

Statement by An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, TD on Withdrawal Agreement

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I am pleased that agreement has been reached between the EU and UK negotiators on a draft Withdrawal Agreement and an outline of the Joint Political Declaration on the future relationship.

Decisive progress has been made and this paves the way for a special meeting of the European Council later this month.

While I welcome these developments, let me say at the outset that Brexit is not our policy, and is something we regret. However, we respect the vote of the United Kingdom's people. And their decision to leave.

Our analysis has consistently shown that Brexit will be bad for Ireland. Therefore our approach has always been to seek to minimise the harmful impacts of Brexit on Ireland and to maximise any opportunities, no matter how few.

Once the outcome of the UK referendum was known, we identified our national priorities. These were, and are:

- Protecting the Peace Process and the Good Friday Agreement;
- Maintaining the Common Travel Area and related benefits for Irish and British citizens;
- Reaffirming our place at the heart of the European Union; and
- Protecting trade, jobs and the economy.

On each of these priorities, we have reached a satisfactory outcome today.

From day one, we sought to ensure that our concerns and priorities were understood by the EU institutions and the other Member States. We sought that they became European concerns, and European priorities, and they did.

The European Council Guidelines, Communications from the Commission, and Resolutions of the European Parliament have consistently reflected this approach. They are proof positive of the solidarity of the other Member States and the institutions with Ireland and the enormous intangible value of being an EU member state.

The Joint Report published last December met our objectives. My goal since then has been to ensure that the legal text of the Withdrawal Agreement was faithful to the commitments therein..

This evening, I am pleased to report that this has been achieved.

The legal text ensures that Ireland and the UK can continue to operate the Common Travel Area and the related benefits for our citizens. We are working closely with the UK Government to ensure that this happens smoothly.

The text also underpins the fundamental rights enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, and the birth right of citizens of Northern Ireland to identify as Irish, and therefore as European citizens, and so to enjoy the rights and freedoms that come with EU citizenship.

Of course, avoiding a hard border has proven to be one of the most difficult challenges.

The December report envisaged that the best way to avoid a hard border was to agree a comprehensive future relationship that would render a border unnecessary. That is still our shared objective, and our preferred outcome.

But we have always said that we also need what has become known as "the backstop". This is now fully spelt out in the draft Withdrawal Agreement. It envisages that the UK and the EU would establish a shared customs territory, with Northern Ireland applying some additional rules for goods to ensure that no need for a hard border between North and South arises.

The text makes clear that this backstop would apply "unless and until" a better solution is agreed. I firmly hope that we can achieve that better solution, and will be working strenuously to that end. But we do now have the insurance policy of the backstop, to apply if all other efforts fail to produce a better solution.

We have also agreed a review mechanism for the backstop, which would allow it to cease to apply if or when a better solution can be found. But the legal text says that this cannot be a unilateral decision - it can only be taken jointly.

The text also allows for a possible extension of the transition period beyond the current end date of December 2020.

The draft agreement contains a number of other welcome and important commitments and assurances regarding the Good Friday Agreement and the need for continued close relations among all parts of these islands.

PEACE and INTERREG funding will continue.

We have consistently said we don't want a border on the island but we also don't want a border in the Irish Sea, either between Ireland and Britain or between Northern Ireland and Britain. The trading arrangements envisaged in the agreement, during the transition period, are very welcome for our businesses trading with the UK.

The confirmation that the UK will facilitate the transit of goods moving to and from Ireland is also very welcome. This is the UK landbridge, our route from Ireland to mainland Europe.

No international negotiation gives one side everything it wants. As I have said, for us, the very notion of Brexit is unwelcome and brings negative consequences.

At the same time, I want to acknowledge that the negotiations have been a tough, difficult experience for everyone involved. With this in mind I want to acknowledge Prime Minister May's integrity in honouring her promise to protect the Peace Process and the Good Friday Agreement. And her commitment to avoid a hard border. She has been true to her word.

For our part, we are absolutely committed to working with the Prime Minister and her Government to secure the deep and close future relationship between the UK and the EU. We both want to build ever deeper bilateral relations and to help secure the restoration of power-sharing institutions in Northern Ireland.

I want to repeat my message of earlier today to unionists - our approach is not intended in any way as a threat to you, or to your identity. We never wanted Brexit. Our goal is simply to protect the Peace and the Good Friday Agreement from any unintended or undesirable consequence.

The draft Withdrawal Agreement states in black and white that Ireland and the EU fully respect the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom, and that this can only change if the majority of people in Northern Ireland want it.

I also believe that the trading arrangements envisaged in the text can, if embraced, represent a genuine economic opportunity for Northern Ireland businesses, with unfettered access to both Great Britain and EU markets.

I want to acknowledge the role of the other political parties, including their leaders and Brexit spokespersons, in broadly supporting the approach of the Government throughout the negotiations.

I am extremely grateful for the continued solidarity of other Member States, my fellow members of the European Council, the European Parliament and the Commission.

I want, in particular, to acknowledge once again the commitment and professionalism of Michel Barnier and his team, with whom we have worked extremely closely over the past year.

Finally, I want to recognise my Government colleagues, in particular Tánaiste Simon Coveney and Minister of State Helen McEntee, together with all the other ministers and officials who have worked to secure today's outcome.

Of course this is not an end point. The full text of the Withdrawal Agreement - all 500 pages - will be scrutinised closely over the coming days, here at home and across the other Member States. The outline of the Joint Political Declaration on the future EU-UK relationship will have to be developed into a more detailed document.

As I indicated in the Dáil this morning, there will be ample opportunity for it to be discussed in the Oireachtas, including a vote in the Dáil.

There is still a long way to go but I believe the draft agreement published today is a very solid step on the journey.

Thank You.