

# Talks to extend Fine Gael rule set to intensify

Niamh Lyons Ireland Political Editor

Tough talk between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil on the extension of the confidence and supply deal between the parties is set to intensify in the wake of the agreement of the draft Brexit withdrawal treaty.

The government has been buoyed by the outcome and is eager to explore whether there is potential to extend the agreement with the main opposition party. Failing that it is likely an election will be called.

At a meeting of Fine Gael junior and senior ministers on Wednesday night, Leo Varadkar said the window to hold a pre-Christmas election had “almost closed”.

It is understood the taoiseach has given strong consideration to holding a national ballot but the uncertainty over whether the draft treaty will be ratified in the House of Commons in the coming weeks could have an impact on those plans.

Paschal Donohoe, the finance minister, also spoke at the meeting and said he expected talks with Fianna Fáil to intensify, while Regina Doherty, the social protection minister, said the next ten days would be important.

It is understood that Simon Harris, the health minister, also spoke at the meeting and told negotiators that there should be no “faffing around” and that the talks should reach a swift conclusion.

The parties have been meeting for the past fortnight in an attempt to review the previous deal but Fine Gael is seeking for the talks on renewing the agreement to begin swiftly.

In a sign of rising tensions between the parties the government has been forced to defend itself against claims of triumphalism over the draft Brexit withdrawal agreement.

Fianna Fáil warned the minority coalition that claiming a “victory” could affect Theresa May’s ability to

secure support for the document in the House of Commons.

A press conference was held in Government Buildings within an hour of the publication of the draft deal during which Mr Varadkar said it was “stronger” than last December’s joint agreement, a document that infuriated unionists and Brexiteers.

Lisa Chambers, Fianna Fáil’s Brexit spokeswoman, described the taoiseach’s tone as “very self-congratulatory” and claimed it was “unhelpful”.

“I think the government need to be far more aware of their actions and their self-congratulations. Patting themselves on the back here in Dublin will absolutely negatively feed into what’s happening in the House of Commons,” she said.

“The government now needs to calm down, and it needs to give the UK government space.”

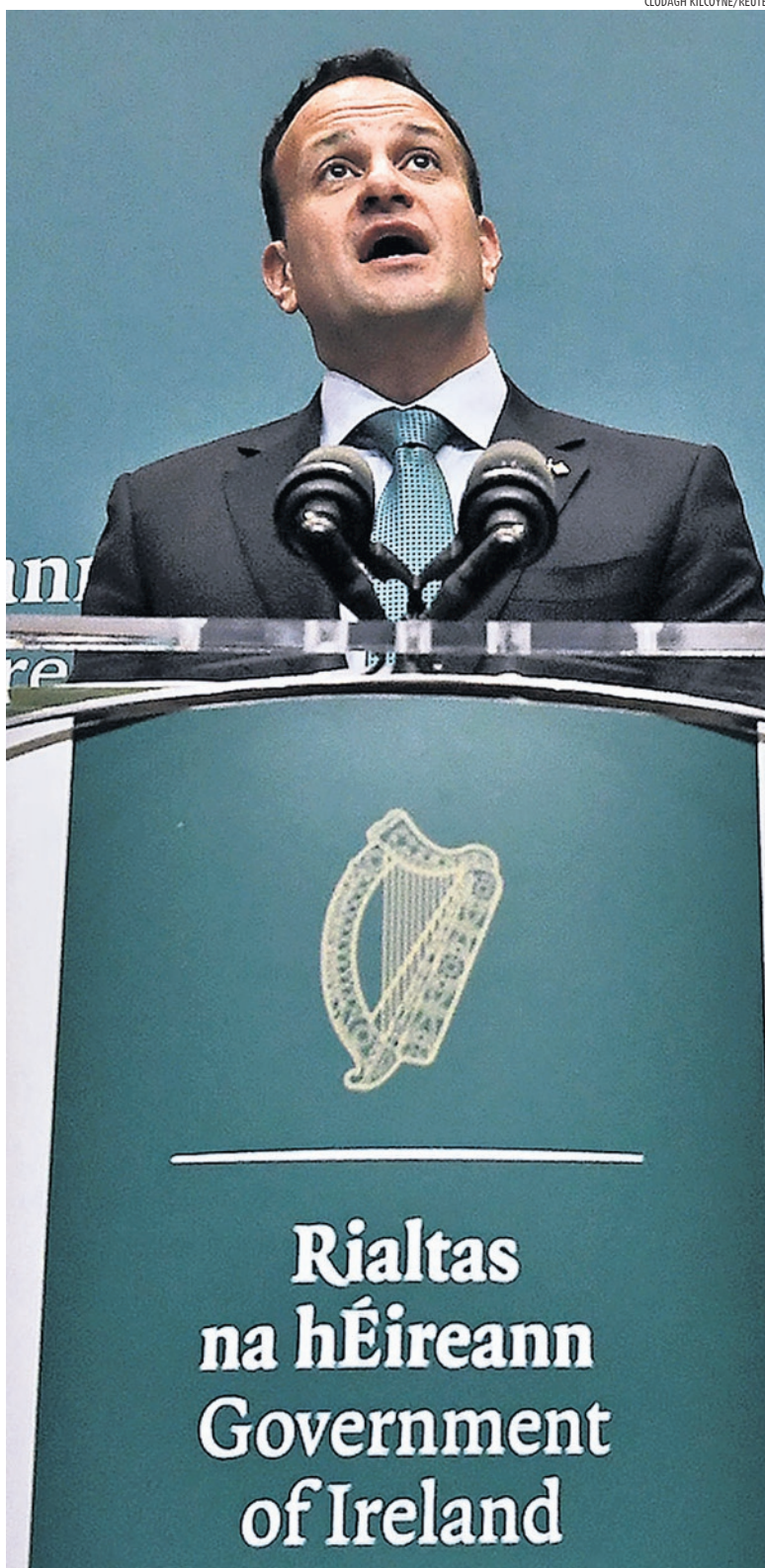
Simon Coveney, the foreign affairs minister and tánaiste, also faced criticism in the Dáil during leaders’ questions yesterday.

