

***Dublin City University***

***The future of UK-Ireland relations and the Article 50 Negotiations***

***Speech by Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP, Chair of the Exiting the EU  
Select Committee***

***25 January 2018***

An Úachtárain agus a chairde. President and friends.

Thank you for your very kind invitation. Can I say what a great pleasure it is Prof Fabbrini to be here at Dublin City University this morning for the launch of your Brexit Institute, not least because of your strong reputation as a University for research, excellence and inclusiveness, and also what a great honour it is for me to have been here to hear such a magnificent exposition on Europe's history and development from you, Mr President.

I just hope my opening greeting will be kindly regarded as a very modest contribution to the special year you have launched to celebrate the Irish language.

As well as our discussions in Dublin last year, which I much enjoyed, I had the privilege of listening to your address to both Houses of Parliament at Westminster during your State Visit in 2014 when you talked about a vision of citizenship shared by our two peoples and warned of the risks of a gulf opening up between citizens and politicians.

How timely was that warning.

As we look around we see the rise of populism across our continent and on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

And it was a warning that anticipated the EU referendum result of June 2016 in the United Kingdom.

A result that affects the UK above all but which also affects the Republic of Ireland more than any other EU member state. And as we learn from life, when a decision is made over which we have no control but which will result in great consequences for us, it is unquestionably a difficult and an uncomfortable experience.

And from all the conversations I have had, this is what you are feeling now. And no wonder given how much of your trade in goods and agriculture depends on the free trade you have with the UK - we are your largest trading partner - never mind what you must think when you hear some British politicians talk casually about the benefits of no deal.

Let's be clear. No deal is not better than a bad deal. No deal is the worst possible deal you can imagine.

So may I try to offer some comfort by saying to you that I do not think there is a majority in the House of Commons that would accept no deal.

This is not just about trade in goods and services. It is about the referendum's impact on the border, on the Good Friday Agreement and on the lives of the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic.

And that is where I wish to begin, because our two countries share so much in history, culture, ideas politics and people. And the story of all of these things runs like a thread through these isles and through the lives of so many families, including my own.

I have happy memories of many a family holiday here pushing the brambles aside to peer at gravestones, looking at lists of names in family records centres and finding and taking photographs of houses, all of which told us the story of the lives of both my and my wife's ancestors - Ulster Scots and Irish Catholics - in Roslea, Cork, Ballinrobe and Dublin - although I must confess that that particular part of the family history involves another university down the road.

And many of my Leeds constituents of Irish descent will tell you their own stories about how their families came to leave, settled on the East Bank and contributed – then and now – so much to the life of our great city. A long tradition that thrives to this day in the Leeds Irish Centre on the York Road.

It is not, of course, an entirely benign or sentimental history, for our relations over the centuries have seen great wrongs, great violence and a revolution, but that thread has remained in place and it has found new expression in recent years in ways that would have seemed unimaginable to us even 50 years ago.

The Queen's visit to Ireland in 2011, the first by a British Head of State since independence.

President Higgins' reciprocal State Visit to the UK three years later.

And the Good Friday Agreement, signed almost 20 years ago. A triumph of patient diplomacy and political courage that has wrought a transformation that I never thought I would see in my lifetime.

It has brought peace and normality.

It has established institutions like the British Irish Council to promote relationships among the people of these islands.

And it has also created something more intangible but just as precious.

It has provided the space and the opportunity for people to be who they are and not to have to make a choice between the different identities that all of us increasingly have in a more complex and interconnected world.

As Peter Sheridan of Co-operation Ireland put it so eloquently:

*“After the Good Friday agreement, you had this idea of a region whose inhabitants could be British, or Irish, or both. Europe made that easier to imagine.”*

Every one of us knows just how important our shared membership of the European Union was to the crafting of the Good Friday agreement, and every one of us knows that nothing can be allowed to put that agreement at risk as Brexit unfolds.

And that is why the issue of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic has come to symbolise the choice that the UK Government has yet still to make about its approach the next stage of the Brexit process.

The Brexit select committee has an important job in scrutinising the negotiations and holding the Government to account.

From the beginning of our work, I felt it was essential for us to do our job effectively to hear from those outside Westminster who had things they wanted to say to us.

Dublin was the first place outside the UK that the Committee visited in February last year and today we are back for our second visit.

