

Press release: Foreign Secretary condemns new North Korea missile test

North Korea has conducted yet another illegal missile launch. The UK and the international community have condemned the aggressive and illegal actions of the North Korean regime, and the succession of missile and nuclear tests. We stand firmly by Japan and our other international partners.

We are working to mobilise world opinion with the aim of achieving a diplomatic solution to the situation on the Korean peninsula.

This week the most stringent UN sanctions regime placed on any nation in the 21st century was imposed on North Korea, after being unanimously agreed at the UN Security Council. These measures now need to be robustly enforced. We urge all states to play their part in changing the course North Korea is taking.

Press release: Attorney General seeks evidence on the impact of social media on criminal trials

Judges, solicitors and victims' groups are being asked to submit evidence about the impact of social media on criminal trials in a Call for Evidence launched by Attorney General Jeremy Wright QC MP today. The Call for Evidence asks for experience of trials being affected by social media commentary and evidence of anonymity orders and reporting restrictions being breached on social media. The purpose of the Call for Evidence is to ascertain whether the risks posed by social media to the administration of justice are increasing, and whether any further action needs to be taken.

The Attorney General Jeremy Wright QC MP said:

“Every defendant in this country is entitled to a fair trial where a verdict is delivered based on the evidence heard in court. Our Contempt of Court laws are designed to prevent trial by media, however, are they able to protect against trials by social media? I am looking for expert evidence on whether the increasing influence and ubiquity of social media is having an impact on criminal trials and if so, whether the criminal justice system has the tools it needs to manage that risk.”

The Contempt of Court Act 1981 sets out what can be published in order to ensure that legal proceedings are fair and that the rights of those involved

in them are properly protected. It is a Contempt of Court to publish anything that creates a “substantial risk that the course of justice in the proceedings in question will be seriously impeded or prejudiced, even if there is no intent to cause such prejudice”.

Social media platforms allow individuals to reach thousands of people via a single post, making their views readily accessible to a potentially vast audience. Whilst the traditional mainstream media are well aware of the boundaries set out in the 1981 Act and the consequences of stepping outside them, social media presents new challenges to these fair trial protections.

The evidence submitted to this Call for Evidence will form the basis of a report prepared by the Attorney General’s Office and inform a consideration of what changes, if any, are needed to strike a balance between the rights of the individual to express their views via social media and the protection of fairness in criminal proceedings.

The Call for Evidence is open until 8 December 2017.

Press release: More money in Severn Crossing drivers’ pockets in 2018

Drivers using the Severn Crossings will have more money in their pockets from January next year thanks to the UK Government’s decision to reduce the bridge tolls for the first time, Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns announced today (15 September 2017).

Following the return of the Severn Crossings to public ownership on 8 January next year, the tolls will be reduced for all drivers in line with the commitment made by the UK Government in Budget 2015.

This will be the first time the tolls have decreased since their introduction in 1966. The normal annual inflation increase (due 1 January 2018) will also not be applied.

From 8 Jan 2018:

- Cars will pay £5.60 instead of £6.70.
- Small buses or vans will pay £11.20 down from £13.40
- Lorries and coaches will pay £16.70 instead of £20

The announcement comes hot on the heels of the [21 July](#) confirmation that the UK Government will abolish the tolls altogether at the end of 2018, strengthening the economic links and prospects of South Wales and the South West of England.

The Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns will announce the news to an audience of Welsh business representatives at the CBI Wales Regional Council meeting in Newport where he will also outline how the UK Government is working to deliver a EU exit that works for the whole of the UK.

Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns said:

For so many years, the tolls on both Severn Crossings have been seen as an economic and symbolic barrier to Wales' future prosperity. Our decision to reduce the tolls – before abolishing them altogether – will cut costs for businesses, for commuters and tourists alike – helping boost jobs and trade in Wales and across the South-West.

This is yet another strong indicator that Wales is open for business and of the UK Government's commitment to making the right decisions for Wales' future as part of a strong United Kingdom.

It is estimated that the abolishing of the tolls will boost the economy of South Wales by around £100 million a year* and regular motorists could save over £1,400 per year**.

The UK Government is also today publishing its response to the [consultation](#) on its proposals to reduce the Severn Crossing tolls launched earlier this year. In view of the responses received, the Government is confirming that it will not press ahead with halving the tolls but instead commit to abolishing the tolls entirely at the end of 2018.

Notes to Editors

1. *Welsh Government: The Impact of the Severn Tolls on the Welsh Economy, 30 May 2012
2. **Based on a monthly tag charge of £117.92 over 12 months
3. On 13 January, the Government launched a consultation, setting out a series of proposals designed to deliver improvements at the Crossings. This consultation ran for eight weeks until 10 March.
4. The consultation response can be found [here](#) from 0930hrs on Friday 15 September.
5. The Severn Bridge was built in 1966 and a second crossing was completed 30 years later.
6. When the bridges come under public ownership, they will be run by

Highways England. Previously it has been run by Severn River Crossing plc.

