

BREXIT BRIEF

Brexit Brief Issue 146
19 January 2023



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Introduction

With Christmas and New Year behind us, a very busy fortnight has seen a new UK Foreign Secretary and NI Secretary (on 11 January); a newly elected Taoiseach and Tánaiste (on 12 January) and a UK Labour Party leader (on 13 January) crowding into Belfast for meetings and briefings with the Northern Ireland political parties and with community and business representatives. In London on 9 January, the Foreign Secretary met the EU Commission Vice President for talks on the Protocol negotiations, following this with a video call on 16 January 2023. On 10 January the Tánaiste, Micheál Martin, held telephone talks with the five NI parties.

Section One: State of Play

Talks and Negotiations

The EU-UK talks on the NI Protocol have moved into a formal negotiation stage, with agreement on two key elements – data sharing and customs arrangements in Belfast port – leading to growing speculation about the prospect of an overall agreement,

and offering the hope of restoration of the Stormont institutions. A possible move to the final “tunnel” phase of negotiations was spoken about in Brussels circles but played down by officials.

The *RTE* correspondent, Tony Connelly wrote:

On Tuesday, the European Commission briefed diplomats from Member States on the breakthrough and the following day 27 EU ambassadors were briefed. There were precious few details beyond the fact that the atmosphere in the talks had been positive. ‘Things are going well’, is what we were told, ‘The mood music is good and it does reflect the atmosphere in the negotiating room. There’s an understanding there’s still a lot to be done, but the UK is willing to find solutions.’ The tone of the Cleverly-Šefčovič statement was telling: it was a joint statement. We haven’t seen that in a long time.

The Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, currently in the House of Lords, remains a potential cause of direct confrontation with the European

Commission. Tony Connelly reports that “it is clear from a number of sources that Rishi Sunak has tacitly stalled the Bill as a goodwill gesture while the negotiations intensify [...] it has been paused, not ad infinite, but it has been paused. At other stages there has been some ticking over of stuff on the Bill but at the moment no one is lifting a quill.”

The DUP’s Lord Dodds introduced a negative note “Do we want the political process in Northern Ireland or do we want this Protocol? If they adhere to the Protocol, well there is not going to be the restoration of the institutions and Rishi Sunak is therefore going to have to deal with the fallout of that. Surely after 25 years, he doesn’t want to be the Prime Minister that goes down as the one who destroyed the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement and the institutions in Northern Ireland?”

EU and UK Announce Progress

The EU and UK have reached an agreement on EU access to UK IT systems covering the movement of goods from Britain to Northern Ireland. The UK has indicated that it has built a new system to provide the EU with real-time customs data relating to Northern Ireland, safety and security declarations and transit information, to deal with EU concerns. A spokesman said: “We are pleased that they are starting to use the system now and are broadly working with the UK administration to make ongoing improvements.”

This announcement was seen as a significant advance in the ongoing talks/negotiations on the Northern Ireland Protocol. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak told reporters that the deal was “an important step forward” while the Tánaiste Micheál Martin welcomed the announcement: “I think we all welcome the progress that

was made and without doubt the agreement on data sharing is a very significant building block to a potential agreement, but obviously a lot of work remains to be done. At times it has been torturous, and at times it’s been very difficult and remains difficult, and I’ve no doubt there are many, many difficulties yet that both sides have. There’s obviously a journey to travel yet.”

Cleverly – Šefčovič Meeting 9 January / Joint Statement

UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly and Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris welcomed European Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovič to London on 9 January 2023. Following the meeting a joint statement was released rather than two separate ones – a practice which broke down at times as talks stalled or became more adversarial in recent years. The statement recorded an agreement on EU access to UK IT systems reached on the same day.

Vice President Šefčovič met Foreign Secretary Cleverly and Northern Ireland Secretary Heaton-Harris in London on 9 January. They took stock of work to find joint solutions to the concerns raised by businesses and communities in Northern Ireland. The meeting was cordial and constructive.

They underlined the EU and UK’s shared commitment to protect the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in all its parts, while protecting the integrity of both the EU Single Market and the UK internal market. They agreed that while a range of critical issues need to be resolved to find a way forward, an agreement was reached today on the way forward

regarding the specific question of the EU's access to UK IT systems.

They noted this work was a critical prerequisite to building trust and providing assurance, and provided a new basis for EU-UK discussions. EU and UK technical teams will work rapidly to scope the potential for solutions in different areas on the basis of this renewed understanding, and the Foreign Secretary, the Northern Ireland Secretary and Vice President Šefčovič would take stock of progress on 16 January.

A UK Foreign Office Tweet from Cleverly and Heaton –Harris recorded: "We agreed on the way forward on the EU's access to the UK IT system. This means a new basis for UK/GB discussions on the Protocol. Our teams will work urgently to cope potential for solutions in different areas."