“The time for victory and celebration is when this draft agreement is accepted and ratified by all,” Darragh O’Brien, of Fianna Fáil, said.

“The tánaiste and the ministers should be acutely aware of the impact of comments made here in Ireland during what is a very sensitive and volatile time in the UK. I ask the tánaiste and his colleagues in government to try, from today, to resist the temptation to brief the press with victorious statements, such as we have seen in some of the Irish newspapers today.”

Mr Coveney defended the decision to hold a press conference to explain the Irish elements of the deal. “Neither the taoiseach or any other ministers, including me, will claim victories or anything like that. That has not been happening. Yesterday we were very careful not to comment when it was not helpful to do so,” he said.

Leading article, page 19  
David Davin-Power, page 20



Leo Varadkar was criticised by Fianna Fáil’s Brexit spokeswoman for seeming “self-congratulatory” while he addressed a press conference about the deal

## Chaos a boost for Irish unity

Analysis Feargal Cochrane

We are now moving from Brexit in theory to Brexit in practice.

Anglo-Irish relations, already strained, will deteriorate further if there is no deal, especially if a hard border returns.

This is bad news for the DUP, midwife to the British government’s failure. That should throw a lifeline to the Ulster Unionist Party, and it will be a test of its leadership to see if it can win back the support it has lost to the DUP since 1998.

The irony of Brexit is that though the DUP supported it and Sinn Féin opposed it, it has the capacity to precipitate Irish unity. Sinn Féin is emboldened in its demands for a border poll, and nationalists will find the idea of reunification more attractive if it brings with it EU membership. Unionists may reinterpret their positions, as the union was based on economic benefit and fear of a theocratic Catholic Irish free state. Ireland will be much more attractive to unionists in 2020 than it was in 1920.

This is worst-case-scenario thinking — if you are a unionist at least — and it may work out less traumatically. Yet Brexit is a roll of the dice on the livelihoods of people in Northern Ireland, Ireland, Britain and the EU. None of the recent developments will help Northern Ireland to put its political institutions back together; indeed, when the time comes to do so the foundation stone of a strong London-Dublin mutual guarantor relationship may not be there.

It is worth remembering, though, that there is little public pressure on either the DUP or Sinn Féin to restore the power-sharing institutions to deal with Brexit. They are more likely to be rewarded for not doing so, and punished if they do.

