

Speech by Naomi Long, then leader of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, to the All Island Brexit Forum, Dundalk Institute of Technology, 30 April 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. It is a pleasure that we have been joined today by the EU's Chief Negotiator, Michel Barnier.

I want to place on record our thanks to both the European Union and the Irish Government for their understanding of and commitment to addressing the massive political, economic and social challenges thrown up by Brexit for Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Brexit poses a real threat to the whole concept of a shared and interdependent Northern Ireland, and our interconnected, cross-border economy is uniquely vulnerable.

We welcome the fact that the EU and UK Governments have worked out insurance backstop arrangements, and recognise that these need to be turned into legal text.

The next weeks are incredibly important. We remain frustrated with the lack of clarity in the UK Government position.

In essence, they have created a trilemma of three contradictory objectives, namely: maintaining an open border on the island of Ireland without physical infrastructure; leaving the Customs Union and Single Market; and ruling out special measures for Northern Ireland in terms of those mechanisms.

Technological solutions are at best many years away and most would require a level of intrusion into and surveillance of the private activity of ordinary citizens that they would be completely unacceptable.

So the UK Government faces a profound choice.

Short of a reconsideration of the entire Brexit project itself, our preferred approach is for the UK as a whole entering into a fresh Customs Union with the EU, and if not the entire UK remaining in the Single Market, then at least Northern Ireland doing.

It is crucial that there are no new borders created anywhere across these islands. New borders and friction need to be understood in more than just economic terms: they carry significant emotional and psychological implications.

We also have some concerns with the current backstop arrangements. It is important that they are acknowledged as minimum terms, essentially a platform on which a more comprehensive arrangement between the UK and the EU can ideally be built.

We must also realise that the backstop is essentially defined in defensive terms. It is about avoiding a hard border and protecting the Good Friday Agreement.

However, an arrangement that is limited to goods but does not extend to services and the movement of people, risks depriving Northern Ireland of the means to be fully competitive. Our economy is already starting from a much lower base across a wide range of indicators: we must find a solution which allows us to grow rather than lock us into continued under-performance.

Finally, any special measures for Northern Ireland need to be seen and understood in pragmatic terms, being entirely in keeping with devolution and the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, including the Principle of Consent. This cannot and must not become entangled in a debate about sovereignty.

It was recognised with devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that the UK required tailored solutions for different regions: never has this been more the case than in addressing Brexit, where the support for leaving the EU and the challenges created by doing so vary enormously across the regions.

The Brexit challenge in NI is unique: we therefore need a unique solution and the GFA and devolution provide a basis for delivering on that.