In Dublin, Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Micheál Martin, tweeted: "I welcome today's joint statement that progress has been made on EU access to UK IT systems and that this provides a new basis for EU-UK discussions. It is important that joint solutions are found. I will be in Brussels tomorrow for meetings on the Protocol and other important issues."

Joint EU-UK Statement, 16 January 2023

The EU and UK have agreed that scoping work to resolve the dispute over the NI Protocol should proceed in a 'constructive' spirit. A Joint Statement was issued:

European Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič, UK Foreign Secretary

James Cleverly, and Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris met via video conference today to discuss the work on the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland since their last meeting on 9 January. The two sides discussed the range of existing challenges over the last two years and the need to find solutions together to tackle comprehensively the real-life concerns of all communities in Northern Ireland and protect both Northern Ireland's place in the UK's internal market and the integrity of the EU's Single Market.

They agreed that this scoping work for potential solutions should continue in a constructive and collaborative spirit, taking careful account of each other's legitimate interests.

Tánaiste in Brussels

Tánaiste Micheál Martin met with EU Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovič in Brussels on 10 January 2023. Following their talks Micheál Martin hailed the progress being made in talks between the EU and UK on the NI Protocol, referencing "growing trust in the relationship between the two sides but expressed some caution. Much work remained to be done to reach a final agreement on the Protocol. There needed to be a "step-by-step" approach and it was not useful to give a "running commentary" on developments. "The political will I think is now there, but that doesn't take away from the complexity of the issues."

Maroš Šefčovič tweeted: "Great to speak with Tánaiste Micheál Martin today in Brussels. We discussed yesterday's IT

database agreement – positive news. We are committed to finding joint solutions that work for all communities in Northern Ireland. I appreciate Irish Government support.”

Foreign Secretary and Northern Ireland Secretary in Belfast Talks

UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly and Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris convened round table talks with the Northern Ireland political parties on 11 January 2023 to discuss the impact of the NI Protocol and the UK Government’s desire to see the restoration of power sharing government at Stormont. The talks were overshadowed by the fall-out of the decision not to include the Sinn Féin president, Mary Lou McDonald.

The talks took place between the UK ministers and three parties – DUP, UUP and Alliance. The UK ministers then met with Northern Ireland business interests. The Foreign Secretary described the talks as useful, saying that “I am listening to the concerns of people and businesses in Northern Ireland and am keenly aware that the current situation isn’t working.” The NI Secretary commented that “I stressed that while an agreement on the Protocol is incredibly important it remains my view that the devolved institutions must return as soon as possible.”

The UUP leader, Doug Beattie, argued that the Stormont parties need to have “input” into the negotiations on the NI Protocol, expressing fear that a solution agreed over the heads of politicians in Northern Ireland will not result in the return of the institutions. The Northern Ireland Secretary is now expected to delay fresh elections to the Stormont Assembly to allow more time for

the ongoing Brexit negotiations. The latest deadline for calling elections was fixed for 19 January 2023.

Taoiseach & Tánaiste Visit Belfast and Armagh, 12 January 2023

The Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, travelled to Belfast on 12 January 2023 for meetings with the leaders of all the main political parties and with the Northern Ireland Brexit Business Working Group. The Tánaiste, and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Micheál Martin, also travelled to Belfast for a meeting with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Chris Heaton-Harris and then to Armagh for a number of engagements, including a visit to the Secretariat of the North South Ministerial Council and the launch of the Shared Island Civic Society Fund.

The Taoiseach conducted what *Politico* described as “a daylong diplomatic push north of the border” discussing the Protocol impasse with the five party leaders, commenting that defusing London-Brussels tensions would “be of value in its own right” but that this might not be enough to revive cross-community government. Following his session with DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson, the Taoiseach spoke of the difficulty of persuading the party to move from its strongly held position. Jeffrey Donaldson indicated that “We will look at what measures are required in the event of an agreement being reached between the United Kingdom and the European Union. But on trade within the United Kingdom there should be no border controls.”

The Sinn Féin leader, Mary Lou McDonald, who was invited to the talks as leader of an all-island group, said she told the Taoiseach

that a deal on the Protocol is possible. She said there was a window to do it but it needed to be grasped “with both hands”. She went on to say that “It’s now on every one in political leadership and political life to grasp this opportunity to bring matters to a conclusion and to move forward together, acting in good faith.”

Following their meeting NI Secretary Heaton-Harris commented: “I was delighted to host Tánaiste Micheál Martin in Hillsborough this morning and look forward to furthering the UK and Ireland’s bilateral relationship. We agree on the need to see a strong devolved government in Northern Ireland and the restoration of an Executive as soon as possible, as the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement intends. Next week, we will convene a meeting of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference in Dublin, which will offer us space to discuss these matters of mutual interest in greater detail.”

