

BREXIT BRIEF

Brexit Brief Issue 100
17 December 2020



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Introduction

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)

Section One: State of Play

Brexit Negotiations to Continue: Joint Statement from UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, 13 December 2020.

The Prime Minister and President spoke by telephone on Sunday 13 December and issued a brief joint statement, indicating that talks were to continue – going the 'extra mile'.

We had a useful phone call this morning. We discussed the major unresolved topics. Our negotiating teams have been working day and night over recent days. And despite the exhaustion after almost a year of negotiations, despite the fact

that deadlines have been missed over and over we think it is responsible at this point to go the extra mile.

We have accordingly mandated our negotiators to continue the talks and to see whether an agreement can even at this late stage be reached.

The Taoiseach Micheál Martin commented that it is a "hopeful sign" the EU and UK negotiators are continuing to talk but does not want to understate the "very significant challenges" ahead in Brexit talks. "A lot has been done and it would be a terrible pity to lose all of that." Foreign Minister Simon Coveney also responded "Time to hold our nerve and allow the negotiators to inch progress forward – even at this late stage. Joint statement on

Brexit negotiations is a good signal. A deal clearly very difficult but possible.”

Speaking later in Downing Street, Boris Johnson said there is a “deal to be done” but warned that the UK and EU “remain very far apart” on the key issues. “And you know what they are - the UK can’t be locked into the EU’s regulatory orbit and we’ve obviously got to take back control of our fisheries four-and-a-half years after people voted for it. So those are the points. I think that it is very clear what the UK is talking about, let’s see what we can achieve. But in the meantime, get ready, with confidence, for January 1 - trade on WTO terms if we have to.”

UK Ministry of Defence, 12 December 2020

The UK Ministry of Defence has stated that four offshore patrol boats will be available to monitor UK territorial waters and that it would have “robust enforcement measures in place to protect the UK’s rights as an independent coastal state.” The Chairman of the House of Commons Defence Committee, Conservative MP Tobias Ellwood described the threat to use ‘gunboats’ to patrol UK waters in a no-deal situation as “irresponsible.

Von der Leyen / Johnson Dinner, Brussels, 9 December 2020.

The President of the European Commission and the Prime Minister, with the senior members of their negotiating teams, met for dinner in Brussels on Wednesday 9 December. They agreed that talks should continue until Sunday 13 December when a firm decision would be taken about the future of the talks.

Prime Minister Johnson issued a Statement following the dinner discussion:

“The Prime Minister and President von der Leyen met for dinner in Brussels this evening.

The leaders had a frank discussion about the state of play in the negotiations. They acknowledged that the situation remained very difficult and there were still major differences between the two sides. They agreed that Chief Negotiators would continue talks over the next few days and that a firm decision should be taken about the future of the talks by Sunday. The Prime Minister is determined not to leave any route to a fair deal untested, but any agreement must respect the independence and sovereignty of the UK.”

President von der Leyen tweeted: “We had a lively & interesting discussion on the state of play on outstanding issues. We understand each other’s positions. They remain far apart. The teams should immediately reconvene to try to resolve these issues. We will come to a decision by the end of the weekend.”

The absence of a joint statement following the dinner talks was interpreted as evidence of a difficult encounter. The Commission President briefed the European Council at its meeting on 10 December and was described as striking a downbeat note about the chances of success in the negotiations, arguing that the main obstacles remained in place.

Prime Minister in House of Commons, 9 December

Prior to departing for Brussels on 9 December, Prime Minister Johnson replied to a Parliamentary Question in the House of Commons:

A good deal is still there to be done, and I look forward to discussing it with Commissioner von der Leyen tonight, but I must tell the House that our friends

in the EU are currently insisting that, if they pass a new law in the future with which we in this country do not comply or do not follow suit, they should have the automatic right to punish us and to retaliate. Secondly, they are saying that the UK should be the only country in the world not to have sovereign control over its fishing waters. I do not believe that those are terms that any Prime Minister of this country should accept.

Prime Minister and Commission President Conversation, 7 December 2020

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen held a ninety minute phone conversation on 7 December in the continuing effort to break the post-Brexit negotiation stalemate. They issued a joint Statement:

As agreed on Saturday, we took stock today of the ongoing negotiations. We agreed that the conditions for finalizing an agreement are not there due to the remaining significant differences on three critical issues: level playing field, governance and fisheries. We asked our Chief Negotiators and their teams to prepare an overview of the remaining differences to be discussed in a physical meeting in Brussels in the coming days.

It was subsequently agreed that the Prime Minister and President would meet over dinner in Brussels on 9 December.

Talks Reconvened, 6 December 2020

The negotiating teams met again on 6 December. Suggestions of a breakthrough on Fishing were quickly dismissed by the UK side

and the three main 'sticking points' remained on the table.

