
Minister Coveney remarks to British-Irish Association

[Speech](#)

Minister Simon Coveney - 10/9/17



Remarks by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Simon Coveney TD, to the British-Irish Association

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Cambridge, 9 September 2017

Check Against Delivery

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to have this opportunity to speak to you here in Cambridge, at my first British Irish Association annual conference.

To be here in a city of such academic renown, a beautiful setting and a location famous for its history and success in rowing, among other things – it almost reminds me of my native Cork!

There are few more fitting places for this kind of conference than Cambridge. A place that has committed itself to knowledge, expertise, and the free and frank exchange of ideas. It is a particular pleasure to be a guest here at Downing College, which is notable for producing alumni who see the world differently – from the exuberant drawings of Quentin Blake and the surreal comic genius of John Cleese to the wit of acclaimed writer Howard Jacobson.

It is a particular pleasure for me to speak to such a knowledgeable and distinguished audience. The common thread that brings us here is the concern that each of us has for the relationships on the island of Ireland and for the British-Irish relationship more generally.

I would like to thank Hugo for convening us here and of course Francesca for making sure that it all runs smoothly, with a certain charm that adds to the positive atmosphere. This conference is running since the year I was born and the commitment of the people who attend, and their ongoing engagement, has played an important role in bringing us from the dark places of the past to the peace and relative prosperity that we enjoy today.

But there can be no room for complacency about the island of Ireland and its future, or the relationships that we share on a North/South or East/West basis. Today, albeit in a different form, we are being tested in our determination to protect the positive and progressive relationships that many here have fought hard to achieve... Historians will not go easy on us if we allow that progress to unravel.

The twin challenges of a political impasse in the North, and – more profoundly – the potential impact of the UK's decision to leave the European Union, make navigating the next months and years, to protect the relationships we have developed across these islands, a rallying cause for politics today.

I have thought long and hard about the reasons why, despite the many similarities between us, our attitudes to the EU differ so much. I understand the role that certain media here in Britain have played in the Europe debate going right back to before we both joined in 1973.

A lot of this negativity is simply absent in Ireland, as our population saw first-hand the huge benefits that membership of the EU brought us from agriculture to infrastructure, from the role of women to workers' rights. The stars of the EU flag became a familiar sight as the EU became our partner and supported our development over the last four decades.

As a small nation with big values, membership of the European Union has given us a greater standing on the world stage. It has strengthened and amplified our voice and helped us make a difference. Ironically our membership of the European Union has made Ireland a more independent country not less.

Maybe it's our own troubled history with famine and emigration, but by and large, our experience with immigration has been enriching.

In some ways, our diversity today – for a country once renowned, and with good reason, for its religious and cultural homogeneity – that diversity has become our selling point, encouraging businesses to locate in Ireland and benefit from a tolerant, inclusive society with a multicultural, well-educated talent pool.

We were deeply disappointed at the UK's decision to leave the EU. And while we, of course, respect the will of UK voters, for the reasons I've stated – and many more – we won't be following the road you've chosen. Recent polls in Ireland show a more than 80% satisfaction rating with EU membership. Being Irish and European now goes hand in glove.

Where to, then, in this world in which our neighbours and oldest partners have chosen a different course? How do we make the best of a Brexit we hoped would never come to pass?

In our considered view, we all – Ireland, Britain and the EU - now need to work towards:

- the closest possible relationship between the UK and the European Union,
- an orderly exit and
- a substantial transition period that allows everyone to prepare adequately for new realities.

For business, this will provide certainty to allow companies to plan and invest. The transition period must however, maintain the status quo in terms of membership of the Customs Union and Single Market – it would confound all logic to expect businesses to adjust to new arrangements twice.

I welcome the publication of the UK's position papers and now we have Guiding Principles from the EU to help advance the Ireland issues in the Talks. I would like to pay tribute to Michel Barnier and his team in the Task Force, who have taken great care to fully understand these issues, and to ensure that Ireland and the Peace Process are, to the greatest extent possible, protected from the impact that Brexit will undoubtedly have.

We need now to move as swiftly as possible to Phase 2 of the negotiations, but this can only be achieved once there has been "sufficient progress" on the phase 1 issues, which include the financial settlement, citizens' rights and the Ireland issues. We hope the British Government will engage fully on each of these so that progress can be made and the critical discussions on the future relationship with the EU can begin. Real progress in the Phase 1 talks will help to build confidence in the process and lay good foundations. And building trust in the process is important to ensure that these difficult negotiations have the best possible chance of a positive outcome.

For us, and I know many of you here tonight, the greatest concern is that the gains of the hard won peace on the island of Ireland are protected. Under no circumstances can we countenance going backwards on this journey. Too many lives have been lost and too many hearts have been broken.

We need to protect the all-island economy too, which has supported peace and facilitated the normalisation of relations, allowing people get on with their daily lives. More than a third of all Northern Ireland's exports travel south across our near-invisible shared border each year.

And the cycle of prosperity supporting peace, which in turn supports further prosperity, is essential for the economy of Northern Ireland to grow. For this, there can be no hard border. Creativity and political will is needed to ensure that this

does not happen.

On the face of it, maintaining the integrity of the EU's single market on the one hand, and implementing the ideas on a customs relationship that the UK put forward last month, seem to be mutually exclusive.

Streamlined customs arrangements are unlikely to be streamlined enough for businesses whose margins are tight. And while a customs partnership has some promise as an idea, this will simply not be feasible if it is undercut by the UK making trade deals with countries that don't share our standards or systems.

