

**Minister Coveney's appearance before the Seanad Special  
Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the United  
Kingdom from the European Union**

**2 December 2020**

I am pleased to have the opportunity to come before the House to give an update on Brexit developments. I last updated the Seanad on Brexit developments in September, and of course we are all aware that the Brexit Omnibus Bill completed Second Stage in the Seanad yesterday ahead of Committee and Remaining Stages tomorrow.

I wish to convey, once again, my appreciation for the solidarity shown by the Oireachtas throughout the Brexit process. It has been of critical importance to have that support and unity of purpose as we face the challenges that Brexit brings.

I will give an update on the three strands of Brexit work ongoing across Government: the EU-UK Future Partnership negotiations; the implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland; and readiness for the end of the transition period.

This week, as Senators will know, is a crucial one for the **EU-UK Future Partnership** negotiations. Michel Barnier and his team are in London, engaging intensively with the UK side to secure a deal in the short amount of time remaining. We are in decisive days of this process.

Commission President von der Leyen briefed the European Parliament last week – she noted that while real progress has been achieved, gaps on the three key issues of the level playing field, the governance of a future agreement, and fisheries have not been bridged. Closing these gaps is the prerequisite for a successful conclusion to the negotiations.

I believe that with political will, a deal can be done. The EU wants a deal, but our stance has always been that this cannot be at any price. Any deal must uphold the integrity of the Single Market and reflect the long-term political and economic interests of the Union. This is why free and fair competition is at the heart of these negotiations – it underpins our common current high standards on labour and social rights, the environment, climate change and tax transparency.

Senators will be very aware that fisheries is an area of the utmost political importance and sensitivity for Ireland. It is vital that we do everything possible to protect our vulnerable

coastal communities and fishers. In particular, it will be important to ensure that no EU Member State is disproportionately affected by any new arrangements.

Throughout this process we have worked closely with the EU Task Force and Michel Barnier. From the start, Mr Barnier has been a good friend of Ireland. He is acutely aware of our concerns and knows that Ireland continues to fully support his work.

The work on **implementing the Withdrawal Agreement** is formally separate to the Future Relationship, and of course the Withdrawal Agreement is designed to operate regardless of whether there is a separate trade agreement. We remain committed to building a positive and fruitful future relationship with the UK, but it can only be on the basis of trust and confidence that the Withdrawal Agreement is being fully implemented. We have emphasised this in our discussions with our EU counterparts. The **Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland** is a central component of the Withdrawal Agreement. It is devised to provide stability and certainty on the island of Ireland - to protect the Good Friday Agreement, North/South cooperation and the all-island

economy. It prevents a hard border on the island of Ireland, and preserves the integrity of the EU Single Market and Ireland's place in it. It ensures access for Northern Ireland goods to the Single Market and allows the trade in goods to continue to flow freely on this island. It is vital that the Protocol is now fully and faithfully implemented.

There has been some positive momentum on implementation in recent weeks. Progress has been made in relation to a number of key issues including medicines and the operation of the Single Electricity Market in Northern Ireland. It is vital that this momentum continues and we expect intensive engagement at the Joint Committee for Implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement and Specialised Committee for Implementation of the Protocol in the immediate period ahead.

We are acutely conscious of its sensitive nature and critical importance of all of these issues. I am confident that we will be able to find and implement solutions that work for people and businesses in Northern Ireland.

I know that Senators have been following the progress of the UK's Internal Market Bill very closely. I supported the **private members' motion brought before this House on**

**the Withdrawal Agreement in September.** The EU has made clear that a Future Relationship agreement is predicated on implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement. We expect that the UK Government will take the necessary steps to ensure that there is no suggestion of the Withdrawal Agreement, including the Protocol, being undermined.

The Withdrawal Agreement provides structures for handling issues around the implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Protocol. These are the only appropriate way to deal with the outstanding questions.

The third strand of our Brexit work in Government is our **preparations for the end of the transition period on 31 December – just 29 days away.**

Irrespective of the outcome of the ongoing negotiations, the end of the transition period will bring substantial and lasting change and action must be taken now. There will be no extra time.

From 1 January, UK will be outside the Single Market and the Customs Union. This means new controls and procedures must be applied to any goods moving to, from or through

Great Britain – processes that do not apply to such trade today.

I would urge Senators to continue to amplify key readiness messages to stakeholders, particularly businesses large and small. Time is running out and it is imperative that they now finalise their preparations for 1 January.

In September, the Government launched its Brexit Readiness Action Plan. The Plan sets out the actions the Government will take, and that businesses and citizens must take, to address the changes arising at the end of the transition period.

Since it was launched, there have been more than 50 separate Ministerial engagements dealing with Brexit. These were supported by a range of official level meetings and briefings. We are using a multitude of virtual tools from webinars to instructional videos to assist businesses prepare for the new reality.

The Tánaiste has sent a Brexit readiness checklist to the 225,000 businesses registered in Ireland. Revenue separately has written to over 90,000 businesses trading with the UK and followed up with some 14,000 phone calls.

We have made a range of financial, upskilling and advisory supports available to businesses. Budget 2021 allocates €340 million to Brexit-related measures.

In response to a specific demand from industry, the July Jobs Stimulus Package included a €20 million “Ready for Customs” package to assist with hiring and training staff in the customs area.

Preparations in our ports and airports are well advanced. In addition to the new infrastructure, we have invested in new staff and ICT systems. Some 1,500 additional staff will be engaged in supporting and carrying out customs, SPS and food safety checks and controls.

We are working closely with the European Commission to ensure the €5 billion Brexit Adjustment Reserve targets the sectors and Member States most disproportionately impacted by Brexit.

I was here yesterday for the Second Stage debate on the 2020 Brexit Omnibus Bill which is another key part of our national preparations for the end of the transition period. I am grateful for your cooperation in ensuring this essential piece of legislation is in place by the end of the year.

Just as the future shape of the relationship between the UK and the EU will be decided in the coming months, we must continue to develop **Ireland's bilateral engagement with the UK outside the EU.**

We will always be close neighbours, trading partners and co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement. The context for our relationship has changed, but we are committed to building on and strengthening the British Irish relationship.



Ireland will also work to ensure the closest possible future relationship between the EU and the UK in the time remaining. Ireland's place remains at the heart of the European Union. I will continue to inform the House on developments in the weeks ahead.