

EESC goes to Belfast to listen to concerns over #Brexit



The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the EU house of organised civil society, represented by its Diversity Europe Group, met at Queen's University in Belfast on 15 February 2019 to take stock of the Brexit process and focus on its consequences for the Northern Ireland peace process.

"We are here to listen to your concerns, your fears and your hopes. We are here to reach out a hand to civil society on both sides of the border. We will stand by you, whatever happens in the next ten weeks. Civil society knows no borders and we should already be thinking about how to continue to work together in the months and years to come," declared the president of the Diversity Europe Group, **Arno Metzler**, pointing to the fears brought about by the Brexit process.

"Although not everyone here agrees on what the impact of Brexit will be on the island of Ireland, there is no doubt that all of us, the other 27 EU Member States, European civil society and the European institutions, will do everything within our means to ensure that the spirit of cooperation enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement continues in your minds and in your daily lives," he added.

European representatives from business, trades unions, farmers, consumer groups and others heard local politicians, academics and local voluntary organisations describe how the UK's withdrawal from the EU would affect their lives from a professional, political and personal point of view, with less than two months to go before the Article 50 deadline for the UK/EU divorce and a settlement not yet agreed.

With the current stalemate created by the 'backstop' proposal, the fact-finding mission of EESC members aimed to gain a better understanding of the challenges facing the UK/Ireland border and find out more about the social, economic and political impact of the UK's withdrawal on Northern Ireland.

EESC members **Jane Morrice** and **Michael Smyth**, from Northern Ireland, maintained that a no-deal Brexit would be madness and stressed how important it was to act now to avoid chaos. Diversity Europe Group vice-president **Séamus Boland**, from the Republic of Ireland, declared that peace in Northern Ireland was fragile and urged the EU and the British and Irish governments to prevent the emergence of a hard border in Ireland at all costs.

Guest speakers included **Brian Cowen**, former Taoiseach of the Republic of Ireland, **Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP**, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and MLAs **Caoimhe Archibald**, Sinn Féin, and **Mike Nesbitt**, Ulster Unionist Party (UUP).

"We will report back to Brussels," concluded **Mr Metzler**. "Many in the EU were reluctant to accept the reality of Brexit. With less than 42 days to go, the EU must face up to the fact that the UK is leaving and it is urgent that we work out any possible new arrangement that can be put in place to ensure the close contact between UK and EU civil society is maintained."

Background

For further information on the activities of the EESC Diversity Europe Group, please consult our [website](#).