

British-Irish relations are 'very damaged'

BREXIT has been extremely damaging to British-Irish relations and it has enormous implications over which this country has no say or control, a gathering of Irish and UK academic, political and business leaders has been told.

At this stage there is no going back to the normalisation of the relationship that was evident during the Queen's visit to Cork in 2011, according to Professor Brigid Laffan, Director of the European University Institute.

"That was a truly historic occasion and everybody understood that it was not just symbolism but it was also healing," she said.

"There had never been a full acceptance of royal power as it was based on domination rather than accommodation but the relationship was transformed in 1973 when both countries joined the EU and the impact that had on Anglo Irish relations cannot be underestimated," she told the Killarney Economic Conference in Co Kerry.

But, Prof Laffan cautioned, Brexit reopens Ireland's 'English question' which everybody thought had been normalised and solved.

She said during the referendum debate in the UK there was scant attention paid to the extraordinary implications for Ireland and she described Brexit as "poison in the channels".

The way the UK has gone about it has made it much more difficult and there has been an underlying low-grade hostility to the Irish view in the UK media and in some political circles.

She said it was reported in on newspaper that Prime Minister Theresa May loathes the Irish Taoiseach and a Tory MP said that the Irish needed to know their place.

"If you Tweet on this matter and you are Irish you will get low-grade but constant harassment," Prof Laffan said.

She told the gathering in Killarney that Ireland needed to exercise its interests without fear or favour and protect the country from something over which it has no control.

"Long before London woke up to what Brexit meant, this country had done its due diligence and devoted enormous human hours to understanding what Brexit might mean. Ireland understood how serious this was," she said.

When the Irish state is confronted with a problem that it understands it has an enormous capacity to turn itself into a task force and it ensured that Brexit damage was limited, delegates heard.

"British-Irish relations will have to be rebuilt. They are not as bad as the hard times of the troubles but they are very damaged. Diplomatic relations are poor, there is mistrust and political relations are poor," said Prof Laffan, a native of Caherciveen.

"We can't go back to the normalisation that was evident in 2011. The relations between these two islands will be different and, in some ways, for this state and its people, it could be the final breaking of that umbilical cord".