

**Paul Johnston, UK Ambassador to Ireland, introductory statement to Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs, Wednesday 12 July**

Dear Chair and Deputies

It is a pleasure to be here; thank you for the invitation to address the committee.

We met last year in a very different political context in terms of the UK's relationship with the European Union.

Given the crucial importance of political stability in Northern Ireland, and also the wider importance of the UK/EU relationship, not least to Ireland and not least in the current geopolitical context, it was rightly a priority for the UK and the EU to resolve the difficulties concerning the Northern Ireland Protocol.

So I am pleased to be here this year in a different political situation, in particular following the conclusion of the Windsor Framework. And I want to put on record again our thanks for the important role the Irish government played in that process.

The UK Foreign Secretary said last week at the UK/EU Partnership Parliamentary Assembly that "it was always obvious" that "close and friendly cooperation between the UK and the EU would be the ultimate and eventual outcome of Brexit".

He admitted that it took longer to get there than many of us would have liked.

But I believe that we are now on a positive trajectory for UK-EU relations for three reasons.

First because we have stabilised our relationship with the conclusion of the Windsor Framework.

Second, our shared values and interests in the challenging world we face today, exemplified by our work on Ukraine, has offered a new model for effective UK-EU cooperation.

And third, we have a forward looking agenda to maintain momentum, as the Foreign Secretary and Vice-President Sefcovic confirmed when they met last week.

**Windsor Framework**

The Windsor Framework was a significant achievement based on a shared sense of collaboration to find workable solutions, underpinned by trust.

It fixed the practical problems we were facing, particularly on trade from GB to NI, thus, crucially, restoring one of the delicate balances of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement.

And it was so welcome and appropriate that the Framework was agreed before the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. It was a privilege and an experience I will long remember to be at Queen's University Belfast and Hillsborough Castle for the events to mark that special anniversary.

The Windsor Framework is rightly seen as a turning point for Northern Ireland. The UK government, like the Irish government and the EU as a whole, wants to see an Executive restored, so that Northern Ireland can seize the full benefits that the new Framework provides. We continue to urge the parties to return to power-sharing at the earliest opportunity.

Of course, more work will be needed on detailed implementation in the coming months but the government is confident the Framework provides the foundation, most importantly for political and economic stability in Northern Ireland, but also for a more positive UK-EU relationship in the years to come.

## **Ukraine**

It's clear that an important factor in the determination to resolve the differences over the Northern Ireland Protocol was the shared priority the UK and EU have in relation to the appalling events happening at the other end of our continent.

I think the commitment the UK has shown to Euro-Atlantic security ever since the Brexit decision, but particularly since the invasion of Ukraine has illustrated that - to coin a phrase - although the UK has left the European Union, we have not left Europe.

The UK's Integrated Review Refresh, our review of the international situation and its implications, published in March this year was clear that *"the security and prosperity of the Euro-Atlantic will remain our core priority, bolstered by a reinvigoration of our European relationships"*.

We have seen this in practice over the last sixteen months as we have worked together to support Ukraine and its people, and to sanction the Russian war machine.

And we are seeing that cooperation also, in supporting Ukraine to rebuild its society, its economy and its infrastructure.

I was delighted that the Tánaiste was in London for the UK-hosted Ukraine Recovery Conference last month, where President von der Leyen pledged, on behalf of the EU, €50 billion in grants and loans.

We must support Ukraine to win the war and the peace. Our shared European values and interests are at stake.

## **Maintaining momentum**

This brings me to my third and final point of my introductory remarks.

I believe that the conclusion of the Windsor Framework and the intense UK-EU cooperation on Ukraine, have shown that we are now in a positive place for the future of UK-EU cooperation.

To quote the Integrated Review Refresh again: *"the enduring strength of the European family of nations, and of the UK's ties within it, has been reaffirmed"...*

And *"we will build on the Trade and Cooperation Agreement and the Windsor Framework to enter a new phase in our post-Brexit relationships in Europe"*.

Under the TCA there are now formal UK/EU dialogues on cyber security and counter-terrorism.

And more broadly we are developing foreign policy cooperation between the UK and EU.

One important example is the Western Balkans – I know you heard from the EU special representative for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue a fortnight ago. Our missions in Brussels and on the ground across the region are working together very closely on these issues.

But our ambition and our agenda can go further. To name three areas:

1. The European Political Community (EPC) has been a welcome new forum for continent-wide cooperation. The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach most recently met in the margins of the last meeting in Moldova last month. The UK will host an EPC leaders' meeting next year following the next summit in Spain in October.
2. The UK has also renewed our participation in the North Seas Energy Cooperation group, which will help facilitate, amongst other things, deeper UK/Ireland cooperation on energy. We're grateful to Minister Eamon Ryan for the role he has played in that forum.
3. And we are expanding cooperation on illegal migration, which is a pan-European issue. This includes working through the Calais Group (UK, FR, DE, BE and EU) and we have opened talks to establish a Working Arrangement with Frontex, the EU border and coast guard agency.

## **Conclusion**

Looking even further ahead, there will be a review of the TCA as a whole in 2025. A lot of water will pass under many bridges before then. Our focus for now should be building on the positive developments of recent months to encourage further progress in the relationship in our shared interest.