7. The first Severn Bridge was opened in September 1966, providing a direct link from the M4 motorway into Wales, with a toll in place for use of the bridge to pay for the cost of construction. It continually operated above capacity and in 1986 the then Government stated that a second bridge would be constructed.
8. In 1988 it was announced that tenders would be invited from private consortia to fund, build and operate the second bridge and take over the operation of the first bridge. In 1990 the concession was awarded to Severn River Crossing PLC ("SRC"). Construction work also started in April 1992 and the second bridge was opened in June 1996.

[News story: Cassini: an incredible journey of exploration](#)

Having used almost every bit of fuel it carried to Saturn, operators are plunging Cassini into the planet to ensure Saturn's moons will remain pristine for future exploration.

The UK has been heavily involved in the ESA/NASA mission, providing £8 million in funding for building vital instruments, plus on-going support for operational costs.

The Cassini-Huygens spacecraft embarked on a seven-year voyage across the Solar System, eventually reaching Saturn in July 2004. Several months later, the Cassini orbiter released ESA's Huygens probe, which landed on Titan on 14 January 2005 – the first landing in the outer Solar System.

Cassini – UK involvement

- Magnetometer: Led by David Southwood, then Michele Dougherty, at Imperial College London. The Magnetometer measures the magnetic field
- Composite Infrared Spectrometer (CIRS): Co-Ied by Simon Calcutt, Peter Ade, Pat Irwin and Fred Taylor at Oxford University and Peter Ade at Queen Mary University of London. Measures infrared thermal radiation
- Cassini Plasma Spectrometer (CAPS): Co-Ied on the Electron sensor unit by Andrew Coates, Mullard Space Science Laboratory and by Manuel Grande, Aberystwyth University. Measures the auroral environment and activity
- UK academics also contributed to work on the Radio Plasma Wave Instrument, Imaging Science Subsystem (ISS) and Cosmic Dust Analyser

(CDA).

Huygens – UK involvement

- Surface Science Package (SSI): Led by John Zarnecki, Open University. Co-Ied by Simon Green, Open University. A package of 9 sensors to determine the physical properties of the Huygens landing site.
- UK industrial involvement included LogicaCMG and Irvin-GQ for the flight control and parachute manufacture.
- In April 2017, Cassini was placed on an impact course that unfolded over five months of daring dives – a series of 22 orbits each passing between the planet and its rings. Called the Grand Finale, this final phase of the mission has brought unparalleled observations of the planet and its rings from closer than ever before.

Katherine Wright, Head of Space Science said:

Cassini-Huygens has been an incredible journey of exploration and we are very proud to have supported the UK scientists and engineers who have led many of the discoveries from this mission. It is sad to see the end of this expedition but its data legacy will keep on producing first class science for many years to come.

Professor Michele Dougherty, from Imperial College London, who took over the management of the Magnetometer from Professor David Southwood, said:

“The Cassini mission has been spectacular on a whole range of fronts, the science it has achieved, the way in which the spacecraft and instruments have operated way beyond their planned lifetime and how the large international team from many different countries and cultures have come together and worked to produce the results we have.

“I will have a range of emotions at the end: sadness that such an endeavor has come to an end, great pride in what we have all achieved together and a bit of relief since I am now exhausted and can't keep this end-of-mission pace up forever!”

[Watch the climax of the Grand Finale](#), as Cassini plunges into Saturn's atmosphere from 12 noon to 1.30pm (BST) on Friday, 15 September.

[Speech: Secretary of State's Speech to Top 100 Companies Banquet 2017](#)

Thank you David [Elliott, Ulster Business Editor], and thank you for the kind

invitation to speak here today. It is a great honour to be here and to join you in celebrating the very best of NI business.

I would like to thank A&L Goodbody, Ulster Business Magazine and Lanyon Communications for hosting and organising this fine event.

Events like these are a welcome reminder of the economic progress we have seen in Northern Ireland since the Belfast Agreement nearly two decades ago.

Some often query whether, when politics comes to the fore, business takes a back seat as a result.

But the transformation of Northern Ireland in the past two decades shows why it is imperative to keep both at the heart of the work we do.

To see the change, from a place which had struggled to attract investment and jobs against a backdrop of terrorism and instability, to one of the most popular locations in the UK outside of London for foreign direct investment, shows exactly why we see a stronger economy as a key priority for Northern Ireland.

And as Mark Thompson mentioned in his remarks, 2016 was a hugely successful year for the Top 100 – with record sales and a 16% increase in profits from world-beating businesses making strides at home and globally. I can only congratulate you all for that achievement.

