degree to which this presented new political incentives to the main political parties.

The rise of the border as a political issue after the Brexit referendum cut into one of the most sensitive aspects of Northern Ireland's ethnonational conflict – and forced people to confront what the GFA had managed to de-escalate. In blunt terms: Which side of the binary line do you live on – the British part of Ireland or the Irish part of Ireland? In this sense Brexit re-weaponised the partition of Ireland and the 'constitutional question' which had been skilfully parked by the terms of the GFA since 1998 and by the existence – until recently – of a set of power-sharing institutions in Northern Ireland which also went some way to demonstrating that a new era of local democratic control was valuing the rival traditions of Britishness and Irishness equally. Mediating the 'constitutional question' was a key tenet of the GFA and the subsequent institutions established after 1998.¹⁰ Northern Ireland's

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devolved political institutions were based on a form of consociational democracy that has been at the centre of scholarly debates on Northern Ireland since they were established in 1999.¹¹

The capacity of the GFA to facilitate dual political identities on the basis of choice has also provided a key foundation for the development of Anglo-Irish relations since 1998.¹² The British government tried to provide repeated assurances that the process of leaving the EU would not undermine the GFA and would seek to maintain the Common Travel Area in Ireland as well as the commitment to dual citizenship rights. As this chapter demonstrates, however, it became clear very quickly that these aspirations were hard to guarantee and that little was set down or clearly fleshed out about how these dynamics would unfold in practice, once the process of Brexit had formally begun.

Chapter 6 looks specifically at the extent to which the Brexit process represents a challenge to the Good Friday Agreement. This examines the arguments relating to whether the substantive principles of the GFA were affected by the UK's decision to leave the EU. This chapter also assesses the extent to which the negotiations themselves presented challenges to the future of the GFA and the devolved institutions within Northern Ireland.

10 April 2019 marked the twenty-first anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. This multiparty negotiation, which resulted from two years of formal talks, involved ten political parties in Northern Ireland, the British and Irish governments and included the support and involvement of senior mediators, including the White House administration of President Bill Clinton. A formal agreement was endorsed by the two sovereign parliaments in Ireland and the United Kingdom and importantly was passed by dual referendums in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic with overwhelming majorities. It has lasted for a generation but, at the same time, the devolved power-sharing institutions that resulted have been plagued by instability, political inertia and a chronic lack of collective coherence.

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Unsurprisingly, there are different narratives surrounding the extent to which Brexit has impacted on the GFA – as indicated by some of the quotes at the beginning of this chapter. Sinn Féin see Brexit as a fundamentally destabilising challenge to the GFA and its institutions. Many unionists, however, see Brexit as more of a bump in the road within the peace process and criticise Irish nationalists for talking up Brexit as a crisis. This chapter examines these conflicting narratives on whether Brexit is actually breaking peace in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 7 examines the Brexit negotiations from a wider perspective and looks at the impact it has had on Anglo-Irish relations. The reason for this wide-angled lens is that the London/Dublin relationship has been integral to the political fortunes of Northern Ireland and will continue to play a critical role in the future viability of the peace process and political institutions in the region. UK and Irish membership of the EU has been a point of commonality since the simultaneous entry of the two countries to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. Membership also brought key personnel in both jurisdictions into regular proximity on other matters but normalised diplomatic relations between the two countries to a level that had not been seen previously. The Brexit referendum changed that and sets a new course for both countries. This relates to policy towards Northern Ireland but also to wider dimensions, notably to economic interests as well as broader attitudes to security, human rights and to the European neighbourhood itself.

The chapter demonstrates how the Brexit negotiations made diplomatic relations more fraught between the two countries, primarily over the ambiguity surrounding the future of the Irish border, but also over the UK's broader commitment to the future of the GFA itself. The chapter argues that Brexit brought a structural incompatibility into the Anglo-Irish relationship that very quickly led both countries to regard one another as opponents in a zero-sum negotiation, rather than allies with a joint purpose over Northern

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Ireland. This was demonstrated through public statements on both sides relatively early in the negotiating process, with trust draining out of the political relationship between them. In January 2017, for instance, the Irish EU Commissioner for Agriculture, Phil Hogan, suggested a need for a recalibrated Anglo-Irish relationship as a result of the UK's imminent departure from the EU: 'Brexit will happen and we now need to take a very strategic and far-sighted review of our relationships with both the UK and the rest of our European partners. ... It is also important that our political relationship with the United Kingdom matures to reflect the changed political and legal circumstances.'¹³ This chapter maps the slow fracture in the Anglo-Irish relationship, explains why this took place and assesses its implications for Northern Ireland.

