
Managing the Brexit Challenge, Center for Strategic and International Studies

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Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Simon Coveney TD -
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Managing the Brexit Challenge: Ireland, the European Union and Transatlantic Relationships

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Center for Strategic and International Studies

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I am delighted to be here in Washington DC and it is a great privilege to be invited to speak at the prestigious Center for Strategic and International Studies. I want to sincerely thank Vice President Heather Conley and her colleague Jeff Rathke for organising today's event. Both Heather and Jeff know Ireland well and it is great to be here with them, and you, to speak on what is undoubtedly the single biggest foreign policy issue to face Ireland in generations.

That issue, of course, is the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union – an unwise decision I believe, but a decision that has been taken nonetheless. Ireland will be more affected than any other EU Member State by the UK's departure. Our relationship – like our relationship with these United States - is characterised by the depth and strength of the historic, human, political, economic and cultural ties which bind us. Like so many Irish people, I have my own strong personal links with Britain – I studied there, and have family there still.

More broadly, the United Kingdom remains Ireland's single most important economic partner, though our trade with the rest of the European Union is more than twice as great, and though the United States is our top source of inward investment.

We both joined the European Union on the same day, 1 January 1973, together with Denmark. Our common membership, and the shared EU rules we have helped make, have facilitated and developed our co-operation – not just in the economic sphere, or in such important areas as aviation, research, and the environment, but in human terms too.

Politicians, diplomats and civil servants grew more familiar and found it easier to work together as they sat around the same EU negotiating tables and met in the same corridors. This factor was not unimportant in developing the atmosphere of trust and partnership in which Ireland and Britain could co-operate in building peace in Northern Ireland. As Britain prepares to leave the European Union, the bitter irony is that its relationship with Ireland has never been better.

For Ireland, the strategic objective of the Brexit negotiations now under way is clear: the creation of the closest possible future connection between the EU and the UK. We want a smooth and cordial separation. It is in the European Union's interest to have a confident and co-operative UK on its doorstep. After all, we cannot alter the basic facts of geography and history. And those facts are more pronounced for Ireland than for any other country in the EU.

The negotiations are not and will not be easy. The immediate focus is on a number of issues directly related to the UK's withdrawal from the Union. These include the extent of the UK's financial obligations, and the future situations of EU citizens now in the UK and vice versa. Some progress has been made, and the UK has taken some forward steps, but it may well not be sufficient to allow the EU's leaders to decide at their meeting two weeks from now to move on to parallel discussions about the future after the exit. It is vital that further efforts are made. The ball remains firmly in the UK's court, but if and when it moves ahead, I have no doubt the EU will respond in kind.

As regards later negotiations on the future relationship, these too will raise really difficult issues. There will be a particular emphasis on trade, but there is a wide range of other questions to be settled too, reflecting the scope of the EU's responsibilities and powers.

If the UK is indeed to enjoy the closest possible relationship with the EU, its own regulatory rules and structures will need to be, at a minimum, closely aligned with those of the Union.

There remains, too, the hugely difficult question of what has up to now been the free movement of EU workers to the UK but which will - after Brexit - become immigration into the UK. There is a fierce debate on this taking place in the UK, the answer to which will have a major impact on the overall EU attitude.

The European Union has made clear that in the negotiations it will not compromise on the integrity of the four freedoms of movement – of capital, people, goods and services – which are the basis of so much of what it does. Nor can the United Kingdom enjoy privileges and flexibilities outside the EU which it does not have within. Being outside cannot be the same as being inside.

Within those parameters, I am sure that the Union will be imaginative and open. Indeed, the growing strength of the EU economy, its new mood of cautious optimism, and the fact that if anything Brexit is having a reverse domino effect, should all allow it to be more generous – if, of course, the UK can settle on a stable, constructive approach of its own.

The issue in the current round of so-called Phase One talks which is of greatest concern to Ireland is, of course, how to mitigate or eliminate the impact of the United Kingdom's withdrawal on the unique circumstances of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

In the Good Friday Agreement, the EU membership of both states, and hence of the two parts of Ireland, was taken as an absolute given. That common membership has ensured that very many areas of North/South co-operation are embedded in the framework of EU law. Non-discrimination and the protection of human rights have been reinforced by the obligations of the EU Treaties. The European Union has given financial support to projects aimed at fostering reconciliation and co-operation within Northern Ireland and between both parts of the island.

Between them, the long-standing Common Travel Area between the UK and Ireland, the creation of the EU Single Market, and the removal of security posts made possible by peace, have made the political border in Ireland invisible. People travel freely throughout the island of Ireland. There are no customs or regulatory obstacles to completely free trade. And in particular people living near the border, on either side, can move back and forth without hindrance, whether to shop, work, be educated, receive medical treatment, or visit friends and relations.