The Tánaiste spoke of a “very good meeting” and “substantive discussions” with both governments very focused on the need to get the Good Friday Agreement institutions restored. “We also discussed a range of other issues, of course the ongoing situation in relation to the talks between the European Union and the UK government. We both updated each other in respect of the ongoing discussions we have had at European level with Maroš Šefčovič.”

Prior to the visit to Belfast the “newly minted” Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, held phone discussions with the party leaders, Jeffrey Donaldson commenting that the call was useful, with Dublin now recognising the Protocol as the problem for unionists and

expressing the DUP’s ongoing opposition to it. First Minister designate Michelle O’Neill, for Sinn Féin, spoke of a “good call” and said that “we share a common commitment on the way forward to get a negotiated outcome on the Protocol and an immediate restoration of power sharing.”

Sinn Féin & SDLP “no-shows” at Brexit Talks

The Foreign Secretary’s Brexit/Protocol talks took place without nationalist participation when Sinn Fein and the SDLP refused to attend following the “exclusion” of the Sinn Féin party President Mary Lou McDonald from the discussions. The Northern Ireland Office said that the meeting was “for Northern Ireland politicians to talk through issues around the Northern Ireland Protocol with the Northern Ireland Secretary and the Foreign Secretary. The leader of Sinn Féin in the Assembly was invited. Her attendance is a matter for Sinn Féin.”

Sinn Féin accused the UK Government of “Tory petulance” and of ignoring the all-island nature of the party. Mary Lou McDonald saw the move as “bizarre and unacceptable.” The SDLP saw the decision as “daft and surreal” and refused to attend the meeting.

Alliance Party deputy leader Stephen Farry said: “The Government made a mistake in terms of how they handled the talks yesterday, their position on that is not tenable. They need to recognise the subtleties of the situation in Northern Ireland and the reality that Sinn Féin is organised on an all-Ireland basis. The Government need to de-escalate their language and they need to climb down and find a means of ensuring

that we have proper inclusive talks at the next opportunity.”

Taoiseach Varadkar on Brexit

The newly restored Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, has said that mistakes were made on all sides in the handling of Brexit but vowed to be “flexible and reasonable” when attempting to solve issues with the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Speaking to the press in Dublin, Leo Varadkar said:

I’m sure we’ve all made mistakes in the handling of Brexit. There was no roadmap, no manual, it wasn’t something that we expected would happen and we’ve all done our best to deal with it. Again, I look forward to travelling to Northern Ireland early in the new year, meeting with all the parties, and reaching out to all parties and all communities in an effort to find a solution.

One thing I have said in the past is that, when we designed the Protocol, when it was originally negotiated, perhaps it was a little bit too strict. And we’ve seen that the Protocol has worked without it being fully enforced. And that’s why I think there is room for flexibility and room for changes and we’re open to that and up for that, and I know from speaking to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Vice President Maroš Šefčovič, that’s their position too.

So, we are willing to show flexibility and to make compromises. We do want there to be an agreement. I have

spoken to a lot of people who come from a unionist background in Northern Ireland over the years. I do understand how they feel about the Protocol. They feel that it diminishes their place in the Union, that it creates barriers between Britain and Northern Ireland that didn’t exist before.

And I do understand that and I do get that. But that’s also true of Brexit. Brexit was imposed on Northern Ireland without cross-community consent, without the support of the majority of people in Northern Ireland, and one the good thing about the European Union was that it diminished barriers and diminished borders between north and south and that was a great reassurance to people who come from a nationalist background in particular. A lot of people who are unionists feel that the Protocol has separated them from Great Britain. A lot of people from a nationalist background in Northern Ireland feel that Brexit separated them from the rest of Ireland. So there are two sides to this story.

The Taoiseach also said that Brexit is a reality which is not going to be reversed:

I accept that – I regret it but I accept it – and anything we’ve done since then, whether it was the backstop or the Protocol, was an attempt just to deal with that reality and to avoid a hard border on our island, to make sure that human rights in Northern Ireland are upheld and there is no diminution of them, which is really important to me as well, and also that the European Single Market is protected, and they’re

my firm red lines. The back stop the Protocol, were just mechanisms to achieve those objectives and, so long as we can achieve those objectives, I'll be as flexible and reasonable as I can be.

The Taoiseach's remarks were widely reported and interpreted in Ireland, Britain and beyond leading to a spokesman for the Taoiseach indicating to political correspondents that his comments were not a signal that the text of the Protocol could be renegotiated or rewritten. The Taoiseach was seeking to suggest that "the issue of flexibility is an important one."

