

Foreign Secretary: The Northern Ireland Protocol must be changed to protect the hard-won peace

Northern Ireland has so much to be proud of. Businesses here set the standard in the industries of the future such as fintech. Clean innovation is thriving, whether it is in building the world's largest offshore tidal generator or the world's first hydrogen-powered buses. Smash hit shows like Game of Thrones are filmed across Northern Ireland, demonstrating its unique cultural influence.

Such achievements rest upon the peace and prosperity sustained through the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, which established power-sharing on the parity of esteem to all parts of the community. However, the Northern Ireland Protocol is putting that hard-won progress at risk by upsetting the delicate balance which is fundamental to the Agreement.

My priority is to protect peace and stability in Northern Ireland. That is why on taking charge of our negotiations with the European Union, I invited my EU counterpart Maroš Šefčovič for talks aimed at sorting out the situation as soon as possible. After cordial and constructive discussions at Chevening last week, we agreed to intensify our work.

The core purpose of the Protocol is to protect the peace process and the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in all its dimensions: East-West, North-South and within Northern Ireland. But it is failing on its own terms – having lost the consent of the Unionist community over fears their identity – along with the integrity of our country – are under threat. They point to a fundamental truth: that Northern Ireland's prosperity is overwhelmingly tied to the place it has in the UK internal market.

This is crucial for the future of Northern Ireland. The UK and EU agreed under the Withdrawal Agreement to support the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in all its aspects. It is unsustainable to prioritise one strand over all the others by treating Northern Ireland as if it is in the Single Market and part of the EU, when we all know it is not. The core principles on which the Protocol was built remain as relevant as ever: protecting the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, respecting the integrity of the United Kingdom while providing adequate protections for the EU's Single Market. We are spending over £500 million on trader support services and new IT systems to make it work.

But our extensive efforts are not able to solve the countless problems emerging because it is clear that there are intrinsic faults with the current arrangements which need to be fixed. Needless paperwork has put hundreds of businesses off trading within the United Kingdom. Rules are frustrating efforts to bring everything into Northern Ireland from beloved family pets to critical medicines.

Any UK Government of any party would have the same duty to fix these pressing problems. They will only get worse if we leave the situation to fester or insist the answer lies in implementing the Protocol's rules more tightly. The latest polling shows that the vast majority of people – 78% – in Northern Ireland agree the Protocol needs to change.

Our proposal is pragmatic and common-sense: only goods actually going to the European Union should face checks and processes. We remain happy to keep checking those that do to ensure there is no need for a hard border North-South. This approach works because fundamentally it respects both unions: the UK and the EU. That principle is why we need to ensure people in Northern Ireland can benefit fully from the same economic decisions as the rest of the UK – respecting their fundamental democratic right to have a say on who should set and spend their taxes. This democratic deficit is also why we must end the role of the European Court of Justice as the final arbiter of disputes and revert to the same rules as found in other international treaties.

I remain determined to find a solution. After this week's round of renewed talks, I am looking forward to meeting Vice-President Šefčovič on Monday to review progress.

We need to find a resolution one way or another. I am willing to do whatever is needed to preserve peace and stability in Northern Ireland, which includes taking legitimate safeguard measures if necessary, as the Protocol allows.

For a solution to stand the test of time, it needs to fix the Protocol comprehensively rather than rely on piecemeal solutions to problems as they arise. As fellow believers in liberty and democracy, I believe the UK and EU can bridge the gaps and deliver for Northern Ireland.

Just as all sides rose to challenge of securing peace, let us step up and work with the same conviction, clarity of purpose, and innovative thinking. There is a deal to be done, and a shared responsibility to make it happen.

This article originally appeared in the [Belfast Telegraph](#).