

Response

I very much welcome the chance to follow on from that thought-provoking and powerful contribution from Arlene Foster.

I am delighted to be taking part in this important Policy Exchange conference on Brexit and the Union.

The 300 year old Union between the four nations of the United Kingdom is one of the most successful political partnerships in modern history.

We should be proud of this country's great past ... and optimistic for its future.

Proud of what we've achieved over the centuries ... and confident about the role we can continue to play on the world stage.

Our union of four constituent nations is a key foundation of our strength ... one United Kingdom made up of four distinctive parts but with a common history and a shared destiny.

The Brexit vote has divided opinion in every part of our country and what we need to do now is try to bridge the divisions which the referendum revealed.

Of course we must ensure that the result is respected but that doesn't mean disregarding the views and fears of the 48% who voted remain.

Making a success of the huge decision this country made on 23rd June 2016 requires compromise as we shape a new relationship with our European neighbours.

Our goal should be to create a new settlement with Europe with which a majority of people in this country can feel comfortable, whether they voted leave or remain.

And of course a vital question to be settled relates to the Irish border.

There is increasing concern that some are seeking to exploit this issue as a means to further the negotiating aims of the EU and force us to stay in the customs union and the single market.

Brexit has divided opinion in Northern Ireland, just as it has in the rest of the UK.

But support remains strong in Northern Ireland for the political settlement established under the Belfast Agreement and its successors.

As the poll published in the Telegraph today shows, backing for a united Ireland remains at modest levels.

Even more clear, is the rock solid support in the Northern Ireland for the principle that its future should only ever be decided by democracy and consent.

I do not accept the claim that Brexit might weaken that resolve and precipitate a return to violent confrontation.

That is the underlying allegation from those who assert that leaving the EU could lead to a return to the Troubles and I would caution those who make that claim.

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There is every evidence to believe that disparate and small groupings who still attempt terrorist attacks will continue to find themselves condemned by the vast majority of the broader community.

And that profound lack of popular support stunts the ability of these individuals to do harm ... together with the resolute determination of the police and intelligence services to prevent terror plots from coming to fruition.

The security reason why we should seek to avoid any new infrastructure at the border is not a fear of a return to the troubles of the past ... it is the need to avoid endangering officials charged with erecting, maintaining or operating border infrastructure.

All sides are agreed on the importance of avoiding unnecessary new division on the island of Ireland ... and preventing economic life in the border areas from being disrupted.

But it is important to note that there is already a border in Ireland.

Even though it is barely visible, there is a border for the purposes of tax, excise duties, taxes, currency and security.

And the risks around these matters are managed largely through cooperation between the authorities north and south ... rather than physical checks at the border.

In the summer last year, the UK Government published workable proposals for ensuring that the Irish border remains as free flowing and open as it is now.

The key aspects of that plan are streamlined customs arrangements deploying the latest technology ... mutual recognition of trusted trader schemes ... and an exemption for small local traders carrying out what is essentially local business which just happens to cross the border.

The Head of HMRC, John Thompson, told the House Commons Brexit Committee that this would cover vast majority of north-south trade and that, *quote*:

"if there were any checks they would be risk and intelligence-based, and would take place well away from the legal border".

Similar statements have been made by Niall Cody, head of the Irish Revenue service ...

... and by Lars Karlsson ... a former director of the World Customs Organisation who was commissioned by the European Parliament to look into this subject.

Mr Karlsson told MPs that modern technology means that physical customs posts are no longer essential at border.

He envisaged instead, the use instead of mobile phone and GPS technology to track HGVs, together with the computer-based customs clearing ... (the norm across much of the world).

He pointed out that arrangements without physical infrastructure have been successfully trialled on the Norway-Sweden border and the reason why they haven't yet been adopted is because existing arrangements are viewed as sufficient.

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Even without the introduction of the latest smart border technology, the vast majority of goods are dealt with remotely via trusted trader and authorised economic operator schemes.

It's already the case that less 5% of goods coming from outside the EU into the UK are subject to customs checks at the border.

I would also highlight that the landmark WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement was adopted by the EU in 2017.

This places a binding obligation on signatories to cooperate with their neighbours in trying to make trade across customs borders as smooth and seamless as possible.

All of this points to the conclusion that with common sense, goodwill and cooperation, there is no need for the introduction of a so-called hard border on the island of Ireland.

Technology can deliver the solution we need to keep the border open so the barriers to settling this question with the EU are now political not practical....

... a point well made in the impressive paper for Policy Exchange recently written by Graham Gudgin and Ray Bassett: "Getting over the Line".

Why we need to respect the result

Finally I would like to emphasise a point which tends to be overlooked in the intensity of the debate on Brexit and the UK's future relationship with the EU.

Whilst the road out of the EU is fraught with controversy and continues to be bitterly resisted by some ... we shouldn't lose sight of the big disadvantages that would come with staying in.

The EU will only ever have one direction of travel ... towards more centralisation, more harmonisation, and more Europe.

Indeed, for the Eurozone countries, there is a pressing practical need to move in this direction ... towards the single budgetary and banking system they need to make their currency work.

If Brexit is stopped, we can expect a long stream of instances where we will be outvoted and our national interests overridden by the voting strength of others.

Even where we secure protection and opt-outs in EU directives, the relentless federalism of the European Court of Justice will continue to drive further political integration.

Our net contribution would inevitably rise well beyond the £10 billion a year we already pay ... with the real possibility of the UK being drawn into future bailouts if the days of banking and sovereign debt crisis recur in EU member states.

And the stated aim of the EU is to expand to include new members.

That leaves open the possibility that the population changes facilitated by unfettered free movement could intensify in the future.

These problems would be even greater if we were to remain in an EEA type arrangement, subject to all the rules of the single market and the customs union but without the chance to vote on them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I often look back at the day two and a half years ago, when I was one of five ministers to emerge from the Saturday morning emergency Cabinet meeting to pledge my support for the campaign to leave the European Union.

I did so because while we remain part of the EU, no matter who we vote for, there are many things we can never change.

As commission president Jean-Claude Juncker put it: “There is no democratic choice against the European treaties.”

The long struggle between crown and Parliament culminating in 1688 was to establish the principle that no laws should be passed, nor taxes raised, except by our own elected representatives.

But our membership of the EU means vesting supreme law-making power in people we do not elect and we cannot remove....

... people who, in almost all cases, we cannot name and who we've never even heard of.

And this happened without real consent.

When the UK joined in the 70s, very few people would have been aware of the scale of the political project envisaged by the founding fathers of the EU.

Over the succeeding decades, significant transfers of power have been made via a series of incremental steps, deliberately disguised as technical changes unlikely to attract widespread attention.

As Jeremy Paxman put it in a documentary aired during the referendum, British national sovereignty has gradually slipped away over time, piece by piece.

We needed a referendum to determine whether there was consent for that huge constitutional change ... and we received the message back *that there was not*.

Now is the time to implement the result ... pass the Withdrawal Bill ... and get to work on building a truly global future for our United Kingdom.