A brief conclusion examines how the experience of the referendum and the Brexit negotiations that followed have affected political and economic affairs in Northern Ireland. This final section frames the key arguments within the book and the main issues that will face Northern Ireland, the UK government and the Irish Republic, as the next phase of the Brexit process begins. It will make the argument that Brexit is 'breaking peace' in Northern Ireland and that the severity with which it does so is dependent upon how Brexit is experienced. A 'no-deal'¹⁴ Brexit with no transition period is likely to result in a more extreme decline in Anglo-Irish relations and the peace process, while some form of deal between the EU and UK with the Backstop¹⁵ element intact is likely to cause a less immediate and urgent crisis.

On a brief biographical and editorial aspect of the book – there is no neutrality in Brexit, as in politics more broadly. As Kevin O'Rourke puts it: 'It is impossible to write about Brexit completely dispassionately and so it is important to be open about one's potential biases.'¹⁶ From an ontological standpoint, the book is written from the position that there is no ultimate neutrality and that academics play a part in shaping the data and the research they publish. I voted Remain in the 2016 referendum. I did so enthusiastically as

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a European – while being fully aware of the critique of its neo-liberal nature and its inherent political and economic failings. I also did so because I felt that a Leave result would have a negative impact on the island of Ireland and on the political institutions in Northern Ireland.

I have lived in England for over twenty years and one of my last political acts before I moved away from Northern Ireland was to vote ‘Yes’ in the referendum on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in May 1998. I felt at the time that it would be the most important exercise of my democratic franchise in my lifetime.

I was wrong. My vote to remain within the EU on 23 June 2016 was the bigger issue – though, as it turned out, I was on the losing side – one of the 16 million rather than one of the 17 million. Of course, if I was still living in Northern Ireland I would have been on the winning side (the 56% of Remainers not the 44% of Leavers) – though ultimately Northern Ireland’s wishes have been sublimated under those of the whole UK in the Brexit negotiations. This is the incendiary aspect of Brexit in the Irish context – it confronts us with the reality that the GFA, its devolved institutions and our democratic right to self-determination are subservient to the will of the British government, parliament and even courts in London.

I would position myself politically as being on the left on the political spectrum, sensitive to the fact that the EU is focused more on the interests of international capital and big business and dominated by its richest members rather than by its poorest ones.¹⁷ But I am also acutely aware of the positive dimension of European membership: the contribution made by the EU to the peace process in Northern Ireland and the importance to me personally of my European colleagues and friends in the UK. At a very basic level, I was aware of the implications of the UK leaving the EU when Ireland remained within it – the implications for the place I care about most, Northern Ireland and the wider island.

I found the radical left Brexit position unconvincing, in some cases a self-indulgent vanity project, where Brexit was a convenient

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vehicle for broader revolutionary goals. For some on the left their desire to resist neo-liberal institutions such as the EU was pursued irrespective of the damage that it did along the way. But many people are already getting hurt by Brexit: in small businesses, in construction industries, in whatever manufacturing sector the UK has remaining. Some of these intellectuals ‘are so far left – they’re right’ and on Brexit, at least, they have become the enablers of right-wing racism, xenophobia and austerity. Where was their voice on the damage done to livelihoods of workers in Swindon, Sunderland, Scunthorpe and other places where people had already lost their jobs before the UK had even left the EU? Where was their voice on Ireland and the peace process? It was so *sotto voce* it was inaudible. They can write their own books and try to justify the number of eggs that have to be broken to cook their revolutionary omelettes. This book takes the view that Brexit is an act of colossal self-harm by the UK and an act of criminal disregard for peace in Ireland.

The implications of Brexit for Northern Ireland are profound for everyone who lives there and for the whole island – politically, economically and culturally. In this sense the book (like most books) has a position that is not a point of neutrality. At the same time it aims to give a voice to the case of those who have argued for Brexit and who have advocated and constructed the policies aimed to engineer the UK’s departure from the EU. The book aims to be faithful to that view and to represent it fairly and accurately – while pointing out the errors of judgement that lie behind it. It lies with the reader, of course, to determine whether I have done so successfully.

The majority of the book was written by October 2019 with some very limited updates added in December 2019. Brexit has been something of a moving target and it is inevitable that this narrative account will be overtaken by the pace of fast-moving events. But while the Brexit story will continue to evolve, the fundamental themes, principles and arguments within the book will prevail.