And just before Christmas, we visited the border at Middletown between Armagh and Monaghan. Never before, I suspect, have so many British parliamentarians had their picture taken by so many photographers as we looked at a piece of tarmac. There was nothing there - that was the whole point - just a road with yellow and white lines and traffic – lots of traffic carrying goods and people – travelling back and forth.

And as we stood there we were told of how 30 years earlier at that very spot there had been checkpoints, a customs post, an army base, a police station and watchtowers - all symbols of the Troubles.

Now they are gone, and I came away from that visit understanding more clearly than ever before exactly what is at stake and why we all have a responsibility to ensure that it remains a piece of tarmac with no barriers and no border.

Now, understandably, this issue – along with money and citizens’ rights, including the very important Common Travel Area - came to dominate the Brexit discussions between the United Kingdom, the Republic and the EU before matters came to a head in December at the very end of the negotiations on Phase 1.

It was a very difficult week, but a form of words on the border was eventually found that proved enough to secure agreement and so allow progress to Phase 2.

Those words made it clear that Northern Ireland would not be treated differently from the rest of the United Kingdom because the UK was committed to full alignment between the whole of the UK and the EU.

Some called that wording a fudge.

Others described it as kicking the can down the road.

It can even be seen as an attempt at alchemy; a promise to turn the base metal of “full alignment” into the gold of a border with no checks and no infrastructure.

I say that because it is completely unclear at present how this aim of that open border, which we all support, will be achieved in practice. And many worry that this uncertainty may damage what the Good Friday Agreement has achieved.

So this question goes to the heart of the choice facing the UK Government and our Parliament in this year - this crucial, defining year - about what kind of future relationship we wish to have with the European Union after we have left its institutions at the end of March 2019.

It is, after all, a practical problem. In 2016, UK exports to Ireland were worth £26.7 billion and UK imports from Ireland £20.8 billion. These goods move across the Irish Sea and across the border in Northern Ireland, and that is why the Select Committee has welcomed the Government’s commitment to “no physical infrastructure” at the land border and its rejection of a customs border between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. But in our most recent report we also said this:

*“We do not currently see how it will be possible to reconcile there being no border with the Government’s policy of leaving the Single Market and the Customs Union, which will inevitably make the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland the EU’s customs border with the UK ... We call upon the Government to set out in more detail how a “frictionless” border can in practice be maintained with the UK outside the Single Market and the Customs Union.”*

Thus far, the answer to the question - “what does the UK want? - has been to talk about a deep, special and bespoke partnership. But we have now reached the point where that won’t do any longer.

The Government needs to tell all of us what it is seeking, but even more important than that, it needs to tell us what trade-offs it is prepared to make in order to achieve the things it says it wants. There are consequences to the choices it has made and they cannot be avoided.

Which brings me to the customs union and the single market.

Continuing tariff-free trade is essential to the British economy, to your economy, to the EU’s economy and to that open border in Northern Ireland.

The simplest and best way to achieve that would be to remain in the customs union, a course of action that David Davis used to support before he became the Brexit

Secretary. It's what I think we should do. And it's what the Director-General of the CBI, Carolyn Fairbairn, thinks we should do as she set out in her very significant speech last week.

Why? Because 44% of our exports go to our biggest single market - the other member states of the European Union. A further 17% go to countries with whom we already have trade agreements because they have been negotiated by the EU on behalf of all of us. A further 19% goes to the country to which we sell more than any other; one, incidentally, with which we do not have a trade agreement at present. It is the United States of America.

Do we really think that the President of United States will be keen to see Britain selling even more into the American market? I somehow think not given the protectionist approach he has taken to trade.

What do you think will be the reaction from India to the suggestion of a free trade agreement? Their first request will be for more work visas for their citizens.

And has China suffered disadvantage because it does not currently have a trade agreement with the European Union? No. And in the pocket of, I suspect, just about every person in this hall today is the proof of that – our mobile phones.

Trade negotiations are complex for a reason and that reason is that they involve negotiation between two countries that are each trying to protect their vital interests while seeking to gain advantages in the country with which they are negotiating.

And if you want to know how complex trade negotiations are, remember what Peter Sutherland, who sadly died recently, said when he arrived at GATT to try and rescue the Uruguay round - which he did - and was greeted by a mountain of documents and advice.

*“After a couple of hours of it, if you're not confused then you haven't been listening.”*

The idea that somehow the United Kingdom has been prevented from trading with the rest of the world by our membership of the European Union is a nonsense.

