
UK exit from the EU Statement to the Dail by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade 27-06-2016

[Speech](#)

Minister Charles Flanagan - 27/6/16



UK exit from the EU
Statement to the Dáil by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 27 June 2016

Ceann Comhairle,

I would like to thank Deputies across the House for being here today for this important discussion. As a Government we welcome all views and I believe there is a collective determination across the government and opposition benches to meet the challenges and uncertainties of the period ahead. Our work together over the next months and years must serve Irish national interests as we construct a new environment in which to maintain the strongest possible relations with our EU partners and with the United Kingdom.

The Irish people expect nothing less than a comprehensive, pro-active, constructive and calm response to these challenges. The Taoiseach has set out his overall approach and the key priorities across government, while other ministers and state agencies are setting out their plans in their respective areas.

For me as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and for my Department, there will be no greater priority than effective handling of the process following the UK electorate's vote to exit from the European Union.

Almost every single unit in my Department will be involved because almost every aspect of our work has a direct connection to this issue – EU and global foreign relations, Northern Ireland, British-Irish Relations, supports to the Irish abroad, trade, development assistance, international law, passport and consular services, and so on. As Minister, I will ensure that we have the capabilities in place to manage all this work both at home and abroad.

The government published a summary of its contingency framework on Friday afternoon. My Department has its own detailed contingency framework and has commenced implementation.

I will go into further detail shortly on actions underway. I want to start, however, by briefly recalling what I said on Friday following confirmation of the referendum result.

First, Ireland is - and will remain – closely aligned to both the EU and the UK. Ireland will of course remain in the EU and in the Eurozone, while we will also do everything to protect our political, economic and people-to-people links to the UK.

Secondly, a key priority for me will be the ongoing work to support stability, reconciliation and prosperity for the people in Northern Ireland.

Thirdly, we must all stress that the UK is not leaving the EU immediately and that all arrangements, rights and facilities linked to EU membership still apply in full. A negotiation process will get underway and will take a minimum of two years prior to a UK exit. During that time the UK remains an EU member state.

Approach of DFAT & its Missions

The referendum outcome presents serious challenges for the EU as a whole but it presents unique challenges here in Ireland, as we repeatedly outlined in the period leading up to the referendum. It is important for us now in the days, weeks, months and, indeed, years ahead, that Ireland's particular circumstances are understood and taken into account.

Last Thursday, polling day, I briefed all the EU Ambassadors accredited to Ireland, setting out the government's priorities for both possible outcomes to the referendum taking place that day. I continued that work on Friday, when the result was known, speaking to UK and other European counterparts by phone, including the UK Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

As ever, Northern Ireland remains a core priority for me. On Friday I also spoke with Northern Ireland political leaders including the First Minister and deputy First Minister. On Wednesday I will travel to Belfast for a series of meetings.

Within my Department, Irish Ambassadors and Consuls General across the world were briefed in the days leading up to the referendum. There were consultations with Heads of Mission in key missions on Friday morning and in the coming days I will convene a meeting of our Ambassadors from a number of EU capitals for consultations and discussions on our approach in the period ahead.

I want to assure the House that Ireland's diplomatic resources will be used to the full – to drive home Ireland's priorities with EU governments, to support the Irish community in Britain and to support Irish trade, among other key tasks.

The Government will also prioritise the necessary work to protect and sustain trade, business, tourism and investment flows within this island, as well as with Britain, the EU and across the world. Our Embassies will support and co-ordinate this work on the ground with Local Market Teams involving the state agencies, while that work will be guided at home by the work of the Export Trade Council which I chair.

As a Government, we will use every resource available to us. On Friday I wrote to all members of the Global Irish Network requesting their support for the Government's work to minimise any adverse impacts on Ireland's interests. I extend my thanks to the vibrant Irish community in the UK who made a very valuable contribution to the debate with many, including Irish4Europe, working tirelessly to stress the Irish perspective and to inform and involve the Irish community. I know that among the Irish community in Britain, many are now worried about their future. The Government, including my Department and Minister of State Joe McHugh, is acutely conscious of their concerns and I want to assure our citizens in the UK that we will continue to advocate for and defend their interests in the time ahead, with particular reference to the Common Travel Area.

Irish Passports

I want to take this opportunity to address the matter of passports and to acknowledge that there has in recent days been a spike in interest in Irish passports in Northern Ireland, Great Britain and elsewhere.

The increased interest clearly points to a sense of concern among some UK passport holders that the rights they enjoy as EU citizens are about to abruptly end. I want to state clearly that this is not the case. The United Kingdom has voted to leave the European Union but it has not yet left. It will take some time for negotiations on a British exit to conclude; Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty envisages a two year negotiation process once the Article is triggered, while many speculate this could take longer.