The fundamentals of the UK economy as a whole are strong. We have grown continuously for more than four years, reduced the deficit and delivered a record number of jobs.

We are proud of this record but not complacent. We must restore productivity growth to deliver higher wages and living standards for people across the country. That is why we are committed to investing in infrastructure, technology and skills to deliver the best possible base for strong future growth.

This strength includes continued growth in Northern Ireland, which has secured 34 new Foreign Direct Investment projects in the last year alone, creating more than 1,600 new jobs. We now have more than 800 international companies located in the region and employing in excess of 75,000 people.

And overall the picture is one of solid growth, increasing output, falling unemployment, and job creation.

Indeed we saw yesterday that unemployment is now at 5.3%, the lowest since the great crash in 2008, while more than 10,000 jobs were created over the course of the year. And the last quarter saw the sharpest rise in business activity in 2017 so far.

It is wonderful to be able to celebrate such success – to recognise the strength and resilience of the economy in Northern Ireland. But building upon that success must be the priority for the year ahead. And as we look to do so, it is important that we acknowledge the key issues that we must face.

EU Exit

The first is EU Exit.

We might be leaving the EU but we are not turning our backs on our friends and partners in Europe.

As a Government our goal is to secure a deal that works for the whole of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, as we leave the European Union.

This was reiterated in the Government's Position Paper on Northern Ireland and Ireland, setting out in more detail how we might achieve our objectives.

This Position Paper expanded on the Government's proposals for a future customs relationship with Europe. We proposed two options: a highly streamlined model and a new customs partnership. In our Northern Ireland/Ireland Paper we have set out the additional facilitations that the Government see as necessary to protect the open border and ensure as frictionless a movement of goods as possible.

Specifically, the Government has proposed that small and medium sized businesses should be exempt from all customs processes entirely. This imaginative and flexible solution to the free movement of goods would see some 80% of all Northern Ireland businesses free from any interaction with customs processes.

And for those businesses not falling into that category, the Government wants highly streamlined and flexible administrative arrangements to ensure no physical checks are required on goods crossing the land border.

Our second proposal is a new customs partnership with the EU, aligning our approach to the customs border in a way that removes the need for a UK-EU customs border.

One potential approach would involve the UK mirroring the EU's requirements for imports from the rest of the world where their final destination is the EU.

These are bold and imaginative proposals to the issue of free flow of goods across the border with Ireland. And we would encourage everyone to get behind that debate as we look to develop the next stage of detail and an implementation plan.

But of course the open border is about more than goods, it is also fundamentally about people and communities. The Government is absolutely committed to ensuring the border remains open to allow for the normal everyday interactions between people on either side.

For its part, the UK wants to continue to protect the CTA and associated reciprocal bilateral arrangements. This means protecting the ability to move freely within the UK and between the UK and Ireland with no practical change from now, recognising the special importance of this to people in their daily

lives, and the underpinning it provides for the Northern Ireland political process.

We also recognise that investors, businesses and citizens in both the UK and the EU, and beyond, need to be able to plan ahead. In order to avoid any cliff-edge as we move from our current relationship to our future partnership, people and businesses would benefit from an interim period, for the implementation of the arrangements, which allowed for a smooth and orderly transition.

The Government believes it would help both sides to minimise unnecessary disruption and provide certainty for businesses and individuals if we agree this principle early in the process.

The Government is keen to explore with the EU a model for an interim period which would ensure that businesses and people in the UK and the EU only have to adjust once to a new customs relationship.

So the UK Government has been clear that we will respect and recognise the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland and its relationship with Ireland as we leave the European Union.

We must avoid a return to a hard border, and trade and everyday movements across the land border must be protected as part of the UK-EU deal.

The Government will take account of these unique circumstances and the priority attached by all parts of the community in Northern Ireland to avoid a hard border and protect cross-border trade and cooperation.

Lack of an Executive

But the most immediate challenge is the lack of an Executive, and the imperative – for growth, prosperity and for the people of Northern Ireland – to see power-sharing return.

For nine months government has effectively been in the hands of civil servants, rather than politicians who are rightly accountable to the public for the decisions they make. This has meant there has been no political direction to tackle the fundamental challenges facing Northern Ireland – including the reform and transformation of critical public services.

So our overriding priority for the UK Government in Northern Ireland remains the restoration of devolved power-sharing government in Stormont. We believe in devolution. It is right that decisions over local services – like health, education, transport and economic development – are taken by local politicians in locally accountable political institutions.

This is why I am working intensively with the Northern Ireland parties and, in accordance with the well-established three-stranded approach, the Irish Government, to secure the reestablishment of inclusive, stable, devolved government in the interests of the entire community in Northern Ireland.

I have been clear with the parties that they must come together and reach agreement in the short window of time that remains.

