

# BREXIT BRIEF

Brexit Brief Issue 156  
8 June 2023



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The Brief seeks to provide up-to-date information on the progress and content of the UK-EU negotiations, and bring together relevant statements and policy positions from key players in Ireland, the UK and the EU.

The Brief is part of a wider communications programme covering the work of the IIEA's UK Project Group – including commentaries, speeches, texts and event reports – which are highlighted on the Institute's website. ([www.iiea.com](http://www.iiea.com))

## Introduction

The Stormont impasse continues. The DUP's Ian Paisley Jr MP has said that a return to powersharing "...could be an ice age away". If this prediction proves to be true, the consequences could be significant for Northern Ireland. The former Alliance Party leader Lord Alderdice has warned that failure to restore the Assembly and Executive means that Northern Ireland is moving inexorably towards joint UK-Irish authority

The significance of the results of last month's local government elections, in which nationalist parties outperformed unionist parties for the first time in Northern Ireland's history, has not gone unnoticed. There has been widespread commentary on the prospect of a border poll, the possible nature

of a United Ireland, and the implications of nationalism's electoral success for post-Brexit relations between London and Dublin

The former UK Prime Minister, Sir John Major, has called on the UK Government to issue its criteria for calling a border poll. In Dublin, the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, said "the time is not right" for a vote on Irish unity and that holding a poll in the near future would be "counterproductive" for those who aspire to a United Ireland. The former President of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams, urged unionists to engage with the debate around a United Ireland so that they could have input into shaping what any new Ireland might look like.

*The Irish News* forecast that any future border poll will be decided by those who do not identify with either of the two main political traditions

in Northern Ireland. Brendan O’Leary, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, who has perhaps undertaken the most profound research into Irish unity, has said that a referendum is closer now than it has ever been before in Northern Ireland’s history.

Meanwhile, Brexit itself has become the subject of an increasingly spirited debate in British political, academic, and media circles. Nigel Farage’s assertion that, “Brexit has failed. We’ve not delivered on Brexit” has led to a highly publicised, nation-wide poster campaign by the anti-Brexit campaign group, *Led by Donkeys*.

Furthermore, in a new book on the UK’s parliamentary debates on Brexit, University College London (UCL) academics, Meg Russell and Lisa James, concluded that:

*The Brexit period, marked by a divided public, the uncompromising campaign style of Dominic Cummings, a Labour leader drawn from the fringe left of his own party, and finally the premiership of Boris Johnson, established a degree of political polarization unknown in the preceding decades. This eroded the very spirit of compromise on which politics depends, sparking attempts to undermine traditional institutions and reject many of the norms of propriety upon which the system had long depended. Post-Brexit, and post-Johnson, rebuilding these norms and standards is a critical priority.*

## Section One: State of Play

### Taoiseach on the possibility of a Border Poll

The Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, has said “the time is not right” for a border poll on a United Ireland, warning that the push for a

referendum could be “counterproductive”. In an interview with *The Irish Times*, Mr Varadkar said that attention should instead be focused on getting the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive back up and running, and on ensuring that the north-south and east-west bodies function well before examining the possibility of constitutional change. Mr Varadkar added that that he was “definitely hopeful” that power-sharing will be restored in Northern Ireland in the autumn.

### BIIGC Meeting June 2023

The British and Irish Governments have announced that the next meeting of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC) will take place on 19 June 2023. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Chris-Heaton Harris MP, will co-chair the meeting with Ireland’s Tánaiste, Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Minister for Defence, Micheál Martin TD.

The last BIIGC took place on 19 January 2023 in Dublin. The next meeting has been planned since early spring and will take place in London. A joint communiqué will be issued at completion of the meeting.

Established under Strand 3 of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, the BIIGC is a bilateral forum, the purpose of which is “to bring together the British and Irish Governments to promote cooperation at all levels on all matters of mutual interest within the competence of both Governments”.

The Conference will discuss political stability in Northern Ireland and the importance of restoring the Northern Ireland Assembly, Executive and North South Ministerial Council to full operation. It will also address

important areas of bilateral cooperation, including security and group transition, education, rights and citizenship matters, and take stock of progress on energy and cyber security, which were previously discussed in January. Finally, the Conference will cover matters of mutual interest, such as dealing with the legacy of the Troubles.

