

## **LORD KINNOULL**

### **OPENING STATEMENT TO THE OIREACHTAS JOINT COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN UNION AFFAIRS, WEDNESDAY 21 OCTOBER 2020**

Deputy McHugh, Deputies and Senators, we are honoured to join your meeting this morning. Our respective Committees have enjoyed a strong working relationship in recent years, and today's virtual meeting is a welcome opportunity to continue our dialogue.

Scrutinising the implications of Brexit for Northern Ireland and Ireland has been one of my Committee's overriding priorities. In December 2016 we published a report on *Brexit: UK-Irish relations*, and have conducted several visits to Belfast, Dublin and the border region. Following our analysis of the original 'Backstop' in December 2018, we published detailed reports on the revised Withdrawal Agreement and Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland in January and June 2020.

After last week's European Council, the Prime Minister said that the UK "should get ready for January 1 with arrangements that are more like Australia's based on simple principles of global free trade". The Committee has consistently held that it is greatly in the interests of all concerned that a mutually advantageous free trade agreement is concluded. Therefore our hope is that both the UK and the EU will be willing to make the necessary compromises to ensure that negotiations reach a successful conclusion.

On 16 October, my Committee published a report on Part 5 of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill, ahead of its Second Reading in the House of Lords on 19 October. The report concluded that the UK Government has not disclosed any evidence that the EU has acted in bad faith; and has not explained why it chose not to use the Withdrawal Agreement's safeguard, arbitration and dispute resolution procedures, or why it chose instead to take pre-emptive and unilateral action through the Bill. In the absence of these explanations, the Committee expressed the hope that the Government will undertake to remove Part 5, while seeking to reach an agreement with the EU both on the future UK-EU relationship, and on the implementation of the Protocol.

At the same time, the report acknowledged the UK Government's continuing commitment to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and its legitimate concern that a rigid interpretation of the Protocol, by creating barriers between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, could undermine it. Yet the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is itself made up of three interlocking strands, supporting North-South, East-West and internal Northern Ireland relationships. The challenge before the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee, which met earlier this week, is to come up with solutions on implementation of the Protocol that maintain this delicate equilibrium.

More than ever, it is incumbent on all parties, including the UK Government, the EU, the Irish Government, and the Northern Ireland Executive, to work in a common endeavour to prioritise and urgently address the interests, stability and prosperity of the people and communities of Northern Ireland. As we concluded in our first report, anything less would diminish the efforts of all those who have worked so hard for peace and good relations across these islands.

We look forward to discussing these issues with you this morning.