Michel Barnier briefed EU ambassadors and the European Parliament Brexit Committee emphasising that the talks were in the 'endgame' and speaking of the importance of contingency plans to cope with a no-deal outcome. His assessment was described as 'very gloomy'.

Prime Minister and Commission President Conversation, 5 December 2020

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen held a one-hour phone conversation on 5 December in an attempt to break the post-Brexit negotiation stalemate. They issued a joint Statement:

In a phone call today on the on-going negotiations between the European Union and the United Kingdom, we welcomed the fact that progress has been achieved in many areas. Nevertheless, significant differences remain on three critical issues: level playing field, governance and fisheries. Both sides underlined that no agreement is feasible if these issues are not resolved.

Whilst recognising the seriousness of these differences, we agreed that a further effort should be undertaken by our negotiating teams to assess whether they can be resolved.

We are therefore instructing our chief negotiators to reconvene tomorrow in Brussels. We will speak again on Monday evening.

Brexit talks stalled, 4 December 2020

On 4 December the Brexit negotiations between the EU and UK stalled after a week of talks in London under pressure to meet a narrowing deadline. The Chief Negotiators, Michel Barnier and David Frost issued an agreed Statement:

After one week of intense negotiations in London, the two chief negotiators agreed today that the conditions for an agreement are not met, due to significant divergences on level playing-field, governance and fisheries. On this basis, they agreed to pause in order to brief their principals on the state of play of the negotiations. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen will hold a phone conversation with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Saturday to discuss the state of play.

Commentators have suggested that the outcome of the talks depends significantly on whether Prime Minister Johnson can sell a compromise deal to Conservative Party MPs as compatible with 'sovereignty' and 'taking back control'. On the other hand, it is understood that Michel Barnier has been under increasing pressure from some EU Member States, notably France and the Netherlands, not to move beyond his mandate in finalising a deal.

What held up progress in the recent round of talks was the state aid element of the Level Playing Field chapter – seen as 'the key battleground of sovereignty versus constraint'. A Brussels consultant and former EU Commission official is quoted by Tony Connelly of RTE as saying "The key test, as it had been for months, is whether Boris Johnson is willing to accept domestic constraints on his government's ability to subsidise businesses. That his state aid picks could be challenged by a UK regulator, or by businesses, in UK courts."

Joint Committee reach Agreement on Northern Ireland Protocol

The EU-UK Joint Committee on Implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement met on 7 December 2020. The Joint Committee co-chairs issued an agreed Joint Statement:

The co-chairs of the EU-UK Joint Committee – European Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič and the UK Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Rt Hon Michael Gove – yesterday held a political meeting to address the outstanding issues related to the implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement, in particular the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, is fully operational at the end of the transition period, i.e. as of 1 January 2021, is essential. The Protocol protects the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement in all its dimensions, maintaining peace, stability and prosperity on the island of Ireland.

Following intensive and constructive work over the past weeks by the EU and the UK, the two co-chairs can now announce their agreement in principle on all issues, in particular with regard to the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland.

An agreement in principle has been found in the following areas, amongst others: Border Control Posts/Entry Points specifically for checks on animals, plants and derived products, export declarations, the supply of medicines, the supply of chilled meats, and other food products to supermarkets, and a clarification on the application of State aid under the terms of the Protocol.

The parties have also reached an agreement in principle with respect to

the decisions the Joint Committee has to take before 1 January 2021. In particular, this concerns the practical arrangements regarding the EU's presence in Northern Ireland when UK authorities implement checks and controls under the Protocol, determining criteria for goods to be considered "not at risk" of entering the EU when moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, the exemption of agricultural and fish subsidies from State aid rules, the finalisation of the list of chairpersons of the arbitration panel for the dispute settlement mechanism so that the arbitration panel can start operating as of next year, as well as the correction of errors and omissions in Annex 2 of the Protocol.

In view of these mutually agreed solutions, the UK will withdraw clauses 44, 45 and 47 of the UK Internal Market Bill, and not introduce any similar provisions in the Taxation Bill.

The UK Government position was made clear in a statement to the House of Commons by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove:

We have been able to deliver a package which now means that the protocol can be implemented in a pragmatic and proportionate way. It takes account of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement in all its dimensions, and it protects the interests of both the EU single market and, more importantly, the territorial and constitutional integrity of the whole United Kingdom. This agreement will be approved officially at a Joint Committee meeting in the coming days. Of course, the agreement we have reached also enables the Government to withdraw

clauses 44, 45 and 47 of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill and avoids the need for any additional provisions in the Taxation (Post-transition Period) Bill. Having put beyond doubt the primacy of the sovereignty of this place as we leave the EU, we rest safe in the knowledge that such provisions are no longer required.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney, responded on behalf of the Irish Government:

I very much welcome the positive news announced today that agreement in principle has been reached on the outstanding issues on the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland. Of particular significance is the commitment by the UK to withdraw clauses 44, 45 and 47 of the Internal Market Bill bringing it back into line with its obligations under the Withdrawal Agreement. This positive development comes after significant and productive engagement between the EU and the UK on implementation of the Protocol, as provided for under the Withdrawal Agreement.

