

The NI Protocol offers a way to mend British-Irish bilateral relations

*It is vital for the Good Friday Agreement that British-Irish bilateral relations are mended, writes former Irish Ambassador and GFA negotiator **Dr Ray Bassett**. Reform of the NI Protocol, to the benefit of all parties involved, is the first place they should start.*

The one point of agreement between the Irish and British Governments is that their relationship badly needs to press the reset button. The last few years have witnessed an unseemly public spat between them which adversely affected bilateral relations.

The Irish Government worked hand in glove with Brussels and members of the Remain establishment in London to thwart or at least totally neuter a real Brexit. That policy has failed, and has left a legacy of distrust among many Brexiteers.

On the Irish side, it was felt that those advocating Brexit never realised the ramifications that leaving the EU would have on the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), and on the delicate balance of political forces within Northern Ireland. This is in no way to excuse the blind devotion shown by Leo Varadkar et al to the interests of the EU, while regularly disregarding the real national interest of Ireland.

The outcome of Brexit now includes the Northern Ireland Protocol. This essentially creates a deeper border in the Irish Sea between Northern Ireland and Britain. There have been inspections of live animals and some plant material between the two for many years already, but this was carried

out in a non-contentious way and operated smoothly.

I had always advocated that any Irish border resulting from Brexit should be in the Celtic Sea between the Irish Republic and the European mainland, since most goods from Ireland to other EU states travel over the land bridge via the western ports in Britain and then on to Calais through the Channel ports. This has not proved possible for political reasons.

Therefore, we have the Protocol, and it would be very difficult and probably unwise to seek to unilaterally abolish it. Firstly, it is enshrined in an international agreement and hence abruptly abrogating it risks not only reputational damage but also the entire and hard-won overall EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement itself. It would also risk the ire of the new Biden Administration in the United States who have made it clear that it would be strongly opposed to such action. Not a good move for a Johnson Administration seeking stronger ties with Washington.

It should also be remembered that a majority of MLAs in Stormont and NI MPs elected to Westminster oppose its abolition. The Unionist position of Arlene Foster is a minority one in Northern Ireland.

However, it is clear that the present operation of the Northern Ireland Protocol is far from ideal. Changes to the operation and scope of the Protocol is an area where a new more constructive Irish/British relationship could show itself. The Irish Government shares the UK's belief that the Protocol has been clumsily and pedantically interpreted by EU officials. Michael Gove's policy of reform and simplification of the Protocol offers a much better way forward, and would have Dublin's full support.

It is also clear that institutional links between Ireland and the UK need strengthening, as their old informal bilateral networking in Brussels has come to an end. The British/Irish

elements of the GFA, which are based on a close supportive partnership, have been sadly neglected in recent times by both Governments. There needs to be regular meetings at political level to ensure our new post Brexit relationship gets onto an even keel and that the myriad of connections across the Irish Sea come to be seen as bringing the two islands together rather than dividing us.

The first item for a new reset relationship should be a joint bid for reform of the NI Protocol.