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## Simon Coveney: Technology alone can never solve a political quandary like Brexit

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This week has brought a degree of much-needed clarity on the UK's proposals and ideas for its exit from the EU, with a number of Government position papers published. One is specifically on Northern Ireland and Ireland, while another - on the UK's wider customs relationship with the EU - is obviously also very relevant in relation to how we address the question of the border on this island.

The Irish government is analysing these papers in detail and, in doing so, will engage closely with the European Commission, the Barnier Task Force and our EU 27-partner member states.

The immediate focus for the coming rounds of negotiations remains on advancing the issues identified for phase one, including citizens' rights and the financial settlement, as well as issues specific to Ireland.

I remain hopeful that there will be sufficient progress on these issues to allow the necessary parallel discussions on the future relationship between the EU and the UK, including in relation to customs, to commence.

Overall, I welcome the emphasis placed in these UK papers on priority areas long-identified by the Irish government, including the Common Travel Area, the Good Friday Agreement, north/south co-operation and avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland.

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Our own position remains that set out in my own public statements and by the Taoiseach in his comprehensive speech at Queen's University earlier this month.

One of the greatest advances in my lifetime has been the achievement of peace and the progressive normalisation of relations between both parts of the island and between Ireland and Britain.

The gains of the peace, achieved through the Good Friday Agreement and supported by the European Union, have been particularly tangible and transformative along the 500km border on the island of Ireland.

Today, the border is invisible and both parts of the island enjoy the benefits of close collaboration and interaction. The open border is critical for our integrated, world-class agri-food sector; for the success of businesses both small and large; for the effectiveness of north-south co-operation that is an indispensable part of the Good Friday Agreement; and for the ease with which people study, work and live their lives as individuals and communities, north and south.

This peaceful normality is the very core of the peace process and of the ongoing process of reconciliation.

The European Union has been essential to the creation and maintenance of the invisible border. The previous customs border was dismantled by the completion of the internal market in 1992. The security border was removed on foot of the historic political changes of the Good Friday Agreement, which was strongly endorsed by the people, north and south, in 1998.

Protecting the peace process and avoiding a hard border on the island is of highest priority for the Irish government and the European Union.

It is very welcome that the priority of protecting the peace process and avoiding a hard border is shared by the British Government. The publication this week of the UK paper on Ireland/Northern Ireland is a helpful contribution to the achievement of that priority objective.

In recent discourse on the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, some were saying that new border arrangements were inevitable. The further suggestion was that cameras, online registrations and customs software could smooth over the

political challenges that would be involved.

However, with such a serious issue, it is important to be honest and clear - seeing technology as the answer misunderstands the problem. We cannot rely on technology alone to solve political questions.

Cameras, checks, delays and the resulting possibility of increased security issues at the border would pose a major political challenge that would have serious implications for both governments, for the people of the island and for the peace process.

As the UK progresses towards exit, alternative political approaches will be needed if we are to avoid a hard border. Technology alone would not solve all practical problems and cannot gloss over political realities.

It can, of course, be part of how we implement the operational aspects of any new trading regime between the EU and UK, but that will be part of the detail that follows after we settle on a political way forward.

I, therefore, welcome the suggested key principle outlined in this week's UK paper on Ireland/Northern Ireland of "aiming to avoid any physical border infrastructure in either the United Kingdom or Ireland, for any purpose (including customs or agri-food checks)".

The Irish government and the European Union are clear that flexible and imaginative solutions will be required to reflect the unique circumstances and geography of the island of Ireland. Of course, the EU-UK negotiation will be conducted on behalf of the Union by the European Commission - specifically the Barnier Task Force - and any approach to resolving the border issue will need to respect EU law and Ireland's place within the European Union.

This will not be easy and will require collective political will and imagination on all sides, with broad policy objectives being supported by the necessary negotiating substance.

The historic gains of the peace process were hard won by the two governments and by political leaders in Northern Ireland, working together over the last two decades and more. The European Union has been a major supporter of what has been achieved and I know its support remains constant.

As the UK leaves the European Union, our collective duty and commitment is to protect the peace process.

As we do so, difficult questions on the border cannot be avoided, obscured or minimised.

The same political vision and determination that secured the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 will be required to make sure that there are no risks to the invisible border that our people enjoy and rely on every day.

- Simon Coveney TD is the Republic's Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

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