Mr Heaton-Harris said that the BIIGC provides space for strengthening cooperation between the UK and Ireland on issues of mutual interest, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland, and he added that he looked forward to welcoming Mr Martin, along with the Irish Minister for Justice, Helen McEntee TD, to London for the Conference.

## **Taoiseach and Prime Minister speak**

The Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, has asked the UK Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, to keep the Irish Government informed of any new package of measures designed to reassure the Democratic Unionist Party about Northern Ireland's place in the UK.

Speaking following a bilateral meeting with Mr Sunak at the European Political Community summit in Moldova, Mr Varadkar said:

*What is publicly known at this stage is that the DUP is seeking some assurances from the British government about their place in the UK. That's really a matter between the DUP and the UK Government. But we've said we would just like to be aware of that so that we're not caught off guard or by surprise, and that there's nothing that would concern us in terms of the integrity of the Good Friday Agreement. I fully trust the Prime Minister in that regard.*

Mr Varadkar told reporters that the leaders had also discussed financial arrangements that might work for Northern Ireland, indicating that the Irish Government was willing to make a financial contribution to specific projects such as upgrading the A5 road and funding for university programmes.

The Taoiseach had referred to this bilateral meeting earlier in Dáil Éireann on 23 May 2023 in response to a question from Sinn Féin President, Mary Lou McDonald. Mr Varadkar remarked that he was due to meet Mr Sunak in Chisinau, where he envisaged that they would discuss the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive:

*"...[W]e will work with together with the UK Government to do all we can to get the Executive up and running as soon as possible. I firmly agree that the message from the people of Northern Ireland is clear. They want the Executive up and running. They want the enormous problems they face on a day-to-day basis dealt with by their politicians."*

## **Northern Ireland (Interim Arrangements) Act 2023**

The Northern Ireland (Interim Arrangements) Act, which received Royal Assent on 24 May 2023, prevents a 'governance gap' in the Executive's absence and allows the UK Government to explore, with the Northern Ireland Civil Service, options for budget sustainability.

The Northern Ireland Office explained that current civil servant decision-making arrangements are due to expire on 5 June 2023, and that the Act will continue these powers until an Executive is formed. In the absence of ministers, the Act also enables

preparatory work to take place around options for budget sustainability, including further revenue raising. Further, the Act requires that NI departmental accounts are laid in the House of Commons to increase transparency around how public money is spent.

This Act supports the British Government's focus on the restoration of the Executive and Assembly. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Chris Heaton-Harris MP, said that he greatly appreciated the work of Northern Irish civil servants to maintain public services in the absence of an Executive. He added:

*While I am hopeful that locally elected ministers will once again resume their responsibilities in government, this new legislation ensures continued governance for the people of NI.*

*The Government has a responsibility to provide this certainty, and our desire to see an Executive restored recognises that strong local devolved government offers the best way to build a brighter future for the people, communities and businesses of NI.*

## Civil Service Head meets parties

The Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Jayne Brady, held talks with representatives from the four largest NI political parties on 25 May 2023, with the focus on finances and restoration of a devolved, powersharing administration at Stormont. The agenda included the recovery and transformation of public services and outlining priorities for an incoming government.

Writing to the parties entitled to form such a government, which excludes the SDLP, Ms Brady wrote that only elected ministers can take "major policy decisions, some of

which are required for departments to make savings in the budget for 2023-2024." The absence of a functioning Executive "leaves the accounting officer in the invidious position of having no legal means to ensure full compliance with the duty to remain within budget limits."

*BBC News* commented that Jayne Brady had laid bare the scale of the tasks that she and her staff are having to deal with and made it very clear that unless Stormont is restored, or the Secretary of State intervenes, the major decisions that are necessary to get the budget under control cannot happen.

## Irish News Editorial: Election signals huge symbolic shift

*The Irish News*, on 23 May 2023, published an Editorial on the outcome of the local government elections. The Editorial noted that, 25 years after the results of the Good Friday Agreement referendum were announced, the local election results have given rise to questions about a further referendum, this one on the constitutional future of Northern Ireland.

