

UK on collision course with US over Northern Ireland protocol after Washington diplomacy ends in acrimony and threats

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Richard E. Neal's recent visit to Ireland was a debacle. Last month, Neal, Democrat chair of the powerful US Congress House Committee of Ways and Means, led a nine-strong team of both Democrats and Republicans hoping to press the British government into finding an agreement acceptable to the European Union (EU) and the Irish government over the Northern Ireland protocol.

Neal was met with extraordinary hostility from Northern Ireland's unionist parties, even to the point of threatening the delegation's security—a stand given tacit support by the Johnson government in Westminster.

The Northern Ireland protocol component of Britain's Withdrawal Agreement from the EU has effectively instituted EU checks on commerce across the Irish Sea. The Johnson government agreed it as a compromise intended to avoid the return of a "hard" trade border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is viewed by unionists as an existential threat to their position within the UK, with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) suspending participation in the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive and demanding the protocol is dropped before either institution can re-open.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's beleaguered premiership increasingly depends on the support of the party's most fervent Brexiteers. Foreign Secretary Liz Truss therefore announced, shortly before Neal's visit, her intention to legislate "in the coming weeks" for changes to the protocol without any agreement from the EU. The position was reiterated yesterday by Johnson, after he narrowly defeated a vote of no confidence on Monday evening. He calculates that the protocol issue will keep his loyalists on board, while dividing his opponents. Those who voted against his premiership represent an uneasy coalition between a section of the party's hard right and what remains of its anti-Brexit

wing who are desperate to avoid trade war with the European Union and the wrath of Washington this brings with it.

Truss's proposed solutions to the protocol involve setting up two channels for goods, with "green" goods destined only for Northern Ireland not checked. It is a measure of the crisis that former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, who boasts of being the architect of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) ending three decades of "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland, has issued his own proposals to "obviate the vast majority of checks on goods moving between Britain and Northern Ireland, provide a compromise on the involvement of the Court of Justice of the EU, and give greater opportunities for consultation on draft EU laws affecting Northern Ireland to representatives from all sides of the community." This would give Johnson and the unionists much of what they want, while hopefully keeping the lid on tensions with the EU.

The Biden administration views the UK/EU falling out with alarm. As well as threatening its vast Ireland-based financial interests by destabilising the GFA, the row sets its British and European allies against each other. The NATO-Russia war in Ukraine has dramatically intensified concerns, prompting the dispatch of Neal's delegation. Neal told the *Financial Times* May 20, prior to his visit, that the "onus and spotlight" was on Britain, warning that the UK was taking the GFA for granted. He opposed unilateral UK legislation warning, "We don't believe that Ireland should be held hostage to turbulence in the UK political structure."

Neal, head of the Friends of Ireland in the US Congress, would have expected at least a polite reception in line with the United States' overwhelming influence in the South, its strategic alliance with the UK and role in

orchestrating the GFA. In 1995, the US appointed Democrat George Mitchell as Special Envoy for Northern Ireland. The GFA he helped negotiate laid the basis for Sinn Féin to participate in power sharing in the North, along with the unionists.

It is a mark of the collapse in transatlantic relations over the protocol that, from the first, Neal was denounced from all quarters of unionism, while the Johnson government said nothing. DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson took calculated offense at Neal's statement that the GFA was based on "accepting the notion that we could make space for the Planter [Protestant settlers from England and Scotland] and the Gael to live together." He responded by accusing Neal of "the most undiplomatic visit I have ever seen to these shores."

Former Northern Ireland First Minister Arlene Foster, writing in the *Express* May 25, denounced the Biden administration for claiming to be "protecting the Belfast Agreement [GFA] when it is clear for all to see that they are only interested in looking after those who would seek to wipe Northern Ireland from the map." Days later, Foster was awarded with a Damehood by the queen.

On June 1, Conor Burns, a Northern Ireland minister and close ally of Johnson, visited Washington where he asked, "How is the Good Friday Agreement protected if the institutions born of the Good Friday Agreement don't exist?"

Other events point to an extraordinary breakdown in security cooperation and implicit threats of loyalist violence against Neal and his entourage. On May 24, the *Belfast Telegraph* was "alerted" to a barely reported security breach, with precise venues, travel times and details of private meetings being held by Neal and his delegation having "somehow fallen into the hands of loyalist paramilitaries". Details of Neal's itinerary had only been released to senior Northern Ireland Office officials, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Neal's own delegation. The British state has a long history of infiltrating loyalist paramilitary groups and colluding with their activities.

The threat to Neal came only weeks after Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney was forced to suddenly abandon a speech he had been making at a "peace and reconciliation" event in North Belfast. The loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was thought to be behind an incident in which a van driver was forced at gunpoint to drive his vehicle, containing what he thought was a bomb, towards where Coveney was speaking. The device turned out to be a fake.

Sunday Independent quoted a UVF Thmember threatening to "escalate" threats against "all politicians and officials visiting from Dublin". A senior Ulster Defence Association (UDA) member told the newspaper of a "two stage strategy" against the protocol: "One is politics, the other is political violence".

The fact that loyalist paramilitary groups, tied to the top echelons of unionism and the British state, are making such threats is a serious warning that sectarian conflict could re-erupt amid the desperate crisis of unionism, British imperialism and the Johnson government.

Neal's trip was followed by one of the largest Orange Order demonstrations in years. On May 28, up to 20,000 loyalist band members and supporters of the sectarian organisation, watched by up to 100,000 flag-waving spectators, including the entire unionist political hierarchy and at least one former UDA assassin, marched from Stormont to Belfast city centre to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland's bloody founding amid the pogroms of the 1921 partition crisis.

Mervyn Gibson, Grand Secretary of the Orange Order and former detective sergeant of the Royal Ulster Constabulary Special Branch, attacked the protocol, declaring, "Let us make it very simple for our European neighbours, not least those on the other side of the border in the Republic of Ireland... We will not tolerate any system, process or structure that will allow checks on any goods trading within the UK for use within the UK." He concluded, "And the cry to those who seek to persuade us, protocol or push us into a united Ireland, is still the same: no surrender." Gibson was given an MBE (The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) by the queen.



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