

# My interventions in the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill

**Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con):** In the light of these Lords amendments for a crisis, does the hon. Gentleman not think the crisis has been brought on by the EU interfering in the internal market of GB and Northern Ireland and diverting trade, and would he urge the EU to step back so that we can get back on track?

**Peter Kyle (Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland):** What is holding us back is people continually re-fighting the battles of the past. We need to build a better future, and we can do that only if we are facing the future, unlike the right hon. Gentleman. Instead of a break from the past, the Government have dragged us back into the Brexit quagmire, as he and others seem hell-bent on doing, which has directly led to the Bill being needed with immediate effect.

Northern Ireland has often been a secondary issue for this Government. When the consequences of decisions taken by Ministers have played out in Northern Ireland, the Government have behaved as though they found themselves at the scene of an accident over which they had no control. This bystander effect peaked last week. The Northern Ireland Secretary and the Foreign Secretary both pretended that the Northern Ireland protocol was purely a matter for the Executive, but in reality it was part of a deal drafted, negotiated and signed by the Prime Minister, and the legal duty to uphold that deal rests with the EU and UK Governments. Ministers cannot wash their hands of it as easily as they pretend.

Now the First Minister has resigned, with the protocol and broken ministerial promises playing a central role. The manner and impact of the resignation raise serious questions that must be addressed. I have sympathy for the position in which the Democratic Unionist party has been placed. Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson, in frustration, revealed that the Prime Minister told him that the current protocol negotiations have only a 30% chance of success. If that is the case, do the Government have a plan B? Have Departments worked up impact assessments and action plans for the eventuality or possibility of article 16 being triggered?

The people of Northern Ireland and the political parties have been given promise after promise by the Prime Minister and his Ministers, some of them fundamental and existential, such as the promise of no border in the Irish sea. It is no wonder that frustrations have boiled over, that trust in this Government is at rock bottom and that we find ourselves in this moment where hope seems so distant.

We have just discovered that the Northern Ireland Secretary is flying to Washington tomorrow. That is right: the Secretary of State will get in a

plane and fly right over Northern Ireland on his way to Washington. That says everything we need to know. There is no one with the stature required in this Government, so he has to go to America to find a grown-up to be the honest broker they need.

While the Labour party welcomes this legislation and has supported its progress at every stage, we cannot pretend that it has an answer for how the Executive will be reformed if more progress is not made in protocol negotiations. It is hard to know whether the ongoing negotiations with the EU are a priority, because after three rounds of negotiations there have been no statements on progress made to the House. Considering the vital importance of those negotiations to the immediate circumstances in Northern Ireland, I hope the Foreign Secretary can come here and make a statement without any more delay. The political parties in Northern Ireland deserve such an update on the record—we have had enough nods, enough winks and enough back-handed promises that are never met and do nothing more than destabilise the fragile political settlement.

The Bill was supposed to deliver greater resilience in the institutions established under the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday agreement, but once again their fragility has been highlighted. Too often, Northern Ireland has been overlooked and the work to deliver on the promise of peace allowed to stall. While the Labour party supports the Bill and hopes it receives Royal Assent in time to be effective, it is worrying how much of it may already be obsolete. The provisions of the Bill alone cannot enable stability. To do that, Ministers must take responsibility for their words and actions, which have shaken faith within Northern Ireland. It is time that this Government, from the Prime Minister down, are seen to care about their words, promises and actions in a vitally important part of our United Kingdom, and to directly work on a way back for the Executive.

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**Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con):** But is it not the case that the EU is breaking the protocol? The protocol clearly protects the UK internal market and says that communities' consent is needed and that trade must not be diverted.

**Jeffrey M Donaldson (DUP Chief Whip, Shadow DUP Spokesperson):** Article 16 of the protocol—this is relevant to the debate this evening—makes provision for the UK Government to act unilaterally, and the Minister has said that the Government are prepared to do that. However, they said that in their Command Paper over six months ago, and in those six months the cost to Northern Ireland businesses has exceeded well over half a billion pounds. In those six months, businesses in Northern Ireland have faced costs and disruption to their trade with the rest of the United Kingdom. This is simply unacceptable.

The European Union said that the main purpose of the protocol, apart from setting out practical arrangements for the movement of goods, was to protect the political institutions in Northern Ireland and the Good Friday agreement. Does anyone now seriously believe that the protocol has achieved that purpose? It has not. Why? Because there is no Unionist consent for the

protocol. It has changed our constitutional status with the rest of the United Kingdom. It has superseded article 6 of the Act of Union itself, which makes provision for free trade within our own country.

I am therefore disappointed that, although we are debating this Bill and the issues it addresses, they are relatively minor in comparison with the key commitments made by the Government in the New Decade, New Decade agreement, which have not been honoured two years later. Why should my constituents be treated as second-class citizens in their own country? Why should my constituents be subjected to laws that are imposed by a European Union over which we have no say whatever? We have regulations that my Ministers are required to implement and over which we have no say whatever.

We have been patient. We have waited and we have waited for the Government to act or for the EU to recognise the reality that this protocol is harming political and economic stability in Northern Ireland. But I am afraid that I have to say to the Minister: enough is enough. We need action—not words, not more promises, as the hon. Member for Hove said, and not more empty commitments. We need action by the Government, because this is about the Union, about the future of the Union and about protecting Northern Ireland's place within the internal market of our own country. Why are we leaving it to the European Union to come up with a solution? This Government are the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Their primary responsibility is the integrity of this country. It is time the integrity of this country, and Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom, was properly protected in line with the promises made in this agreement.