



## **Two Islands – One Future Ireland, the UK and the EU**

Dublin, 15 April 2021: European Movement Ireland and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung organised the first in a three-part series of events to offer a range of different perspectives on the state of play and future relationship between Ireland, the UK, and the EU. The discussion, introduced by **Matthias Barner**, Director Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung UK & Ireland, and moderated by **Noelle O Connell**, CEO European Movement Ireland, focused on potential areas of cooperation for future relations between the EU and the UK, Ireland's role in facilitating a mutually beneficial partnership, the impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement, and the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The panel consisted of **Leo Varadkar TD**, Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment; **Dr. Katja Leikert**, CDU Member of the German Bundestag; and The Right Honourable **Sir David Lidington**, Former Cabinet Office Minister.

In his address, An Tánaiste Leo Varadkar TD, underlined that the Irish people have consistently remained pro-European, although Irish-EU relations have not always been entirely positive. He also spoke about a changing dynamic in Brussels in terms of leaning towards protectionism and the impact of Brexit on the whole of Ireland. However, Brexit has shown Ireland, and other smaller EU Member States, that sharing national sovereignty makes us stronger and that our interests are at the heart of the EU. As a result of Brexit, Ireland will also have to look for other alliances and partners. For example, on the issue of trade it aligns with Germany to uphold a multilateral based and working to strengthen transatlantic relations. Ireland sees Europe's future as a collective one, which should be policy-focused and citizen driven. On the future EU-UK relationship, *Mr. Varadkar* argued that there is a responsibility to repair the relationship and to remain allies as challenges become increasingly global in nature.

Likewise, in terms of Ireland-UK relations we must ensure closer cooperation and increase engagement between government counterparts, as those discussions no longer take place on the margins of meetings at the EU institutions. They must become more institutionalised, especially with regard to Northern Ireland and on the Northern Ireland Protocol, which was carefully constructed and designed to ensure minimal disruption in the North whilst upholding the Good Friday Agreement and protecting citizens' rights. There are significant economic opportunities for investment for Northern Ireland – as it has access to both the UK's and EU's single market – that need to be promoted. Ireland will continue to advocate for flexibility around the Protocol and be solution-oriented at EU level. However, Mr. Varadkar stated that they will not support anything that undermines the EU's single market integrity and called for more cooperation and a halt to unilateral action.

The UK, the EU and Ireland find themselves at a critical juncture for several reasons explained Dr. Katja Leikert MdB during her opening remarks. Firstly, the situation in Northern Ireland calls on both the EU and the UK to look at ways the Protocol can be tweaked, and the voices of Northern Ireland can be taken into consideration. Secondly, Dr. Leikert argued that EU-UK relations will normalise with time as both need each other to tackle issues of a global nature, such as defence, China and cybersecurity. Finally, the Conference on the Future of Europe presents an opportunity for the EU to listen to what changes the public wants. Some of the topics Dr. Leikert would like to see discussed are a bigger role for the European Parliament in keeping the European Commission to account, cleavage between growing economy and inequality, legitimacy of the EU institutions and rethinking the way decisions are made in areas as foreign affairs and defence.

The world today is a less friendly place for liberal democracies than it has been for the past 30 years because of growing threats from Russia, increased technological dependence on China, climate change, terrorism and organised crime, and millions of people in the developed world questioning whether the democratic order is delivering anything for them. Sir David Lidington, argued in his opening remarks that Brexit has further divided the democratic world, weakened the EU and the

UK as global players, and that neither side has given thought to what a long-term strategic relationship might look like. These common threats should increasingly drive both sides to work together and lay the basis for improving the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) in their mutual interest. With regard to Ireland-UK relations, there is an interest in keeping peace in Northern Ireland and to institutionalise this relationship. The recent unrest in Northern Ireland is in part due to the tensions over the Protocol, which will require compromises to be made from both the EU and UK sides. The former needs to focus on upholding peace and proportionality, and the latter needs to show it stands by the Protocol and publicly accept it entails a different treatment of Northern Ireland on certain occasions.

During the discussion various questions were raised on the position of the European Parliament's reluctance to set a date on which it intends to ratify the TCA, the impact of an all-Island border poll and economic prospects in Northern Ireland. Both Mr. Varadkar and Dr. Leikert stated that they understand the reasoning behind the European Parliament's position as it is pivotal the UK abides by an internationally binding agreement and argued that the increased pressure on both sides may result in a positive outcome on the ongoing talks regarding issues around Northern Ireland's trading arrangements. Regarding the prospect of a border poll, Mr Varadkar said that there are different ideas on what reunification might look like and we must ensure Ireland is a home to all, which will require challenging people to alter their mindset. Sir David replied that a border poll is not inevitable and therefore unionists will be required to deeply reflect on a strategy on how they want to make the case for unionism against the backdrop of shifting demographics. Sir David further highlighted that the root of the conflict is identity, which is not capable of having a sole economic solution.

Further, the audience raised issues such as diverging food and veterinary standards between the EU and UK, and the impact of Germany's parliamentary elections on the future of Europe. Sir David argued that it would be beneficial for the UK to align on food and veterinary standards with the EU to help ease frictions over the protocol. Yet the government's reluctance stems from the interpretation they gave to Brexit, which is to break away from EU rules, and to keep their options open to negotiate a trade deal with other third countries - whom may be incompatible with EU food standards. On the impact of upcoming German parliamentary elections, Dr. Leikert told the audience that Germany is set on cooperating and reviving relationships between the EU and the UK.

You can watch a recording of the event [here](#).

The next event in the KAS EMI 2021 series will take place in June 2021.