*The Irish News* commented that, since the adoption of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the political landscape of Northern Ireland has changed dramatically, with Sinn Féin and the DUP dominating nationalism and unionism respectively, and the former becoming the largest party at Assembly and local government level. The Editorial also remarked that, perhaps more striking than Sinn Féin's electoral success, was the fact that the combined votes cast for nationalist parties outpolled those cast for unionist parties for the first time in Northern Ireland's history:

*When votes for Sinn Féin, the SDLP, Aontú, People Before Profit and the IRSP were added together, there was a*

*clear gap to the combined total for the DUP, UUP, TUV, PUP and Conservatives. Given that the boundaries of Northern Ireland were drawn to guarantee a secure unionist majority, this is clearly a moment of huge symbolic significance. Politically, it has also led to calls for the Secretary of State to set out the precise conditions to be met for a border poll to be called under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement.*

The Irish News added that, while votes for nationalist parties may not translate into support for a United Ireland, the DUP's poor decision-making over Brexit and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland ("the Protocol") had only succeeded in bolstering arguments in favour of constitutional change. The Editorial concluded with some words of advice for the DUP:

*It would be in both the party and wider unionism's interest to demonstrate that devolution can still work by immediately re-joining an executive and committing itself to genuine powersharing for the benefit of all the people in a rapidly changing Northern Ireland.*

## Section Two: The Evolving Debate

### Jeffrey Donaldson Letter

On 27 May 2023, the DUP leader, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, wrote to party members on the outcome of the local government elections. Sir Jeffrey dismissed those who spoke negatively of the DUP's performance, writing:

*Last Thursday our mandate was renewed, and we were able to reaffirm our contract with the people to fully restore Northern Ireland's position in the United Kingdom. Whilst the non-*

*unionist commentators seek to pick holes in our mandate, I am heartened that we were able to increase our vote share from the NI Assembly election last year.*

Sir Jeffrey also reiterated his party's criticisms of the Protocol and the Windsor Framework, and called on nationalists to recognise unionist concerns over the post-Brexit arrangements:

*The Northern Ireland Protocol placed a barrier between us and the rest of the United Kingdom which is offensive to us as unionists. Indeed, whilst nationalists seek to play down the impact of the Irish Sea Border, we should all remember that Sinn Féin and SDLP politicians were in uproar at the very idea of any additional cameras being placed on the north-south border.*

*Northern Ireland will struggle to move forward if republicans have so little respect for their unionist neighbours that they can't see the problem with the current protocol arrangements. I would never have expected nor asked my nationalist neighbours to accept the kind of infrastructure north-south that we are being asked to accept east-west. Alongside colleagues, I have consistently campaigned to ensure that the Protocol is replaced by arrangements that restore our place within the United Kingdom. Those arrangements must be capable of commanding the support of unionists as well as nationalists.*

### Brexit 'Right or Wrong' - Statista Poll, May 2023

The polling company, Statista, published, on 23 May 2023, the results of its up-to-date research on public attitudes to Brexit,

entitled, "Share of people who think Brexit was the right or wrong decision 2020-2023."

*Statista's* polling revealed that 56% of people in Great Britain thought Brexit was the wrong decision, compared to 31% who thought it was the right decision. These results support trends established in previous *Statista* surveys, which show that, since 2020, more people have consistently expressed greater regret over Brexit than support for it, apart from some polls in Spring 2021 in which support for Brexit was higher.

*Statista* also noted that, since late July 2022, the share of people who regret Brexit has consistently been above 50%. According to the polling company, the fall in support for Brexit mirrors the government's sinking approval ratings, especially since the ruling Conservative Party, along with former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, are heavily associated with Brexit and the Leave campaign.

The surge in support for Brexit that occurred in Spring 2021 may have been related to the United Kingdom's fast rollout of vaccinations for COVID-19. Compared to other major European countries, the UK had managed to vaccinate a far higher share of its population by Spring 2021, although other countries did catch up in the summer. The relatively fast procurement process of the UK was contrasted with a more cautious bureaucratic EU, supporting some of the key sentiments that drove the Brexit vote.

## Observer Poll

On 28 May 2023, *The Observer* published the results of a poll measuring public opinion in the UK on post-Brexit relations with the European Union.

The poll found that a clear majority of British voters now favours building closer relations

with the European Union, highlighting a clear reversal in public opinion since Brexit. Even in those constituencies that recorded the highest votes to leave the EU in 2016, more than twice as many voters now believe the best route forward is to move in the opposite direction and forge closer ties with Brussels.

The poll by *Focaldata* found that three times as many adults (63%) now believe Brexit has created more problems than it has solved, compared with just 21% who believe it has solved more than it has created. Overall, 53% of voters now want the Government to seek a closer relationship with the EU than it has currently, having left the European Single Market and Customs Union, against just 14% who want the UK to distance itself from Brussels.

