Talks to extend Fine Gael rule set to intensify

Niarnm Lyons, Ireland Political Editor

Tough talk between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil on the extension of the agreement with the British government has been marked by a series of disagreements and threats of a general election.

At a meeting of Fine Gael junior and senior ministers on Wednesday night, Leo Varadkar and Micheál Martin were both on the defensive. They both warned that the deal was only possible if there was no hard border on the island of Ireland.

Varadkar said that the talks would start again and that Fianna Fáil would work with the Taoiseach to ensure that the deal was implemented.

Martin, however, said that the talks were not possible unless there was a backstop to protect the integrity of the UK.

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

Paschal Donohoe, the finance minister, also spoke at the meeting and said that he expected talks with Fianna Fáil to intensify, while Regina Doherty, the social protection minister, said the next few weeks could have an impact on the government's negotiations.

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

None of the recent developments will help Northern Ireland to put its political institutions back together, he said.

"If there is no deal, it will be a disaster for both the UK and the Republic of Ireland. It is important for Ireland to be a part of the European Union," he said.

"In the event of no deal, the government now needs to calm the House of Commons. It is understood the taoiseach has met with Fine Gael's junior and senior ministers yesterday.

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"The government continues to work hard to reach a deal. Simon Coveney, the foreign affairs minister and taoiseach, also faced criticism in the Dáil during leaders' questions today.

"The time for victory and celebration is when the Brexit draft agreement is accepted and ratified by all," said Darragh Ó Briain, of Fianna Fáil, said.

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