

The future EU-UK relationship: An Irish perspective

Minister Thomas Byrne, T.D.

Centre for European Reform Speech

12 May 2021

*****Check against delivery*****

I was delighted to accept Charles' invitation to this discussion. The Centre for European Reform has a long and distinguished track-record of facilitating important conversations, and it is difficult to think of an issue more deserving of consideration than how the EU-UK relationship will develop in the time ahead.

Today, now that we are almost half a year into the new arrangements, it is timely to consider the questions that will underpin the future of EU-UK relations.

Ireland has a unique perspective on this issue, not least because of the complex ways in which the island of Ireland has been affected by Brexit, and by the specific form of Brexit chosen by the UK Government.

We also have a very stable perspective on this – early on, we identified what were the main challenges for Ireland from the UK's withdrawal and what were our core interests in the arrangements that would result. These will be familiar to you: avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland, protecting the gains of the Good Friday Agreement, protecting the integrity of the Single Market and Ireland's place in it. It is also important to us to preserve the close and valued people-to-people, economic and cultural ties that have grown to define the East-West relationship between the UK and Ireland.

This analysis is shared right across the political spectrum in Dublin and is why there has been such consistency in the Government's Brexit strategy all the way through this process.

Those core values and interests are the prism through which we approached discussions around the Withdrawal Agreement and the negotiation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), and are the prism through which we now look at implementing them.

The shape of these Agreements has been determined by choices made – in particular by the UK Government’s decision to leave the Customs Union and Single Market, to prioritise its right to choose its own path on regulatory standards, and to end freedom of movement. We respect those choices, but we must also be realistic about how they restrict what is possible within the new arrangements.

Our collective task has been to maximise as much as possible the space for mutually beneficial cooperation, and to minimise as much as possible the negative impact on our citizens and businesses of the UK no longer being part of the European institutions that it helped to build.

The EU has shown enormous creativity and flexibility in how it approached negotiations over the UK’s withdrawal and the future relationship. The Withdrawal Agreement and the TCA provide for an unprecedented level of economic cooperation between the EU and a country outside the European Economic Area. They also provide for both parties to continue to work together in vital areas like judicial and police cooperation, transport and energy connectivity, and on continuing the very important PEACE funding in support of reconciliation on the island of Ireland. Through the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, they include bespoke arrangements addressing the unique ways in which the island is affected by Brexit.

The scale and scope of the two Agreements reflect the depth of the ties created during the UK’s EU Membership as well as the irresistible logic of our geographic proximity. They provide the connective tissue that can support partnership and prosperity into the future.

Of course, the Agreements do not reproduce all the types of cooperation nor the seamless trade that existed prior to Brexit. Controls and checks on goods that had disappeared with the creation of the Single Market are once again a permanent feature of our trade. That was the unavoidable consequence of the UK’s negotiating choices.

Further waves of Brexit related change will come in October this year, and into 2022, when the UK introduces additional import controls on many products of plant and animal origin. We are working with the UK Government to clarify the precise nature of these changes to our exporters, so goods can flow as smoothly as possible through UK ports. Nonetheless we can expect that there will be further challenges ahead. As a Government, we will do everything we can to support our traders to meet these challenges.

Many sectors – especially our fishers, and those involved in the import and export of goods and services with Great Britain– have found themselves at the sharp end of these changes. This

reality has been at the heart of my Government's comprehensive preparations in the lead up to 1 January, and it continues to guide our intensive engagement with those most affected by Brexit.

Taking a step back from the detail, it is important to underline a foundational fact about the new framework for EU-UK relations. Both the TCA and the Withdrawal Agreement – including of course the Protocol – are joint creations, involving joint responsibilities, and they must now be fully implemented as joint endeavours.

These Agreements set the parameters for what is possible and permissible, but we still have important choices to make in how we approach the future of this relationship. As we make these choices, one question should be foremost in our minds: what is best for our citizens and businesses?

There is of course the choice of how we approach areas of cooperation not addressed by the TCA. Foreign policy and security & defence cooperation are one such area, although they were a part of the Joint Political Declaration made in 2019. Ireland would like to see structured EU-UK cooperation where our interests and values align.

There is the very fundamental choice of how we manage the EU-UK relationship at a political level. As in any relationship, we can only get out what we are willing to put in. Successful partnerships thrive on trust, stability and respect. Truly investing in the EU-UK partnership is indisputably in the interest of our citizens and businesses. The political signals we give about how we value the EU-UK relationship have a direct impact on their welfare, now and into the future.

There is the choice of how we approach the commitments already made in the Agreements. This is a matter of trust, which, as I have already said, is an essential prerequisite for a thriving partnership. Both Agreements must be fully implemented through joint action in the appropriate channels– it is only by doing this that their full potential can be realised.

Regarding implementation of the Protocol, I understand and appreciate the genuine concerns that some have voiced. I and other members of the Irish Government have proactively engaged with Northern Ireland stakeholders on these issues. So too has the EU.

We cannot lose sight of why the UK Government and the EU agreed the Protocol in the first place. Northern Ireland's unique circumstances require unique arrangements, the shape of which were determined by the type of Brexit sought by the British Government. The

exhaustive discussions involved commitments and compromises on both sides. There is no alternative to the Protocol. We have to make it work and it is the joint responsibility of the EU and UK to do so – but the baseline for these discussions must be full respect for the legally binding commitments already made.

I welcome that there is intensive, ongoing engagement on the outstanding issues around the Protocol. Even now, there are choices available that would address many of the most difficult challenges. This includes a new SPS and veterinary agreement between the EU and UK, tailored appropriately. This could considerably reduce the checks needed on relevant goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, and would have Ireland's full support. The EU has signalled very clearly that it is open to new arrangements, but this would need to be the UK's choice also.

Jointly addressing outstanding issues through established channels will also allow us to focus on the opportunities presented by the Protocol for Northern Ireland – including full access to both the UK internal market and the EU Single Market of 450 million people.

There is also the question of how we make the most out of the TCA's joint bodies: the Specialised Committees responsible for overseeing the practical detail of cooperation across the Agreement. There is an opportunity here to make these forums where we explore every letter and punctuation mark of the Agreement to see how its full potential can be realised; where we address difficulties in a spirit of partnership; where we work together to see what new avenues of cooperation can be identified. That is the ambition with which Ireland, working together with our EU partners, approaches this.

In a way, all of these many decisions can be boiled down to a single choice – do we want a future of shared prosperity, partnership and cooperation?

For Ireland, the answer is an unequivocal 'yes'. It is my fundamental belief that closer ties will only strengthen us - they do not bind us. What can we possibly have to fear from working together in partnership with our closest neighbours?

Of course, how to approach the future relationship is not a question for Ireland, or even the EU, alone. The decisions made in the months and years ahead by the UK Government will determine much of what is possible. The past few years have too often been defined by difficulties and disagreement but the future needn't be, if the political will is there. History,

geography and plain common sense tell us that it is in our interest to make a success of the EU-UK relationship, but actually doing so rests on choices not yet made.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.