What makes sense is for the UK to continue to be part of that customs union which has given us and the other 27 members of the European Union, including the Republic of Ireland, so much.

Secondly, the single market.

It is true that we will start from a position of alignment with the EU, but I suspect that the word we will all hear a lot more of in the months ahead is divergence.

To what extent will the UK wish to diverge from those common rules now and in the years ahead?

Michel Barnier, President Macron and others have made it very clear. If the UK wishes to remain in the customs union and the single market then the EU will

facilitate this, but if the Prime Minister continues to insist on all of her red lines then this will inevitably narrow the range of options open to the negotiators when it comes to our future partnership.

The UK worries about free movement and that is an issue that needs to be addressed.

And the EU worries about two things.

First, maintaining the unity of the 27 and not offering Britain such a good deal that it might appear attractive to other member states.

And secondly, the worry that the UK will use its freedom to gain a competitive advantage which will enable us to sell more goods and more services into the European market through the door that we will be asking the EU to leave open for us.

And so we find ourselves in this position.

It is now 19 months since the referendum.

There are only 9 months to go to the end of the negotiations.

We are two thirds through the process and yet we haven't even started negotiating our future relationship with the EU.

It is frankly astonishing. And why are we in this position?

Because of the Cabinet's inability – it's an open secret - to reach agreement even among its own members about what it is they want, never mind starting to try and negotiate for it.

Because the Government appears to be contemplating with equanimity going into a negotiation in which, because of the red lines it has set, it is facing the almost certain prospect of coming away with a less good deal for trade and services than the one we currently enjoy; an outcome that will make the UK poorer than it would otherwise have been.

Because it has consistently refused to face up to the consequences of those red lines for the border. However skilful the drafting on full alignment as a fall back, and no matter how insistent ministers are that come what may, there will be no hard border, no checks and no infrastructure, they have absolutely no answer as to how this will be achieved given that every other trade agreement in the world involves border checks.

And because ministers continue to insist that it will be possible to negotiate all of these things:

Goods  
Services

Security and foreign policy co-operation

Policing

Information sharing to fight terrorism

The regulation of medicines, aircraft and food safety

The transfer of data

Mutual recognition of qualifications

Our future role in the 30 or so trade deals which the EU has negotiated to all our benefit

and everything else – it's a very long list – and complete the process with a full, final agreement by the end of this October. And yet they probably won't even start talking about the new partnership until March.

No-one else thinks this is remotely likely, I doubt that ministers actually believe it, but the fact they still maintain that position weakens their credibility. And it undermines confidence at a time when uncertainty is undermining decisions on the part of companies about their future investment in the UK.

Now the first thing the negotiators will have to agree is a transitional period. I think that is a more accurate description than an implementation period because you can only have an implementation period if you have something to implement, and it is precisely because we haven't yet got anything to implement that we are going to need a transitional period.

Whatever we call it, it is essential. Without it, the UK would in all likelihood fall out of the EU without a partnership agreement and it is because of uncertainty that companies will continue to make contingency plans to safeguard themselves against that possibility.

That is why the Chancellor of the Exchequer correctly described the transition period is a wasting asset. It is very valuable now, but it will be less valuable in the summer.

The UK Government has had to accept, as the Prime Minister set out in her Florence speech, that during this transitional period everything will stay the same, apart from the fact we will no longer have a voice in the Council of Ministers or the Parliament.

What we do know is that we will remain in the customs union and the single market. We will continue to accept free movement. And we will have to go on abiding by judgements of the European Court of justice.

What we don't know is what will happen once the transition period is over. And we may still not know at the end of the Article 50 process if much of the negotiations remain to be completed during the transition. And what do we do if the negotiations on a new partnership have not been completed by the time the transition period expires? Well, my answer to that is simple – extend the transition – but in order to do that the transition agreement itself must include a clause enabling it to be extended by agreement between the parties.

So I say this. The UK Parliament will have the final say. It will vote on the draft agreement. But before doing so, I think it will expect to know what our future

relationship on trade and services will be and therefore how that open border will be maintained. The vague offer of a possible post-dated cheque for an unspecified agreement will not do.

I want now to turn to some of the wider lessons of what has been happening around us as we seek to build a better world.

Having to deal with change has been part of the human condition since the dawn of time, but there is something about the last decade which has been unsettling.

