
Facing Brexit: Ireland, Northern Ireland and the EU

Simon Coveney, Republic of Ireland minister for foreign affairs and trade, speaks with Jason Naselli about his government's approach to the border, the Conservative/DUP deal and the 'Brexit bill'.

What is the Irish government's preferred solution with regards to the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic if the UK leaves the EU customs union?

Our preferred solution is that we find a way of maintaining as close to the status quo as possible. We don't believe we can do that by simply using technology on the border. There needs to be quite a unique political solution agreed between Ireland, the UK and the EU that can allow the free movement of goods and services and people, and the normal environment that has been created in the border area on the island of Ireland, to continue.

Don't forget that this is very much part of the development of the peace process as well as a functioning economy, and that is something that we need to protect. And sometimes politics needs to find new ways of doing things in order to protect what's valuable. I believe that the normality that we've managed to create between north and south in Ireland, where we effectively have an invisible border – we have to protect that and maintain it.

Whether you're a unionist politician in Northern Ireland or a nationalist politician, or whether you're from the Republic of Ireland, I think that is a very important status quo in Ireland that we want to protect through the Brexit negotiating process. Which isn't easy, by the way, and that's why we'll need some flexible new thinking here.

What kind of commitments are you looking for from the British government with regards to this?

First of all, that there is a political solution required here rather than a technical one. Everybody recognizes that Northern Ireland is staying in the United Kingdom, until a majority of people in Northern Ireland want to change that. But that means a portion of the island of Ireland is leaving the European Union.

You have a 500 kilometre border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland... about 1.8 million cars cross the border every month; there are 400 road crossings on the border. So the idea that we're going to put up checks, whether it's through cameras or through physical stops on the road – we can't accept that. I think the British government understands that and we are now looking at ways in which, through politics, we can come to an arrangement that can allow the island of Ireland to continue to function as it does.

How do you feel the confidence and supply deal between the Conservatives and the DUP at Westminster will affect negotiations?

A lot of people would expect me to be negative about that, but I'm actually not that negative on it. The DUP have agreed in that confidence and supply agreement to support Brexit legislation and so there is now an onus on them politically to ensure that legislation is popular in Northern Ireland. That means that they will have to argue to ensure that the border issues are resolved in a satisfactory manner for Northern Ireland. And I think on those border issues, the DUP want to try to maintain the status quo as closely as they can. From that point of view, there are upsides to the confidence and supply agreement in the context of Northern Ireland and Brexit.

Are you worried that, in insisting on a large 'exit bill' for the UK, the EU is willing to risk 'no deal' and a difficult situation in Ireland in order to avoid an internal fight over the EU budget?

This isn't an exit bill. This is simply asking Britain to pay what it has committed to pay. Between now and 2020, every country in the European Union has committed to spend money on certain programmes. That budget is signed off on; it's agreed. So the EU is not asking for anything more than Britain has already committed to. The EU is simply saying that you've committed to certain amount of expenditure and so, if you're leaving, you need to honour your commitments. It's not a fine, or a bill, or any kind of punishment. It's simply asking Britain to follow through on the commitments that they've made financially.

But do you think that 'no deal' between the UK and the EU is possible? And if so, what is your biggest concern in that scenario?

I think that 'no deal' would be disastrous situation for Britain and for Ireland. It would be an uncomfortable situation for the EU, but they would get through it. But from an Irish perspective, that's a really bad outcome, and we need to ensure that it doesn't happen. I think there are enough pragmatists around the table who recognize that no deal is very damaging and that politics needs to find a way to make sure that it doesn't happen.

We need to agree on transition arrangements. But before we can get onto that, we have to get through the current round of negotiations, which are dealing with three clear issues: citizens' rights, the financial commitments that have been made and need to be honoured, and the Irish issues, which are very complicated in terms of the border. Then, if we can make progress on those three issues, we can move on to

trade and transition arrangements.

The sooner we can get on to those negotiations, the better, because... you know, if you speak to British businesses, they need certainty. They need to know where they're going. They need to know what transition looks like. They need to make sure they're not going to have to make two changes: one for a transition period and another for a more permanent situation.

So I would be hopeful that we can avoid a 'no deal' scenario, and I hope there are enough pragmatists and sensible people around the table that know that the consequence for their citizens of not getting a deal done is a lot more important than the politics of being seen to be firm and courageous. I think David Davis is a good person; I think Michel Barnier is a very good and strong person too. I hope that between the two of them, we will ensure that the scenario of 'no deal' – which would be desperately damaging to Britain and the British economy as well as Ireland and other EU member states – can be avoided.