The economic benefits of this invisible border have been immense, but just as great have been the human and societal benefits. The absence of a border is, after of course the end of killing and armed conflict, the single most tangible outcome of the peace process.

We want to ensure that none of these enormous advances is halted or reversed by Brexit. We cannot see the clock turned back. So we seek the maintenance of the Common Travel Area between Ireland and Britain. We seek the protection of the benefits and gains of the Good Friday Agreement, and we interpret that to mean all of the benefits and gains of the peace process, going beyond the letter of the Agreement. We seek continued EU support for peace and reconciliation.

Irish citizens in Northern Ireland – which under the Good Friday Agreement and Irish law potentially encompasses all of its people – will continue to be EU citizens. We want the widest possible interpretation of the rights and entitlements that EU citizenship confers.

And we are also determined to avoid the return of a hard border between North and South, or the creation of new barriers to co-operation.

These are challenging objectives. But I am glad that they are fully shared by our EU partners, whose solidarity and support have been remarkable. This goes too for the EU's chief negotiator Michel Barnier, and for the European Parliament.

Finding concrete solutions however, above all regarding the border, will demand a great deal of flexibility and imagination.

Our strong view is that the border question, and many others going well beyond Northern Ireland, would be best solved by the UK's remaining in the Customs Union and Single Market, or in equivalent arrangements.

Second best would be specific arrangements for Northern Ireland permitting the effective maintenance of the current situation, without violating the rules of the EU Single Market and Customs Union - or indeed the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as part of the UK.

These issues will not be solved soon, or easily. Some of them are tied to the wider negotiations on the future. But we are working to agree principles against which

possible solutions, unique solutions, can be tested.

In all of this, it is deeply regrettable that there is at present no power-sharing Northern Ireland Executive in place. A majority of people in Northern Ireland voted against Brexit and the two major parties – with support from very different constituencies – share a determination to address the practical challenges which will arise. The Irish Government is doing its very best to protect the interests of Northern Ireland, which are the interests of the island of Ireland as a whole. But a direct voice for Northern Ireland in Brussels and London would be of great value – and would carry considerable weight.

It is important to understand that in most European countries Brexit, while of course important, is not at the top of their EU agendas. The Union continues as usual to address such issues as climate change, fighting terrorism, investment in infrastructure, strengthening the digital economy. And at the same time a lively debate has begun on the medium to longer term future of the European Union.

There is not the time today to go into Ireland's position on ideas that have arisen in any detail. Suffice to say, there are some we find more interesting than others.

But I want to make a fundamental point: Ireland is more than ever committed to its membership of the Union. This was the existential choice of our people in 1972 and it has never been seriously called into question. The EU Single Market and Customs Union are essential to our economic growth – not least given their importance in attracting US investment.

As a small country, we find that our interests and values are best advanced and protected through a Union of hundreds of millions of people – a Union which is deeply committed to the rule of law, to human rights, to global trade and to international co-operation.

One hundred years on from independence, we have no wish to retreat back into a British sphere of influence.

And the European Union needs and wants the United States as its major international partner – in foreign and security policy, in free trade and investment, in protecting the environment.

Despite difficult moments in the past – such as arguments over relations with Latin America in the 1980s and the Iraq war in the 2000s – our partnership has continued and developed. Together we are the champions of democratic values and of co-operation for prosperity.

Of course, circumstances change and partnerships evolve. The nature of many of the new security challenges facing Europe require a greater collective effort – and here I am not thinking just of military aspects. There are many people in both the US and in Europe who feel that globalisation has not worked for them and that trade has destroyed their jobs.

So it is right that we do not assume that we should forever carry on exactly as before, and that we ask ourselves how our policies need to be adjusted. But I still passionately believe that the fundamentals of our partnership are sound and robust.

We in Ireland hugely value our special relationship with the US – which is strengthened by, and contributes to, the wider EU relationship.

Within the EU, no Member State is more committed to free and open trade and investment than Ireland. This is an agenda on which Europe must continue to work with the US and I hope in particular that the possibility of a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership can be examined afresh when the time is right.

So Brexit poses great challenges. It is not of our making and we believe it will not be good for anybody. But Ireland is determined to work for the least harmful Brexit possible and for a good future EU-UK partnership. That partnership must allow for the continuation of all we have achieved in Ireland over recent years. Ireland's place remains firmly in the EU, an EU which still needs the United States just as the US needs the European Union.

Thank you for welcoming me here today.

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