There is an obvious solution, if we really value the peace and prosperity that has brought us this far. And that is for the UK to remain in an extended Customs Union and Single Market, or some version of that concept, taking advantage of the new and comprehensive trade deals the EU is reaching with countries like Canada and Japan.

As even the Leave campaign argued at the time, a vote to depart the EU was never explicitly a vote to leave the Customs Union or Single Market.

And if it looks like the UK's economic future is being risked on the dubious promise of far-in-the-future trade agreements with markets much further from the UK than the EU's, then – well, it is beholden on all of us who care and will be affected by this decision, as Ireland will, to comment directly and in an informed way.

I find it difficult to accept that while the options available to the UK are now being discussed, debated and negotiated, that the potential option of staying in a customs union would be taken off the table, before negotiations on trade have even commenced with the EU.

On this front, I listened carefully to what Michael Martin had to say this morning - we will take on board those proposals and test them in a non-party partisan way. Any approach or proposal that makes sense for better relations between Ireland and Britain we are open to, on something as fundamental as our future together.

However, I would respectfully hope that the UK Government can also approach some of the big questions they face, on the basis of persuasive argument, tested approaches and facts as they emerge rather than party political positioning. I heard Ken Clarke make this point in the House of Commons this week.

There is clearly no unified position on Brexit in either large party, we know that - so surely there should be an openness to making decisions, including on the Repeal Bill, on the basis of the arguments made and not by "party-whip politics". More importantly, shutting off avenues such as remaining in a customs union, without agreed deliverable and credible alternative pathways, narrows future options in a dangerous way.

I think it is important to be candid about this – the friend who isn't honest at a time of fateful decisions isn't actually that much of a friend. And of course we have self-interest. Apart from the UK, Ireland is the country most vulnerable to the effects of Brexit - we have a lot of skin in the game. We just think our interests coincide here, rather than diverge.

And we have an undoubted shared responsibility for Northern Ireland, as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, the peace agreement that succeeded where so many other attempts failed. The Good Friday Agreement must be our guiding star in good times and in bad, when the institutions are working and whenever they are not.

The genius of the Good Friday Agreement is its recognition of the totality of relationships on and between these islands. And the institutions it established reflect that. If we envisage those institutions as a living system, then it is fair to say the devolved Executive and Assembly are its heart.

If the heart is not beating, then the system as a whole cannot function and so it has been for the past number of months. Without a power-sharing Executive in place, held to account by an Assembly of locally-elected politicians, the core of what the people of Ireland, North and South, voted for in 1998 is missing. This in turn has meant that the valuable work of the North South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council have been stalled at a time when, because of Brexit, the need for such engagement is at its most acute.

But I am not here to admire the problem.

The difficulties and differences which have led to this point are well documented and you do not need me to rehearse them again tonight. When I came as Minister to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, I was informed that every official working on the peace process is told that part of their role is 'a duty of hope'.

Hope is somewhat out of fashion these days – "the audacity of hope" seems like

some time ago - but I have reason to believe that it may come back into style – at least in Northern Ireland. Let me outline why:

All five political parties believe in devolution and in power-sharing and want to make it work.

The DUP and Sinn Féin – despite two bruising elections and difficult negotiations since March – have engaged intensively with one another over the last two weeks and this engagement will continue. It is imperative that an Executive in Northern Ireland is re-formed and the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are restored. There is no more time to wait.

Both Governments remain steadfast as guarantors of the process, guided by the Good Friday Agreement, and continue to help and support the parties to chart a way forward.

I want to recognise the positive role that James Brokenshire continues to play with patience as I work with him to find ways forward. I also want to recognise the work of my predecessor, Charlie Flanagan, who continues to play a key role now as Justice Minister on issues relating to North-South relations, particularly when it comes to introducing legislation relating to the legacy issues of a painful past.

The greatest cause for hope though is what has been achieved on the island of Ireland over the last two decades. It is perhaps too easy to take for granted the transformation of lives and communities that has taken place.

That is not to say that everything is rosy – the continued challenge of building true reconciliation is all too evident – but look at the relationships we have built, the barriers we have torn down and the positive change we have wrought that was unthinkable 40 years ago.

My personal hope is rooted in the sincere, genuine warmth between our countries that has been built up over the last forty years, first slowly as we learned to trust each other in Brussels, as our officials and Ministers began to get to know each and respect each other as equals, and then all of a sudden when the Queen displayed her compassion in the Garden of Remembrance, her affection at the English Market in Cork, her respect at the State Banquet in Dublin Castle, and her respect throughout.

The Queen's visit unlocked something in many of us – it marked a real change in our relationship. President Higgins cemented this new maturity to our relationship when he visited the UK on a State Visit in 2014.

It is more important than ever to find ways to continue to collaborate once the UK leaves the European Union - to avoid a situation where, with the best will in the world, friends that don't meet frequently become acquaintances and gradually drift apart. This is the last thing we want and the Irish Government will work to ensure it doesn't happen.

At a time when old certainties are being challenged and the pace of change can seem more frenetic by the day, I believe the British Irish Association – and organisations like it - can play a critical role. This room is full of knowledge, wisdom and experience. But it cannot be confined to this room. We really need it – and need you - influencing others over the crucial months to come.

Thank you for welcoming me here this evening.

ENDS

Press Office

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