



The Centre for
Cross Border Studies

MEDIA WATCH

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PM and Taoiseach Varadkar to meet as May looks for a breakthrough

Theresa May will meet European leaders including Republic of Ireland counterpart Leo Varadkar as she continues to push for a breakthrough in Brexit talks.

The Prime Minister will meet the Taoiseach on the margins of a major European summit today, with the issue of the Irish border one of the key sticking points in the Brexit negotiations.

Mrs May was also due to have talks with Sweden's prime minister Stefan Lofven last night as his country hosts leaders from across the European Union to promote fair jobs and growth.

The Prime Minister hopes EU counterparts will agree next month that sufficient progress has been made in the first phase of the Brexit talks to move on to discussions about the future trading relationship between the UK and the bloc.

Resolving cross-border issues between Ireland and Northern Ireland as a result of Brexit is one of the main areas where progress is required before EU leaders can agree to move to the next phase of the negotiations - along with citizens' rights and the financial settlement between the UK and EU.

The Prime Minister's official spokesman said "you can expect Brexit to come up, along with other issues of importance" in Mrs May's talks with her counterparts.

Today's Gothenburg social summit brings together political leaders and other key players to discuss issues including workers' rights and how to promote fair economic growth.

Mrs May will take part in a working session on fair employment and working conditions and is expected to highlight the findings of the Taylor report, published in July, which examined the treatment of workers in the so-called gig economy.

She will tell fellow leaders "how the UK is addressing issues head-on in relation to the way employment practices are changing and the opportunities and challenges this presents and to point out how we've been consulting with business groups, trade unions and wider stakeholders".

The Government has committed to responding to the Taylor report by the end of the year.

Source: The Belfast Telegraph

18 November 2017

Barnier to push for answer on Brexit border

EU negotiator Michel Barnier is set to give the British government a three-week deadline to spell out how to avoid a hard border. There has been increasing frustration among Irish government and EU officials at the failure of the British government to come up with practical proposals. But it is understood that Barnier and his Article 50 negotiating team need to get detailed proposals within the next three weeks so that they can be properly considered.

The next summit of EU leaders is due to take place on December 19 to decide if sufficient progress has been made to advance the Brexit talks to the second phase, which is on a future trade deal between Britain and the rest of the EU.

"If they don't get that clarity, the likelihood of additional progress is quite low," said an EU source.

There is strong opposition at EU level to the prospect of British Prime Minister Theresa May arriving before the summit of EU leaders with last-minute pledges on the border, which cannot be properly assessed. European Council president Donald Tusk has said that much more progress on Ireland has to be made by the beginning of next month, at the latest. Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and the Irish government's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney, are insisting on getting written guarantees of proposals from the British government to show how they will manage to avoid a hard border for goods and citizens.

But former Irish ambassador Dr Ray Bassett warned there was a real risk to Irish interests if the talks moved onto the second phase with no deal. He pointed out that there would be no Irish veto on the future trade relationship because the vote would be decided on a qualified majority system, which gives Ireland only 1 per cent of the voting rights.

"We are useful now as a bargaining tool to force the British onto the back foot but when push comes to shove, the economic interests of the big countries will be the sole final determinant of policy," he said.

And there was also a stark predication from Northern Ireland-born millionaire businessman Neville Isdell that Brexit will change Ireland.

"We are seeing the cracks now within Brexit. I don't know where it is going to end up but I don't think it is going to be in a good place or a better place," he said.

Isdell, who was previously the chief executive and chair of Coca-Cola, said although he thinks there is a lot wrong with the EU, it is better to be a part of it.

“It is going to be very very difficult for Britain. It is the wrong decision,” he said.

The 74-year-old, who was born in Co Down and moved to the Zambia at the age of ten, said he supports a united Ireland.

“I am an ex-rugby player and I support that green jersey, which is an all-Ireland jersey,” he said.

However, Isdell, who owns The CHQ building in Dublin’s IFSC, said Brexit will not immediately lead to a united Ireland.

“That would be my desire but I think that is away down the road,” he said.

EU Brexit negotiators have a list of more than 100 areas of North-South cooperation which they want assurances on from the British side. They include soil management on both sides of the border, access to cross-border healthcare treatment and joint management of lakes.

The talks between British and EU negotiators are expected to be able to resolve the rights of EU citizens in Britain after the country leaves the EU, as well as the size of the British financial settlement to pay for EU projects it has committed to funding. But Fianna Fáil Brexit spokesman Stephen Donnelly has warned there is a danger that Ireland’s interests will suffer if clear proposals are not agreed before the talks move onto the second phase.

Varadkar has so far ruled out using its veto at the summit of EU leaders next month. But one development welcomed by the government last week was the British government’s decision to give the British parliament a right to vote on the final Brexit deal.

That led to the emergence of several Conservatives arguing for a long transition period before Britain leaves the EU, which is in line with the wishes of the Irish government.

The Minister of State for European Affairs, Helen McEntee, said it was positive that there were more Conservative MPs who were arguing against a hard Brexit.

“We are starting to see a more positive tone coming from the Conservative Party, from within Westminster, people who clearly understand the importance of getting the transition and the deal right,” she said.

Source: The Sunday Business Post

22 November 2017

Business - North-south interconnector ruling 'could be down to civil servants'

Keeping the lights on in homes and businesses the north next winter could now be down to civil servants in the Department for Infrastructure.

For in the absence of a functioning executive, they've been tasked to rule on approving a second north-south interconnector to ensure future security of energy supply.

It came after the Planning Appeals Commission forwarded its recommendation on the interconnector to the department following a public inquiry earlier this year.

In line with common practice, the PAC has not disclosed the content of its report issued to the department.

But given that the interconnector remains an urgent requirement to ensure the north has enough electricity to meet demand in the coming years, it is widely believed it will be recommended for approval.

The System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI), members of the Business Alliance (made up of the NI Chamber of Commerce, IoD, CBI, Retail NI and Federation of Small Businesses) and politicians have all heralded the move as a "positive development" which advances the delivery of a key piece of infrastructure.

The frenzy of opinion followed a three-sentence statement released by the PAC which read: "The public inquiry into the proposed Tyrone/Cavan electricity interconnector concluded on February 27. The commissioners have forwarded their report and recommendation to the Department for Infrastructure. Release of the report is a matter for the department."

SONI's general manager Robin McCormick said: "This is a positive step towards a decision on the planning application for the north-south interconnector.

"It remains an urgent requirement to ensure we have enough electricity to meet demand in the coming years, and is also needed to reduce electricity costs to domestic and commercial consumers throughout the island.

"The PAC has been very professional in its approach to the proposal, and we now look forward to the Department for Infrastructure announcing a decision as soon as possible."

That is seen as putting pressure on civil servants within that department, given that it could be many months before a minister is in place (before the present political crisis, Sinn Féin's Chris Hazzard was at the helm).

All the groups within the Business Alliance have responded positively to the PAC move.

Retail NI's Glyn Robert insisted: "A decision should not be kicked into the long grass in the absence of devolution and, given the wide consensus across the business community, the Department's permanent secretary should make the call."

Angela McGowan at the CBI said sectors ranging from manufacturing and hospitality, through to education and health, will all feel the benefits of this critical piece of infrastructure while Christopher Morrow at the NI Chamber insisted: "We will continue to voice our support until a decision is made - hopefully no later than the end of this year."

The FSB's Wilfred Mitchell said: "The interconnector will create downward pressure on energy costs and relieve the cost burden on small businesses, and we encourage civil servants to move ahead with the project as soon as possible to provide certainty for consumers."

Source: The Irish News