

## **Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement**

**Thursday 15 October 2020**

**Committee Room 3, Leinster House**

### **Opening remarks**

- I thank the Chair for the invitation to meet the Committee. I am pleased to have this opportunity to outline a number of issues relating to the Good Friday Agreement in the context of Brexit and I look forward to discussion with Members. It is good also to have so many Northern MPs joining us today, this forum is an important, practical way to facilitate the all island engagement that is so crucial on these issues.
- Protection of the Good Friday Agreement has been a fundamental priority for the Government from the very beginning of the Brexit process, and at every phase of the negotiations.
- That is reflected in the very prominent place that the protection of the Good Friday Agreement has in the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland. This emphasis is in line with the central importance that the unique circumstances of the island of Ireland have not only for Ireland, but for all of our EU partners.
- It is vital that the Protocol is now implemented in full and in good faith. For our part, together with our EU partners we have consistently urged the UK to move forward on operationalising the Protocol.
- We have delivered this message through bilateral channels but also, very importantly, through our participation as part of the EU delegation in the **Joint Committee on Implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement** and the **Specialised Committee on Implementation of the Protocol**, which have met in recent weeks and months, and are expected to meet again soon. I understand the next meeting of the Joint Committee will take place on Monday next.
- I would like to address the UK Government's Internal Market Bill. Both Ireland and the EU have made clear our profound concern at this Bill, including in respect of the Bill as now amended. The UK must move away from the path it has chosen in the Bill and work to rebuild trust by implementing the Withdrawal Agreement in full and in good faith.
- We have been particularly concerned by suggestions from the UK Government that its unilateral approach is designed to protect the Good Friday Agreement. The Protocol itself is specifically designed to protect the Agreement and the gains of the peace process, including

avoiding a hard border. It also protects the integrity of the Single Market, and Ireland's place in it.

- The Protocol is designed to operate in all circumstances, including in the event that there is no EU-UK Future Relationship agreement. Our view is that these developments could seriously erode and damage political trust in Northern Ireland and between the EU and the UK.
- The Protocol was the result of long and difficult negotiations and represents a fair and balanced outcome for all parties. There have been compromises on all sides. We have also been clear that implementation of the Protocol should work for the economy and people of Northern Ireland - and indeed for the all-island economy and the people of this island - in as smooth a manner as possible. Clarity and stability are vital for businesses and people in Northern Ireland.
- The Protocol also provides for no diminution of the rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity provided for the people of Northern Ireland, as set out in the Good Friday Agreement. We will continue to engage with UK counterparts on implementation of this important commitment.
- The EU rights of Irish and therefore EU citizens from Northern Ireland are specifically addressed in the Protocol. It confirms that Irish citizens in Northern Ireland, "will continue to enjoy, exercise and have access to rights, opportunities and benefits" that come with EU citizenship.
- The Government is working proactively to ensure that people in Northern Ireland can continue to enjoy access to EU rights, opportunities and benefits into the future, as they do today - including in relation to the benefits of EHIC and the Erasmus + programme. Some of this is still to be addressed during transition. I would be happy to provide further detail on this with Members during our discussion.
- As Members will be aware, the **Common Travel Area** arrangements underpin the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts, as well as the cross-border freedoms central to the lives and livelihoods of the people of Northern Ireland and the border region. The CTA will be maintained in all circumstances and Irish officials across Government continue to work with UK counterparts to ensure that the interests and reciprocal rights of our respective citizens are maintained and safeguarded by the CTA.
- I welcome also the resumption of meetings of the North South Ministerial Council, since I last joined you. A plenary session was held on 31 July and Ministerial meetings on sectoral issues continue, bringing our Government and the Northern Ireland Executive together to oversee and further develop North South cooperation, as provided for under the Agreement.

- North South Cooperation is recognised and protected in the Protocol and will remain a priority for successive Irish Governments. To build normal relations on our island, we must continue to cooperate formally and informally in the areas which are important to our people, our businesses and our environment. In Budget 2021, through the Shared Island Fund, a planned €500m will be made available out to 2025 to deliver on our commitment to build a shared island underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement. This complements the Government's existing all-island commitments.
- As I am sure Members will appreciate, the next few weeks are crucial with regard to ongoing work to secure an agreement between the EU and UK on a future partnership. I attended the General Affairs Council earlier this week, where I and my colleagues from across the EU27 Member States considered the outstanding issues, not only in the Future Relationship but also regarding implementation of the Protocol.
- Significant challenges remain, but the EU is doing its utmost to work towards a successful conclusion of the talks.
- The EU-UK relationship will change regardless. It is vital that businesses no matter how small, take immediate steps to understand the impacts the new rules or processes that will apply from 1 January 2021 will have on their operations. Time is short and action is required now. The Government's **Brexit Readiness Action** plan provides information on these changes and the supports in place to assist businesses.
- In all circumstances, our relationship with the UK will remain crucially important but it will be different. As co-guarantors, however, the two Governments will continue to have our obligations under the Good Friday Agreement and we will continue to work together to deliver on our shared goals.
- The Irish Government will continue to place the Good Friday Agreement and the gains of the Peace Process at the top of our agenda, working with the UK Government in partnership.

Ends