

**Remarks by the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin T.D.,
at the launch of the report “*Cork and the Brexit Effect*”**

University College Cork - Friday, 24th June 2022

I would like to thank Professor John O’Halloran for his hospitality today, and also to thank Dr. Mary Murphy and her colleague Michael D’Arcy for the invitation to launch this report, and for their work on delivering this project.

I would also like to acknowledge also all those from the Cork Chamber, local business, the tourism sector, the fields of arts and culture, as well as the wider education sector, including academics and researchers - who contributed to the discussion that informed this report on *Cork and the Brexit Effect*. It gives me great pleasure to join you this evening and to welcome its publication.

This piece of work touches on a range of issues of great importance to me as Taoiseach, to the Government and to the future wellbeing of our country: our Shared Island, successfully managing the impact of Brexit, and the specific economic profile and development potential of Cork and Munster in and of themselves, and as part of a wider outward-looking all-island economy.

It is now six years since a majority, a small majority but a majority nonetheless, of voters in the UK decided that their country should leave the European Union. It was by any measure an historic vote, but history also records that exactly none of the details of what was to be involved in exiting the Union were published at that time.

During that referendum every substantive warning, no matter how independent the work it drew upon, was simply dismissed. I particularly remember the way in which the sincere and profound warnings of John Major and Tony Blair, the two prime ministers who did so much to achieve peace on this island, about the potential damage to Northern Ireland from Brexit, were also dismissed out of hand.

As we unfortunately keep seeing, there are those who seem determined to try to keep Brexit alive because they would otherwise have to accept that the European Union can no longer be blamed for every problem. For these people, weening themselves off forty years of scapegoating Brussels is proving very hard.

That is why we are seeing efforts which can only be described as trying to get Brexit undone.

In contrast, the European Union has been trying to move on. The Union has negotiated in good faith and it is focused on our future – which we are determined will be as a larger, more dynamic and values-based community of nations.

We believe in strong, rules-based organisations which can oblige all participants to seek compromise and honour agreements – the UK government apparently does not.

That is their choice. However, they need to understand that fundamental principles of international law and cooperation do not permit unilateral action to break agreements.

For Ireland, the decision of my predecessors Seán Lemass and Jack Lynch to lead us towards Europe has been one of the greatest political successes for Irish democracy. We have no interest in a return to the type of competition between nations which caused such economic and political misery in former times.

And because we are clear about our future in Europe we have an obligation to address every new and potential challenge.

That is why we cannot and will not simply stand back and let Brexit damage us and damage our island. We must diversify our markets and our products – and we must work together to cooperate and to create new opportunities.

That is why it is so important that we keep building a positive agenda nationally and regionally to make sure we fully understand the Brexit effect – and this is why studies such as this report are essential.

Shared Island

From my first days in office I have made it clear that we need to move from talk to action when it comes to realising the full potential for working together on an all-island basis. For too long we failed to take up the great opportunities envisaged in in the Good Friday Agreement. In fact, in many ways we allowed ourselves to grow further apart.

I know that there are those who would rather talk only about constitutional issues - they are impatient with the idea that investing in building new links, shared understanding and services which benefit us all is a priority. I couldn't disagree more. If we are to break a near century-long pattern and to achieve lasting reconciliation, the shared island initiative is absolutely essential.

There is a really welcome focus in the Report on taking up opportunities on a Shared Island basis, as we look to move beyond the challenges that Brexit has raised.

The Shared Island initiative which I have established is working to deepen practical cooperation and societal connections right across the island.

We are delivering real benefits for people and working to build consensus around a more shared, reconciled future on this island, underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

The Government has made a €1 billion commitment to all-island investment out to 2030 through our Shared Island Fund and the revised National Development Plan.

As an example of very practical action which is already underway this year we're making new all-island investments on community climate action and EV charging infrastructure.

Through the Shared Island Dialogue series, we are fostering a genuinely inclusive and non-partisan civic dialogue on the future of this island. So far engaging more than 1,500 citizens and civic leaders, from across all communities, traditions and regions. Looking at how - in real terms - we can better share this island, across all of our sectoral policies but also more deeply in society.

There is a very strong regional dimension to our Shared Island approach, recognising the significant opportunities of region to region cooperation and interaction, that are highlighted in today's Report.

In April, the Government launched a new €5m scheme to provide seed capital to cross-border Local Authority partnerships to develop new joint investment projects.

For instance, to deliver cross-border tourism and recreation projects; conserve natural and built heritage; protect biodiversity; and help meet regional skills needs.

There's been a really strong response from Local Authorities with applications from right across the island, including Cork City Council. I look forward to seeing the funding awards announced in the autumn for new projects that will help cities and regions across the island move forward together.

