

Meeting of the Seanad Special Select Committee on the UK's Withdrawal from the European Union

Thank you Chair for your kind invitation and the opportunity to address this committee.

As many of you know, Border Communities Against Brexit, came about because of real concerns that the voices of those of us in the border region are not being listened to when it comes to the implications of Brexit.

We are a broad, cross community and non-party-political group. We invite anyone who shares our concerns to join with us in building an effective campaign.

We have come together to ensure that the North's democratically expressed wish by 56% of its people is to remain within the EU is respected.

We want to ensure that the views of local communities are heard when big decisions affecting our futures are taken in London, Dublin and Brussels.

The prospect of a new EU frontier, stretching from Dundalk to Derry some 300 miles, is not acceptable to those of us living and working in border areas, North or South.

Our DAY OF ACTION in October and again in February was a huge success, and another protest at Stormont and Leinster House against article 50 being triggered without the British Prime Minister out lining a position for the North and Border Communities.

We are gathering a huge ground swell of public support with thousands attending our co-ordinated rallies.

It also demonstrates to everyone how unworkable a hard border would be.

We have met the Ministers at the North South Ministerial Council, attended the All Ireland Civil Dialogue in Kilmainham, we would like to

take this opportunity to thank all political parties and the office of the Taoisigh, for their support.

Main Challenge

If Brexit proceeds under the current constitutional arrangements, the border dividing Ireland will become an external border of the EU, possibly classified by the EU as a Third Country.

There is no reassurance for us in hearing both the British and Irish Governments state publicly that they do not wish to see the reintroduction of border control's and customs posts, and the closure of hundreds of Border roads.

This may not be up to them alone to determine.

Recently Michel Barnier said in his statement to the Oireachtas that the EU would seek to protect its borders and its consumers, and on Monday 22nd following the General Affairs Council (GAC) meeting in Brussels their statement on the Border stated that "The EU's hope of avoiding a Hard Border on the island of Ireland, while respecting the EU's legal order, meaning customs checks will have to be in place, if the UK leaves the customs union".

Like me, you probably remember what it was like when there were customs post here in the past.

We remember the time of lengthy delays and traffic backlogs crossing the border. We were recently told that in excess of 2 million vehicles cross the border each month, with over 30,000 cross border workers each day.

Every other external border of the EU has physical and economic controls. Why should we believe that the border dividing Ireland would be any different?

The current arrangements for Europe managing it's external border on the Eastern part of Europe is the responsibility of Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency.

Frontex supports co-ordinates and develops European border management in line with the Treaties including the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU as well as other international obligations.

Frontex seeks to ensure the coordination of the actions of the Member States in the implementation of measures, thereby contributing to an efficient, high and uniform level of control on persons and of surveillance of the external borders of the Member States.

All small roads are closed and people are forced through large designated checkpoints.

We have approximately 270 border roads, in the past there was approximately 17 official crossings.

Frontex state that the issue of migration is there largest issue, but also is the issue of smuggling of excise goods, stolen vehicles and human trafficking.

Unfortunately we know too well of the damaging effect of smuggling and the rise of criminality in the border area.

On our recent visit to Brussels it became very clear to us, that our border will throw up many problems, it is a very complex issue, which cannot be easily sorted out.

A frictionless border or a soft border is a nonsense, because all it takes is a series of serious infringements of that border for Europe to decide that a Hard Border must be put in place; such as the potential for GMO's or beef coming into the UK from countries who do not have the same welfare or steroid rules as the EU does.

Added to that Britain with many different tariffs on excise goods, such as cigarettes and fuel and the forced closure of hundreds of border roads we can therefore see a huge rise in resentment that this new physical border would create.

Therefore a soft border is a Hard Border by stealth.

Major Risk's.

If a hard Brexit happens and the UK decides to purchase cheap food (hormone beef, chlorinated chicken) and allow GMO crops to be grown, and these were brought across a soft border the EU would very quickly establish a Hard Border.

From the very damaging economic effect on business, the 30,000 workers who cross the border daily, the tens of thousands who visit family and friends, and the tens of thousands who for work or sporting fixtures, or those who choose to holiday and travel North and South on a regular basis a Hard Border would be a disaster.

The agri / agri food sector will be especially affected with a Hard Border, there are 100,000 employed in the North in this sector, and across the island of Ireland 263,000 jobs supported in Tourism which is an all island product.

With a Hard Brexit and therefore a Hard Border many of these jobs will be put at risk.

But on a broader political issue a Hard Border is much, much more potentially disastrous.

If the UK moves to WTO tariffs to trade with EU countries some agricultural tariffs would reach 60 – 70%, this would severely damage agriculture across the island of Ireland. The Irish Beef industry employs between 80,000 – 100,000 people.

Northern Nationalism has embraced the Peace Process which has had massive European support.

The financial assistance to thousands of community groups in Peace building, the fantastic support in developing the Economy such as Motor Ways, Train links, and Telecommunications and supporting business to set up and create jobs, has utterly transformed the North of this Island in the past 25 years.