Keir Starmer in Belfast

The UK Labour Party leader, Sir Keir Starmer, visited Belfast on 13 February 2023 for talks with the leaders of the main Northern Ireland political parties for discussions on the Protocol and the devolved institutions. "I want to reach out on this, speak to all unionist communities. There are legitimate problems with the Protocol and these must be recognised in any negotiations." The DUP leader, Jeffrey Donaldson, tweeted: "Delighted to welcome the Labour Party leader, Keir Starmer, to Stormont. The Protocol caused the collapse of the NI Executive and it must be replaced with arrangements that restore our place in the United Kingdom."

Keir Starmer used a speech to Queen's University to deliver a message of reassurance to unionists and a pointed political message to Prime Minister Sunak.

My point is this – the spirit of 1998, on both islands, is not one of tribal politics. This is the process which brought Ian

Paisley and Martin McGuinness together – and they made it work – there can be no clearer example than that.

So I say to the Prime Minister, if there is a deal to do in coming weeks – do it. Whatever political cover you need, whatever mechanisms in Westminster you require, if it delivers for our national interest and the people of Northern Ireland – we will support you. The time for action on the Protocol is now. The time to stand up to the ERG is now. The time to put Northern Ireland above a Brexit purity cult, which can never be satisfied – is now.

We can find ways to remove the majority of checks – a bespoke SPS agreement, a monitoring system that eradicates checks on goods that will only ever be sold in Northern Ireland. The opportunity for these reforms is there – and they would deliver for communities and businesses across these islands. Northern Ireland can be prosperous under the Protocol. But it requires leadership from you, Prime Minister.

I said this yesterday, I will say it here and I want every community in Northern Ireland to hear it – the Labour Party will always be a good faith guarantor of the constitution and the principle of consent. That commitment is written in to the agreement we want to celebrate in April – it stands above politics, it should stand above Brexit negotiations as well. I think people know we would have done things differently, and that we will stand by those values when in Government.

But I also say this – in the coming weeks, it's possible there will be siren voices in Westminster that say again, there is another path, a path that doesn't require compromise on the Protocol. In fact, it's possible those siren voices will include – may even be led by – the very people who created the Protocol. That were cavalier with the constitutional settlement of this United Kingdom. That came to this island and acted – to be blunt – in bad faith.

You can listen to those voices, of course, it's not for me to determine the interests of any community here. But I would counsel that the example to follow is not theirs. But the spirit of negotiation, of conciliation, of courage, that, in the end, is always the force which moves Northern Ireland forward towards the future. That's what I want to do in April – look forward.

A spokesman for the ERG, David Jones, commented: "I'm sure that the Prime Minister is well capable of seeing a Trojan horse when it presents itself. There is no way that he is going to want to rely upon Labour votes in order to get legislation through."

Section Two: The Evolving Debate

DUP Seven Tests

In advance of the Belfast roundtable with James Cleverly the DUP leader, Jeffrey Donaldson, stated that the party's "seven tests" (set out in the House of Commons in July 2021) remain the yardstick by which any future deal would be measured.

The DUP's "seven tests" are:

- Fulfil Article 6 of the Act of Union;
- Avoid any diversion of trade;
- Not constitute a boarder in the Irish Sea;
- Give the people of NI a say in making the laws which govern them;
- Result in "no checks on goods going from NI to GB or from GB to NI (and remaining in NI);
- Ensure no new regulatory borders develop between NI and the rest of the UK; and
- Preserve the letter and spirit of NI's constitutional guarantee in the Belfast Agreement by requiring consent from a majority of its citizens for any diminution of its status as part of the UK.

Protocol Raised in UK – Germany Talks

UK Foreign Secretary, James Cleverly hosted Germany's Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, for talks in London. The issue of the Northern Ireland Protocol was raised in their discussions.

The Guardian reported that "Disputes over implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol have become 'the Achilles Heel' of the EU's relations with the UK, the German foreign minister said on Thursday as she held talks with her UK counterpart in London. Ms Baerbock, a former student at the London School of Economics, said she had felt Brexit like the loss of a family member but that she was determined not to look back in anger.

In a reference to the Protocol she said: "It is key that we find a responsible and pragmatic solution for Northern Ireland on the basis of existing agreements. It is the only way we will realise the full potential of our partnership.

As we engage in our new relationship, we are under an obligation to get the very best results for those who are directly affected. While we cannot turn back the clock we can decide to step forward into a good common future." She pointedly urged the UK not to act in breach of international law, warning that it would be harder to make the case for order based on international rules at the UN Security Council.

Section Three: Background Material and Further Reading

Background Material

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The IIEA acknowledges the support of the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union



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