If this does not happen within a short number of weeks, we risk greater political decision-making from Westminster – starting with provision for a 2017-18 Budget this autumn.

This is not what anyone wants and would profoundly be a step back not a step forwards. But in the continuing absence of devolution the UK Government retains ultimate responsibility for good governance and political stability in Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom – and we will not shirk from the necessary measures to deliver that.

If things don't change we are on a glide path to greater and greater UK government intervention.

But I believe we can change course. This can be achieved with political leadership and with support of the people of Northern Ireland – including communities and businesses.

I ask everyone here tonight to do all you can to help secure what Northern Ireland wants and needs.

There is so much at stake. Risks, yes. But also so many opportunities, because I firmly believe in the huge unlocked potential there is right across Northern Ireland.

Opportunities to leverage the UK-wide Industrial Strategy to deliver stronger growth, and capitalise on new Sector Deals to support the industries of the future – like biotech and life sciences – where the UK, and Northern Ireland in particular, has the potential to lead the world.

To take forward with this Government a comprehensive and ambitious set of City Deals for Northern Ireland to prosper, and to put innovation at the heart of Northern Ireland's growth.

To be at the heart of a stronger, fairer and more prosperous United Kingdom, and one that is more outward looking than ever before as we make trade deals around the world – with NI business able to realise their ambitions and make their mark on the world stage.

And to make use of the considerable freedoms available, getting the devolution of corporation tax back on track to enable Northern Ireland to cut its rates to attract investment and jobs.

In all of these ways – and more – I see a bright economic future for Northern Ireland.

And that is a future that the UK Government will support – through all the ways above, as well as through the range of funding streams there will be available, whether our £4.7bn Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund, our £23bn National Productivity Investment Fund, and far more besides.

And that is what a restored Executive can do for Northern Ireland. It can promote an enterprise-driven economy, somewhere where young entrepreneurs want to invest and the younger generation see opportunities to forge their careers in Northern Ireland – a place where innovation, skills, opportunity and prosperity are at the forefront of the way ahead.

With a stable, power-sharing government in place, business can rely on the backdrop of stability that removes barriers to finance, to investment, and which boosts confidence to create jobs and opportunities.

And that is exactly why it must remain our absolute priority in the critical weeks ahead.

Impact on business/private sector

All the while, I want to reassure you that the UK Government will always uphold its responsibilities to the people and businesses of Northern Ireland.

I will continue to keep communications open with businesses right across Northern Ireland. Some of you may be aware of the work of my Business Advisory Group, but more broadly too, my door will always be open to hearing more from the business community.

For no matter what, I will remain a strong advocate for Northern Ireland and NI business within the Government and beyond.

Including on the Government's ongoing work to support Bombardier in the ongoing trade case brought by Boeing.

Let me be very clear: it is a top priority for this Government to safeguard Bombardier's operations and its highly skilled workers in Belfast.

This is obviously a commercial matter, but Ministers across Government have engaged swiftly and extensively with Boeing, as well as the US and Canadian governments on this case.

We want to encourage Boeing to drop what we see as an unjustified case, and to get round the table and seek negotiated settlement with Bombardier. And we would encourage all those with an interest, whether of a political view or none, to join us in pushing for the same outcome.

Working to restore devolved government

So as we approach our dinner, I want to finish by being clear of what we want to see in the weeks to come in the best interests of Northern Ireland.

Over the last few weeks, the DUP and Sinn Fein have been holding meetings together and this intensive dialogue is continuing.

These discussions have been constructive and I am hopeful that further progress will be made as they continue. The issues remain relatively small in number and are clearly defined. But difference remains.

We have also been bringing together the other parties eligible to join an Executive and have had positive engagement with them in line with our commitment to an inclusive process.

But ultimately we cannot force an agreement.

That has to come from the parties themselves.

And we – all of us in this room – want to see those parties come together to...

...make the important decisions facing Northern Ireland's public services...

...to contribute to the important discussions about how the UK will leave the European Union alongside the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales...

...and to support continued economic growth in Northern Ireland: investing in infrastructure, taking its own decisions on corporation tax, and taking other actions to support businesses large and small...

To do this it's vital that they continue to work together to find a solution to their differences.

And it is my belief that they are committed to doing so... in the interests of everyone in Northern Ireland.

I have very much welcomed the growing voice of businesses, trade unions, the voluntary sector and others in stressing the need for the return of devolved government – as we have seen for example in the media profiles by business leaders from across different sectors this week.

And tonight, I would encourage all of you here to continue to make it clear to the political parties just how important the restoration of devolved government is for business, for ordinary people and for Northern Ireland as a whole.

We all want to see the parties come together and form an Executive. They need to hear from you just how important it is for you to see them working together for the good of Northern Ireland.

And deliver the bright positive future for NI we know we can achieve together.