I am at heart an optimist about the future, not least because we can see with our own eyes the progress we have made including the advance of democracy and the extraordinary achievement of humankind in reducing absolute poverty.

But the watchwords of this - our - age are turmoil and uncertainty.

The continuing and bloody echoes of the Arab spring, nowhere more tragically heard and witnessed than in Syria.

The struggle between the secular and the religious.

A resurgent Russia seeking, it is said, the velvet glove of respect while wielding an iron fist.

The inexorable dawning of a changing climate and the onwards march of technology and innovation.

A rising global population that by the time my two grandchildren reach my age will be more than three times greater than when I was born.

And the relentless movement of people across the globe, whether they be fleeing conflict, escaping the consequences of that change in climate or simply seeking the better life that they see others living, a story that is so much a part of Irish history.

When the story of this century comes to be written, I think it will be defined by this movement and the way in which we sought to deal with it.

It is not hard to see why there is so much uncertainty. The global financial crash not only shook our economies; it also shook people's confidence in our system and in our belief that our children will enjoy a better life than the one that we have had.

And it was in these circumstances that concerns about immigration and change, the loss of what had been familiar, a wish not to be told by others what to do, stagnant wages, economic inequality, austerity, globalisation, a sense of powerlessness, a loss of identity, and a belief that somehow our country had given up that which had made it great, led 52% of the British people who voted in the referendum to make that decision and to send us a message that they were not happy about the way things were.

It wasn't so much about facts or even just about the EU. It was about the state of their lives and our politics.

And if those of my constituents who resisted all of my arguments as to why they should vote Remain were here today they would probably look us in the eye and say "You weren't listening to us. Well you're listening now, aren't you?"

More than anything else I think it was a cry for control in a world in which change is now happening faster than at any other point in human history, but in which it sometimes seems, particularly to the older generation as if they have barely any control at all.

And yet for those who voted Remain, they too experienced on that Friday morning a feeling of loss, of insecurity, of uncertainty and worry about a future they think will be worse because the progress and freedoms that the EU has brought will now be taken from them. And that was I suspect the feeling here.

And the echoes of that campaign - in which our nation was shown to be divided almost exactly down the middle - continue to be felt within our politics.

I was, and still am, a passionate remainer. But I also respect the result of the referendum and as democrats I think we have a duty to give effect to it.

If you think we have a crisis of confidence in British politics already, then just imagine what a crisis of confidence we would have had if Parliament had turned round and said to the 52% of those who voted to leave "We know better than you."

All of these are reasons why we must reach a deal on a new relationship with the European Union, but as nations and as a world, we must also find an answer to the central political question posed by the referendum result.

How do we hold in a new balance the two great forces of our age, reflected in the principles set out side by side by Winston Churchill and Franklin D Roosevelt in the Atlantic Charter of 1941?

The first; the self-evident truth that nations must work together to secure better economic and social conditions for all, as we deal with the great challenges we face as a world that increasingly pay no heed to national borders.

And the second, the innate thirst for self-determination so that people can shape their own future - the search for control.

Understanding and then responding to these forces is urgent and important work if we are to see off those populists around us who seek to exploit the frustration, fear and anger that many people feel by promising a return to a fictitious golden age when, in fact, their inward-looking nationalism is a road to nowhere.

And the way in which some of them have sought to fan the flames of prejudice towards our fellow citizens, attack the independence of the judiciary and undermine a free media represents a threat to our way of life.

If the last century taught us anything it is that international co-operation is at the heart of economic and political security for us all.

In Britain's case it was in the second half of that century that we came to realise that it was far better and more effective to seek to be a global power that achieved its goals through the influence that comes from working with others, rather than by holding on to the Empire through which we had become a dominant world power aided of course by the industrial revolution.

Our future relationship with the EU – an increasingly important pole of influence in the world – will therefore be critically important in these uncertain times, with unpredictability to the east in the Kremlin and to the west in the White House.

We also need to be forthright in defence of internationalism and the rules-based system created out of the ashes and the suffering of the Second World War, in in the face of the resurgent climate change deniers, the aid cutters and the isolationists who would have us turn away from our responsibilities one to another. If they ever succeeded, far from taking back control, they would lessen our power and our ability to shape events.

This is no time for any of us to be retreating from what helps to give each of us security and influence in the modern world.

And what is the one word that sums up the human condition more than any other at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

For me, that word is interdependence. Interdependence - the very definition of what it is to be a human being.