Evidence is also mounting of the damage done to the UK economy and its trade because of post-Brexit trade barriers, extra bureaucracy and costs to exporters and importers. Last week *The Guardian* reported data from the London School of Economics (LSE) showing that British households had paid £7bn since Brexit to cover the extra cost of food imports from the EU resulting from new trade barriers.

## Maroš Šefčovič Speech in Ireland's EU Perm Rep

The Vice-President of the European Commission, Maroš Šefčovič, spoke at an event organised by European Movement Ireland in the Permanent Representation of Ireland to the European Union in Brussels to mark the 50th anniversary of Irish membership of the European Communities and the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Šefčovič remarked that, throughout the Brexit negotiations, protecting the Good Friday Agreement and preserving peace in Northern Ireland had been a priority for the Brussels negotiators. He added that the European Union itself is a peace project, and that the establishment of the Single Market in 1993 had facilitated the peace process in Northern Ireland by enabling a softening of the Irish border. Mr Šefčovič also referred to the EU PEACE programmes which, he said, had played a role in delivering economic and social stability to Northern Ireland and border counties in Ireland.

Looking ahead, Mr Šefčovič noted that, along with the UK and Ireland, the European Commission has agreed to co-fund a new €1.15 billion PEACE PLUS programme, expected to start shortly. He expressly reaffirmed the European Union's commitment to the peace process in Northern Ireland and Ireland, and praised the Windsor Framework as offering joint solutions which preserve the Single Market and Northern Ireland's place in the UK while also maintaining the foundations of peace, particularly a soft border, on the island of Ireland. He concluded by saying, "As I have often said: If the last 25 years have been about peace in Northern Ireland, the next 25 years should be about both peace and prosperity."

## **Prime Minister's Questions, 24 May 2023**

During PMQs on 24 May 2023, the UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, took a question from the SDLP leader, Colum Eastwood MP, on whether the UK Government could give a commitment on a financial "public sector rescue package" for Northern Ireland, and whether it was now time for the DUP to "get back to work"?

Mr Sunak responded by, once again, calling for the restoration of the Northern Ireland governing institutions, claiming that local governance is the only way to properly address the challenges facing Northern Ireland's public sector. Mr Sunak added:

*...[W]e have prioritised health in the Northern Ireland budget for this year, with £20 million more funding. I know that he (Mr Eastwood) will be an important contributor to the conversations that the Secretary of State is having, to embark on public service reform and restore the Executive.*

## **Centre for European Reform Breakfast, 23 May 2023**

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Chris Heaton-Harris MP, tweeted following a Centre for European Reform business breakfast in Belfast on 23 May 2023:

*The Windsor Framework brings huge opportunities to Northern Ireland by cutting red tape and restoring the free flow of trade within the UK. These opportunities would be best delivered by a functioning Northern Ireland Executive.*

## **EU Research Programme Links**

Cambridge University has called for urgent government action to ensure UK affiliation to the EU Horizon Europe science research programme, describing it as a "number one priority for the university". Cambridge highlighted the importance of international collaboration in research, and expressed frustration that, "narrow-minded politics is going to have an impact on the UK in an area where we are global leaders."

It is assumed in academic circles that if the differences over the Northern Ireland Protocol could be resolved, the UK would fully re-join the Horizon Programme under terms similar to those it had before Brexit.

## Good Friday Agreement Tour

An original, signed copy of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement has completed a tour of some 800 miles across Northern Ireland from London to mark the 25th anniversary of its signing, the first time the original UK copy of the Agreement has returned to Northern Ireland since its signing on 10 April 1998. The document was provided on loan from The National Archives in London to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland.

The original UK Government's signed copy of the Agreement features the signatures of the then UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, the late Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mo Mowlam, and the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, David Andrews.

Since April, the document has gone on display at various locations across all six counties in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Chris Heaton-Harris MP, commented:

*It is fantastic that the original Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement has returned to Northern Ireland for the first time since its historic signing 25 years ago, and that the public has had the opportunity to see the document across various locations in Northern Ireland.*

*The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement was an incredible achievement, helping to lay the foundation of a more prosperous Northern Ireland that we see today. It's important that current*

*and future generations are aware of its significance in helping to create a more peaceful society in Northern Ireland.*

## Section Three: Background Material and Further Reading

### Background Material

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## Further Reading

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The IIEA acknowledges the support of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) Programme of the European Union



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