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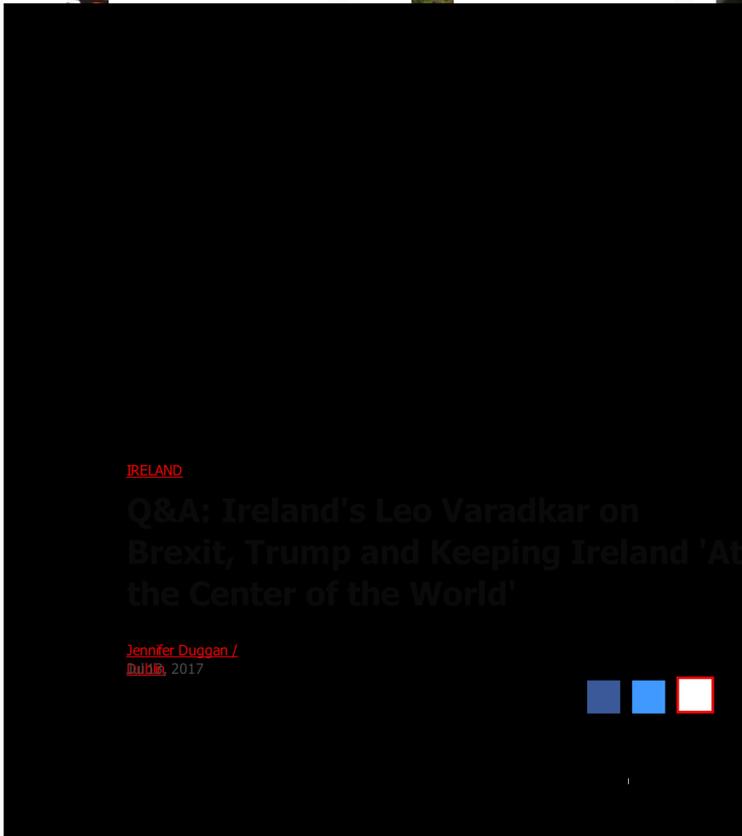
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Q&A: Ireland's Leo Varadkar on Brexit, Trump and Keeping Ireland 'At the Center of the World'

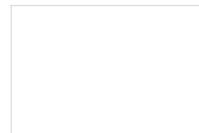
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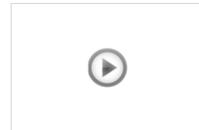
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Photograph by Nick Ballon for TIME

Varadkar takes up the post of Taoiseach at a time when the Republic of Ireland has emerged from a deep financial crisis and its economy is turning around. But he knows that, especially given external threats such as the neighboring U.K's withdrawal from the European Union, continued progress is not guaranteed. Showing TIME around his new office on July 7, one of the pictures ready to be put on the wall is a copy of the first sovereign bond issued to the Irish Free State. It's there as a daily reminder not to be complacent, he says, that "no matter what happens even the revolutionaries had to go to the bond market in order to sustain the free state."

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He brings a straight-talking style to the office and in his interview with TIME he spoke frankly about various issues confronting him: about the threat Brexit poses to the Republic of Ireland and how he can rule out the prospect of an Irish vote to leave the E.U., how he plans to confront President Donald Trump on global trade; and what he thinks about media attention on his sexuality.

**IRELAND**

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This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity:

**TIME:** You said in your first address as Taoiseach your government would be "one of the new European center." What did you mean by that?

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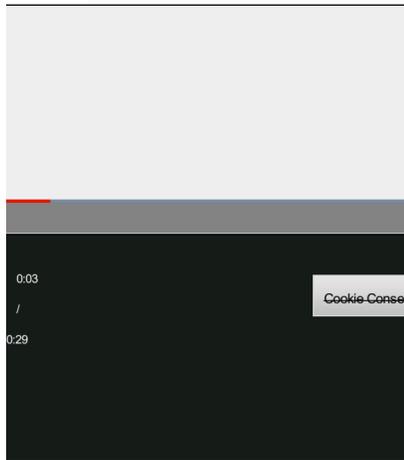
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Varadkar: These things are always changing, but what I think is that the traditional divide between left and right, capital and labour, small state and big state, high taxes and low taxes, doesn't define politics in the way it did in the past. We see new divisions emerging in politics and I think what you have, perhaps with me and my party, with Macron, with Trudeau, with Mark Rutte of the Netherlands, Angela Merkel in Germany, is very much a centrist politics. We maybe side with the right on economic issues, in that we are for balanced budgets and free trade and open market economies. Perhaps we are slightly to the left on other issues, such as the role the government has on redistributing wealth, in personal freedoms.

□

But then there is a very new division in politics. Those of us who are in the centre believe in opening up to the world, believe migration on balance is a good thing if it is managed properly, and believe that multilateralism is the best way to solve problems. It's a different form of politics to that which is popular in Britain now, in America and in the far right across Europe which wants to put borders up again, which sees migration as a threat, which wants to protect their economies from trade. I know exactly where I stand on those questions and I think it is in the same place as those European leaders. I haven't quite found a word to describe it yet. But I think it is generational too. I see it in the way people vote.