I look forward to an early meeting of the EU-UK Joint Committee, Chaired by Commission Vice President Maros Sefcovic and Michael Gove to formalise the agreements reached.

I hope this may also provide some of the positive momentum necessary to instil confidence and trust and allow progress in the wider context of the future relationship negotiations.

The Northern Ireland Protocol

On 10 December 2020 the UK Government published – in a Command Paper – the details of the agreement reached in the Joint Committee.

The paper outlines how this meets the Government's three key commitments to the people of Northern Ireland as the Protocol takes effect:

Unfettered access guaranteed for Northern Ireland businesses to the rest of the UK market - with no export declarations required as goods move from Northern Ireland to Great Britain.

Northern Ireland's place in the UK customs territory secured - with a new UK Trader Scheme to ensure there are no new tariffs for businesses and consumers on internal UK trade, and the means to maintain the UK's VAT area.

Smooth flow of trade from Great Britain to Northern Ireland maintained - with critical flexibilities to maintain the flow of food supplies and medicines, and avoid the need for any new physical customs infrastructure.

UK Internal Market Bill

The controversial UK Internal Market Bill had returned to the House of Commons on 7 December 2020 where MPs voted by 359 to 268 to restore the controversial clauses in relation to the Northern Ireland Protocol which had been removed by the House of Lords.

Prior to the Commons debate the Government indicated that it would be willing to take the offending clauses out of the Bill – or to take steps to nullify their effect- if there was real progress with the EU in the Joint Committee on

the Withdrawal Agreement. The Government also stated that an equally controversial measure – a Taxation Bill – would not be moved if progress had been made.

Section Two: The Evolving Debate

Brexit Brief No.1, December 2015

The first Brexit Brief appeared in December 2015. As part of a wider communications programme covering the work of the IIEA UK Project Group, the Brief was designed to cover developments in the on-going debate in the UK and between the UK and the other EU Member States on the UK's negotiations over its membership of the Union. The first Brief referred to the publication of Prime Minister David Cameron's letter to the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, setting out the United Kingdom's case for reform of the European Union, arguing that "the countdown to the 'in-out' referendum has begun."

Five years on...

The reality of 'Australian Terms'

The former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has warned the UK to be "careful what you wish for" when it comes to EU trade. Speaking on BBC Question Time, Mr Turnbull said that "Australia has a deal with the EU on WTO terms and there are really some very large barriers to Australian trade with Europe, which we are seeking to address as we negotiate a free trade agreement with Europe. But Australians would not regard our trade relationship with Europe as being a satisfactory one. There are very big barriers to Australian exports of agriculture products in particular and a lot of friction in the system in terms of services."

The *Observer* commented that the Prime Minister – who was reportedly heard singing *Waltzing Matilda* in Downing Street last week – should remember that the song’s jolly swagman ultimately drowns in a billabong!

A French Veto?

French sources have indicated that President Emmanuel Macron could act unilaterally to block EU approval of a UK-EU trade deal if the terms were not right. The French Minister for European Affairs, Clement Beaune, has said that “I still hope we can have a deal but I also say to our fishermen, to our producers, to our citizens, that we won’t accept a bad deal. I think it’s also the case for our partners that if there were a deal that isn’t good, which in our evaluation doesn’t correspond to those interests, we will oppose it.” The Financial Times has headlined: “Brexit wrangle turns into classic Anglo-French confrontation”.

UK Labour Party Debate

The UK Labour Party is engaged in an intensive debate on the policy to follow in the event of a UK-EU trade deal coming before Parliament for approval. The Party Leader, Keir Starmer, favours a Labour Party vote in favour of a deal, believing that a no-deal outcome would be disastrous. A significant number of his colleagues support the idea of a Labour abstention which would not prevent ratification of a deal but would not associate the party with a Boris Johnson deal.

The former Party Leader, Neil Kinnock, has warned colleagues that backing a Johnson deal could be politically ‘lethal’ and arguing that the Prime Minister must be made to ‘own it’. “If Labour supports the deal all our future justified criticisms will be rebuffed by ‘but you voted for this!’ and, because it will be true, it will be lethal.”

Northern Irish Business

Business leaders from Northern Ireland gave evidence to a Westminster Committee on the implications of Brexit. The President of the Ulster Farmers’ Union told the meeting that “We have a transition period, but we do not know what we are transitioning to with six weeks to go.” A survey by the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce in October revealed that less than 40 per cent of members were making preparations for Brexit.

