



CNI



PRESS WATCH - Brexit game has been slipping from us

While publicly, the Irish Government has to state it is preparing for all contingencies, and it is right and proper it do so, it is clear on a political level, things are not going our way, writes Daniel McConnell in the Irish Examiner

It's senior hurling now lads, as the late Seamus Brennan famously once said.

For months, since the referendum was lost on June 23 last, the Irish Government has stuck rigidly to a tight mantra of what it wants to happen in the post-Brexit world.

No return to a hard border with the North, keeping the Common Travel Area with Britain and trying to minimise the impact on trade have been the key priorities.

But the game has been slipping away from Ireland in recent weeks, since British prime minister Theresa May has signalled a clean break or hard Brexit from the EU.

Testimony two weeks ago from customs experts Michael Lux and Eric Pickett that only a hard border could apply seem to blow a hole in the Government's strategy.

Today's confirmation that the Government, through the Revenue Commissioners, has begun identifying sites for where full customs check points will be located is a stark illustration of how high the Brexit stakes for Ireland.

Details of the Government's, up until now secret Brexit plan, published by the Irish Examiner show that while in public Taoiseach Enda Kenny and his ministers are demanding as soft an

impact as possible, in private they are preparing for the worst.

The fact the Government have all but abandoned hope, privately, for a soft Brexit means the potential risks to people and businesses here are increasing as Theresa May opts for a clean withdrawal from the European Union.

The problem is that, the cleaner the break from Britain's perspective, the starker the impact on little old Ireland.

But we have featured very little in the Brexit dialogue in Westminster or in the British press. The site of long tail backs on the road between Dublin and Belfast and in towns all along the border would be, even by the Government's description, the most negative outcome possible.

While publicly, the Government has to state it is preparing for all contingencies, and it is right and proper it do so, it is clear on a political level, things are not going our way.

Mr Kenny got short thrift for his demands for a special case for Ireland when in Warsaw last week when he met with the no-nonsense prime minister Beata Szydlo.

Pinning our hopes on our 26 colleague nations coming to our rescue in the talks with Britain is high wire stuff, and this new expanded Europe has a shameful record in helping Ireland in the past decade or so.

No bilateral deal between Ireland and Britain is possible as long as we are in the EU, and as such, we will be just one of 26 countries seeking to get the best deal possible for themselves.

At less than 2% of the EU's GDP, we are on that level pretty insignificant and as such our pleas are likely to be drowned out when push comes to shove.

Now we know the Government is preparing for the worst-case scenario, it seems there is growing concern among some ministers that public statements from the Government "haven't changed since the day the referendum was defeated. That is causing a problem," says one minister.

Several ministers speaking in recent days have expressed some concern that the messaging is out of step with what is going on. "The Taoiseach needs to speak more directly as he appeared to do with Theresa May or as openly as Michael Noonan has spoken to the Fine Gael parliamentary party," said another minister.

According to the documents, the Government's reluctance to be more specific has been driven by the lack of clarity coming from Downing Street.

“It is not helpful to try to pre-empt the outcome at this stage for negotiations that have not even begun yet. Theresa May's speech and White Paper gives some clarity about their approach, but uncertainty remains and she left a lot of room for negotiation around trading arrangements and, by extension, the customs regime that might apply. When negotiations start, Ireland will be ready. We will negotiate hard and fair,” the documents state.

The documents also reveal that engagement with our European partners will continue and intensify in the coming weeks and months.

Irish ministers have been told to make sure they attend all European Council meetings in order to enable them meeting their fellow Ministers at Council meetings to make them aware of Ireland's “unique concerns”.

“A huge diplomatic effort” has been launched by Irish officials who are flying out to key capitals for discussions, again to ensure that our unique concerns are well understood.

As of last week, it was estimated that over 80 Brexit engagements by Minister Flanagan with his counterparts have taken place.

Irish officials, led by Secretaries General Martin Fraser and John Callinan, are said to be in regular contact with the EU negotiating team led by Michel Barnier.

“This isn’t about megaphone diplomacy — we have great relationships with the EU and the UK and we’re intent on keeping both,” the documents reveal.

While for months, we have been hoping against hope for a soft break with the UK, but it is becoming more real that a hard Brexit is on the cards.

It is somewhat reassuring that officials are now at least planning for the worst and hoping for the best.

But Ireland has so much to lose if the bounce of the ball does not go our way and we are short of real friends at the big boys table.

Brace yourself Bridget!.

**Daniel McConnell in The Irish Examiner
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