**How does Ireland maintain influence, while its biggest partners in Europe and in the U.S. are seeming to turn inward?**

Partially through advocacy, by doing what we are doing around the world, particularly our role in the E.U. and the United Nations and in other global institutions. I think secondly by example. I would like Ireland to become what Michael Collins described as the shining light unto the world. A country that people look to for example, for example in terms of things like our economic progress, the strength of our economy, our success as a trading nation and more recently in terms of social liberalism, although we have more to do in that space.

Geographically we are at the periphery of Europe, but I don't see Ireland in that way. The way I see us is as an island at the center of the world. If you look at things like trade links and aviation links [with Europe and the U.S.], that actually fits in very well with the future of the country. I see us very much at the heart of Europe; we are founding members of the single market, we are founding members of the Euro.

Notwithstanding what other countries may decide to do – other countries that are turning inwards to a certain extent on themselves — we are absolutely convinced that our place is at the heart of the European home.

**The U.K. is the Republic's largest and closest partner geographically and economically. Are you concerned how its departure from the E.U. might hurt the Irish economy?**

We would prefer if it wasn't happening. We still hope that at some point Britain will change its mind. I'd like them to stay in the European Union, failing that I would like Britain to stay in the Single European Market and failing that I'd like them to stay in the Customs Union.

Our overriding objective in any negotiations is to ensure that we avoid any return to an economic border on the island of Ireland because that could affect our peace process, it would certainly affect the Good Friday Agreement which is really predicated on the idea that both countries are in the European Union and borders wouldn't matter, so that is our overriding concern. Secondly is maintaining trade arrangements as they are now. We are pretty much abolishing tariffs with Japan and Canada and it would be odd if we had tariffs with Britain quite frankly. The idea that you could send agricultural products to Tokyo and Osaka and not pay tariffs and you would have to pay tariffs sending them to Manchester is quite hard to fathom in the modern world.

If Britain doesn't stay in the Single Market or Customs Union, we are very much in favor of a free trade agreement between the U.K. and Europe. We don't want

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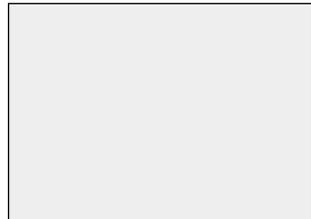
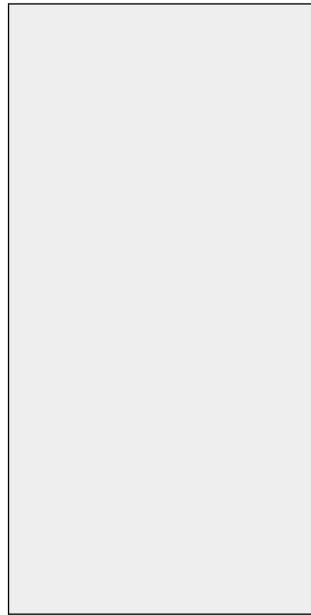


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Britain to be punished for its decision to leave, and it is not in our interests for Britain to be punished because we may be the ones who lose out as much if not more than them.

**Are you confident that the E.U. negotiators have Ireland's best interests in mind? They are negotiating on behalf of 27 countries, and what is good for Ireland might not necessarily be good for Germany or France.**

I am confident that they understand the unique issues and problems that we face. I have met with [European Commission] President Juncker and [E.U. chief negotiator] Michel Barnier, all the Prime Ministers now in Europe, we spent 12-14 hours together in Brussels and I have met and talked with them all. So everyone understands two things. They understand the impact on trade and that is not unique, we are not the only ones who are concerned about the impact on trade, the Dutch, the Danes, the French, the Germans, all understand the impact on their own economies of trade being disrupted.

But they also understand the thing that is unique when it comes to Ireland, which is Northern Ireland. That is well understood and in fact it is very much reflected in the guidelines and the negotiating priorities of the European Union. What I do fully appreciate is that turning goodwill and positive sentiment into a final agreement that can be written down into international law is going to be very difficult, and it still does seem to be largely the position of the British negotiating team that they can retain most of the benefits of membership and disavow most of the costs and responsibilities and that's not a sustainable position.

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I think we are stronger actually because we are part of a negotiating team with 450 million people behind us. Whereas Britain is negotiating with 60 million people behind them. And I think that puts us in a position of strength but it is something we have to be really vigilant about.

**IRELAND**

[A New Face for the Republic of Ireland](#)

**Can you rule out an Irish vote on leaving the European Union too? "Irexit" would certainly solve a lot of these problems.**

It is something we are not even considering and something we can absolutely rule out. Four times in our history, we decided as a country to take a different road than the United Kingdom; we did it in 1921, when we became independent and we were the first country to leave the Empire. We did it in 1948, when we left the commonwealth and declared a Republic. We did it again in 1979, the year I was born, when we broke the link with sterling and floated our own currency and then we did it again in 2001 when we joined the Euro.