No one has been left out or excluded.

The total financial assistance from the EU Co Funded Programmes to the North from 2014 – 2020 is €3.5 billion, while the period from 2007 – 2013 was €3.4 billion.

£2.3 billion pounds of EU financial support to the rural community and farmers in the North of Ireland (from 2014 – 2020) is another example of how enormous the EU assistance to the North is.

Further detail on the various EU funded programmes can be found here <http://www.eurolink-eu.net/eu-funding-2/>.

The total funding for the North from 2014 / 2020 is close to €4 Billion.

The economic damage done by the loss of these funds will be huge, a British administration who has been against CAP for very many years will not assist farmers and rural communities in the North.

Potential Solution.

We are arguing for a Special Status to be tabled NOW in the Brexit negotiations.

We very strongly urge the Irish Government to have this tabled at the next GAC meeting, to open a strand of specific discussions, separately with the British Government and with the political parties in the North so that an agreement on what that Special Status would look like and the three institutions (London, Dublin & Stormont) would have an agreed position to put to Europe.

In our opinion a Special Status does NOT affect the constitutional position of Northern Ireland within the UK, it allows Northern Ireland to remain part of the EU.

The rights of all those born in NI are therefore protected as EU citizens (1.8 million who have the right of an Irish Passport under the Good Friday Agreement).

An EU Border effectively in the Irish Sea allows NI to trade in goods and services as it does now, it removes the need for a border on the island of Ireland, and it protects Ireland and EU consumers.

The EU imposes dozens of different duties on the import of beef; these are the percentage rates charged on selected cuts

For example, if after a Brexit on WTO terms a French restaurant sought to buy £100 worth of British rump steak, it would have to pay an additional £62.20 in customs duties

36.1%

Whole carcass

‘Carcases or half-carcases of bovine animals, fresh or chilled’

47.2%

Forequarters

‘Unseparated or separated forequarters of bovine animals, with bone in, fresh or chilled’

68.5%

Chuck and brisket

‘Frozen bovine boneless crop, chuck and blade and brisket cuts’

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0

Tongue

64.5%

Hindquarters

‘Unseparated or separated hindquarters of bovine animals, with bone in, fresh or chilled’

62.2%

Rump

‘Fresh or chilled bovine meat, boneless’

77.4%

T-bone

'Fresh or chilled bovine cuts, with bone in'

83.8%

Skirt

'Fresh or chilled edible bovine thick and thin skirt (excl. for manufacture of pharmaceutical products)'

Source <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/feb/20/no-deal-brexit-would-mean-6bn-in-extra-costs-for-uk-exporters>

30% of raw milk produced in the north is processed in the south every day; a big percentage of this milk is processed into Baby formula. Firstly a big question mark hangs over whether any of this milk will be able to be processed in the south and the Chinese will not allow formula to contain milk from outside the EU. If this happens it will cause a major shock to the dairy industry in the North.

In 2014, over 45% of lambs from the north (370k) were sold to the south, which is over 7,000 a week, the most of these go on for sale in France, this market access is crucial for sheep farming in the North, it faces devastation.

The UK is Ireland's largest trading partner, with more than €1.2 billion of goods and services traded between us every week, directly supporting 400,000 jobs on both islands and even more among suppliers and surrounding communities.

The fact that 56% of the North voted to Remain in the EU, the North's population is being dragged out against our will. **441,000 voted to remain.**

Their opinion is Not being respected.

They are being totally disenfranchised.

It could be argued that many will see this as a Re - Partition of Ireland, with hard physical infrastructure.

There is at least a generation who do not remember the troubles, and at least two generations who do not remember any physical border.

Therefore the potential exists for creating a divided Ireland, giving way to alienation of border communities, the growth of resentment and frustration as they will perceive that their Irish-ness has been greatly diminished or taken away.

An extract from Irish Border Lands.com on Crossing the Border.

I have an – a memory, very distinct memory, of going to hire – in real hard times, trying to, to buy in a couple of trees from somebody that was felling them, and this was going to keep, eh, reduce the fuel bill and keep the family warmer for the winter, but having to hire em, a chainsaw, which I didn't have, from a fella named Maurice Allen at Kanturk, which is a post office, which basically if you look at it, about two miles from Clones on the Newtownbutler road. And I had to go through a Gard – a Garda checkpoint at the Creighton corner, which is on the, on the Newtownbutler road in Clones. I had to go through a customs post then, on the southern side. Then I had to go through a joint Garda and army checkpoint just before I crossed the border, to be met by a foot patrol of the British army, who were out on manouvers. Then I had to go through an RUC checkpoint less than half a mile up the road, to go through the permanent army British checkpoint at Kanturk ... that was six stops to go to a fella to hire a chainsaw, and I had to go through the six of them on the way back in. and those were the kind of things that in the end of it all, scraped away at people's tolerance.
Donald McDonald Omagh, Co. Tyrone.