

UK government ignores US and European concerns over Northern Ireland Protocol Bill

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The British government is pressing on with its Northern Ireland Protocol Bill despite opposition from the imperialist powers on both sides of the Atlantic. None of the prospective candidates to replace Boris Johnson as Conservative Party leader and prime minister have distanced themselves from legislation denounced repeatedly as breaking international law.

The bill removes all restrictions on trade between Northern Ireland and Britain, apart from checks on goods destined for the Republic of Ireland. It authorises the British government to alter state aid, tax rules and standards regardless of the European Union and ends the authority of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in disputes between the EU and the UK. Designed to appeal to the most hardline Brexiteers within the Tory Party and to Northern Ireland's unionist parties, the bill calls into question key components of the Withdrawal Agreement with the EU, reached only three years ago, and threatens to undermine the 1998 Good Friday Agreement setting up power-sharing after decades of "The Troubles".

Brexit was an attempt to undercut British imperialism's rivals by ripping up such restrictions on profitability that were bound up with EU membership, seeking global trade deals instead and an intensified assault on the working class.

The "hard" Brexit negotiated by the Johnson government placed the UK outside of the EU's single market and, at a stroke, transformed the partition line brutally imposed on Ireland by British imperialism in 1921 into an external EU border. The protocol component of the Brexit agreement, seeking to avoid a border on Ireland itself, which would breach the Good Friday Agreement, allowed Northern Ireland to remain in the EU single market but, in doing so, imposed customs checks on the Irish Sea border with the UK.

The government undoubtedly negotiated this with the intention of renegeing on it as soon as possible, relying on the outrage from its close allies in the hard right Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and their paramilitary loyalist extensions to force the issue. The DUP is currently refusing to allow the suspended Northern Ireland Assembly to be revived, pending abolition of the protocol, while inflaming sectarian tensions. The recent July 12 "celebrations" saw Irish nationalist politicians burnt in effigy on loyalist bonfires.

The bill has infuriated the UK's allies and rivals in the US and EU. Shortly after its publication, the European Commission (EC) launched "infringement proceedings" against the UK for its failure to comply with significant parts of the protocol. EC Vice President Maroš Šef?ovi? said, "Let there be no doubt: there is no legal, nor political justification whatsoever for unilaterally changing an international agreement." The EC cited a series of infringements—legal proceedings on which were either being launched, re-launched, or prepared—including cases to the ECJ over border post staffing and trade data.

The Biden administration has repeatedly made clear that it opposes unilateral moves against the protocol as destabilising. US corporations have trillions of dollars invested and headquartered in the Republic. Moreover, Washington views tensions between major allies in NATO's war against Russia as dangerous.

These issues have provoked factional infighting within the Tory party, exposed when the bill was introduced to the House of Commons, June 27, by Foreign Secretary and hard-right Tory leadership contender Liz Truss.

Former prime minister Theresa May, forced out of office in 2019 by the Brexiteers and replaced by

Johnson, complained that the bill is “not legal under international law, won’t achieve its aims and diminishes the standing of the UK in the eyes of the world.” She questioned whether Truss would achieve her stated aim of encouraging the DUP back into power-sharing.

Tory MP Simon Hoare, chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in Westminster also opposed it, as did former Northern Ireland Secretary, Julian Smith.

Labour’s David Lammy, the shadow foreign secretary, attacked the bill because it threatened to undermine NATO’s war against Russia. “The precedent that it sets is dangerous and the timing could hardly be worse,” he warned. “It divides the United Kingdom and the European Union at a time when we should be pulling together against Putin’s war on the continent, and it risks causing new trade barriers during a cost-of-living crisis.”

Citing his own dealings with US imperialism, Lammy complained, “I have been to Washington on three occasions in the past six months, and I can say that across the political divide, Republicans and Democrats have raised the issue. On my most recent visit, they were aghast; they had not seen the content of the Bill at that stage, but they were aghast at the proposition.”

Despite the alarms, the bill’s second reading was passed by a majority of 74. The bill is currently going through its committee stages.

On July 3, the German government weighed in with an unprecedented joint statement by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock of the Greens and her Irish counterpart, Simon Coveney, warning that the bill would deepen divisions with Europe.

According to the pair, “There is no legal or political justification for unilaterally breaking an international agreement entered into only two years ago. The tabling of legislation will not fix the challenges around the protocol. Instead, it will create a new set of uncertainties and make it more challenging to find durable solutions.”

Baerbock and Coveney noted that 52 of the 90 members of the suspended Northern Ireland Assembly, from Sinn Féin, the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Alliance Party, support the protocol.

Baerbock and Coveney’s primary concern too was that the British position was undermining war against

Russia. “In these difficult times, as Russia is leading a ruthless war in Ukraine, breaking with our European peace order, the EU and UK must stand together as partners with shared values and a commitment to uphold and strengthen the rules-based international order.”

Baerbock’s concern for “peace” in Europe and rules in international relations is such that the German government is currently embarking on the largest rearmament since the Nazi period with a €100 billion Special Fund for the Bundeswehr, to be spent on the most modern weaponry, while older weapons systems are poured into Ukraine. The Irish government, for its part, is moving ever closer to NATO membership, recently announcing an increase in military spending to at least €1.9 billion annually and preparing to recruit 6,000 more troops.

The protocol dispute confirms that Brexit was only one expression of deepening tensions between the imperialist powers. Although the UK, EU and US are currently allied against Russia, tensions between British imperialism and its rivals over Ireland stretch back hundreds of years. The island has historically been the back door through which the European powers have sought to exert their influence against Britain and is now economically dominated by the US, while British imperialism has hung on to its last colonial outpost in the six counties of Northern Ireland to retain influence over and prevent revolutionary threats emerging from the entire island. Only the perspective of a unified socialist Ireland as part of a united socialist Europe, organised by the working class of the continent, offers a progressive way forward.



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