

CCBS – LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

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Northern Ireland
Assembly

Monday 19 September 2016

Summary: 'A Vision for Northern Ireland outside the EU'

The proposer of the motion, Mr Aiken asked that this Assembly, in the light of the referendum decision by the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, endorses and adopts the approach contained in 'A Vision for Northern Ireland outside the EU', published by the Ulster Unionist Party.

Mr Aiken: It is nearly three months since the referendum that resulted in the people of the United Kingdom voting to leave the European Union. We as a party are conscious that the people of Northern Ireland and Scotland voted to remain in the EU — the position that we, on balance, campaigned for — but we accept that the vote taken will result in the United Kingdom triggering article 50 in the near future, possibly as early as January 2017. We have asked for this debate because we, as a responsible Opposition, wish to encourage our Government to action — any action. We have listened closely to civil society, business groups, agriculture, the university sector, the travel industry and, above all, the people of Northern Ireland, who have asked us, time and again, what is being done and what is the plan.

We note that, across the UK, the other regional Governments have already embarked on action. In Scotland, we have seen the formation of a Scottish standing council on Europe and a £100 million stimulus package. The Government there have already taken a proactive approach to getting the best deal for the Scottish people. In Wales, a similar approach is being taken, and the English regions and the city of London have been taking part in detailed discussions with Whitehall. Plans have been published, meetings are taking place and all these regions have defined what the impact of the loss of the EU means to them.

What have the Northern Ireland Executive done? They sent a letter to the Prime Minister on 10 August containing what to many, if not all of us, was a statement of the blindingly obvious. Monday 19 September 2016 4 Our Executive met the Brexit Minister — separately. Our European office in Brussels has set up more teleconferences. Our civil servants — at least some of them — are talking to one another. Oh, and we have the ear of Liam Fox. That, unfortunately, is about it.

Embarrassingly for a devolved Government, the Secretary of State has done more: he has established an advisory panel, held talks with our nearest EU neighbour and held a wide series of meetings with key stakeholders. He has regular chats with the PM and the "naughty trio" — all of which is a damning commentary on our dysfunctional non-Government. I imagine that David Davis was laughing all the way back to Whitehall, and probably still is.

A blank sheet of A4, unfortunately, is a good representation of what has been achieved so far, and our people continue to ask, "What is the plan?". There are no public discussions —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Aiken: Not yet.

There are no public discussions, debates or grand committees, or even an understanding of the scale of the issues involved. Instead, we have a divided Government, pretending to give a facade of unity but still with no proposals or plans. That is why, in the vacuum that is the Government's response to the most significant event to affect our country in over 20 years, we had to take the lead and to publish our vision.

We recognise that, in Northern Ireland, our fellow Opposition party, half of the Government, the Alliance Party and the Green Party still hope that the decision to leave can be halted by the courts.

While the Ulster Unionist Party recommended remaining, we acknowledge that we must now accept the democratic wish expressed by the people to leave the European Union. 12.15 pm

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. I am sure that, in acknowledging all those who advocate what he advocates, he will be quick to mention that 85% of unionists voted against staying in the European Union. No doubt you will come to that.

Mr Aiken: Thank you for that.

As a responsible Opposition, we now offer a vision and a set of key asks to help prepare Northern Ireland for the forthcoming challenges and potential opportunities ahead. It is also useful at this stage to state what those challenges are likely to be. Indeed, as the Member for South Belfast so regularly and graciously points out, we have not yet fallen off the economic cliff into recession. It is good to note that the early action of the Bank of England, which pumped —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Aiken: Not quite yet.

It pumped £250 billion of quantitative easing — [Interruption.] — we are answering your question — into the economy, which staved off the immediate crisis. That was done by adding a quarter of a trillion to our national debt, which is a moot point. However, according to the 'Northern Ireland Economic Outlook' that was published by PwC this week, growth in Northern Ireland for 2016 is forecast to be 1.2% and is expected to slump even further to 0.3% in 2017. That is worse than the overall UK rates, which are expected to remain at 1.8% in 2016 before dropping to 0.7% in 2017. As the learned members of the Government are or should be fully aware, broad economic modelling of our economy shows that Northern Ireland GDP normally lags around 1% behind that of GB.

We as a party do not want to be accused of doing Northern Ireland down, but, instead of sticking our collective head in the sand, we need to face the reality of what is likely to occur. For a start, we are ill prepared as it is, without facing a shortfall of £500 million — perhaps closer to £1 billion — per annum in post-exit funding. We sell Northern Ireland as a great place to do business, which it can be, by pointing out that we have a highly skilled workforce, while conveniently forgetting that most CFOs read the 'Financial Times' and Bloomberg, and, when they do due diligence, which is something that at least half our Government have a problem with, they discover that our universities are underfunded to the tune of £55 million and are dropping like stones in the global rankings. We export 38% of our brightest youngsters per annum. We have the second highest costs of energy in western Europe. We have appalling infrastructure. Now, we have no plan for Brexit.

Rather than being negative — [Laughter.] — we need to build a more positive vision. The border between two great economic groupings can provide considerable economic potential. We have a strong case, if made properly, to become an enterprise zone that could Monday 19 September 2016 5 harmonise EU/UK trading positions. It was good to see — unfortunately, he is not here — the DUP Chief Whip's support for an enterprise zone around our great International Airport last week and Mervyn Storey's continued support for the enterprise zone in North Antrim. It is an idea that needs to be explored, and it already has the support of many business groups here.

We would also use any stimulus package to build up our infrastructure, an approach already being taken across the UK, except, of course, here. We should invest heavily in R&D, again using the borrowing potential created by largescale quantitative easing. I can already hear the harping: "You've always complained about creating more debt" and, through the Executive's new spin doctor, "Is the money coming from the magic money tree?". Well, guess what? After the referendum, we are in an entirely new dynamic. The so-called £350- million-a-week tsunami and the so-called savings from our EU contribution are not going to go far. New ideas about funding will be needed, many of which will involve QE going to infrastructure, potentially through long-term infrastructure bonds, which are being discussed across the UK but, again, unfortunately, not here.

It is not about just economics. We have had a troubled and uncertain history with the Republic of Ireland that has been changed to a positive and growing relationship that has been hardearned. We can, with sufficient imagination and will, create a dynamic that prevents hard borders in Newry or Cairnryan. Achieving those goals will help us, as proud unionists, maintain the United Kingdom in a manner that avoids our proud nation slipping into xenophobia and isolationism.

You also hear from at least 50% of our Government that it is too early to begin planning because article 50 has not been triggered, they have a special relationship with Downing Street, things are not so bad or the falling pound has significantly improved our economy and the manufacturing sector is strong. Consider the record over the last nine years of Sinn Féin/DUP majority government and consider whether they are ready to get the best deal for Northern Ireland or even whether they have a plan.

We ask the Assembly to endorse and adopt the approach in 'A Vision for Northern Ireland outside the EU' because, frankly, the people of Northern Ireland deserve a plan and the consideration of our Government to doing something. Our vision is the best and only framework to achieve that.

Source: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-19-09-2016.pdf>



The Houses of the Oireachtas are in their Summer Recess from 21 Jul until 27 Sep 2016.