And our major North South Research programme, backed with €40million from the Shared Island Fund, is now funding research teams in Universities from every corner of the island to work on pioneering projects over the next four years.

That includes 8 major new all-island projects led by University College Cork, for instance, on healthcare, climate action and on teaching of history in schools.

The Government will continue to take forward and support new investment, policy and cooperation initiatives on a Shared Island basis.

Growth and Development

This report, which captures the views of local business and civic leaders, adds an important perspective to the regional development agenda in Cork and Munster.

Over the coming 20 years, the population of Cork city and suburbs may grow by 50%.

We need to ensure that the right economic and social infrastructure is in place to support this growth, to make sure it takes place in a sustainable way, and that Cork continues to be an attractive place to live and work.

In the National Development Plan, we are investing to deliver growth that is regionally balanced, with strong cities that will act as drivers of growth for their wider region.

Central to that ambition, is the future of Cork and its surrounding region.

Cork is set to benefit significantly from Government investment.

Cork is a major beneficiary of our urban regeneration plans, with over €400 million announced last year for transformative projects in the Docklands, the Grand Parade Quarter, in Mallow Town Centre, and in the Passage West - Ringaskiddy - Carrigaline Harbour Cluster.

Continued investment in our port and airport connections to the UK, the EU and the rest of the world, is central to responding to the challenges as well as the opportunities arising from Brexit – a point that is drawn out in this report.

I welcome the recent announcement by Brittany Ferries that its new midweek sailings between Cork and Roscoff are to be made permanent.

Ireland's capacity and connectivity will be further enhanced by the major capital infrastructure programme currently ongoing in Port of Cork, which will allow the port to respond to market needs.

Cork Airport's future has also been strengthened. With the successful completion of the recent runway project it now has greater potential to have much wider international connectivity.

Furthermore, Ireland will receive just over €1 billion of funding from the Brexit Adjustment Reserve, the biggest single allocation for any Member State, representing just over 20% of the total fund.

As the Member State most impacted by Brexit, we will use this funding to help counter the adverse economic and social consequences of Brexit across the country in areas such as enterprise supports; supports for the fisheries and agri-food sectors, reskilling and retraining; and checks and controls at our ports and airports.

NI Protocol

Mary Murphy, who has contributed significantly to this report, provided the first and the most comprehensive study on the role of the European Union in Northern Ireland. Her work showed how the EU had been a point of shared political cooperation for many years, but that Brexit threatened to turn this on its head and create a new source of division.

I presented this excellent work to Maros Sefcovic and his team during their negotiations with the UK, and I know that it helped to reinforce many important points.

The British Government recently tabled a bill at Westminster which would undermine the Withdrawal Agreement, and the careful worked out arrangements put in place in the Protocol to manage the specific impacts of Brexit on this island.

This move by the British Government is perhaps the first time in half a century that London has acted in such a unilateral manner in relation to policies fundamental to peace on this island.

The unilateral breaking of an international treaty, the sidelining of the opinions of the overwhelming majority of people on this island and the casual disregard for basic principles of cooperation is a very serious moment for everyone who cares about Northern Ireland.

It is a very damaging diplomatic and economic act. It marks the abandonment of an approach to Anglo-Irish cooperation which was triumphantly successful.

The UK Bill pulls in the very opposite direction to the well-researched and detailed work that underpins this Report: where this report looks to certainty and opportunity, the UK bill engenders only uncertainty and exhibits a blindness to opportunity.

It is perfectly reasonable to look for ways to improve the operation of the Protocol, but unfortunately, what we have seen are bad faith efforts that will not benefit Northern Ireland.

I have engaged regularly with business in Northern Ireland and it is clear that people want durable, practical solutions, and they want continued access to the EU Single Market. I would also have to say that Maros Sefcovic and his team have spent more time engaging with groups in Northern Ireland on the detail of the issue than any London-based minister.

What is becoming increasingly clear is that the Protocol is working in protecting Northern Ireland's economy. Northern Ireland, along with London, have bounced back to pre-pandemic growth levels, unlike others.

While NI exports to the EU are up, there is no evidence that NI exports to GB are down in the same period. Dual access is leading to export growth. It has prevented a new border on this island and it is creating badly needed economic opportunity.

So we need to encourage the UK to find the pathway back to a partnership approach: partnership with the EU on implementation of the Protocol and partnership with Ireland in protecting the Good Friday Agreement, and achieving the potential of all parts of these islands.

Reports such as this should be essential reading for all focussed on making this shared island work, and particularly in this case for Cork and the Munster region.

My congratulations to its authors.

Go raibh mile maith agaibh.