We have made the decision that we are at the heart of Europe. It is the union that we helped to build and even if there are rocky waters or difficult times ahead, that is where we belong. When there were challenges on every occasion we overcame them and emerged stronger and prosperous I think as a result.

**There have been suggestions by a number of people, including your predecessor Enda Kenny, that the case for a referendum on a united Ireland is growing stronger post-Brexit. Do you agree?**

It's something I'm very much opposed to, first of all because I think it would be defeated. Unless people who voted for unionist parties are suddenly going to vote for a united Ireland, which I don't believe will happen, a border poll will be defeated. So it would not achieve a united Ireland but what it would do is give rise to further nationalism, further sectarianism and further polarization.

That is the last thing we need in the current environment. I can understand why Sinn Fein are promoting it because that is the kind of politics that they want to promote. That's not the kind of politics I believe in, what I believe in is the politics of John Hume who spoke less about united Ireland and more about an agreed Ireland, that we need to agree the arrangements and the relationships, north and south, east and west.

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**You recently [spoke to U.S. President Donald Trump for the first time](#). How did the conversation go?**

We have actually spoken twice. The first time was many years ago, on a different matter. It was a small thing. When he bought the [Doonbeg] golf course in County Clare, I was Minister for Tourism at the time and he had a planning issue which we were able to resolve. It was resolved by the county council rather than by me but it was resolved.

**Was that normal, for a private citizen to call the Tourism Minister over a planning issue?**

I think it probably reflected his business style at the time. I get the impression he is the kind of person who would just pick up the phone and want to ring the man or woman who is in charge over there, rather than necessarily going through normal business or diplomatic procedures. There are plusses and minuses to that.

In many ways I actually like that approach, because you know traditional civil service and diplomatic approaches can be all about hierarchies, and sometimes the principals just need to talk and sort it out. He is very much a CEO rather than a politician and it might be possible once you have developed a relationship with him to resolve issues that officials and diplomats might spend years exchanging papers on. So I think the first thing is to try to develop a relationship.

**Irish Prime Ministers are typically invited to meet the U.S. President in March for St Patrick's Day. What will you say to President Trump when you meet him?**

I'm not going to tell the American president how to run America but I think it is important that when friends are speaking to each other that they are able to be very frank in the views that are exchanged and I certainly will be doing that.

We want to continue to trade freely with America and if I do get a chance to meet him in March, I'll certainly be making the case for free trade, not just because it benefits Ireland but also because it benefits America as well. He has talked about making America great again and I don't think you can make America great again by trying to go back to an old coal-based manufacturing economy that doesn't really exist anymore. It is going to have to be about embracing a modern trading economy and I have no doubt that as a politician, ultimately what he wants is the best interests of his country.

While I absolutely disagree with some of the pronouncements he has made in the past, the relationship that exists between Ireland and America is much more important than who is president now or Taoiseach now or who is government here or there or which party is in power and I am determined to keep relations between Ireland and America at a very good level.

**Do you think that the [Apple tax case](#) threatens Ireland's attractiveness as a destination for U.S. corporations?**

We have a very clear view on that, which is that Apple should pay its taxes but it should pay them where they are owed. Apple has a real and big operation in Ireland but their operation in Ireland is not where the intellectual property for iPads or iPhones were developed, it's not where they are even made. So Apple pays tax in Ireland on the money it makes in Ireland. Any other money they have made they should pay but where it is made. We don't believe it is owed here. But ultimately the European Court of Justice will decide that.

I think we are going to win the case, Apple have taken the case to the ECJ, we have too but I assume they would have taken the case anyway whether we did or not. I think the fact that we are defending our tax policy sends a very positive message to companies, American or otherwise who may wish to invest in Ireland that we will notwithstanding pressure domestically, stand over our policy and our commitments and we will see what the ECJ determines.

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Internationally, a lot of attention on your appointment has focused on your sexuality, given Ireland's staunchly Catholic past. But here in Ireland, it's not really been an issue at all. Does that surprise you?

I think it has just reflected a change in Irish society that has already happened. I don't feel that I am necessarily changing things for other people. I think that other people, perhaps people braver than me, who campaigned for equal rights

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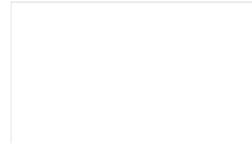
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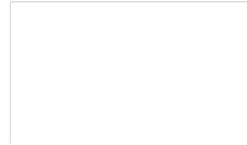
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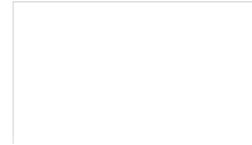
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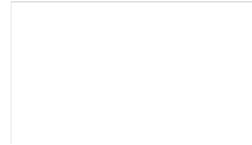
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