

NI protocol tensions threaten UK-Ireland, UK-EU and UK-US relations

Coveney says there is 'some strain' between governments – understatement of the year.



Britain's prime minister Boris Johnson (2R) and his wife Carrie Johnson (R) walk with US president Joe Biden and US First Lady Jill Biden prior to a bilateral meeting at Carbis Bay, Cornwall. Photograph: Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty

If relations between the three points of the Brexit triangle of Dublin, London, and Brussels were dodgy before this week, they have deteriorated further in recent days as the temperature rises over the Northern Ireland protocol.

Speaking to reporters on Thursday, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney, admitted that there was "some strain in the relationship between Dublin and London" over the protocol. Understatement of the year. Relations between the two governments have not been as poor since the days when Margaret Thatcher was in Downing Street and Charles Haughey was in Merrion Street.

Privately some senior officials, who, prior to Brexit, delighted in the diplomatic and political achievement of better relations between Ireland and the UK than at any time since Independence, are aghast at the state of play.

But it is what it is. Politicians are taking pot-shots at each other, officials are briefing against each other's governments with accusations that the other is endangering the peace process and charges of sheer hypocrisy. Some senior figures are aghast at the state of Anglo-Irish relations and old hands warn that the peace process only flourishes and Northern Ireland only makes progress when the two governments are working in lockstep; right now, it looks like the opposite of that.

Reneging

The connected relationship between the EU and the UK is even worse. The EU is accusing the UK of reneging on an agreement and warns that it will take legal steps to seek redress. The UK's position is that the EU has adopted a more legalistic and nitpicking approach than the UK thought it would when it agreed the protocol. "They have taken an approach that is less discretionary than we thought they would," says one senior Downing Street official. The UK's Brexit minister David Frost says that Britain "underestimated the effect" of the Northern Ireland protocol.

But this is completely dismissed on the Irish and the EU side. Even some formerly at the heart of the British government eye it with skepticism. Former permanent secretary at the department for exiting the EU Philip Rycroft told Times Radio this week: "Take that with a large pinch of salt. The UK side knew exactly what they were signing up to. The UK has to accept responsibility."

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- Northern Ireland Protocol: Unilateral action 'never works', Coveney warns British

But the UK side is clear in its accusation that it is the EU that is failing to take account of the special circumstances in Northern Ireland, and say that the EU's understanding of the North – and indeed, of the wider UK – is sketchy. The EU doesn't realize – or doesn't care – that the checks on goods entering the North make unionists "feel less British", says one senior UK official.

EU negotiators often refer to Northern Ireland as being in the EU, the British say, with barely concealed irritation. They describe an approach characterized as "we decide who gets access to our market and Northern Ireland is now part of our market", in the words of one senior official.

Irish and EU officials almost shout: this is what you agreed.

Coveney put it more sharply on Thursday: "When we have Lord Frost visiting Northern Ireland and saying the protocol is not sustainable, that is a problem,

when he was the person who negotiated the protocol,” he said.

“It’s impossible to overstate the annoyance with the British behaviour on the North,” says one senior Irish official. Another says that the Irish Government has conveyed the message to the British: “If you’re seeking to push things to the limit, you’re nearly there.”

Seething

And London is seething that Dublin persuaded US president Joe Biden to intervene, sending an unprecedented diplomatic rebuke to Boris Johnson’s government over its treatment of the protocol, and the implications for the peace process.

The message followed a lengthy meeting between Coveney and the US national security adviser Jake Sullivan at Shannon Airport recently. Internal Irish Government readouts of the meeting suggested that the American tone was “what can we do to help?”

The British reaction can be gauged by the headline in the Daily Telegraph on Thursday: “Joe Biden should keep his sneering anti-British, anti-Brexit views to himself.”

Having applied a wrecking ball to the UK-Ireland and the UK-EU relationship, Brexit is now taking its toll on the “special relationship”. As it hosts the G7 meeting this weekend, the UK looks more isolated than ever.

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