

# **Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the UK from the EU**

**Wednesday, 24 November 2021**

## **Minister's Opening Statement**

[Word count: 601]

Cathaoirleach,

Thank you for the opportunity to return to the Committee.

Thank you to the Members for their work and excellent interim report. I look forward to the publication of the final report later this year.

I would like also to thank the various witnesses that have shared their perspectives with the Committee. The Committee provides an important platform for voices from across politics, business, community groups, and civil society. Continued engagement from across these spheres illustrates just how relevant and important the outworking of Brexit remains for all of us.

Cathaoirleach,

Almost 12 months ago, we welcomed the finalisation of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement. This was the final element in a sequence of agreements negotiated to allow the orderly withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU and underpin the framework for future relations. Since then, the work of the joint implementation bodies under the agreement has begun. In June, we saw the first meeting of the Partnership Council of the TCA and its subsidiary bodies continue to meet, including for example the Trade Partnership Committee on 15 November.

The TCA, like the Withdrawal Agreement, was jointly agreed by the EU and the UK. Through its joint implementation we want to maximise the opportunities presented by the TCA. We want to see the future relationship with the UK develop positively. In order to achieve this, the parties must work together, in a spirit of partnership and trust.

When trust is compromised, progress is threatened. The recent UK approach to the Protocol has unfortunately called that trust into question. I believe, however, that there is an opportunity before us now to seize momentum toward agreeing a constructive way forward.

Cathaoirleach,

The EU has an unwavering commitment to the people of Northern Ireland, and to the implementation of the Protocol. Commission Vice President Šefčovič has repeatedly stated, including before this Committee, that the Union's number one priority remains to ensure that the Good Friday Agreement is protected, that a hard border on the island of Ireland is avoided, and that the integrity of the EU Single Market is maintained.

In October, following extensive engagement with Northern Irish stakeholders – from political leaders to businesses and a cross-section of civic society – the Commission published a package of proposals setting out creative, practical solutions, designed to help Northern Ireland deal with the consequences of Brexit.

These non-papers cover issues of customs, SPS, medicines, and improving engagement with Northern Irish stakeholders and authorities.

Since their publication, the EU has been in dialogue with the UK with the ambition of achieving agreed solutions that can ensure greater stability and certainty for people and businesses in Northern Ireland.

I remain in close and regular contact with Vice President Šefčovič – indeed, we met last week. He remains committed to finding credible and durable solutions for the genuine concerns raised with him by people and businesses in Northern Ireland.

I also met last week with Lord Frost and reiterated the need to engage constructively in this process, to grasp the current window of opportunity, and to agree a deal that can address real-world concerns from people in Northern Ireland.

I believe the remaining issues can be resolved. However, to do so, we need to get to a much more positive, much more stable, much more trusting EU-UK relationship. We have some way to go to get there – but I can assure this house that the Government will not stop doing all that it can to help develop, support and sustain such a relationship in the interests of all people on this island.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.