While our earliest ancestors first appeared on earth between five million and seven million years ago, it was not until Christmas Eve 50 years ago that we finally understood what that interdependence means. It was the moment when, as the astronauts read from the book of Genesis, William Anders took that immortal photograph from the Apollo space capsule as it came back around the moon.

For the very first time we saw our small and fragile planet from a different vantage point in all its white and blue and green beauty floating in the blackness of eternity.

And what that photograph taught us was that we have to learn to live alongside one another in a way that is peaceful and sustainable, that we have to accept our responsibilities to our neighbours, even if we have never met and they live on the other side of the world, and that the only way to do this is by nation states working together.

Co-operation and self-determination do not have to be in tension and both can be embraced in a way that fosters solidarity and creates a sense of national common purpose.

And it is our responsibility to do what needs to be done.

Because the referendum also sent us a message about the lives of many people live in the UK and that is why we must also commit to change at home.

The need to tackle the crisis affecting the way in which we care for our elderly; our grandparents and our mums and dads, remembering that it will be our turn next. This is the greatest social challenge we face and it needs money, time, energy and commitment, because the system is failing and our NHS is creaking as a consequence.

The need to think about how we will prepare for the future of both our economies and manage the next wave of automation and the changing form of employment in a way that does not lead to more insecurity, more zero hours contracts, and more young people completely unable to save for a pension or buy a home. For too long, we have allowed this happen.

The need to build and to invest for the long term instead of just thinking about the short term which, as we know to our cost was the cause of the global economic crash that still echoes through our lives.

Nowhere is this long-term investment more important than in education and skills, innovation and creativity – the wellspring of our future development and prosperity.

And, most important of all, the need to sustain a strong economy that will make all these things possible; which brings me to the task in hand and to why I am an optimist.

These are common challenges for both of our countries, but we should not be daunted by them because we have shown how hope can triumph over fear and cynicism.

Our islands were the birthplace of the industrial revolution and of the man who created the Internet.

With less than 1% of the world's population, we together generate 4.3% of its GDP.

The language we share is spoken by 1.5 billion people worldwide, more than any other.

Our literature, our theatre, our films, our actors are loved the world over.

Our universities attract the brightest and the best.

And, each of us in our own way, has helped to influence and shape the modern world through the power of our ideas and values.

Democracy.

The rule of national and international law.

A free media.

Free trade.

And the belief that every human being has rights that are inalienable, so powerfully and movingly expressed when Ireland became the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage by means of a referendum.

A reminder of the power of referendums, sometimes, to be a force for good.

All of these ideas shaped our lives not because we turned our backs on working with others. They came to pass because we embraced others, travelled, traded, built alliances, were open to new ideas, welcomed new people and turned our minds and our politics to how we could make them happen.

We want the EU to continue to prosper, above all for the sake of its crowning achievement; bringing to an end centuries of conflict on this continent. In the words of the Schuman Declaration, it did this by making a return to war not merely “unthinkable but materially impossible”. That was the best way that we could honour the sacrifice of two generations of Europeans who lie beneath those beautifully-tended war graves. We read their names and their ages, and for me the most poignant graves of all are the ones that simply bear the inscription ‘A soldier of the Great War - Known unto God’ for no one knew then or knows to this day whose brother, son, father, uncle or cousin lies there.

Europe does, however, face a fundamental choice about its own future.

Will those who call for an ever faster, closer, deeper union prevail over those who argue that a multispeed, multi-layer EU is the best way to maintain the unity of its member states?

I think the second is the path to take but it is for European citizens to decide. In making that choice I just hope the EU will, at some point, quietly ask itself how and why it came to lose one of its most important member states.

I want us to find a way of continuing to cooperate on the challenges we together face. Not just trade and economics, but foreign policy, defence, security and the fight against global poverty.

And I also want to see our relationship – the relationship between our two countries – prosper also, as we do all in our power to maintain these close bonds, that thread, despite the referendum result.

You are our closest friend and neighbour. And you will remain our closest friend and neighbour.

As Yeats, it is said, put it: *“There are no strangers here; only friends you haven’t yet met.”*

And whatever happens, we must strive to ensure that nothing gets in the way of our shared economic interests, the free movement of our peoples between our two countries and the bond that has been forged in a shared history which, despite the pain of the past, has brought us closer together now, and I am sure will continue to do so in the many years that lie ahead.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Thank you very much.

**ends**

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