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## A message from Ambassador Adrian O'Neill on EU-UK negotiations

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A chairde,

After long and intensive negotiations, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and Prime Minister Theresa May this morning agreed that sufficient progress has been made in the first phase of EU-UK negotiations addressing the key withdrawal issues, including Ireland and Northern Ireland. Subject to this being agreed by the European Council next week, the pathway is now clear for the commencement of the negotiations addressing the issues of transition and the future relationship between the EU and the UK.

An enormous amount has been achieved in the first phase of talks. First and foremost, is a clear commitment to the protection of the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts, including its constitutional provisions, the operation of its political institutions and North/South co-operation.

The Irish Government always welcomed the stated objective of the UK Government to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland. Today's agreed report includes such a firm guarantee from the United Kingdom and commits to all future arrangements being compatible with this overarching requirement.

With the continuation of the Common Travel Area, there will be no change in the right of Irish citizens to travel freely North and South on the island, or East and West between Britain and Ireland, and to live, work, study and access social benefits in the UK on the same basis as UK citizens. People in Northern Ireland who are Irish citizens will continue to enjoy rights as EU citizens and there will be no erosion of the human rights provisions under the Good Friday Agreement. There is also a commitment to examine favourably how to sustain EU PEACE and INTERREG funding which has been essential to cross-community reconciliation in Northern Ireland and to economic development along the border.

In his statement this morning, the Taoiseach recognised the concerns of the unionist community in Northern Ireland. He reiterated the fact that Ireland does not want to see a border in the Irish Sea, any more than we want to see a border between Newry and Dundalk or between Letterkenny and Derry. The agreement reached today explicitly recognises the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement with regard to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and the key principle of consent.

Following next week's European Council, we look forward to working for the best possible outcome in phase two – delivering on commitments made today and working for key objectives including the closest possible economic and trading relationship between the EU and the UK. Ireland will be to the forefront in promoting the maintenance of that trading relationship, one which sustains the €65 billion in business we do across the Irish Sea each year and supports 400,000 jobs in Britain and Ireland.

I took up my appointment as Ambassador of Ireland to the United Kingdom in August 2017, conscious I was arriving at a time of great warmth and friendly cooperation between our two countries. Three months later, and despite the challenges of Brexit, I am confirmed in this view. There is much to celebrate in our Ireland-UK bilateral relationship and I look forward to it being broadened and deepened in the period ahead.

Le gach dea-ghuí

Adrian O'Neill

Ambassador