During this period, the UK remains a member of the European Union, its citizens continue to fully enjoy EU rights including free movement of people within the EU. **There is therefore absolutely no urgency for UK citizens, who may also be Irish citizens, in now applying for Irish passports.**

An unnecessary surge in applications for Irish passports will place significant pressure on the system and on turnaround times and is likely to impact those with a genuine need for passports to facilitate imminent travel plans. I urge those who believe they need to apply for an Irish passport immediately to enjoy free travel in the EU, to take full account of the facts before making an application. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's website clearly sets out information on passport entitlements and procedures. Earlier today I made a fuller statement on this matter.

Implications for Northern Ireland

During the course of the referendum campaign, the Taoiseach and I both pointed to the importance of Ireland's and the UK's shared membership of the European Union for the progress that has been made in Northern Ireland over recent decades – not least the tangible practical support that the EU provided for building peace and reconciliation on our island.

I am therefore very conscious of the serious implications for Northern Ireland of the UK's referendum decision. The fact that 56% of those who voted in Northern Ireland to remain are now faced with the prospect of their preference being set aside as a result of the overall result across the UK raises profound issues, as it does in Scotland.

I know there are very many people in the North – both of the nationalist and unionist traditions – who are deeply concerned that, despite its expressed will, Northern Ireland will now find itself outside of the European Union and deprived of the EU scaffolding that has provided such support for the progress made on this island over recent decades.

These are very real and genuine concerns and the Irish Government intends to address them with a spirit of determination and responsibility.

The key reassurance I can provide is that, irrespective of Friday's result, the Good Friday Agreement remains the template for political relationships on this island and between these islands. When I spoke to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on Friday, we both agreed that this foundational international agreement remains the basis for the two Governments' approach to Northern Ireland. Friday's result does not in any way diminish the centrality of the Good Friday Agreement or the two Governments' commitment to uphold it. As a co-guarantor of the Good Friday and succeeding Agreements, the Irish Government is determined that its

institutions, values and principles will be fully protected.

The Good Friday Agreement is very clear on the issue of sovereignty in Northern Ireland – it rests on the consent of a majority of its people. The Agreement recognised that the wish of a current majority was that Northern Ireland remained under British sovereignty, but also that this sovereign status might change in the future. It therefore provides for the possibility of a border poll to ascertain if a majority in the future wished for a change in the constitutional status. It further prescribes that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland shall arrange for the holding of such a poll if he or she believes that a majority was likely to vote for such a change.

In the light of Friday's momentous decision, I can understand why some people have now proposed that such a border poll be held. And I also accept that such calls are simply invoking the use of a mechanism provided for under the Good Friday Agreement. Nevertheless, I believe that pressing for a border poll at this time would not be prudent or effective. I say this for two reasons.

First, the fact that 56% of those who voted in last Thursday's referendum in Northern Ireland opted to remain within the European Union cannot logically be interpreted as meaning that a majority of the electorate there would vote for a united Ireland. They are two very different propositions. At present, there is no convincing evidence to suggest that a majority of the people of Northern Ireland would opt for a change in its constitutional status.

Second, while the prospect of a vote for change in the near future would be remote, the mere fact of holding the referendum could nevertheless be very divisive. The Northern Ireland institutions have only recently emerged from a prolonged period of turbulence. It required two major sets of negotiations over the last two years to stabilize the operation of the Northern Ireland Executive. Just as the new Northern Ireland Executive is beginning to deliver good government for the people of Northern, do we now really want to toss in the potentially destabilizing issue of the binary choice between British or Irish sovereignty?

A border poll in the short term would I believe be very unlikely to trigger any change in constitutional status but would risk the current stability of the Northern Ireland institutions that was achieved with such great effort and is beginning to yield positive results.

Rather than focus on a border poll, I believe that our immediate strategy should be to sit down with the British Government and with the Northern Ireland Executive and to urgently discuss how collectively we are together going to protect the gains of the last decades and to prevent the worst effects of a UK departure from the EU. As far as I am aware, no major party in Northern Ireland wants to see the re-imposition of a hard border on the island; they all want to see a continuation of freedom of movement of trade, services and people on the island.

I spoke about this matter in separate conversations last Friday with the First and deputy First Minister and with the Leader of the SDLP. Next Monday's plenary meeting of the NSMC in Dublin, chaired by the Taoiseach, will provide an opportunity to have a high level strategic discussion between the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive on how together we are going to address the challenges arising from a UK exit.

I accept of course that future arrangements in regard to the border on this island will not exclusively be determined by the combined wishes of the Irish Government, the British Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. They will also be influenced by the wider negotiations between the UK and the EU of 27 remaining Member States. One of our challenges, therefore, will be for Ireland to use its influence with our EU partners to persuade them of the need for specific arrangements which protect the key gains of the peace process on this island – a process to which the EU has already made a key contribution.

Ceann Comhairle,

As I said at the start of my contribution, a UK exit from the EU will present us with a challenge, but Ireland and its people have dealt with major challenges before. While the outcome of the UK referendum is definitely not the one we would have hoped for, I believe everyone here in this House is determined to ensure that the peace, stability and prosperity achieved over recent decades is protected and sustained.

Thank you.