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# Minister Coveney remarks to NI Chamber of Commerce

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[Speech](#)

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Simon Coveney TD -  
29/8/17

## Breakfast Briefing with Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce

### Check Against Delivery

**Thank you Ellvena** and thanks to all of you for being here. The silver lining to the cloud of Brexit is that there's now a booming industry in Brexit breakfasts! I'm very glad mine is an Ulster Fry this morning and I'm **grateful to Ann and her team** for all the work that has gone into making this happen.

It's really important you're here. The voice of business has not been heard sufficiently in the debate on what kind of Brexit is best for the UK and what kind of Brexit is best for Northern Ireland. And we are at an absolutely critical juncture now in terms of making sure we agree on the best possible future for your businesses and for the people of Ireland, North and South.

I hear regularly from business-women and men all across the island and I'm planning to intensify that engagement in the coming weeks and months. I visited London in July and met with business representatives there.

And it's really important for me this morning to leave with a better sense of your concerns and hopes for the period ahead - just as I hope to leave you with the message that you should not be underestimating your influence over the crucial weeks to come.

The days of politicians enjoying a quiet August are over anyway! The release of key UK position papers on future customs arrangements and on Northern Ireland in the middle of this month ensured an early return from holidays and a few late nights hovering over small-print with highlighter pens. And this week in Brussels, beginning yesterday, sees negotiators back at work for the UK and EU teams led by David Davis and Michel Barnier.

I and the Taoiseach welcomed the UK position papers, and the paper on Northern Ireland in particular. We had been calling on the UK government to provide greater clarity and commit its ideas to paper, so it is only right and proper to express appreciation when that is done.

And there's a lot we can be positive about - for example on the Common Travel Area, the Good Friday Agreement, PEACE funding and North/South co-operation. There's good language in the UK paper in each of these areas and clearly, at least in aspirations, more common ground than space between us.

That is not to underestimate the task ahead however. Anyone even skim-reading the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement - which has provided the bedrock for peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland for almost 20 years now - will see it is peppered with references to North-South and East-West cooperation, in the context of our shared EU membership. It's quite clear no-one voting for the Good Friday Agreement foresaw the circumstances in which we find ourselves today.

It's no great secret either that the EU has been a quiet but deeply effective force for good in Northern Ireland - not just direct financial supports and the practical benefits of its many economic and social programmes, but also as a source for a common European identity across the island.

The EU has played a vital role in supporting the peace process and this should not be lost in the context of a UK exit. Therefore, one of our objectives for the Brexit negotiations is to ensure that the withdrawal agreement provides for continued EU support to the Northern Ireland peace process and to the future development of the region.

The Good Friday Agreement also ensures that everyone born in Northern Ireland has a birthright to EU citizenship, as part of your right to Irish citizenship. And a lot remains to be clarified about how those rights will be protected when Northern Ireland leaves the EU. We are determined those rights will be safeguarded to the fullest extent possible.

Inevitably, a lot of media attention is focusing on our shared border however, and with good reason. It is critical we get this right - our continued peace and prosperity depends upon it.

The commitment in the UK paper to "avoiding any physical border infrastructure for any purpose" is very welcome. But that is a lot easier said than done.

Any move away from the status quo will be bad news. The current near-invisible border has been a vital part of our shared peace, just as it has been a critical facilitator of Northern Ireland's £3.6 billion (pounds) of exports heading south to Ireland annually. That's more than a third of all Northern Ireland exports.

The question then becomes - how do we preserve this near-invisible border that works so well, that helped us put conflict and division behind us, that allows us to trade so effectively, that sees US visitors drive North from the Boyne to the Titanic

Quarter without a second thought - how do we ensure we don't lose the openness that has brought us so far?

We all need to remember what this is about. It's more than just goods crossing the border. It's about people's lives - the people in the 118,000 vehicles that travel our 15 largest cross-border roads each day. The lives of the people who work with you and for you. And your ability to effectively run your businesses and earn livelihoods.

And I have to tell you, there is one clear way in which we can preserve these arrangements - and that is for the UK to remain a member of a Customs Union, and of the Single Market. As long as we are still at the stage of considering options as regards customs - and that is what the UK paper two weeks ago does, it presents options - then we have to remind our elected representatives that, by a country mile - and it is still OK to talk in miles in the European Union! - by a country mile, the best solution for Northern Ireland is for the UK to remain within the Customs Union.

Failing that, we need a solution which sees Northern Ireland retain the benefits of the Customs Union, and the associated responsibilities. As the Taoiseach said in Queen's earlier this month, this has been done before for key partners and friends of the European Union. And we are determined that is what the UK will remain. The UK paper two weeks ago put forward two options for future customs arrangements - firstly, a highly streamlined arrangement, and, secondly, a new customs partnership.

The highly streamlined arrangements, with the best will in the world, are unlikely to be streamlined enough. Although we will be starting from the same place, regulations and arrangements will inevitably diverge as the UK negotiates trade deals with third countries. And that will mean more paperwork, customs checks and red tape, all chipping away at the already tight margins of so many cross-border businesses. And that is without getting into the impact more of a border will have on the peace process.

The new customs partnership holds some promise as an idea, but, as currently put forward, could be a logistical nightmare to operate. The customs partnership idea will only prove viable if the UK is prepared to not negotiate separate trade deals with third countries and instead is prepared to take advantage of new EU free trade agreements with countries like Japan or Canada.

Simply put, EU Member States will not countenance a partnership which allows the UK to benefit from full EU access while cutting separate deals with countries that don't share our standards or systems.

And that has obvious implications on this island. For example, how can the UK expect to maintain an open border, an objective we all share, while asking Ireland and other EU Member States to accept that beef that doesn't meet European standards can be easily brought into Ireland from Northern Ireland without the necessary controls?

This simply doesn't tally with the UK's other stated objective of not wishing to undermine the integrity of the Single Market and Customs Union and doing nothing that damages Ireland and our political, social and economic interests. Continued membership of this Customs Union and Single Market - or something very like it - is the answer. And you have to tell your elected representatives that that is the case.

We were distraught at the UK vote to leave the EU, we don't deny that. But we have accepted it. What we won't accept is that people voted explicitly to leave a Customs Union or Single Market. They didn't, and history shouldn't be re-written to pretend that they did.

Do not underestimate your influence here. You have real influence over the politicians that serve this community. And with the current arithmetic in Westminster, and the stance now taken by the leading opposition party in the Commons, your politicians have a remarkable opportunity to influence the final approach the UK government takes.

Ireland negotiates as part of the EU27 and Michel Barnier is doing a superb job representing our interests. The Commission Taskforce and our fellow EU Member States fully share our view that the situation on this island is unique and that imaginative and flexible solutions will have to be found. And of course, there are other critical phase one issues currently under discussion, such as a financial settlement and citizens' rights.

A judgement on whether sufficient progress has been made on all these issues - enough progress to allow us to move to phase two and discuss future relationships - that judgement will be made by the European Council in October.

In the meantime, friends must be honest. In truth, there is no way we can stay quiet - too much is at stake. And for Northern Ireland, the stakes are very high indeed.

That is one of the reasons we urgently need a restored Northern Ireland Executive. I have seen first-hand how Brexit has added an additional unwelcome layer to the fragilities and complexities here. That is why James Brokenshire and I will be working hard to help re-establish the Executive over the coming weeks.

But we also need louder voices from Northern Ireland businesses, and urgently. I'm keen to hear your views now, but I'm keener still that they resonate in Belfast, London and Brussels over the weeks to come.

Thank you again for welcoming me here today.

**Ends**

