

**Opening Statement**  
**Minister Coveney's appearance at the JCEUA**  
**27 April 2021**

***\*\*\*Check against delivery\*\*\****

Cathaoirleach,

I was very glad to receive your invitation to appear before the Committee in what is an important week for the EU-UK relationship.

This week, we will finalise the ratification of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). The European Parliament today completes its scrutiny of the Agreement. I hope and expect it to be endorsed by the European Parliament when the result of its consent vote is announced tomorrow morning. This will allow for the final formalities to be completed.

Dáil Éireann of course adopted by acclamation a motion of support in January.

Ratifying the TCA will put a full toolbox at our disposal to make the best of the new framework for EU-UK cooperation.

The Agreement provides for 23 dedicated Committees and Working Groups, under an overall EU-UK Partnership Council to oversee the implementation of all aspects of the EU-UK relationship, with a view to making them work as well as possible. These will become forums where the EU can come together with the UK to iron out the practical details of how we cooperate, on issues from trade to aviation to law enforcement.

Ireland and all Member States will have the right to participate in these meetings as part of the EU delegation. We hope that the work of these joint bodies can begin as soon as possible and we look forward to engaging in them fully, in support of our interests and values.

This week's developments are something of a milestone, therefore, in opening up new paths for us to maximise the potential of the TCA. They also serve as a timely reminder of what the Agreement has gained for us and what it avoided.

It is not so long ago that the daily headlines questioned whether an EU-UK Agreement would be possible at all. Members of this Committee are all too familiar with what a ‘no deal’ outcome would have meant for this island. In addition to tariffs and quotas, a ‘no-deal’ outcome would have severely constrained cooperation in key sectors such as transport, energy and policing. The ESRI found that, over the long term, a trade deal would almost halve the negative impact on our GDP of no deal.

The TCA does not – nor could it – replicate the status quo ante, but it means that these important forms of cooperation and trade can continue, albeit in a new framework.

The adjustment to the new reality created by the UK’s decision to leave the EU, and with it the Single Market and Customs Union, has been challenging. There can be no doubt but that the Government’s years-long planning and major investment in financial supports and infrastructure were entirely justified.

While we have mitigated against the worst possible outcomes, we were always clear that no level of preparation could have entirely allayed the effects of Brexit. Our fishers, our hauliers, and our importers and exporters are at the sharp end of the unavoidable changes brought by Brexit. We continue to engage with these sectors closely. The Government remains wholeheartedly committed to providing all of the support and guidance that we can as we navigate these challenges together.

Cathaoirleach,

The TCA is of course not the only treaty that establishes new EU-UK arrangements. The Withdrawal Agreement, including the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, also provides a vital framework that is of particular importance for this island.

The Protocol is the only solution to the problems created by Brexit for the island of Ireland and we firmly support ongoing contacts between the EU and the UK on its full implementation.

The Government respects and has listened to the concerns voiced by some on aspects of how the Protocol operates. I know from my own engagements with Vice President Sefcovic that the EU is doing everything possible to reflect these concerns and, working with the UK, to implement the Protocol in a way that impacts as little as possible on people's everyday lives. I welcome particularly the recent commitment to joint EU-UK engagement with NI stakeholders in the weeks ahead on the issues involved.

I firmly believe that acting together, within the framework of the Protocol, the EU and UK can find solutions to the outstanding issues. I welcome the recent constructive engagements between Vice President Sefcovic and Lord Frost. Finding a sustainable and collaborative way forward is ultimately to the benefit of all communities in Northern Ireland, and to the EU and UK as a whole. It will also foster stability that, given recent very concerning disturbances in Northern Ireland, is needed now more than ever.

I know that all of us here want to see the Protocol and the TCA operate as effectively as possible. I look forward to the Members' interventions and to answering all of the questions that you have.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cathaoirleach.