Feargal Cochrane is vice-chair of the Political Studies Association and professor of international conflict analysis at Kent University

# North ‘on a platter’ for EU PM staggers on with draft deal Uncertainty remains over flights, warns airport boss

Niamh Lyons Ireland Political Editor

Theresa May has “put Northern Ireland on a platter” to surrender to the EU, Democratic Unionist politicians claimed yesterday.

The British prime minister is reliant on the support of the DUP’s ten Westminster MPs for a majority in the House of Commons but the party has vowed to vote the Brexit deal down.

In the House of Commons yesterday Nigel Dodds, the party’s Westminster leader, told Mrs May that the agreement threatened the integrity of the UK and risked isolating Northern Ireland from the rest of the country.

“I could today stand here and take the prime minister through the list of promises and pledges that she made to this house and to us privately about the future of Northern Ireland and the future relationship with the EU but I fear it would be a waste of time since she clearly doesn’t listen,” he said.

Mr Dodds congratulated the British cabinet ministers who had resigned over the deal.

“The choice is now clear, we stand up for the United Kingdom, the whole of

the United Kingdom, the integrity of the United Kingdom or we vote for a vassal state.”

Sammy Wilson, the DUP’s Brexit spokesman, said the deal was a case of “Northern Ireland being put on a platter as an object to surrender to the EU”.

Kate Hoey, the Labour MP and former minister who was born in Northern Ireland, said: “Will she [Mrs May] not accept that at this stage not only are we all being collectively sold out, but the people of Northern Ireland are being sold out absolutely?”

In response, Mrs May said that the backdrop was something that neither side wished to see being exercised.

Leo Varadkar, the taoiseach, and Simon Coveney, the tánaiste, met leaders of a number Northern Ireland’s parties yesterday.

Speaking afterwards, Michelle O’Neill, Sinn Féin’s deputy leader, said: “The DUP do not speak for the people of the North on Brexit and in fact appear intent on driving our economy over the cliff.”

The SDLP, the Alliance Party and the Green Party also attended the meeting in Government Buildings.

## PM staggers on with draft deal Uncertainty remains over flights, warns airport boss

Continued from front page

Brexit put “real jobs” at risk. That is a message Mrs May will hammer home today as she seeks to sell her deal to the British public on a radio phone-in after a defiant press conference in Downing Street during which she made clear that she wouldn’t quit.

“I believe with every fibre of my being that the course I have set out is the right one for our country and all our people,” she said. “Leadership is about taking the right decisions, not the easy ones.”

Leo Varadkar, the taoiseach, spoke to Mrs May by phone yesterday and offered her help in shoring up support for the deal. It is understood the pair pledged to work together on the future relationship to ensure that the backstop never needs to be invoked.

In the Dáil yesterday the foreign minister, Simon Coveney, acknowledged the challenge of “selling” the deal in Westminster but insisted that Mrs May had “a remarkable capacity to get things done” and had the fortitude required to get the draft treaty ratified.

Michelle Devane

A no-deal Brexit could lead to the UK falling out of aviation agreements “without a parachute”, the managing director of Dublin Airport has warned.

Vincent Harrison said that European efforts had reduced the risk of flights being grounded if the UK left the EU without an agreement, but there was still uncertainty. The EU had negotiated all of the bilateral arrangements between European countries in recent years, he noted, “so technically if the UK leaves without a deal they fall out of that arrangement”.

Mr Harrison made the comments at a Dublin City University Brexit Institute seminar yesterday as the European Commission moved to assure the aviation industry that flights between the UK and the EU would continue in the event of no deal.

“We’ve probably got to a situation where that first, worst-case scenario — instead of an ash cloud, we’ve a lack of paper keeping flights on the ground —

that that’s been averted,” Mr Harrison said. “But beyond that there’s considerable uncertainty.”

Cathy Mannion, the aviation regulation commissioner, said that unless an accord was in place after Brexit, British carriers would not be able to benefit from any deal made by Europe. She said it could have a “very significant” impact on airlines and flights.

Ms Mannion said that planning for after Brexit was important for Ireland because 38 per cent of all traffic from Irish airports was to the UK.

The conference was told that Ireland was far more affected than other EU27 nations because Dublin to London was the busiest international route in Europe and second busiest in the world.

Cathal Guimard, a DCU lecturer, said aviation was burdened by archaic international rules going back to end of the Second World War. “Nobody can fly anywhere without the permission of the neighbouring government,” he said, adding that this was the reason aviation agreements were crucial.