

# Speech: Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA) Speech

It is a great pleasure for me to be in Brussels this afternoon, and I would like to thank the Institute for International and European Affairs both for hosting this event and for inviting me to address you.

The UK Government is at an important time in our preparations to exit the European Union. Our White Paper has set out a clear, measured plan. And we await the triggering of Article 50 to start our negotiations with the EU on these 12 principles which will guide the Government in fulfilling the democratic will of the people of the UK.

Without giving a running commentary on the negotiation ahead, I want to say something about how these principles relate to Northern Ireland and the unique economic, social and political context of the land border with Ireland; I also want to touch on how we see our future relationships with the EU, and with Ireland.

## **Future relationship with EU**

I want to start with our future relationship with the EU. It remains firmly in the UK's national interest for the EU to prosper, and for the EU to have a strong, new partnership with the UK. One that reflects our common bonds and a mature relationship between friends, partners and allies in an ever changing world. We may be leaving the EU, but we are not leaving Europe.

We want to aim for the freest possible continuing trade in goods and services between the UK and the EU.

We approach these negotiations from a unique position. We have the same rules, regulations and standards as the rest of the EU. This differs from most negotiations, where parties' starting position is divergent systems. Instead, these negotiations will be about finding a way to enable UK companies the maximum freedom to trade with and operate within European markets, and let European businesses do the same in the UK through a new comprehensive, bold and ambitious free trade agreement.

We recognise that our European partners have been a good friend to Northern Ireland over the years. Through the PEACE funding programme and other initiatives, the EU has provided significant support to reconciliation projects that have helped improve

community cohesion in border areas. Collectively the EU should take great pride in its role in supporting Northern Ireland make the tremendous progress we have seen over the past decades.

## **Relations with Ireland**

For over twenty-five years successive UK and Irish Governments have worked together to promote political stability in Northern Ireland. Together, we have worked with Northern Ireland's political parties to reach agreement on arrangements for power-sharing government in Northern Ireland and on its future relationships both with Dublin and London.

We are determined to maintain and strengthen the unique relationship between the UK and Ireland, tied by centuries of history, geography and trade.

The relationship between our two countries has never been better or more settled than today. For our part, the UK Government is determined to build on this strong foundation and to deepen our relationship further, for the benefit of the UK, Ireland and the wider EU.

We completely respect Ireland's commitment to remaining firmly within the EU. But that should not prevent us maintaining our two countries' strong relationship. You should be in no doubt that we want the closest and strongest co-operation with our nearest neighbour, and the only country with which we share a land border.

## **The Land border**

Thirdly, I want to turn to the land border itself. Its success today comes from the fact that it is seamless and invisible. People cross it with ease as part of their daily business. And has also allowed the integration of business north and south.

From agri-food to electricity, the unique geopolitical position of Northern Ireland and Ireland has integrated cross border relationships into the respective economies. Although technically international trade, this is very often local trade in local markets that simply happens to cross the border.

The production of milk aptly illustrates how open the land border is: about one third of the milk produced on Northern Ireland's farms (nearly 600 million litres) goes to Ireland for processing.

An example product journey would be milk from a farm in Northern Ireland going over the border for processing and pasteurisation. That milk then returns to Northern Ireland for processing into

cheese, and then to a distribution centre for sales to the Northern Ireland, GB and Irish markets.

The land border is also important to small business in Northern Ireland. The overwhelming majority of businesses – almost 95% – employ fewer than ten people. We also know that these businesses are heavily engaged in cross border trade. When we are thinking about a mutually beneficial new customs agreement with the EU, these micro businesses, and their ability to adapt to these new arrangements, must be at the forefront of our minds.

In terms of the movement of people, our White Paper made clear that we want to protect the ability to move freely between the UK and Ireland, north-south and east-west, recognising the special importance of this to people in their daily lives. Thousands of people regularly commute across the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland for work or study. This cross border movement of people is an essential part of both economic integration and daily community life.

We want to maintain the Common Travel Area with Ireland. It has served both of our countries well for nearly a century. And we are confident it will be possible to find a way of maintaining this, protecting both our strong historic ties with Ireland and the integrity of our own immigration system.

I recognise that the movement of goods presents a separate challenge, as we will be leaving the Single Market and will no longer be bound by the Common External Tariff. However, we are clear in our intent in wanting to secure tariff free and barrier free trade. And we are open minded in the method to secure as frictionless arrangements as possible – whether that be through associate membership of a Customs Union or through a bespoke customs agreement.

I agree with those who say that this presents one of the most complex challenges in our preparations for Exit. However, I am committed to working to find a practical solution that recognises the unique economic, social and political context of the land border with Ireland, without creating any new obstacles to trade within the UK.

We continue to explore this, and indeed many other issues, with counterparts in the Northern Ireland Executive and Irish Government, with a shared commitment to wanting to avoid a return to the borders of the past.

## **Security**

Fourthly, there must be no let-up in the security co-operation.

We have set a firm commitment to cooperating with the EU in the fight against crime and terrorism. This principle is particularly relevant to Northern Ireland. Although the security situation is markedly different from the dark days of the Troubles, there can be no let-up in our vigilance. Equally, the shared risks from organised cross-border crime and from Daesh and Al Qaida inspired terrorists underlines the essential need for more co-operation, not less.

Today's effective cooperation and coordination between the justice and security agencies in Northern Ireland and Ireland are essential in containing the threat from terrorist and paramilitary groups, whose activities can undermine Northern Ireland's security.. This operational and practical cross-border cooperation is an exemplar of the type of relationship we want to have with the EU on these issues.

## **Political stability**

Finally, I want to make clear that the UK government will take no risks with Northern Ireland's hard-won political stability.

We stand by our commitment to the Belfast Agreement and its successors. And I emphatically reject any suggestion that the decision to leave the EU will somehow weaken or imperil the political settlement in Northern Ireland or the peace that we now have.

On the eve of the Northern Ireland Assembly election we have an opportunity to reset and renew the political debate across Northern Ireland and I would urge people to seize this moment.

All people across Northern Ireland – including political leaders, businesses and community groups – need to take this chance to make sure their voice is heard loud and clear; and that the demand for stable, devolved partnership Government is heeded.

My priority is to work together and deliver on a positive and successful vision for Northern Ireland. I will always be a loud champion for the interests of Northern Ireland within Government and externally.

But political leaders in Northern Ireland also have a responsibility to work together to make sure that they are speaking up for Northern Ireland as well.

We will do all that it can to deliver an effective, stable, power-sharing devolved Executive in Northern Ireland. I know the Irish Government is similarly committed. But we cannot do it alone. The priority must be politicians locally working together to strengthen the economy, to deal with the challenges and opportunities of EU

Exit, and build a stronger, shared society based on respect for everyone.

So I approach the future with optimism, a positive sense of what we can achieve, and a shared commitment to get the best possible deal for Northern Ireland – outside the EU but inside the UK – as we define a new and successful future for both the UK and the EU.

We want do this in ways that preserve stability in Northern Ireland; that recognise the unique economic, social and political context of the land border; that support the factors that in the link our citizens together; and continue to strengthen our common bonds.