The Covid-19 crisis has made many businesses more vulnerable with Manufacturing NI saying that a third of the manufacturing workforce has been made redundant, is at risk of being made redundant or is on furlough. This makes work on preparation very difficult and leaves companies “horribly exposed.” Supply routes are seen as particularly risky with a half of Northern Irish food exports shipped through Dublin. Businesses are looking at alternative routes which are inevitably more expensive. Many are unconvinced that the UK Government will protect Northern Ireland interests arguing that “We know there’s bad times ahead. With our politicians, we’re well used to being an afterthought.”

UK Business Leaders

Leaders across UK business have issued a final plea to Prime Minister Boris Johnson to find a compromise solution to the Brexit trade negotiations, warning that the fate of millions of jobs, the future of the most deprived regions and the UK manufacturing base rely on reaching a trade deal.

The Confederation of British Industry has warned that a ‘tidal wave’ of Brexit red tape will hit British firms on 1 January 2021 even with an agreed EU-UK trade deal. The CBI deputy Director General spoke of a no-deal

outcome as a failure of politics. "I find it almost impossible to believe that politicians on both sides would allow our countries to slip into no deal. Preparation doesn't mean protection if a tidal wave is coming. You can put in place the sandbags and that helps a bit but the water is still going to get through."

Survey after survey indicate that businesses lack the full information needed to be properly prepared for Brexit. The CBI urged the UK and EU to inform businesses what any deal would necessitate in relation to Brexit-compliance for crossings between Dover and Calais and other locations. Some are likely to hold back on moving goods across UK-EU borders "because we want to see how the land lies in the first couple of weeks."

The CBI further stated that some critical information was outside the scope of any free trade deal and needed to be agreed at an early date, such as cross-border data transfer, business travel permits for service engineers, and, in particular, rules of origin determining eligibility for access to the EU Single Market. Flexible introduction of customs and regulatory checks in the early months of 2021, as proposed by the UK authorities should be agreed with the EU.

Deal or no deal: What are the key consequences for Ireland?

The Irish Times correspondent Cliff Taylor listed the key differences between a future relationship deal and no deal for Ireland:

Irish Economic Growth (A no-deal Brexit would knock three percentage points off economic growth next year) – Trade (A no-deal would lead to the imposition of tariffs on trade between the EU and UK)– Consumers (ESRI studies estimate a €900-1,350 increase in family living costs arising from tariffs)– Northern Ireland and the Border

(Implementation of the Protocol will be a serious test in a no-deal situation) – Delays and Disruption (New customs rules will apply with a deal but no-deal may involve additional checks and will lead to major issues in relation to transportation by land and sea) – the Unknowns (A no-deal outcome could lead to questions and uncertainties on aviation, fishing grounds, regulation, security co-operation, financial markets and currencies)

At the same time, RTE listed Five Reasons why a no-deal Brexit would be bad for Ireland:

Exports (The agri-food sector would be hit particularly hard)

Imports (Many imports from the UK will have tariffs levied)

Direct Purchases (Certain goods will face VAT and customs duty)

Logistics and Supply Chain (New customs requirements will make it more difficult to get goods into and out of Ireland)

Economy Overall (The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council estimates Irish GDP could be 6% lower over the longer-term, equivalent to €21 billion.)

DUP face Backlash on Protocol

The DUP MP Sammy Wilson told the House of Commons that "I am 100 per cent British and I want to remain 100 per cent British and the reason why I have taken a stance against the withdrawal agreement is because it diminishes my Britishness." He argued that the withdrawal agreement "will decide the shape of our relationship with the EU for decades to come. If we get it wrong we will not be a free nation. We will find our economy slowly strangled and our parliamentary sovereignty shackled by continued interference from Brussels."

The DUP is under pressure, and faces much criticism across the unionist community, because it placed trust in Boris Johnson to produce a better arrangement for Northern Ireland than Theresa May's 'Backstop'. He had declared to loud applause at a DUP conference in 2018 "Junk the backstop" – but then, as Prime Minister, replaced it with the Northern Ireland Protocol with its customs border in the Irish Sea, ensuring that North-South trade on the island would be effectively seamless but that East-West trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain would not. A Belfast *News Letter* editorial commented that, within weeks of becoming Prime Minister "he was cutting the province adrift."

The new EU-UK agreement on the Protocol has been widely welcomed in London and Dublin but opinion in Belfast is divided with many unionists remaining worried and annoyed about its complex provisions. The *Irish Times* comments that "What the DUP earnestly must hope for is a soft Brexit" - an overarching trade deal which would ease the situation.

Section Three: Background Material and Further Reading

Background Material

European Commission Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the preparation of the European Council meeting of 10-11 December, 25 November 2020. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_2204

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



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